

The StoneCutter

A Lawyer making a killing

by Scott Blade,

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For Joe & Gizmo.
Thank you for believing in me.

Chapter 1

The Associate.

"When this monster entered my brain, I will never know, but it is here to stay. How does one cure himself? I can't stop it, the monster goes on, and hurts me as well as society."

—Denis Radar, the BTK Killer.



"My client didn't bash in those boys' heads with a sledge hammer," we said.

"Paul Verize is a world class history professor and an upstanding citizen. Sure he is a quiet man, but that doesn't mean that he killed those college kids," Shane said, using a fake Virginia drawl. It would vanish as soon as he left the courtroom. The jury was mostly conservative, rural Virginians who didn't read *The New York Times*. They didn't fit into the Washington crowd that Shane was a part of.

Det. Blake Gabbs, the prosecution's final breath, sat on the stand, quivering. He gave a weak testimony. The detective cowered in the witness box. He knew that the case was already won. Shane was a good attorney.

"Mr. Gabbs," Shane said. Calling him 'mister' instead of 'detective', made him sound lesser. It demoted him. "My client is being erroneously accused of bludgeoning three college students with a sledge hammer."

Although, we already knew the truth; the number wasn't three it was eleven. Eleven dead kids who trusted the wrong teacher.

"Your honor, Mr. Lasher needs to refer to the witness as detective. That is his title," the local prosecutor said.

We are going to use the sledge hammer on him, metaphorically of course, to smash his case to bits. If I went around bashing everyone's head in with a hammer, like I imagined, then we would've gotten caught by now, and the last thing that Shane or I wanted was to get caught. I would never wear an orange jumpsuit. I would kill us first.

Shane is me and I am Shane.

Before the judge responded, Shane corrected. "Detective," he said. "Where is this murder weapon now?"

"Well...uh...that's the thing, Mr. Lasher. Uh. We have misplaced it."

A sudden wave of mixed voices washed, like a tidal wave of blood, over the jury box and the entire courtroom.

"I'm sorry, DETECTIVE Gabbs," Shane said. "Did you just tell the members of this courtroom that the damning, most tangible piece of evidence that the D.A. has against my client, Dr. Verize, an upstanding college professor, is missing?"

"Yes, it is missing," Det. Gabbs said, sounding like the snake to my mongoose. He squirmed on the bench. My sharp, killer instincts sensed the gasping expressions on the twelve faces of the jurors.

Shane turned around to face the prosecutor; he couldn't bear to miss the expression on his face. The prosecutor furrowed his eyebrows and rubbed his face with his thumb. He did it so harshly; I thought he might rub off his entire face, revealing the shiny, wet muscle tissue beneath as it contorted into the expression of utter defeat.

That would have been sublime.

Shane walked causally toward the defense's table, where his client sat calmly. He knew that Shane was the right guy to defend him from the first moment that we had stepped into his jail cell several months earlier and he should have known. In fact, I bet that when we stepped into his jail cell that cold night all of those months ago, it had made him feel the proverbial butterflies in his stomach. In his case they weren't butterflies, more like moths.

Shane put his hands on the table in front of his defendant. He leaned in close. The jury followed his movements as if he were about to share something pertinent with Paul Verize, some vital information that they needed to know. It appeared as though Shane had a secret. And he did, but it wasn't a secret that they would have ever suspected. It was a dark, twisted secret. I was that secret.

Shane and I thought obsessively about the sledge hammer, the beautiful instrument that Mr. Verize used in those devious killings. The sledge hammer had a long, metal handle. In the direct center of the handle was a dark, metal ring. The ring connected the two long ends of the handle. It could be unscrewed, turning the sledge hammer into two separate pieces of a single instrument, making it compactable and making it a dangerous weapon. Paul concealed it before each use, unscrewing it, hiding it, and then putting it back together. The two separate pieces remained hidden in a special case that he carried in the rear of his Ford Escape.

We closed our eyes for a moment, imagining the murderous weapon. Its two pieces were separated and hidden, awaiting reassembly, awaiting the use of its master.

As the prosecution discovered only days before, the weapon had gone missing. The police had filed away records and pictures of it, but none of that mattered now. The prosecution knew it. Losing the murder weapon blew their case. The missing evidence was just one more way for Shane to prove how incompetent the local police force was. Without it there wasn't much evidence left. Everything else that they had was circumstantial at best. We were one step closer to setting our client free.

Where did the bloody, malicious, sledge hammer go? Where was it now?

Simple: it was disassembled and lying in wait to be used once again, by a new master. Shane's master. Me.

Shane opened his eyes and stared, only for a moment, at his briefcase, his kill-case.

The briefcase's black, leather surface glimmered under the bright lights of the courtroom. It held many truths about Shane—about us. Often, he used it to conceal items that we didn't want people to see.

In this case, it held two heavy, metal pieces that fit together to assemble a sledge hammer—Paul's sledge hammer.

The cops didn't lose it; Shane had removed it from the evidence room. It cost him several thousand dollars to simply have the room left unguarded for a short window of time. This happened late one night—the graveyard shift. Those guys were low paid and often disgruntled. After all who wants to work the graveyard shift? Luckily for us, those guys are always looking to make an extra buck.

Normally, he would never take a chance bribing someone, especially cops, but our client faced life in prison. The evidence was stacked against him. They did have the murder weapon. We couldn't let the state win, not this time.

He worked on Paul Verize's case too long and hard to let the justice system have him.

No. He belonged to me and Shane.

Who was Shane Lasher? Shane was the vessel that I resided in. He was my home. He was the lawyer that the jury attentively gazed their eyes upon. He was the muscle tissue, organs, skin and lungs. He was the bones and the brain. He was the muscular, murderous vessel that I had occupied since we were born together. He had no heart to speak of and that's why I survived in him.

I was Shane Lasher, but I was more than that. I was the dark, wet creature that clutched to Shane's innards.

Sometimes, I watched Shane live his life. Sometimes, I lived it for him. That was when he took a backseat to my murderous deeds. He was kind of like my hostage.

Shane's peers called us "Lasher the Slasher" behind his back. We got this nickname because we had defended so many murderers. If only they knew how much I slashed, how I loved to slash. I was the Slasher part. I needed to slash—to kill.

People said that if a man used 100% of his brain then he could accomplish the impossible. Some believed that if we used that extra, untapped part, we would turn into complete energy.

Serial killer's brain patterns were different than those of regular people. Different parts of our brains were more active, the darker parts. I lived there. I operated in the darkest parts of Shane's brain. I operated in the darkest parts of Shane's soul.

If using 100% of our brains actually turned us into complete energy, then I was the usage at 90%.

A psychologist once named me, my kind. He called us the id. I was the savage, animal instinct, the killer instinct. I was the killer inside of Shane.

Shane Lasher may not have used more than 10% of his brain, but I did. I used much more. I could see things and know things that he could never have known. Sometimes I shared things with him. Sometimes I kept things to myself—secrets.

He knew me. He knew what I was, but he seldom fought me. He never tried to resist me.

In the real estate that we shared, if he were to fight me, we would leave his mind a war-torn wasteland. There would be nothing left of him except sharp, ridged brain shrapnel.

"Thank you for your closing arguments, Mr. Lasher," the judge said. "The jury will adjourn for a verdict."

The judge banged the gavel. It reminded me of the hammer in Shane's briefcase. I couldn't stop thinking about it. I imagined the cracking of bones beneath it. I imagined what it would feel like in my grasp.

The jury rose from their pew and left the courtroom.

Shane glanced over at the prosecutor, a nervous looking man. Shane had already won. The prosecutor felt the sting before the defeat.

"Mr. Verize, let's go into the lobby for a bit," Shane said to his client.

Paul Verize looked giddy. He was so grateful to Shane for getting him this far.

Months ago the press covered his murder spree like it was the only thing happening in the entire world. They covered it like a wildfire spreading across the nation. The story doused the front pages of most every magazine and newspaper in New England. They carried on about it for weeks and weeks.

Shane remembered first reading about it. At the time, he defended regular lowlifes, while we waited for the next worthy client to come along. A long time passed since the last time I had my fun. I wasn't satisfied killing regular degenerates. I preferred serial killers. I longed for the hunt. My mouth salivated at the thought of a new challenge. Paul Verize was that challenge.

Shane's ex-lover, Det. Sun Good, captured our client. Of course, she was not officially put on his case. The D.C. police department was male-centric. They put Det. Gabbs on point for the "Paulverizer" investigation. That was why he sat on the stand, embarrassing an already humiliated police department.

The Paulverizer, I loved that nickname. It fit so well.

It was too bad about Det. Sun Good's absence. I knew that Shane would have liked to see his ex-lover. She was very sexy. And on the stand he could have interrogated her.

Why are you such a bitch?

You are under oath.

Your honor can I treat her as hostile?

When the media first got wind of our client's arrest, they began calling him the "Paulverizer" instead of "Pulverizer".

USA Today's headline read, "Paul Verize is the Paulverizer!"

The New York Times read, "Paul Verize/Pulverized!"

Time Magazine read, "Paulverizer Caught! He is Pulp!"

The Wall Street Journal read, "Professor Hammers Students."

The last one was not very clever, but they printed it.

As it turned out, Paul Verize acted unintelligently when picking his victims. All of the male students that he pulverized were in a fraternity that rejected him many years ago.

Guess he took the rejection hard.

Det. Sun Good discovered that the campus had a string of male students who had disappeared over the years, but no bodies were ever found. At least not until Paul Verize grew lazy and careless—something that I will never let happen to Shane.

He actually began pulverizing students in their dorm rooms while they slept. Det. Sun Good alerted the University P.D. So they began patrolling nightly.

The University Police captured him. Both Shane and I got a chuckle out of the thought of a vicious serial killer being thwarted by University Campus P.D.

Paul Verize sat on a bench outside of the courtroom. That giddy look lingered on his face. Numerous members of the press stood down the lobby, chattering. They waited outside the courthouse for a statement from his client.

The sledgehammer waited in Shane's briefcase, quietly like a deadly viper buried in the desert sand. It waited, coiled and prone to strike like two pieces of a deadly snake.

The briefcase weighed heavy under his powerful grip, but Shane's muscular arm held it with ease. This made it appear that he held a simple briefcase filled with legal papers and nothing else.

No one suspected its true contents, not the cops that scrambled around the station searching for the missing hammer, and certainly not the prosecutor. Most of all, our client didn't suspect that we held his missing instrument.

Shane smiled as he peered down the corridor at the hungry reporters. They lay in wait like a pack of wild dogs, salivating at the chance to get their teeth into Shane's client.

"Shane, they are ready for us to go back in," Ally Embers said, her long, bronze legs shimmered.

Ally Embers was our Brazilian assistant. Shane picked her because she was smart, ambitious, and the most gorgeous woman in the D.C. area.

Shane was not interested in some kind of normal, male fantasy of having raw sex with his sexy female subordinate. He liked that she was good looking. It complimented his vanity. My Shane was a vain one. Having Ally employed under him was about public image. Everywhere we took her there was a chance of being photographed by the press. Shane had an image to maintain, namely his own, and a sexy assistant helped portray that image.

"Shane, the jury is back from deliberation," Ally repeated.

Shane looked over at Paul.

"Paul, let's get you free to walk the streets once again," he said.

Long enough for me to cut your body up into seven pieces, and place them into seven trash bags. Shane's job was to free him from going to jail. Mine was to do the actual cutting and free the world of him.

Inside the courtroom, Shane stood tall and lean next to our client. Everyone stood at attention, while the judge entered and sat on the bench.

"Mr. Lasher and the plaintiff please rise," the judge commanded, ignoring the fact that Shane already was.

"Has the jury reached a verdict?" he asked.

"We have your honor," the foreman jurist said.

"How do you plea?"

"We the jury, find the plaintiff not guilty."

Shane did not expect any other verdict from the jury. Ally seemed excited. She clapped one single time from behind the defense's table.

Shane glanced over at Paul Verize. He smirked. He gets to live and kill again; at least that was what he thought.

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"Shane, don't forget your photo shoot with *Vanity Fair* is in the morning," Ally reminded him. Her toned body blended her in with the lingerie models that lined the ads in *Vanity Fair's* pages.

"Thank you, Ally," Shane said. He glanced over at his client, who waited in the shadow, casted by a large pillar. He waited for his savior to come and guide him through the media jungle.

"Paul, are you ready to face the press?" Shane asked.

"Yes," Paul answered, nervously.

Shane and Paul approached the journalist. The reporters were huddled at the bottom of the courthouse's steps.

"People of the media, I have a statement. My client was always innocent of these heinous crimes. Instead of fabricating these insidious allegations against him, the local police should have been out there searching for the real "Paulverizer". Not just picking on my client for his unfortunate name. Thank you," Shane said.

He moved over, allowing Paul Verize to address the media. They bombarded him with questions.

"Mr. Verize, how did you manage to get an innocent verdict?"

"Mr. Verize."

"What do you have to say to the police department for accusing you?"

"Mr. Verize."

"Mr. Verize. Over here."

"Is it true that they lost the murder weapon?"

"Mr. Verize."

Shane backed away from the podium and faded into the crowd, like a lion fading into the brush. He allowed the media, the vultures, to have their way with Paul. It didn't matter anymore what they asked him. He was already ours. He was already free. He had been proven innocent in the eyes of the law, but not in our eyes.

Shane lifted his briefcase and walked off, vanishing into the traffic of pedestrians. We melded into them, like a crocodile lying on the river floor, waiting

for a lonely deer that wanted a simple drink of water. Instead, it found our deadly jaws.

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Shane's penthouse was on the roof of a very expensive apartment building which suited our needs because of its central location in Washington D.C.

The apartment was very modern. It had four bedrooms: one was a personal office, one a home gym with very expensive equipment, one was the master bedroom, and one was empty.

Shane's penthouse was typical of a high-priced defense lawyer and bachelor. He kept up all appearances. No one suspected us of being the dark, deadly monster that we really were. Only Shane knew about me. He hid me from the public. It was imperative to our survival that he kept my face hidden in the darkest corners of his body.

Shane's penthouse was approximately 2200 sq. feet. It was neat, tidy, and clutter-free. Abstract paintings strategically hung on the walls. It also had a yard of sorts. Two sliding glass doors opened up onto the roof. We used the space on the roof as a backyard. It had a large stainless steel barbecue grill, and some posh patio furniture, covered by a thick cloth canopy.

Across the roof from his apartment was a smaller single-bedroom apartment. To visitors, it appeared that we shared our roof-yard with the occupant of that single bedroom apartment, but we did not. That apartment actually belonged to us. Actually, it was mine. Shane rented it under an alias. It was where he hid most of what I do.

It was my gory workshop, my dark studio, my secret lair.

On the roof of my lair, was a large industrial chimney. The chimney led to a moderately sized furnace, a must-have for any inner city serial killer.

We disposed of most of our victims through the furnace. We didn't always make it though, and sometimes there were special circumstances that called for more creative ways of disposing of a corpse.

The Green River Killer dumped his victims in the woods—amateurish. To his credit, he did throw off the police by planting cigarette butts all over the dumpsite. He picked up used butts from different public places and dropped them at his murder sites, effectively thwarting police investigations. And he didn't even smoke. His mistake was returning to the dumpsites. He would return, often with his wife. He took her too close to the decomposing bodies of his victims. He was careless. They had sex near his dumpsite, and he would imagine having sex with the dead prostitutes. He was a sick one.

Sex with dead bodies wasn't my thing.

Rough sex interested me. Regular sex was more of Shane's side of our brain. His side of the brain, that small 10% I mentioned, was where sexual transactions took place. I liked the animalistic, primal side of sex. Kissing and foreplay was for the sheep.

Although, I will admit that I liked the faces that women made. Their moans and orgasms were similar to the death rattles of our victims. I liked when they screamed.

Maybe that was what the Green River Killer liked so much. The devil within him wanted to relive the deaths of the numerous prostitutes that he strangled until their eyes turned black.

Ted Bundy was another serial killer who had a fetish for women. He would return to their bodies and have sex with them, or so Shane learned in college. I wish I had gotten my claws around his neck, but the Florida justice system got that trophy.

We killed serial killers. Shane convinced himself that the reason why we did what we did was for justice. He rationalized my existence by allowing me to kill murderers like I was just another part of natural selection. To him, I was nature's way of taking care of the trash—a predator of predators.

I allowed him to believe that. It gave him the false sense that he controlled us. It gave him the delusion that he was my master; that he could resist me.

The truth was that I killed killers because they were the most fun, the most challenging. Shane got off on casual sex with women. I got off on the casual bloodbath of a killer. Watching an unsuspecting predator fight for his life in court was only second best to taking his head clean off with a sharpened hatchet.

Ted Bundy had a desire to hunt down other killers. Back in the eighties, he helped the police capture the Green River Killer. Apparently, they were at a loss in that case. So they sent someone to Ted Bundy's cell. While he sat on death row, he revealed enough about his devil to help the authorities discover the Green River Killer's demon.

Teddy was dangerous to the rest of us. He should have never revealed our existence to the world. It was safer for me to live in a world that believed that the Son of Sam really was crazy enough to believe that his neighbor's dog told him to kill. Really his neighbor's dog wasn't the voice of the devil. It was a creature inside of him that he heard. It was a voice like mine. I didn't want humans to believe that I existed, that none of us did. The less that humans understood about us, the safer we were.

Shane walked through the bowels of our lair. His briefcase rested near the front door.

Paul's hammer rested inside.

Shane's lair had an office. It may have looked like a normal home office, but it was for a different purpose. The office contained all the usual makings: a laptop, a desk, a leather chair, and a filing cabinet. The filing cabinet was locked. It contained files of multiple case briefs. Each was of a murderer or serial killer that had fallen victim to us.

Shane approached a series of walls near a fake fireplace. It was really the backside of a furnace. Having a fireplace doubling as a furnace was a way of hiding the furnace and its bodily contents from the neighbors. Not that we ever needed to explain it. Anyone who entered our lair wasn't coming out alive anyway.

The walls that Shane stared at were incorporated with these elaborate glass cabinets. The cabinets were meant to be display cases, designed for historic weapons. Instead of historic weapons, they housed our trophies. Each of these items would have been the key evidence to gain a conviction in a murder case.

Ordinarily, we killed killers using their own weapons against them. Then, we kept the weapons as trophies. I couldn't be without them. They were my impulse. They were my trophies, my souvenirs.

Shane was against keeping them, but I had to have them. Most serial killers kept trophies. Bundy piled bodies in the same dumpsites. Dahmer kept body parts, including genitalia in his house. I kept the murder weapon.

Shane was against this because if we were ever caught the trophies would connect us to every murder that we committed. I didn't care. I needed to have them. I wasn't going to give them up.

Suddenly, Shane's cell phone rang. The ringtone was from a song we knew growing up by the Smashing Pumpkins. It repeated the same song lyric over and over:

***There's a killer in me.
There's a killer in you.***

Shane looked at the caller ID. It was Detective Sun Good.

He grimaced.

"Shane Lasher," he answered.

"Good. You decided to answer me," Sun Good said.

"Sun, how are you? Is this a social call?" Shane asked.

"The last thing I want in my mouth is the cock of a serial killer's lawyer," Det. Sun Good retorted.

Out of all of the ex-girlfriends that Shane made me refrain from killing, I liked Sun Good the most. Yet, I hated her too.

Among her many talents that Shane enjoyed, my favorite was her conversational style. She had a way with words—a special way. She wielded words the way that I wielded sharp objects.

"Colorful, Sun as always. What do you want then?"

"Shane, shut up and listen. There has been another murder. We need to talk. I have to locate your client. It appears that he has killed again," she said.

Shane almost dropped the cell phone along with his jaw.

"What?" he said while trying to quickly regain his composure.

"Are you retarded? I said the son-of-a-bitch has struck again. You got him off and now he is killing again. What did you think would happen? He was just going to stop?"

The only sense of shock greater than Shane's was my own. I was surprised, and nothing ever surprised me. I was a creature of ample astuteness. I'm not sure how I missed this. I thought that even a nitwit like Paul Verize would wait awhile after his verdict before he started to pulverizing kids again.

Besides, I had his hammer. He must have bought a new one or he had a hidden one someplace, a backup weapon. Shane saw him only hours ago. He must have gone straight from the courthouse to the hardware store, back to the university campus, and then picked out another student to bash to bits.

Shane felt guilty and saddened by this. I could sense it. Sometimes, he was far more human than I realized. I treaded lightly around that side of him. The last thing I needed was for him to refuse, fight, or disobey me.

"I'm sorry, Sun. I didn't think that he was that stupid," Shane said.

"He is a criminal, a killer, Shane. They are all stupid," she said.

"I always thought the ones who got caught were stupid," Shane said, trying to make light of his mistake. He should have let me do what I wanted already instead of making me wait until tomorrow.

This was his fault, and he felt it. We had to act fast. Guilt was a dangerous thing. Guilt could consume and change a man. It could corrupt his nature. It could make him turn on me. I had to stop it. I could never allow guilt to seep too far into his brain.

"Shane the dumbest ones are the ones who haven't gotten caught. They are dumb enough to think that they will get away."

Interesting, Shane thought. He looked up at his reflection in the glass case that displayed our kill trophies.

Shane viewed me as the devil that he needed to feed. Sometimes, when Shane looked in the mirror, he stared at me. He could see my ghastly eyes and beastly features protruding through his own.

"Shane, I need you to make sure that he doesn't go anywhere. I will be by your office first thing in the morning. Right now we are still at the crime scene, but I know that they are going to ask me to come see you and your client. I can't disclose any more details. I just wanted you to be aware that tomorrow you will have to assist us," Sun Good said. Abruptly, she hung the phone up.

"Shit!" Shane said.

I remained calm. It was a minor setback, nothing for Shane to get upset about. We had to move up the schedule. That was all.

Shane peered out of the window. Perfect views of the city surrounded our penthouse. The sun set behind the White House. Nightfall came over the city like an invitation for me to come out and play.

Shane would step aside. He faded back into his body so that I could rise to the surface. In a few hours the moon would be out. The time to hunt drew near.

Moments after Shane's transformation was completed, I stepped out of his apartment building. I walked towards the metro and rode it out of the city, toward Paul Verize's neighborhood.

"Paulverizer, I am coming for you," I whispered.

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Shane was not here. This was the part where I took over. This was my part, my role to play. The human known as Shane Lasher was a vanishing smoke. He would return when I exhaled.

I rode the Metro out of the city towards Paul Verize's house. After getting off I made sure to take a taxi into a nearby neighborhood, but not directly to his house. Shane represented this man for months. We knew everything about him. I knew that he lived alone. I knew that he drove a Ford Escape with plenty of cargo room in the back for garbage bags full of body parts.

I was good at hiding bodies. I was good at a lot of things. Being a serial killer living in an urban area, such as D.C., was a challenge, but not impossible. Many of the greats survived in urban areas, like Jack the Ripper or the Zodiac.

Urban areas posed more problems because of the lack of privacy, but it also provided more camouflage. Perhaps, someday I would retire to a small western town. It was much easier to kill with privacy in a place like that. People went missing all of the time in the old west.

I was the creature that hid inside of Shane's body. He was a young and attractive celebrity lawyer living in a town full of celebrities with law degrees. In the whitest city in the world, lived the darkest creature—me. My home was only blocks from the White House. My home was the blackest house.

I found numerous ways of disposing of bodies. We often had to be creative in this matter, thus employing different methods of disposal such as: the furnace, burial, or sometimes the ocean.

In a past client's case, I cut up his body parts and drove them to the airport. I left his car in long-term parking and took Shane's car that we stashed down the street days earlier. Then I drove him to our penthouse and took him to our incinerator.

In a city this size, witnesses were everywhere. Still, it was easy to blend in. People who lived in big cities usually ignored everyone else. I made good use of this. In D.C., everyone was so busy shuffling along in their own little lives that they rarely stopped to notice anyone else. They never stopped to notice that a serial killer lived next door.

The cab pulled up to the curb. I slipped him a twenty and stepped onto the sidewalk. Using Shane's muscular arm, I lifted the heavy briefcase out of the cab and walked down the professor's street. The tail of Shane's black Armani half-trench coat flapped behind me. I walked to visit the Paulverizer. I walked to vengeance, to murder, to fun.

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Dr. Paul Verize lived in a nice house on a nice street. Drunkenly, he parked his Ford Escape in the driveway and cut the engine off. He got out, forgetting the keys in the ignition. He left the cabin lights on as well. He stumbled to the front door.

At the door, he fumbled around in his pocket for the keys.

"Shit!" he cursed. Then he drunkenly, muttered, "I forgot'em."

He turned back towards his car and saw that the cabin lights were still on. He stumbled about and pressed his hand against his front door to balance himself. The pressure from his hand pushed the door ajar. It was unlocked.

Forgetting about his keys, Paul was more curious as to why his front door was unlocked. He was positive that he locked it before he went out to celebrate his victory in court. He was not the type of serial killer to be so careless.

Suddenly, his senses sharpened and he felt less inebriated.

Standing ready for anything, he crept into his house. The door squeaked open. Quietly, he stood in his foyer. The house was completely black. Nothing appeared to be disturbed. The atmosphere was calm.

Still the killer inside Paul remained highly suspicious. He sensed something was wrong. He walked further into the depths of his own lair.

Pictures of various trips to Europe hung on the walls. He crept down the hall and turned left. He entered his library. Various dead authors littered the shelves.

A large, black leather sofa rested in the middle of the room. An empty, brick fireplace took up the section of room across from his bookshelves.

Paul searched the room and noticed nothing out of place. He began to move back into the hallway, when he noticed that his desk lamp was on. He couldn't remember leaving it on.

Then he reentered the room. He moved over to the desk. Lying underneath the dim light was a typed index card. He picked it up and began to read it. It was a filing card the size of a toe tag. It looked very official. It read:

**Exhibit A: Stainless Steel Sledge Hammer
Property of DC Police Department
Do Not Remove**

Paul's jaw dropped in utter shock. It was the evidence tag for his sledge hammer; the one piece of evidence that would have convicted him, but the police had misplaced it.

As Paul's eyes adjusted to the dim light covering the desk, he noticed a plane ticket lying next to the evidence tag. It was a one-way ticket out of the country. The ticket was for only one passenger. It had his name on it. It was to a South American country.

"Going on a trip, Paul?" a dark, unrecognizable voice said from behind him.

Paul whipped around and came face to face with a dark figure standing tall in the doorway.

"Who are you? Where did you get this tag?"

"I am like you, Paulverizer. I am like you," I said.

Paul didn't know what to do. He didn't know how to react.

"Those boys, Paul. Those boys trusted you," I said. I began circling him like a lion to its prey. This was my favorite part. It thrilled me to confront them, to toy with them.

"They scorned me! I was their fag professor!" Paul shouted. He searched around the room for a weapon, but I had already removed all the would-be weapons out of his reach.

"Looking for something, Paul? Maybe something to bludgeon me with?"

"Who the hell are you? What do you want?"

Stepping out of the shadow, I revealed myself—my true self. Paul saw it. He saw me. Then he winced in terror.

I wore an Armani coat, blood-red tie with a sheer black suit and a white Calvin Klein shirt. Snuggled tight to my hands was a pair of black leather driving gloves. A blood-red scarf covered the lower part of my face and neck. The scarf matched my tie, perfectly. As the scarf and tie merged and ran down my neck, the two blended together like two red vipers during mating season.

The scarf made Shane's face almost unrecognizable. One could not discern where one ended and the other began. It protected Shane's identity. The only thing that Paul could see was my hair and dark, cold eyes.

"What do you want?" Paul asked.

"Same thing that you want, Paul—blood!" I said.

Suddenly, Paul's eyes shot wide open. Slow streams of tears formed out of fear and rolled out of his eyes. His fear turned into horror.

Paul peered down the length of my arm to the dark briefcase in my hand. He recognized it. I held his lawyer's briefcase.

"Shane?" he asked. He knew that this was Shane's body.

"Paul, you killed those boys. I know you did. Just admit it."

"I didn't. I didn't. Shane you know that," he said. He was desperate to claw his way out of our trap. He was nothing without his hammer.

"Paul, did your victims beg like this? This doesn't suit you. Here let me show you what is in my briefcase. It will make you feel better," I said, placing the case on the arm of the sofa. I reached inside and twisted the two metal objects until Paul heard a familiar clicking sound.

Slowly, I looked up and saw the terrified look in his eyes had changed into one of hope as he recognized his trusted possession. I wielded in my hands his murderous sledge hammer. It glimmered even in the dimly lit library. It beckoned to him like a desperate mistress.

He gazed upon it like a severed appendage. He needed to acquire it and put it on ice so that it could be reattached.

"My hammer. You stole it. I got off because you took it from evidence room. That is why I am free. You saved my life," he cheered. "But Shane, why are you here? To scare me?"

For a moment, Paul was relieved. He actually thought that I was his savior, his champion.

"Paul, I didn't free you. I sentenced you....to death!" I shouted and raised the hammer. Paul flinched in terror as the hammer came down towards him. I stopped it just inches from his face.

He nearly wet himself.

"Shane! What are you doing?"

"Paul you think that you deserve a second chance? Admit to what you did!"

"I am innocent," he insisted.

I lowered the hammer and flipped it around. I grasped the head, extending the handle out to Paul as a gesture to take it, to take the hammer that belonged to him.

"Here Paul, take your hammer," I said, teetering the hammer's handle inches from his face.

Paul looked into my cold, black eyes and swiftly grabbed the handle. Slowly, he rose from the floor; where he had crouched in fear. He wiped the tears from his face and gripped the handle tightly. He held it with both hands. I could see the expression on his face completely morph. He was no longer Dr. Paul Verize, history professor. He was the creature that I hunted. He was the serial killer known as Paulverizer.

"There you are, Paulverizer," I said.

"Shane, you shouldn't have done that. You know I can't let you leave now. Just like those boys. They went too far. You went too far.

"I appreciate what you did for me. Without you I would have gone to prison...but I have to bash your brains in!"

I turned my back and slowly inched away from him.

Paul raised the hammer high into the air. He geared up for a death blow. One hard whack on my head would certainly put me down.

"Paul, do you know anything about the sea urchin?" I asked, interrupting his swing down on Shane's skull.

He stopped, still holding the hammer high above his head.

"No," he said, puzzled.

"The sea urchin is a creature that simply sits on the bottom of the sandy ocean floor. It rests close to the shore in the shallows. It has a shell that is covered in long spikes like darts. They are thin and appear insignificant. Actually, they defend the urchin from predators. With great potency, they cause paralysis that is almost undetectable at first. The sea urchin's sting kills a lot of people each year. More than you would expect. They walk through the water and step on a stinger and drop dead," I said.

"What are you talking about?" Paulverizer asked.

"Ever heard of a Trang Com?"

"No," he said, feeling unsettlingly weaker. He figured that his sudden fatigue was from holding the heavy hammer.

"It's a Chinese pharmaceutical company that develops the sea urchin's poison into an instant tranquilizer," I said, grinning. "Of course, they altered the original compound. It is much faster acting now."

"So what? You were going to tranquilize me and turn me into the police?"

"Police? No," I said.

"Then what? Blackmail me? Christ you have more money than I do."

"Paul, the tranquilizer that they developed, they wanted to use as an anesthesia. They made it work on touch, on contact," I said. "You see, it just has to be administered on the skin. No need for needles."

"So?" he asked, feeling weaker.

"Paul, it kept killing people because of the poison," I said, pausing for a moment. "Paul, you didn't notice that I was wearing gloves while I held your hammer?"

Paulverizer lowered the hammer and looked down at the handle. That was when he noticed that it was coated in a gel. He didn't feel it before, because his hands were instantly paralyzed.

Suddenly, Paul realized that I drugged him with the sea urchin's poison. He dropped the hammer. I heard its heavy weight hit the hardwood floors, slightly cracking the tiles of wood.

As I moved closer to him, I saw that the hammer wasn't the only thing that fell to the floor. Paul's body doubled over next to the hammer. He shivered mildly.

"Paul," I said, bending down closer to him, "I am not here to just give you back your hammer. I am here to use it on you."

He started to scream, but could barely make a sound. His tongue and lips were numb.

I looked down at him.

"Besides, if I wanted to bribe you; why did I buy the plane ticket? The ticket is so the police think that you left town. See, you are leaving," I said.

Gently, I picked up Paul's feet and began to drag his body. I dragged him out of the library, across the hardwood floors, and past the kitchen. We went into the bathroom.

I lifted Paul's head and leaned him up against the wall. With bloodshot eyes, he looked directly into his own bathtub.

He saw that the shower curtain was gone and his tub was a completely different color. Instead of the pearl white that it had been when he left this morning, it was a dark black, plastic color.

As Paul's eyes focused in and out, a side effect from the poison, he realized that the color changed because his tub was covered with a black tarp.

Paul began to panic. He realized what the tarp was actually for. It was a durable, dark Bond hardware tarp. Skilled hunters used it for toting around deer carcasses. It kept their pickup trucks clean from the smell of dead deer. It also kept all of the blood and innards inside the tarp, making it perfect use for a serial killer.

Paul should have thought of using the same tarp to keep his victims from being discovered. Then he never would have been caught and I wouldn't be here. He could have kept on clubbing young college boys to death like they were baby seals.

"Paul, do you know what you did wrong?" I asked from out in the hall.

I knew that he couldn't speak, but I liked the torment. Like I said before, justice was really more of Shane's thing. Ultimately, I just wanted to bash in some body parts.

"You killed eleven young college boys. They all had futures. They all had parents and grandparents," I said, realizing that maybe I did enjoy the sense of vengeance as much as Shane.

"Shane Lasher and I did not have that. We had no parents. We were born out of death. All Shane and I have is each other."

Paulverizer felt sheer terror by the sound that followed my voice. I dragged his sledgehammer across the hardwood floors, into the hallway and across the kitchen floor. It scraped along the tiles, making a hideous sound that resembled a long, sharp knife scrapping against bone.

I entered the bathroom, sledgehammer in-tow. I leaned it up against the wall next to Paulverizer. Then, I grabbed his arms just behind his shoulders. I lifted him up and plopped him into the tub over the tarp.

"Paulverizer," I said grabbing the long, steel handle of his hammer. "I am Lasher the Slasher. Glad to finally make your acquaintance."

I lifted the sledgehammer up over my head. The bathroom light glimmered behind it. With all of my might, I slammed the hammer down towards Paul Verize's gut, knocking out his light.

Chapter 2

The Creator of Me.

*"I was born with the devil in me. I could not help the fact that I
was a murderer,
no more than the poet can help the inspiration to sing. I was born
with the evil
one standing as my sponsor beside the bed where I was ushered
into the world,
and he has been with me since."*
—H. H. Holmes, mass murderer.

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Vanity Fair's highest ranking photo journalist, Anna Black, was as *world class* as *Vanity Fair* got. Last year, she wrote the magazine's "sexy men" section. This year they chose Shane for a spread called "The Sexy Capitalists", because he lived in the capital. Like I said, *world class*.

She wanted Shane. He could sense it. She inhaled his Polo Black cologne, and relished at the features of his face. She wanted to scratch her sharp nails down his back as he entered her.

Shane leaned against the railing of a white marble balcony. His black kill-suit and tie hung off him like it was his skin. He wore that suit like I wore his skin.

Anna's skin was pale white. Her body was adequately sculpted. She belonged among the stone architecture of the Capital like the armless, busty goddess statues in the gardens of ancient Rome.

For the past forty-five minutes, she threw question after question at Shane:

"Shane, how could you do it?"

"Shane, don't you think he was guilty?"

"Shane, how do you live with yourself?"

"Shane, will you take off your shirt for this next photo?"

Shane's new celebrity status has also brought him the attention of his father's old law partner, Terrance Graves; a man who virtually ignored Shane most of his life. He was a cryptic man to say the least, not much sense of humor. He was a mystery, an enigma. He mostly kept to his ivory tower in the New York City office. Rarely has Shane heard from him. After Shane and I were orphaned, Terrance Graves was always behind us in the shadow of our life. He was our benefactor. Yet, he never participated hands-on in our life.

As our Godfather, Terrance Graves stepped up after Shane's parents died and took us in. He was our salvation. Although, neither Shane nor I remember much about him from Shane's rearing. We got birthday phone calls, which turned into birthday cards. Eventually, we rarely communicate with him at all. Until the day came that we came to work at Graves and Associates.

During our childhood, Terrance Graves hired others to watch over us. We had nannies, butlers, and prep school teachers. We went to the most expensive prep schools in New England. We spent summers in Europe: South France, Italy, and Monte Carlo.

Shane's schooling was extensive. We had the best teachers. We learned everything from mechanics to fencing. Shane and I were educated in two languages other than English—French and Spanish. We learned art, sculpting, and welding. We learned world history, literature, and civilizations. We learned the

sciences and the law. Yet, my personal favorite subjects were psychology and martial arts. I liked to kill things. Psychology helped us to understand them better.

Shane liked criminal justice, art, and international law.

All through our schooling I grew inside of Shane. Occasionally, we met in the dark moments of his life. Our first meeting was long ago.

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School children crowded a playground from Shane's past, set in upstate New York. A young bully picked on a helpless boy. He taunted him. He beat him.

One day on a cold December afternoon, the young, helpless boy hid behind something inside of him that he hadn't fully understood. The thing took over him, controlling his actions. Together, he and the cold thing waited patiently out on an icy lake. The children played hockey on the ice, but only on the sides where the ice was safe. The helpless boy stood in the middle of the ice over the dark patches. He held the bully's favorite hockey stick. He had swiped it earlier out of the bully's gym bag.

From the sides of the lake the bully cried out, demanding the stick back. He stood among the other children, watching as the helpless boy waited, baiting him out onto the frozen lake over the dark water beneath.

When the bully neared the helpless boy, at the peer pressure of his friends, the helpless boy ferociously banged the hockey stick on the ice.

After two hard strikes to the ice, a crack formed and raced across the ice. It shattered the ice beneath the bully's feet. He crashed into the freezing water.

It took an hour for the paramedics to thaw out the bully's toes. The blood in them had frozen.

The bully never messed with Shane ever again. That was the first time that Shane remembered meeting me, his protector.

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Anna Black snapped photos of Shane, sexual photos. I suspected that Anna intended to keep some for her personal use.

Also, I imagined that once the photos were developed, they would make Shane look like he was just casted to be on the new season of The Bachelor. Women would swoon after him.

It didn't require a lot of effort for Anna to convince Shane to take his shirt off. Before I could object, Shane posed in the chill of D.C.'s windy weather. His muscular torso was chiseled beyond that of an ordinary lawyer and he was proud of it.

I wasn't keen on this photo shoot because it brought unnecessary exposure to us. First Shane would be on the cover of Vanity Fair with his shirt off. Next we would be facing the electric chair, something that we both feared, and I have few fears. The electric chair topped the list. It sounded excruciating. A 100,000 volts frying through his brain, the place where I lived was something that frightened me. The only thing that Shane feared more was being trapped in a small cell. He feared enclosed spaces.

That was our kryptonite. Enclosed spaces paralyzed Shane. Claustrophobia sedated him and he stalled out, rendering his body useless to me.

For years, we schooled and trained ourselves for life as a hunter. As a monster, I loved to feast on the flesh and gnaw on the bones of other monsters. I lived for this purpose, to murder, to mayhem. Of course, there was one monster in particular that we both wanted to kill most of all.

We wanted to destroy our creator. Like Oedipus Rex, we wanted to destroy a vile creature known as father—the StoneCutter. He was the serial killer that we craved after, like Ahab to Moby Dick. He was our Great White Whale. He was our heavenly, estranged father, our holy grail. He was not our biological father, but our psychological one. He created us. He committed a vile act against us before we were even born. This act set in motion the darkness that would become Shane's life.

He was the StoneCutter.

The StoneCutter operated with complete anonymity for decades until the press pieced together some of his murders. A New York Times' reporter named Katelyn Fox uncovered his murderous spree.

Like the Zodiac, the StoneCutter killed in secret for decades. However, unlike the Zodiac, the StoneCutter did not advertise it to the media. The StoneCutter never intended to be caught or famous. He was dangerous because he didn't seek fame, recognition, or validation. He simply wanted to kill.

Along came Katelyn Fox, an ambitious, young journalist. She obsessed over serial murder. Often she studied serial killers. She spent hours cataloging and researching local and nationwide crimes, searching for patterns that no one else sought out. She hoped to uncover a serial killer. Her tireless obsession led her to one of the greatest finds in crime history—the existence of the StoneCutter.

One day Shane appeared on her radar. He had met Katelyn over a year ago. She wanted to make a name for herself. She wanted to use him for this means. He defended the serial killer that she had been writing about. He saved the alleged defendant from a guilty verdict.

What Katelyn uncovered was that over the course of many years, a gruesome series of home invasions had taken place across New York and neighboring states. Home invasions were not a new or uncommon crime, especially among the wealthy areas of New York, but these particular home invasions were sinisterly unique.

Normal home invasions involved a wealthy family, a clever thief, and a body count. What set the StoneCutter apart from the rest was that he was no thief. He never took a thing from the homes that he invaded.

He invaded homes in order to brutally torture and murder the families that dwelled inside. He forced the patriarch to bury the other family members alive.

No one knew where Katelyn Fox got her information, but she knew details that the FBI kept from the press. In her articles, she exposed that a serial killer was behind the invasions. She claimed that he targeted wealthy families and forced the father to bury the mother and children alive and then shot the father over an open grave. The StoneCutter left the mother and children to suffocate beneath the cold ground.

One more important detail that Katelyn uncovered was that the StoneCutter created grave markers, headstones, for his victims. The killer specially designed each headstone for each of his victims. He carved them himself. This indicated

that the murders were premeditated and methodically planned out down to the last grim detail.

Katelyn's articles garnered insurmountable attention across the country. The reading public forced the FBI to open an investigation into the phantom that she dubbed the "StoneCutter" or a man who created tombstone makers.

The StoneCutter carved the headstones out of a heavy stone. He wrote "*Here Lies*" and then carved the victim's names into the stone. He took great care in carving and chiseling the stones. The attention to detail informed Katelyn and the FBI that the murders were planned out painstakingly, like a master serial killer would do—like I would do.

I admired the StoneCutter's methodical nature. Those stones were not easy to carve and then lug around until the murder took place. The ritual controlled him. It rose out from a dark place inside of him. Sometimes, Shane made me wait months before I killed again. In that long period of time, I paced, I burned, I drooled, and I waited for the right time to strike. I studied and planned out each murder, laying the perfect trap for my prey, but I could never imagine taking the time to carve out a headstone and then carry it, unnoticed, to the kill site.

Besides being methodical, the StoneCutter was admirably brutal, dispatching a mother and her children in such a cold fashion. That was something even I could not do. Shane and I eradicated other killers. I was not doing this for some moral reason, some misguided sense of righteousness, or for some twisted sense of justice. I understood the difference between right and wrong; I simply am not interested in right. It's not that I am not diabolical enough to kill anyone. I just never found interest in burying a mother with her children. I had no morals, but that kind of murder just didn't feel right. It didn't taste right. I was not sure why. Perhaps, Shane's side of our brain had some sense of morality that stopped me, that blocked me. Perhaps, Shane was my conscience. Luckily for him, I had no interest in killing a mother and her cubs....only the poppa bear.

Katelyn Fox's articles gained enough support with the public that the FBI formed a task force to hunt the StoneCutter. A year and a half ago, the FBI arrested their suspect: a mentally unbalanced man named.....

"Gillard Shutter?" Anna Black said, interrupting our thoughts like she heard them.

"What? Did you ask a question?" Shane asked. We were both thrown off guard. Shane's jaw dropped. The hatch to my part of the brain swung wide open on its hinges in blatant surprise. How did she know that we were thinking about Gillard Shutter?

"I killed Gillard Shutter," I screamed in Shane's head. "He is dead! He has to be! I don't make mistakes!"

"Shane, your client, Gillard Shutter, where is he? How did you feel about defending him?"

"You are not interested in Paul Verize?" Shane asked. He began to put his shirt back on.

"No. What?" she said seemingly confused. "Our readers want to know about the StoneCutter. Paulverizer is not as interesting. His case is over."

"Ah. What did you want to know?" he answered.

"Where is he now? How do you feel about letting him get away with murder?" She asked.

"He was proven innocent in a court of law."

"Actually, he was guilty by reason of insanity. That's not innocent."

"He served his time. Wherever he is, I'm sure that he just wants to be left alone." Shane said.

Anna's questions persisted. She wanted only to know about the StoneCutter. She wanted to reopen old wounds, Shane's wounds. Shane was scarred. I was not, but he carried the burden of conscience, of regret, of guilt. Sometimes, I could sense beneath Shane's arrogant exterior, a sickening sense of right and wrong. I'm not sure why. Morality was useless to us. We killed the StoneCutter, and now we must continue to kill. Shane had to feed me. I needed to grow. I was, after all, a growing monster.

In our youth, we grew together, but now he aged, while I continued to grow.

But right now I only grew hungry.

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Shane's law office was a dark complex of glass, modern art, and expensive furniture. It was located in downtown D.C., not far from the Vietnam Memorial. His office rested on the corner of the third floor. Along with a modern-style conference room that sat down the hall; there were other offices, a lounge area, and a lobby.

Many of our firm's top ranking lawyers had offices next to ours. Most of Graves and Associates were comprised of young to middle-aged lawyers with little to no moral code other than how to make money. The business of law was dog eat dog, or in our world, cannibal eat cannibal.

Ally Embers' picturesque body sat perfectly posed just outside of Shane's office door. He left the door closed, but could still stare at her through the glass. Glass covered seventy percent of Shane's office with the exception of one wall, which divided Shane's office from the lawyer's office next door.

Luckily for Shane, the windows were made of one-way glass, like an interrogation room, a place that we hoped never to be in.

With the one-way glass, Shane watched his clients as they approached Ally's desk, asking to meet with us. It was a way of avoiding unwanted visitors. The glass was like Shane's skin, the walls surrounding my home. Inside of Shane, I could see out. I could see our prey, but they could not see me.

Sometimes, Shane had entire conversations with people that I wanted to kill. They never realized that I stared at them through the one-way glass of Shane's soul.

In a profession where we dealt with killers, I wondered why I was the only serial killer who could see other killers. Why was I the only monster that could sense other monsters? Why did I alone have a one-way glass? Guess I was a more evolved monster. That was why I preyed on them. They were the weaker of my species.

I had the killer instinct. I was the killer instinct. Shane was my looking glass.

"Shane?" Ally said over the phone's intercom.

Shane looked up to see the back of a woman standing at Ally's desk. The woman's frame was well built and toned. She faced the opposite direction, away from Ally and away from our one-way glass. Her backside looked familiar. Her long, dark hair, straightened by her own hand each day, waved perfectly behind her.

She wore a short, trendy leather jacket and a pair of tight designer jeans. She looked like she planned to go clubbing later. Shane noticed that she didn't have a purse. He liked that. We both liked it. A woman without a purse was someone who didn't need to carry a lot of stuff with her everywhere. She possessed little baggage. She was ready to go.

"Yes, Ally?" Shane replied, leaning into the intercom.

"Det. Good is here to see you," Ally said.

Det. Sun Good turned around to face the window so that Shane could gaze at her. She bent down toward the intercom, exposing the perfect amount of cleavage and said, "Let me in, Shane!"

Det. Sun Good was a good cop. I never held that against her. She worked hard in a world filled with sexism. She was tough. Shane enjoyed being with her, back when they were together.

Sun Good was the only real woman that threatened me. I thought that Shane would stay with her forever. I thought they would marry someday. I feared having to spend all of my energy tiptoeing around her. I feared that eventually she would be our downfall. She was a good cop. She would discover us, but so far we were safe.

Shane reached down to hold the intercom button on the phone and said, "She can come in, Ally."

Det. Sun Good walked into our office. Her hips swung with each swagger like a runway model craving attention. Shane saw the outline of her gun holstered under her leather jacket. He wondered how accurate she was with it.

Det. Sun Good was Japanese-American. She was gorgeous. Her dark skin glistened. She used a glitter body cream like a stripper, but I didn't judge, and Shane liked it. The scent grasped at my sensitive nostrils. I couldn't help but smell it. Even I found her alluring. I know Shane did.

Even as she approached, and I choked, Shane's deep blue eyes filled up with lust as they outlined her frame.

While she repulsed me, Shane wanted to touch her.

"Sun, how are you?" Shane said. He gripped tightly to the arms of his chair.

Sun walked in with her partner in-tow. He was completely silent. I chuckled. He stood tall and lean. He looked serious.

Sun stopped at the edge of Shane's desk. She gazed past him for a moment at the lustrous, white marble city beyond Shane's floor-to-ceiling windows.

"Shane, we need to know where your client is."

"Well you know where he lives. Right? You should have the address," Shane replied.

"Shane, stop dicking us around. We need you to tell us where he is. We've been to his house, checked his utility records. He hasn't lived in that house in a year," Sun said. She turned and gaze at Shane.

Shane felt suddenly uneasy. A year? That can't be right. We killed Paul just last night in his home. What was she talking about?

"Why do you look so puzzled?" Sun asked. Her powers of deduction were commendable.

"I'm just confused. I thought he was still living in the same place."

"Cut the shit, Shane. I know that you know where he is. Aiding and abetting, Shane. Aide and abetting. It is illegal to hide a wanted suspect. You know that. I don't want you to get into trouble."

"Sun, I have no idea what you are talking about."

"You don't know what I am talking about?" she asked, looking stunned that he really didn't seem to understand.

"Shane, don't you watch the news? Read the papers? There has been a new murder. How many people are you going to let die before you realize that you shouldn't represent the scum of the Earth?"

"A new murder?" Shane said, puzzled. Now, I was shocked. That was twice in one day.

We bashed Paul's brains in. We chopped him up into little bits. He was nothing more than ashes in our furnace. How could he have killed someone new?

"Shane? Are you serious? Have you been living under a rock? Yes, there have been five murders already. The Johnson family in Maryland and the Frosts in New York," Sun said. She shifted her weight onto her left leg. Her hip leaned out.

"Families?" Shane asked. Now we were both confused.

"Yes. Families. Shane, are you not listening to me? We need to know where Shutter is!"

"Shutter?" he asked.

"Gillard Shutter. Shane, he was your most famous client. You do remember him? If it wasn't for him; nobody would even know your name," Sun Good said, mockingly. "Tell me! Where is the StoneCutter?"

Gillard Shutter made us famous. Shane defended him in the StoneCutter case. It took months. Shane got Shutter off on an insanity plea. He was placed in a mental hospital one day, then six months later he was out. We waited for him to get out. We took him and killed him in the usual, undetectable fashion.

Det. Sun Good just told us that he was back. Back from the dead. It must be a copycat.

"Sun, I'm really not sure where he is," Shane said. He was in such a good mood earlier. His spirit skyrocketed after the photo shoot, but now the engines failed and his mood plummeted toward the ground, spiraling like a crashing plane. Gravity had caught a strong, unflinching hold.

"Shane, you can't hide him from us, and why would you want to? This man killed two more families. You know how demented he is."

The StoneCutter was the most sinister serial killer that I had ever encountered. He was truly devious. I wanted to kill him so badly that it took all of Shane's dexterity to stop me from slashing his throat right in the middle of open court.

"Sun, I'm not sure what else I can say. I haven't seen or heard from Gillard Shutter since the day of the verdict."

Or rather when I watched the terror in his eyes the last night that he was alive.

"Fine, but I'm warning you. I don't like how your most famous client has vanished into thin air. We will be looking into that. You want to play it this way? Then you play it this way," Sun said. She glanced over at her partner and the two of them departed from his office.

The last thing that we needed was for the police digging around into our past. They might notice that many of our firm's clients have vanished, but that's another issue. Right now, I needed to focus my instincts on the StoneCutter's copycat.

The StoneCutter was dead. At least I had thought he was. Gillard Shutter was the StoneCutter. He confessed it to me. He was a little off. He was a little crazy, but my natural predatory instinct told me that he was the killer that we had searched for.

I had to be right about him. No way did I make a mistake. I never made mistakes. Never.

|||||

Shane stood near the edge of the roof of his penthouse. He looked out toward the Potomac River. I could sense Shane's frustration seeping past his part of the brain and into my own like a leak in a nuclear reactor. The radiation seeped into my living area and it stunk. The smell was debilitating. I had never felt this before. I had never felt Shane's regret. Normally, I was emotionless, void of feeling.

Suddenly, I felt concerned about Shane's side of the brain affecting mine. His fear of killing the wrong man was powerful, more so than I ever suspected. I had to keep him in check.

We looked out over the river and thought back to the night that I killed the StoneCutter.

|||||

Six months ago, we waited in the shadows in Shane's black Mercedes E Class and watched the entrance to Devil Arc, D.C.'s maximum security mental hospital.

A gloomy morning sky hovered in the air. The thick overcast slung such a dreary shadow over the city that D.C.'s white marble complexion seemed more of a decrepit grey like a mausoleum. The overcast stole away the city's famous luster. Today, it was a tomb.

We waited in the driver seat of Shane's car, behind the silent hum of the engine. Gillard Shutter stepped out of the hospital. He stretched out his arms toward the sky as if he had just awaked from a yearlong sleep. He wore the same tattered suit that he had worn the final day of his trial.

Gillard walked away from the hospital, waving goodbye to the guards as if to say goodbye to old friends. He seemed different than we remembered. His demeanor was different. He was calmer. He appeared to be a completely new man, rehabilitated. We wondered if they had lobotomized him. We weren't sure if they even did that anymore.

I remembered asking myself a question: *If they ever caught us, what would a lobotomy do to us?* Shane was sure that they didn't perform that procedure anymore. Society deemed it barbaric and medieval, even primitive. However, the truth was that lobotomies worked.

If the state ever caught us and sentenced us to shock treatment, that would surely be the death of me. A lobotomy would kill me. Like the serial killers of the past, who were thought to be criminally insane and then lobotomized; Shane would be cured. The others who were lobotomized actually were cured only they were rendered brain dead.

Shock therapy was the equivalent of chemotherapy. The radiation killed the cancer cells, but it also destroyed the healthy ones. A lobotomy would kill me, but leave Shane alive, but brain dead. He would be a shell of a man. His heart would beat. His eyes would blink. His lungs would breathe, but he would be no more.

Gillard Shutter was a fragile looking man. He did not look nearly the same way that he had a year before, when Shane first approached him in his cell.

"Gillard?" Shane called out through the driver's side window.

Shane wore his kill-suit. It was perfectly pressed along with his red tie and blood-colored scarf. When we first met with Gillard Shutter in his cell, I wasn't completely sure that he was the StoneCutter. That very first day, I wanted to kill him, and Shane wanted me to have him. Yet, we had to verify that we had the right suspect.

We had waited our entire life to kill the StoneCutter. Inside that prison cell, that very first day, we had brought in our kill-case. We were prepared to kill. Shane's briefcase housed a secret compartment. Inside it was a razor sharp, retractable knife with a three inch, stainless steel blade. The small knife was not our preferred method of slashing, but it would do the trick nicely—surgically.

"Yes?" Gillard said, with a monstrous look in his eyes.

He was hard to read, but I felt that he had the killer instinct. Still neither of us was convinced that he was the right man.

After a short conversation, Shane decided to represent him. As usual we would get him off and then kill him. That was the plan.

That criminal case brought Shane national attention, something that we were unprepared for. Getting away with murder was a lot more complicated when you have a famous face.

Gillard walked toward the street. He looked around for a taxi to take him home.

It was no surprise that the media was not there to film his release. The hospital had announced that he would be leaving two months from the day he was actually released. This lie protected him from harassment.

Shane pulled the car up to the curb and honked.

Gillard looked over in surprise.

"Mr. Lasher?" he asked.

"Gillard," Shane acknowledged. "Want a ride home?"

"Sure," Gillard said, looking pleased to see his savior. He opened the door and got into the car. "How did you know I was getting out today?"

"Gillard, it is my job to keep tabs on my clients," Shane said.

"The trial is over, Mr. Lasher. Are you in the habit of going the extra mile for your clients?"

Suddenly, I realized that there was definitely something different about him. The monster that was inside seemed to be hiding from me. I could no longer sense him. It didn't change anything. Gillard was going to die today.

"You are a very special client, Mr. Shutter. A very special client," Shane said, his voice turned darker. I rose to the surface and took control.

We drove along the highway for thirty minutes in silence until we started to speak.

"Gillard, of all of those families that you ruined, I wonder if you remember a particular family from about twenty-five years ago?"

Gillard looked over at Shane in uncomfortable dismay.

"Mr. Lasher, I am innocent," he proclaimed.

"Gillard, you don't have to lie to me. I'm your lawyer, your defender, your priest. You were convicted and claimed insanity. Remember? We both know that you were not really mentally insane at the time."

"Mr. Lasher, I was mentally unbalanced during the trial. I am rehabilitated now, and I'm telling you that I did not commit any murders. The unbalance in my brain caused me to admit to those horrible acts."

"Imbalanced," Shane said.

"What?" Gillard asked, confused.

"It's imbalanced not unbalanced," Shane said.

"Gillard! Now, just answer the damn question!" I shouted. We peered over at the StoneCutter. My black eyes seeped through Shane's eye sockets.

Gillard Shutter saw me clear as day. He gazed into the large, black orbs that replaced Shane's blue eyes.

"Oh my God!" he shouted.

"StoneCutter, I know who you are," I said. The darkness in my voice shook him to his core.

Gillard froze in terror. Suddenly, he glanced out the window at the highway and noticed that we had passed the exit to his house.

"Shane? That was my exit. Stop the car. I told you. I am not the StoneCutter. We made a mistake at trial. Stop the car!"

"StoneCutter, we are going to visit a special place. We are going to the place of my birth," I said.

Gillard peered back into my dark eyes.

"Dear God!" he said. "What are you?"

"I'm a monster, like you. Except, I am a monster who feeds on other monsters.....like you," I said, turning my head and gazing into his face.

Gillard went for the door handle. He pulled it. He yanked it, but the door didn't open.

"I detached the spring to that door handle," I said. "It won't open for you. You can't escape."

Gillard reached into his jacket pocket. Before he could pull out whatever he had reached for, I stuck a syringe hard into his inner thigh.

Quickly, the needle dispersed a powerful tranquilizer into his bloodstream. Instantly, he fell into a deep sleep as his hand emerged from his pocket gripping softly to a cell phone.

The phone dropped to the floor of Shane's car.

"You are mine, StoneCutter," I said. I could barely contain my excitement.

I slowed the car down and reached down to the floorboard. I picked up the cell phone and turned it off. Then I rolled down the window and tossed it out onto the black highway.

No one is coming for you StoneCutter. No one. We thought.

|||||

Nightfall neared. Shane parked his Mercedes in the enormous backyard of a quiet manor. We walked among the wealthy family dwellings of West Hampton Beach.

A cool breeze swept up off of the private beach in front of us.

The Mercedes headlights beamed onto the ground, lighting up the six-foot hole that Shane dug.

Gillard Shutter began to stir. Slowly, he woke up to the nightmare that I had planned for him for so many years.

I stood tall, wearing Shane's kill-suit. The blood-red scarf wrapped around the bottom of Shane's face, hiding Shane and revealing me.

Gillard's eyes slowly opened. His sense of touch began to return to his extremities. A few moments passed, and finally he was fully awake.

He was dazed, but knew that he was lying in a deep hole in the ground. He lifted his head and investigated his surroundings. A tight rope bound his hands and feet together. He tried to speak, but a thick strip of duct tape impeded this action. I didn't care about what he had to say. I didn't want to hear his voice or his lies about being innocent. Gillard Shutter was going to die.

After he realized that he lay in a hole, it also dawned on him that he was encased in a wooden box with no lid. He started to squirm violently. He struggled to free himself from his bonds. Terror filled his veins like rushing blood.

"StoneCutter, I can't tell you how long I have waited for this. You are my opus. Truly, I relish this moment," I said.

Gillard Shutter seemed to beg for mercy with his eyes. Mercy was something that only humans expressed. Shane was the only one living in this body that was human, and he had recused himself hours ago. This was one kill that he wanted me to enjoy.

"StoneCutter, you kill people by burying them alive. So I am going to do the same to you, but I have added a twist to your ritual."

"Ugh," Gillard mumbled through the duct tape.

"StoneCutter, you created headstones for your victims. That takes some talent. To carve their names into stone, you must have spent a lot of time doing that. Picking out the right words to use and picking the right sized stones," I said. After circling around the grave, I reached down and picked up a small, stone tablet.

"StoneCutter, here is yours," I said, holding up the tombstone that I created so that he could see it plainly.

Gillard studied it in horror. His tombstone read:

**Here Lies the StoneCutter:
The creator of me**

Again Gillard struggled with his ropes. It was useless. I tied them far too tight for him to escape. He was all mine.

"I see that you approve of my work. Good. I feared that you were going to think that it was amateurish."

"Mmmm," Gillard mumbled through the duct tape.

I moved out of his view for a moment and placed the stone firmly into the hole I made just above his grave. It slid into place. I hammered it with the shovel. The sound upset Gillard even more because he began to flail around like a fish out of water.

Finally, after a few hits with the shovel, the tombstone rested upright and perfect. It appeared just as a real gravestone would.

I returned to Gillard's view and said, "Now for one last twist. StoneCutter, you are the ultimate prey. You created me. In many ways, you are my mentor. Without you, I would have never been born. Without you, I would only be Shane. So I have to pay homage to your killings the right way.

"When you carried out your dark deeds, you forced the father of the family to bury the mother and children alive at gunpoint. Then you killed the father. I don't want to kill you just yet, but I don't want to short change you either. I don't want to short change your work.

"You are an artist," I said. From behind my back I revealed a silver colt 1911 handgun. The silver finish glimmered in the moonlight like the shiny scales of a barracuda beneath the murky surface of the Atlantic at night.

"I apologize that I couldn't find your gun. I prefer to use the murder weapon of my victims, but you hid that gun too well," I said.

Gillard Shutter began to struggle so hard in his bonds that I was sure that he might actually break free of them.

I pointed the gun down the deep hole at him. Slowly, I moved the sights down his body to his legs.

I fired twice, one bullet into each kneecap. He gasped behind his duct taped mouth. Tears flooded his eyes. He was no longer going to be mobile even if he could free himself from his restraints.

"Don't worry about bleeding to death, StoneCutter. You will run out of oxygen long before that," I said, grinning.

After I slipped the gun back into Shane's jacket pocket, I stepped out of his view again to grab the lid to the coffin. I tossed it down on top of him. There was no need to nail it shut. Gillard wasn't getting free. At least I hoped that he wasn't.

I returned to the car to grab the shovel that leaned against the driver's side door.

When I returned to the grave, once more I peered down at the StoneCutter's coffin. I heard him, squirming in complete agony. It only took about twenty minutes to shovel all of that dirt back into the hole. Afterwards, I patted it down gently with the tip of the shovel.

The StoneCutter was dead and buried. At least that was what I had thought.

Shane began to regain control of our body as my murderous deed disintegrated into the background of the night. He peered down at the mound of dirt. He looked at the shovel in his hand. He felt satisfied.

One more time, Shane patted down the dirt and peered out over the bay. The turbulent waves crashed onto the private beach.

Shane returned to the Mercedes. He popped the trunk and put the shovel inside along with the gun.

He sat behind the wheel and drove away.

Leaving the manor's backyard, we drove past the silent old house. At the end of a long, twisting driveway, Shane glanced over at the mailbox before we pulled out onto the main street. The mailbox read:

S. Lasher Residence

Shane and I never thought we would actually catch the StoneCutter, but we had. And now he was buried in the place where we were born—Shane's family manor.

Chapter 3

Wounds Run Deep.

"I liked not being hurt. So send the pain below."

—Chevelle, Send the Pain Below.

|||||

"Ally, I need to take a personal day," Shane said into the microphone built into the steering wheel of his car. His iPhone was plugged into the console near the radio. Ally's Facebook picture was displayed on the touch screen in the center of his console. It was Ally showing off her toned body in a bikini, her long hair fluttered behind her like she was in front of a wind machine. She must have done modeling on the side, but I didn't know for sure. Shane stayed out of her personal life. Unless she volunteered the information; he didn't ask.

"Shane, are you ok? I can't remember the last time that you took a personal day," she asked with genuine concern in her voice.

"I'm fine. Just move everything up for me. Do not contact me unless it is absolutely necessary. Everything else can wait until I return," Shane said. He hung the phone up and turned up the volume on the car stereo. He listened to Chopin's Nocturne.

The memories of killing Gillard Shutter were not enough. Shane decided to visit the place of our birth, the same place that we buried Gillard Shutter a year ago, our family home. He pulled the car into the long driveway to Lasher manor. He followed the driveway to the front of the house, parked, and got out of the car.

The morning daylight showered through the trees, leaving the impression that we stood under a rooftop of leaves. A dark shade covered most of the ground. Shane walked around to the back of the house and down the long path to the private beach.

The house and the backyard looked just as deserted as it did that night that we buried Gillard Shutter.

Long ago, when Shane was a child, Terrance Graves hired caretakers to oversee the house. They trimmed the hedges and kept the yard up. They cleaned the outside of the house. They swept the leaves off of the roof. Once a month, a cleaning crew would enter the house and clean it from top to bottom, detailing every square inch. They always left it immaculate. We were never really sure why Terrance took such good care of it in those days. It remained empty, and we never visited the house. I supposed that it had something to do with the grief he felt for Shane's parents and their deaths. Shane assumed that he felt responsible for it, like the house belonged to his own brother. We had no siblings, so Shane wasn't sure what that kind of attachment felt like. We only had each other.

Throughout his life, Shane did not stay in the manor very often. We mostly spent our years away at school. During the holidays, when Shane was young, we stayed at Terrance's penthouse apartment in New York City.

Shane never visited any aunts or uncles. After our parent's deaths, Shane's extended family retreated into the background of their own lives. The tragedy was too much for them to bear the sight of us.

The closest thing that Shane ever had to a father was Terrance Graves. Although, he saw after our well-being, he was a poor substitute for a real father. He was more of an absent guardian than anything else.

The only real guardian that Shane ever had or needed was me.

Near the beach, Shane stopped at the small family cemetery. He carried a shovel. He looked at the tombstones. His father's, mother's, and the StoneCutter's headstones were all there, lined up together like a grouping of the dead people who influenced us the most, our family.

Shane grabbed the shovel and began to dig up the StoneCutter. We needed to make sure that he was still buried, that he didn't escape somehow. When we arrived I half expected that the StoneCutter's grave would have been dug up, like a ghost had risen from the dead. I thought that he had come back to haunt us.

Still, we found it as we had left it a year ago. It was undisturbed. I almost wish that it was dug up, that he had come back from the dead because now I started to doubt. I started to believe that I made a mistake, that I had killed the wrong man. Although, I was sure that there was a killer in Shutter, the new murders meant that I could have been wrong about him being the StoneCutter. There were a lot of psychopaths out there. I could have mistaken him for the one that we spent our life searching for.

What have I done? Shane thought. The words whispered through the walls of his skull and into my domain. The guilt, it came, crashing into my walls like a tidal wave. I had to stop it. I had to make it right.

After forty-five minutes of digging, Shane reached the top of Shutter's coffin. He stood on top of it and tossed the shovel out of the pit.

Please Shutter, you bastard, don't be on the other side of this lid, Shane thought.

Shane peered down, closed his eyes, and with all of his might, jerked open the lid.

Lying in a mound of worms and dirt, Gillard Shutter's skeleton stared back at us. The empty sockets in his skull looked directly through Shane's blue eyes and

into mine. For the first time ever, I felt fear. It was Shane's fear, seeping through the cracks and invading my side of our brain. It began to leak into my home, like a water valve busting on a submarine. I had to plug it up before it drowned me.

Shane and I began to think back to our genesis. We were here because of the StoneCutter.

|||||

More than twenty-five years ago, a young, rich couple lived in Shane's house. Their names were Shannon and Sebastian Lasher, our parents.

It was a hot summer night. A warm breeze swept off the bay and onto their private beach. The leaves on the trees bloomed jauntily with a colorful scheme of green hues.

The sun slowly set. Shane's parents sat on the back porch, witnessing the grand sunset. Sebastian studied an important case brief. It was detrimental to the success of his and Terrance's firm, back then they were partners, Graves-Lasher and Associates. Their firm was only five years old. They had worked hard to build it from the ground up.

Shannon Lasher, Shane's mother, was seven months pregnant with him. A large bump protruded from her belly. Yet, she still had several weeks to go. She was only twenty-eight weeks pregnant.

She sat reading Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. That was one of her favorite stories. It was the tale of a successful doctor who was really hiding a madman inside himself, a killer. It took a special formula to allow the killer in him to take over and wreak havoc on the city and Jekyll's loved ones.

Hyde destroyed Jekyll's life.

I related to the story. Shane and I were constantly balancing our needs and our lives. The mistake that Hyde made was that he took control over Jekyll's life and actions without caution, without self-control. I could do the same, taking Shane's personal life hostage, but that would lead to our demise. I needed Shane in order to survive. I needed people to believe that he was alone in our body. I needed them to see only Shane and never to look upon me. He was my disguise. If I went around killing, like I wanted, we would both face the electric chair, not just Shane. We would be no better than Jekyll and Hyde. We would be a killer and a man struggling to take control over one vessel. Instead, we lived together like two roommates of the same body.

Startlingly, the front doorbell rang. Sebastian rose to answer it. As he began to enter the manor from the backyard, the telephone rang.

"Damn. Shannon would you answer the door? I need to take that call. I'm expecting a call from Terrance," Sebastian said.

"Okay, honey. It's probably just Mrs. Livingston from down the street anyway, looking to gossip," Shannon said, placing her book on the patio table. She grabbed both arms of the chair and heaved herself to her feet.

"Thank you, darling. I know that it hurts you to move about so much, but I really must answer Terrance's phone call. He said that he would call about the case this evening," Sebastian said.

"Of course, honey. Don't worry about it. I need the exercise anyway. I still have another two months to carry around our son in here. I don't want to get lazy now. In three weeks I might weigh another twenty pounds," she said.

They both chuckled.

Sebastian went into the den and picked up the phone.

"Hello, Terrance. I've been eager to hear from you," he said.

Shannon steadily made her way to the front door. She fell out of earshot of her husband. She wondered what was so important to the case that made Sebastian so eager to speak to Terrance.

The doorbell rang again. She reached out and pulled open the door. The figure on the front porch was tall and lean. That was all that she had seen before he punched her with a hard right cross. Shannon flew back off of her feet and onto the stone floor.

She cried out in pain. Her vision blurred. She couldn't see anything. She tried to roll over onto her stomach, but the intruder kicked her. She let out a scream that felt like it would burst the windows, but the kick had knocked the wind out of her, so all that came out of her mouth was a muffled and painful gasp of air.

The intruder pulled her by the hair and dragged her down the hall towards her husband's voice.

"Hold on a second. Something is going on," Sebastian said. He put the phone down by the receiver and walked out into the hallway.

He saw Shannon lying on the floor. Her nose and mouth were bleeding. The front door was wide open. Dirty footprints were tracked across the stone floor leading into the living room.

"Shannon?" Shane's father blurted out. He hurried to help his wife. Before he could bend down to help her, the intruder stepped out of the shadows. He wore a ski mask and black clothing. He held a silver handgun, a colt 1911.

Before Sebastian uttered a word, the intruder struck him dead center of his forehead. Sebastian fell flat on his back.

The intruder walked back to the den and hung up the phone. Quickly, he returned. He pointed the gun at Sebastian.

"Get up," the intruder whispered. His voice was dark and raspy.

"What? What do you want?" Sebastian asked.

The intruder stepped closer to Shane's father.

"Ask me one more question, and I will shoot your wife in the stomach. Do you understand?" the intruder whispered.

Nervously, Sebastian nodded.

Shannon started to cry. She was terrified.

"Now get up. Both of you," he ordered.

Shane's parents rose to their feet.

The intruder motioned for them to walk toward the backdoor. He returned to front door and closed it.

"Go outside," he commanded.

Shane's parents followed his instructions. Shannon moved slowly. She was terrified and Shane started kicking profusely inside her stomach.

The intruder didn't seem to be irritated by the sluggishness of Shannon Lasher. He waited patiently for her to climb down the steps and off of the back porch.

"What now?" Sebastian asked. He held his hands out to assist his wife as she neared the bottom step. He helped her onto the grass.

"Now, we take a little walk down toward the beach," the intruder said. He pointed the gun clear at Shannon's stomach and at Shane.

Shane's parents followed his orders and walked toward the sandy beach. The sun had almost set completely. It gave off a deep reddish hue that pierced through the trees, transcending the skyline into a spectrum of red colors leading to black.

As Shane's parents struggled to reach the beach, they noticed something only meters away. Just before the grass became sand, there was a long, thin object jutting out of the ground.

Shane's father first realized what they walked towards. There was a shovel stuck out of the ground ahead.

"What is this for?" Sebastian asked. He halted their walk just paces away from the shovel.

"I want you to dig," the intruder demanded.

"Why?" Shannon screamed while tears ran down her face.

"Dig," the intruder whispered.

"What for?" Sebastian begged.

The intruder pointed the gun at Sebastian's unborn son.

"Dig," the intruder ordered.

"Okay," Sebastian replied. He stepped in front of the gun, shielding his wife and Shane.

He looked over at the shovel with a grimaced expression.

He rolled up his shirt sleeves and leaned into his wife. He kissed her and moved toward the shovel. Shannon stepped back. The intruder followed her. He pointed the gun at her. He never lowered it, not even an inch.

Sebastian dug until he couldn't lift his arms, and then he dug some more. He was afraid of what the hole was for. It looked like a grave.

"Stop. That is enough," the intruder said.

He stepped closer to Sebastian and the grave. He knelt down and reached out his hand.

"Shovel," he said.

Sebastian handed the shovel up to him. The intruder stepped back and stabbed the shovel hard into the earth.

"Get out," he said.

Shane's father reached up to the sides of the hole and struggled to pull himself out of it. When he finally stood up on his feet, chunks and particles of dirt blew off of him and into the wind.

"Stay," the intruder said. He reached out to Shannon and grabbed her arm.

"Where are you going?" Sebastian asked in an alarmed tone.

"Stay!" the intruder replied, sharply.

The intruder took Shannon's arm and dragged her into the tree line and the darkness surrounding it.

After a few moments, Sebastian glanced over at the shovel. He thought about using it as a weapon. He began to inch towards it. Carefully, he moved closer and closer. He hoped that the intruder was not watching from the darkness.

Suddenly, Sebastian heard a noise. It was faint at first and then grew louder. The noise wasn't from the forest. It came from the beach, from the water.

Sebastian looked out over the bay. He saw in the distance a glimmer, a reflection off of something metal. He squinted his eyes. A small fishing boat drifted along the water. It coasted near the other side of the bay. He wanted to run towards the shoreline and jump up and down. He wanted to call out to the occupants of the boat like a marooned castaway seeing the first passing ship in months, but the intruder still held his wife captive.

Then another sound entered Sebastian's ears. This sound came from the forest. It was a scuffing sound like something was being dragged across the hard ground.

Slowly, he watched as his wife stepped out of the darkness. She had tear-filled eyes. She towed something behind her. It was tied to a short length of thickly knotted rope. As she came clearer into view, Sebastian saw that she dragged a large object like a mule plowing the fields.

Sebastian thought that it might have been a canoe.

The intruder followed behind her pointing the gun at her back. Then he pointed it at Sebastian.

"Stay!" he called out.

Sebastian watched in complete horror as his pregnant wife dragged what appeared to be a large wooden box, not a canoe. As the object became clearer to Sebastian, he winced in utter terror. He now knew what the hole was for.

His wife towed a coffin behind her.

Oh God, he's going to bury us! Sebastian thought.

Shannon stopped just shy of the deep hole that her husband had dug.

The intruder flipped the lid off of the coffin and half-shoved, half-slid the box into the hole with his foot. It landed perfectly on its bottom. The lid remained open, barely attached to the body of the coffin by a couple of loose hinges.

Sebastian saw that the intruder now held two guns. He struggled to adjust his eyes to study the second gun, which appeared quite large. Then he realized that it was not a regular gun. It was large and bulky with a cylinder top on it. The top looked like a jar. Then Sebastian recognized what the second gun was for. It was a nail gun.

"Lasher," the intruder whispered in his dark voice.

"Yes," Shane's father replied. He trembled at the thought of what this man planned for them.

"I'm here to rob you, and only rob you. I don't want to hurt you," he said.

Sebastian's fear subsided, but only slightly.

"Lower her in," the intruder whispered.

Shannon's eyes burst open as wide as they could. She began to tremble in overwhelming fear.

"What?" Sebastian shouted.

The intruder pointed the gun again at Shannon's stomach.

"Lower her in," the intruder said.

"Why?"

"I need you to have incentive to help me. She is insurance. That is all," he said.

Sebastian looked into his wife's eyes. She trembled.

"Lower her in or I will shoot her and she will fall in."

"I'm sorry," Sebastian said to Shannon.

"No! No!" she cried.

Sebastian, having no choice, took her by the wrists and carefully lowered her down into the coffin. Her legs lay out across the cold, wooden bottom.

Shane kicked violently inside her. He grew unsettled and upset from all of the commotion.

The intruder waited until she was completely inside of the coffin.

"Step back," he said to Sebastian.

Sebastian moved back towards the beach. He kicked up sand with the heels of his shoes.

The intruder gazed down in the pit at Shannon, who cried like a new born child.

Sebastian glanced over his shoulder towards the spot where he had seen the fishing boat. He saw the glimmer from the vessel. It was still out there.

Oh please, help us, he thought.

The intruder kicked the coffin lid shut. It flapped close over the top of Shannon and the unborn Shane.

Sebastian turned back in horror. The intruder jumped down on top of the coffin. With extremely fast reflexes, he nailed the coffin lid shut with six good shots with the nail gun.

Sebastian only had seconds to take advantage of the intruder's lack of attention on him. He looked at the shovel and back at the fishing boat. The boat seemed to move closer, but it was still far away. He decided to make a move for the shovel.

He was only inches from it, when the intruder intervened.

"Go ahead. Grab it," the intruder said, pointing the Colt straight at him.

Sebastian froze.

"Grab it."

Sebastian picked up the shovel.

"Bury her," the intruder said.

"What?"

"Bury her."

Sebastian looked at the pit with the coffin. Sluggishly, he walked over to it and began throwing dirt on top of his wife's coffin. He could hear her screams as the sounds of dirt hit the top of the coffin.

He shouted encouragements back at Shannon through the entire process.

He said, "It'll be okay, baby."

"Hang in there, baby. I'm going to get you out really soon."

After she was completely buried, the intruder walked over to the mound of dirt and patted it with his foot.

Sebastian fought to hold back his rage.

The intruder motioned for him to walk over to the tree line away from the house.

"What? Why? I thought that you were going to rob us?"

"Walk and bring the shovel," the intruder said, motioning to the trees.

With little choice, Sebastian did as he was ordered. Before they disappeared into the darkness around the trees, he glanced one more time at the fishing boat. It floated away from the shore and off into the distance.

In the darkness, Sebastian could barely see, but he sensed that the intruder was still following him closely.

They walked a short distance.

"Stop," the intruder ordered.

Sebastian stopped. His eyes struggled to make out the ground in front of him. He was almost certain that it was not there.

"Lasher," the intruder said. He pulled a flashlight out of his coat.

Suddenly, there was a bright light shining in Sebastian's eyes.

"Follow the beam," the intruder commanded.

Sebastian stared directly into the beam. The intruder moved it towards the ground. The beam moved like a spotlight along the swaying grass. The intruder stopped it just beyond where Sebastian stood.

Sebastian gasped in terror. He laid his eyes upon a tombstone. It jutted out of the ground, slightly crooked. The tablet read:

**HERE LIES SEBASTIAN LASHER:
A BASTARD LAWYER**

"No!" Sebastian shouted. He turned back towards the source of the light. He heard the intruder laughing. The sinister laugh echoed in his ears and into his brain.

The beam from the flashlight moved to the intruder's face. He removed his mask.

Sebastian's heart pounded out of his chest. It was the most terrifying moment of his life. He stared into the intruder's eyes. They were not human eyes. In the darkness, they looked like large, black orbs.

The intruder pointed the gun at Sebastian's chest and then lowered it to his knees. He shot him twice in each leg.

Sebastian cried out in agony and fell back into a deep pit. It was a hole that he had not noticed before. He landed hard into a wooden box, another coffin.

The intruder stepped closer to the ledge above him. He revealed the shovel. He stabbed it into the ground next to the hole. He vanished out of Sebastian's sight for only a moment and then returned with the lid for the coffin. He tossed it on top of Sebastian's coffin.

"Help! Help us!" Sebastian cried out, hoping that someone would hear his screams.

The lid quickly muffled his pleas for salvation.

The intruder nailed the lid shut.

Sebastian stopped shouting and waited for the horrible sound that would come next. He waited for it and it came. It was the sound of dirt bellowing on top of the coffin's lid.

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"I'm telling you that I heard gunshots," Gregory McBride said.

"We don't know what that was, dork," Bradley McBride replied. "Just go back to fishing."

The brothers weren't supposed to be out so late. They snuck out with their father's boat after their parents went to sleep. Bradley, the older brother, feared

getting caught. After all, their parents thought that Greg was an angel. So Bradley was the one who would get blamed and punished.

A deadly calm swept over the bay for most of the night. The gunshots interrupted that calm. The sound echoed in the boys' ears like a banshee wailing across the water.

Gregory stared at the Lasher's private beach.

"Bradley, that is that lawyer's house," he said, pointing at the beach.

"So what? Mind your own business. We still have to finish this beer, and then go home before dad discovers that we snuck out," Bradley said.

Gregory looked at his older brother, and then he returned his attention to the beach. He squinted his eyes. He thought that he saw something on the edge of the coastline.

Gregory reached down and grabbed a pair of binoculars from out of the tackle box. He pointed them at the private beach. He gazed through the eyeholes, squinting hard, trying to see clearly in the darkness. He studied the beach.

Suddenly, he saw a tall, dark figure standing at the edge of the water and sand. Shocked, he stumbled and tripped back onto the boat, bumping into his brother.

Bradley fumbled around with his fishing pole, trying to catch it before it fell into the water. It was too late. His brother had knocked it out of his hand.

"Shit! Greg!" Bradley said. He slapped his little brother in the back of the head.

"Bradley," Gregory said.

"Greg, I had a huge fish on the line and now dad's favorite pole is drifting in the bay."

"Bradley, there is something on that beach," Gregory said.

"What are you babbling about?"

"The lawyer's beach. There is someone or something there," Gregory said,

Bradley swiped the binoculars out of Gregory's hand and took a reluctant look for himself.

He adjusted the sights. The beach was out of focus for him. As it came into focus, Bradley began to tremble. He saw it too.

On the edge of the beach, a man stood staring directly back at them. The man was definitely not supposed to be there. He wore a black ski mask.

"We have to tell someone, Bradley."

Bradley McBride set down the binoculars for a moment as if he paused to think clearly. Then he gazed through them once more at the beach. The man was gone. He searched around the area. He found the man. He stood next to what looked like a tombstone. Bradley watched as the man propped the tombstone up on top of a mound of dirt.

"Let's get father," Bradley said.

The boys started the boat's motor and began to return home.

|||||

Shannon Lasher's chest panted heavily. Her body was covered in sweat. Her air was running out. She was desperate to survive, to see her unborn son. She ran out of energy long ago. Her fingernails were blood soaked from trying to claw her way out of the coffin.

Inside her womb, something else clawed its way out. Something dark was happening. Shane kicked and struggled violently. As she fought to free herself from her tomb, Shane fought to free himself of her womb. Something traumatic happened to him, something evil.

Shane fought and kicked until Shannon's water broke.

She screamed and screamed. She was going into labor. Shane was coming out prematurely, but he was coming out.

Shane kicked and stirred. Then he kicked again. Suddenly, darkness overcame his insides. Within moments, I was conscience.

We had to escape. I had to live.

Shannon screamed more and more.

I squirmed and swam the inside of Shane. He, in turn, squirmed inside of Shannon.

A moment later, she went into full on labor. She pushed and heaved. The pain overwhelmed her. The pain was me. It was my birth.

Painfully, Shannon Lasher heaved and panted, trying desperately to push out her child. After great agony, she succeeded.

We emerged from Shannon Lasher's womb. Covered in blood, we were alive. Horror fused us together as one being. Shannon looked down at us. She could barely see anything in the darkness of the coffin. All she could see was our shadow rustling about beneath her waistline. We looked like an unnamable creature, a critter crawling up her wet legs.

Shannon's body grew numb from the pain caused by our birth. She neared death.

We did not cry like most newborns. For a moment, she feared that Shane was dead. He was born far too early. He was not dead. I kept him alive. We were alive.

Suddenly, a loud banging sound crashed above us. We heard voices. Someone was digging up the coffin. The cavalry arrived just in the nick of time.

Shannon's frail body fought to make a sound. She muttered, "Help me."

A sliver of light crept through the coffin's lid. The light fell across her belly, exposing my reptilian features to the world for the first time.

She used her remaining strength to lift her head up to look upon her baby, upon Shane.

"Shane?" she muttered.

"Shane!" she gasped.

She looked for Shane, but she saw only me, cradled in the darkness between her legs. She saw the blackness in our eyes. Her baby's eyes were huge, black orbs like a serpent's, like a shark's, like some unnamed subspecies born out of the depths of the ocean.

At that moment, I controlled Shane. I saved us.

"Oh God!" she said. "What are you?"

She looked on me with terror in her eyes. She looked at me like I was a demon.

Again she asked, "What are you?"

Those were her last words, her final words.

She spoke and then she was dead. Her heart failed. Her body failed. Terror killed her.

I was the abomination that stared at her in the darkness. The sight of me killed her. I was the evil thing that pushed my way out of her. I made my first kill. I drew first blood. I killed our mother.

A single moment later, the coffin's lid flew open. Standing over me was a group of police officers wielding shovels. Just as a flood of red and blue police lights engulfed our coffin, my eyes returned to Shane's eyes. I allowed him to come to the surface. He cried like a normal baby. I left no sign that I existed. I hid inside him, nestled in my new home, my new life.

Most people are buried in a coffin. I was born in one. I was slasher. I was Shane's devil.

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The ghosts of our past faded into memory.

Shane stared down at the skeleton of Gillard Shutter. He was filled with doubt. He doubted me, doubted my instincts, and doubted that we killed the right man. Shane had never doubted me before. He feared that we had made the wrong choice. He started to think that maybe Gillard was not the real StoneCutter.

I admit that it was possible that I saw him wrong, but I was sure that I saw a killer inside him—a killer like me. Maybe he was just the wrong killer.

We had to catch the new killer. We had to right our wrong. Perhaps, the StoneCutter had an accomplice. Or perhaps, it was just a copycat. Or maybe it was the real deal. Maybe he set us up. At any rate he had to die.

Gillard Shutter was dead now. It was too late for him. If Shane needed redemption, there was only one way to have it. We had to kill the StoneCutter again.

Shane's phone rang. He reached into his pocket and pulled it out. The display showed a new picture of Ally. She was topless, but covering her breasts with her hands. She must have updated her Facebook picture at work. His iPhone synced the Facebook pictures of all of his contacts.

"New modeling pictures?" Shane asked.

Ally giggled.

"Anyway, I told you not to interrupt me today."

"Sorry Shane. It's important."

"Okay," Shane said. He listened astutely.

"Det. Sun Good called. She wanted to speak to you. They arrested a suspect in the new StoneCutter murders. She said that the FBI has some incriminating evidence on him," Ally said.

"Who is the suspect?" Shane asked. He could barely contain the excitement that we felt. In one day the FBI had done our legwork for us.

"She wouldn't say."

"Find out?" Shane said.

"I thought that you might ask that. So, I tried to find out. I used all of our sources in the police force, the county jail, I even called my ex-boyfriend—the FBI agent. No one is giving up the StoneCutter's identity," Ally said.

"That's strange."

"I know. I did learn something interesting though. Apparently, the suspect has something to do with the Secret Service."

"Secret Service?" Shane asked, surprised. He looked up toward the sky with a confused expression on his face.

She got my attention.

"Yes."

"Good work, Ally. I will be back in D.C. soon."

"Shane, there is one more thing. It is important," Ally said. She cleared her throat over the phone. She sounded nervous. Shane had never known Ally Embers to be nervous.

"Ally? What is it?"

"Mr. Graves's office called. He wants you to call him immediately. He is in town. He wants you to meet him," Ally said.

"Great," Shane said.

"Shane, it might be about your partnership. His secretary said he wasn't happy that you were not around."

"I'm on my way back," Shane said. He hung up.

We looked back down at Shutter's skeleton. Shane began shoveling the dirt back on top of the grave.

He whispered, "Sorry."

He finished reburying Gillard Shutter and patted the mound of dirt. He walked past his parents' graves and thought about them for a moment.

The new StoneCutter would die. If he was a copycat, we would dispatch him as normal. However, if he turned out to be the real StoneCutter, then we would have to make special arrangements, unforgettable arrangements.

Chapter 4

Suspect

"Don't waste your time on me. You're already the voice inside my head."

—Blink 182, I Miss You.

|||||

The cops arrested a suspect for the new string of StoneCutter murders. Shane and I were eager to learn about him.

Shane sped his car through the winding country roads away from his family estate and down the freeway towards D.C.

He pushed all of his work off until he could learn more about the StoneCutter suspect. We both wanted to know who the man was. He wanted to know if the new suspect was the man who killed his parents and created the dark monster that inhabited him—me.

I'll admit that I felt estranged because of this StoneCutter mess, but we had to get to the bottom of it, even if it took us to the pits of hell.

Shane turned on his cell phone and dialed Terrance Graves' number.

The AT&T bars were half full. Being out this far from civilization provided little cell phone coverage. Too bad we couldn't reach down, grab one of those bars off of the screen and beat our AT&T salesman to death with it.

"Hello?" a voice finally answered.

"Terrance?"

"Shane?" the voice asked. "I've been waiting for your call."

"Sorry Terrance, I should have been here sooner. I had a personal errand to run."

"I hope that it is finished now. I need you back."

"For the moment, it is dead and buried," Shane said, a hint of my voice echoed behind his.

"Good. I need you to come by the Grand Hotel in the downtown plaza. Can you do that?"

"Sure. What is this about?" Shane said.

"I can't explain over the phone. Just try to be here soon."

"Terrance, I have to swing by the office first. There is something that I need to pick up," Shane said.

"No. Come straight here. This is a priority," Terrance replied. "Whatever else that you have going on can wait until after."

We wanted to go to the office in order to find out about this new suspect.

The only thing that was more important was protecting our secret. In order to do that, sometimes I had to adhere to the needs of Shane's life. That was the balance that we maintained between our worlds. This was a case where Shane's boss needed him. We could wait until after morning to find out about the suspect. He wasn't going anywhere.

Besides, Terrance Graves rarely came out of the New York City office. However, today, he was in D.C. and he wanted Shane to meet with him. Whatever he wanted to meet about must have been important.

"Okay, Terrance. I should be there within the hour," Shane replied.

"Good. When you get here, go to the fourth floor. Secret Service will be waiting for you. Tell them who you are and they will let you in," Terrance said. "See you then."

"Secret Service?" Shane asked, speaking into an already dead line. Terrance hung up the phone abruptly.

The mention of the Secret Service shocked both of us. Highly trained, government bodyguards made us nervous. Living in D.C. had forced us to encounter them before. They even patted us down for weapons before, but never had we gone to a hotel and voluntarily allowed them to frisk us without knowing what we were getting into first. It felt like we were going into a location filled with guys who were trained to smoke out our kind, like entering the lion's den.

I guess the only way that Shane and I were going to find out why Terrance was with the Secret Service was to check it out.

Shane was more nervous than I was. He was close to making partner in his father's firm. Now was not the time to be off vanishing. And Terrance had caught us doing just that.

Terrance possessed enormous influence with the board, although, it was no longer just his firm. Every member of the board had a stake in Graves and Associates. They owned it collectively. They were the unnamed partners.

Still, we didn't need Terrance angry with Shane. Now, we had to appease him more than ever. So we headed to his important meeting with the U.S. Secret Service.

|||||

Back in Washington, D.C., Shane's black Mercedes pulled up into valet at the Grand Hotel. A young man ran up to our car and took the keys.

Shane looked up to the top of the hotel. He sighed. He was not looking forward to going into a mysterious meeting without knowing any details. He was a tiger crawling into the tall grass without knowing what other beasts lurked in the thick brush.

What was Terrance doing with the Secret Service?

What was so important that it couldn't wait until after we had discovered the identity of the StoneCutter suspect?

Suddenly, Shane realized something that we both completely overlooked. Ally said a strange thing earlier. She said that the Secret Service was keeping the identity of the StoneCutter suspect a secret.

I wondered if this meeting was about the StoneCutter suspect. Now, I was intrigued to learn more.

Shane entered the hotel and surveyed the lobby. Immediately, we noticed one agent stationed there. He sat on a sofa near a majestic, albeit fake, fireplace. He read a magazine, but stared directly at us as we entered.

Shane looked over to the elevators. A man and two kids waited for the lift to open. We walked toward them.

The doors opened and we got on the elevator with them.

"What floor?" the man asked, motioning to the buttons.

"Four. Thank you," Shane replied.

The doors shut and we began going up. Then suddenly, the elevator stopped. It appeared stuck.

"Shit, what now? Not another power failure?" the man said.

The elevator was quite crammed. The lights on the ceiling flickered, initiating the beginning stages of Shane's claustrophobia, something that I wasn't prepared for. Uncontrollably, I began coming to the surface of Shane. For only a brief moment, we lost the balance and his eyes became black. One of the children, a little boy, stared directly up at me.

He winced in terror as he saw the dark, crawly thing that lived inside Shane. He grabbed a tight hold of his father's pants leg. He trembled and held on for dear life as he looked again and saw that I faded from Shane's surface back into my hole in his brain.

"Sir, what is wrong with you?" the man said, jerking the boy up hard by his arm, almost dislocating it.

"Calm down!" Shane blurted out. He stared coldly at the boy's father as my claws retracted into him.

The man's expression was one of utter shock and terror. Slowly, he released his son from his abusive grasp.

The elevator had resumed and the doors opened to the third floor. A single moment passed.

"This is your floor," Shane said in a voice that was perfectly pleasant as if nothing happened.

The man scooped his terrified son up in his arms and jerked his daughter by the wrist. The trio exited the elevator at a speed that was virtually a leap and as they ran out. The doors closed.

We were left alone in the elevator's box. Suddenly, standing in the box, Shane and I experienced a flash of something that we hadn't felt in a long time. We felt fear. The air in the elevator's car seemed to evaporate.

Shane's chest began heaving. We were overwhelmed with an abrupt sense of claustrophobia, my Achilles' heel.

We hadn't experienced claustrophobia in years. This was not a good sign.

Occasionally, a confined, dark space reminded me of the coffin. Whenever Shane felt the fear of being confined, it overwhelmed him. He froze up. Like a car frozen on the side of the freeway during a blizzard, he stalled out. It was up to me to rise to the surface and protect us.

Luckily, the lights flickered back on. The elevator doors opened again and we were safe on the fourth floor.

Shane returned to normal.

He stepped out into the hall. The hotel looked expensive. The hallways consisted of crown molding, antique fixtures, and vibrant colors.

Standing in the open elevator doors were two serious looking Secret Service agents.

"Mr. Lasher?"

"Yes," Shane answered.

"Please, raise your arms and spread your legs?"

Shane did as they asked. One agent frisked us. He searched Shane so hard that I feared he might find me lurking in my shadowy hiding place. After a moment, he stood up and the other agent seemed to relax more.

"Okay, Mr. Lasher. You can continue. The Secretary is expecting you," the agent said.

The Secretary? I thought.

"Head down the hall. Around the corner, go to room 416. There is an agent posted out front. You can't miss him."

Shane smiled at the agents and continued down the hall as instructed.

I recoiled in my hiding place, lowering my guard.

At room 416, an agent waited. He knew that Shane approached. He stood at attention and opened the door as we neared. He motioned for Shane to enter.

Inside the hotel room, Shane noticed that it overlooked a French cafe near the National Mall.

The suite was large. The living area was carpeted, had four large sofas, and a flat screen TV attached to the wall.

The first thing that I noticed was the number of guards posted: one guard patrolled the balcony; two roamed the halls, one stood at the door, one waited in

the lobby, and one stood idle in the kitchen. The Secretary, whoever that was, had at least a six guards protecting him.

Seated on the sofas were two well-dressed assistants. They scribbled notes while occasionally texting on their cell phones.

Shane was so silent that no one even noticed that we had entered the room. He cleared his throat in order to make his presence known to the assistants. One of them put down her phone and looked up at him.

She squinted her eyes and adjusted her wire-rimmed glasses.

"Mr. Lasher?" she asked.

"Yes," Shane answered.

"You look just like your magazine pictures," she said, standing up. She looked him up and down.

"Thanks," Shane replied. I knew those pictures were a bad idea, but Shane thought they would help maintain a human image. I thought that the only reason that he wanted to do them was to feed his vanity.

"Do you think that I can have your autograph?" she asked.

Shane was a little surprised. He still was getting used to his celebrity status.

"Sure," Shane answered.

The assistant was about ten years older than we were and had no wedding ring on.

Great.

"What should I sign?" Shane asked. At the tail end of his question, she pulled out the GQ issue that he posed for last year.

She carried it with her? How pathetic, I thought.

"I just happened to have picked it up this morning out of my car," the assistant said.

"Ok. This is my first autograph," he lied. "So, what do you want me to write?"

"Something clever," she answered.

That's helpful.

"What is your name?"

"Marsha," she said, pulling a black marker quickly out of her purse, like a gunslinger from the old west drawing his gun. She held it out to him.

Shane reached out, grabbed the magazine and the marker from her.

He stared at the cover. His eyes followed the perfect design of his exposed abs. He wondered if they air brushed them.

Suddenly, Shane was stumped. So I took the marker and wrote:

**To my fan, Marsha.
Meeting you was KILLER!
Your friend,
SHANE LASHER**

Shane returned the magazine and marker back to her. She giggled after reading the message.

"Shane," a voice said from the shadows of the master bedroom.

We looked up to see Terrance Graves appearing from the doorway. He stood tall and lean for a man in his fifties. The suit he wore was flawless. It was black without a single wrinkle, only perfect creases.

Behind Terrance, a woman in her fifties stepped out of the bedroom. She wore a pants suit that looked overly worn. It was dark blue with a crinkled, white top underneath—definitely the attire of a busy politician.

Shane recognized her face. At first he couldn't place it. He only knew that she was famous.

"Shane, I'd like you to meet, Eline Kline, the Secretary of State."

The Secretary of State was in fact very famous. Her husband was a former President. She was very political.

What was she doing meeting with us? I wondered.

"Hi. Nice to meet you," Shane said, extending his hand out for a handshake. As she shook it, she studied him from head to toe, assessing what kind of lawyer he was. The Kline family experienced their fair share of lawyers. Scandals plagued the Kline's due to Eline's unfaithful husband and his escapades with young interns.

Eline Kline was infamously direct. She was a no-nonsense politician. She was also highly intelligent, but Shane was not intimidated. He had me.

"Shane, we need to speak to you candidly," Terrance said.

"Of course. What is going on?" Shane asked. He was dumbfounded by all the secrecy, not to mention the armed guards.

The mechanical cogs and wheels turned and coiled in Shane's head. I was gearing up, alert. I was ready to spring out in case Shane needed me.

"This matter is delicate. Let's go out onto the balcony. I will explain," Terrance said, guiding them over to the sliding glass doors.

Shane, Terrance, and the Secretary walked out to the balcony overlooking Constitution Avenue.

Terrance looked at the Secretary and back at Shane.

"What is going on?" Shane blurted out once again and without my consent.

"I know that you worked hard on the StoneCutter case. I know that you successfully got Gillard Shutter off. Now, we need your help again. Mrs. Kline is an extremely important client. She and I have had a long professional and personal relationship together."

Shane nodded.

"Mr. Lasher," Eline Kline interrupted with a thick Massachusetts accent, "I have five children. They are all grown. My oldest son is forty-five years old. His oldest is twenty-one and has a baby. I am a great grandmother. I am the Secretary of State for the United States of America, and I am asking for your help."

Eline Kline's posture faltered. Her demeanor appeared to be flooding with emotions. She teared up. That was not something that either Shane or I expected from such a professional and put-together politician.

Terrance placed his hand on her shoulder in order to calm her. I noticed that their relationship was friendly, familiar, and even perhaps flirtatious.

This was all interesting to Shane, but the only thing I wanted to know was who the new StoneCutter suspect was. I needed to know his identity. I craved it. I needed to know if he was the one who created me. Shane needed to know.

We wanted the StoneCutter for ourselves. We needed to know if he was the real deal or a faker.

"Eline needs you to represent one of her sons," Terrance said.

"Her son? What does he need representation for?"

"Lies! They lie about him!" Eline said, bursting into the conversation and Shane's personal space as she latched onto him. Her fingertips squeezed the sleeves of his jacket. This woman surprised even me with her desperation.

The Secret Service agent that was posted on the balcony reacted to her outburst. He stepped forward and waited until he realized that she did not need him. He was quick. I had to be careful around them. I was the scavenger, creeping through the alligator's nest of eggs. One falter or slip and I could get eaten.

"Shane, the Secretary's son is the StoneCutter suspect," Terrance said, reaching out to Eline and embracing her in his arms like a concerned brother would.

Her son was the StoneCutter?

Now, I was aroused. Now Shane and I listened with deadly focus.

"Help him, Mr. Lasher. He is my son. My baby. Please help him," Eline begged.

"Shane is the very best, Eline. I'm sure that he will do what he can for your son."

Shane took hold of Eline's hand. We squeezed it tightly. Shane tried to reassure her by staring deep into her eyes, giving her the same fake smile that he gave his clients just before I killed them.

Oh, everything will be alright. I will make it alright. I thought.

"I will acquit him of these outrageous charges. I will save your son, Madame Secretary," Shane said, nodding.

I grinned beneath his surface.

My eyes gleamed through Shane's. I peered at this woman. She had no idea what I was going to do to her monster of a son. He was forty-five years old. He was old enough to have killed Shane's parents. If he was our creator, then he faced a deadly reckoning.

"Eline let me speak with Mr. Lasher alone. I will join you promptly in the living room," Terrance said. He stared into Shane's eyes and cocked his head to one side, studying Shane. In that brief moment, I thought that he saw me. I thought that he recognized me. I must have lost sight of caution. I got too excited.

We watched as Eline Kline glanced back at Shane once more before exiting the balcony. She was a strong, well-polished woman. However, her eyes begged for Shane to help free her son from captivity. Family was her weakness, but I supposed that that's what being human meant. Humans felt sadness, loss, a sense of protection over their offspring. Serial killers were not like that. For Shane, there had never been anyone that he cared enough about to die for, not in our entire existence. Sure, we would kill for almost any reason, but Eline Kline appeared as though she was willing to die for her son.

Beyond the lifelong politician, there was a mother fearing that her first born son was a monster. She feared that he would go to the electric chair, a fear that I understood better than anyone.

Terrance smiled at her, reassuring her. As soon as she was out of earshot, Terrance glared back at Shane with a stinging look of disappointment.

"Shane, you have been a great asset to this firm. Since the first case that you led, you have had a phenomenal winning ratio, but your interview with *Vanity Fair* has cast an unwelcomed light on our firm, our reputation," Terrance said.

"How do you know what I said in that interview? It hasn't even come out yet," Shane asked.

Terrance merely looked at Shane.

Guess that somehow he had gotten an early copy of it, probably from Anna Black.

Terrance walked over to the balcony and leaned over the railing, looking down at the street.

His stature was menacing. He had been a successful trial lawyer for decades, and now he ran a wealthy firm. When he wanted to, he could portray a tyrant, and he was doing just that.

It used to intimidate Shane, but he knew that he had me. He stood strong, unfaltering to Terrance's demeanor like two bears meeting in the wild. Still, Terrance always impressed me. He definitely had a dark side. That allowed him to be such a good attorney. Empathy made both a villain and a great lawyer.

"I don't mean to disappoint you, Terrance. I thought that the article would be good for my career."

"Good for your career as an underwear model?" he asked, sternly waiting for Shane's reaction.

"It is not good for this firm. You only think of yourself. Graves and Associates is the name of OUR firm. Everything that you do publicly reflects upon us all. I need you to remember that," Terrance continued. He poked his finger in Shane's chest, just like he did whenever we misbehaved as an adolescent.

Funny how he was around to discipline us and never most any other time, I thought.

"I'm sorry, Terrance. I got a little carried away," Shane admitted.

I agreed. The spread was unnecessary exposure. We were both flying high. We should've been more humble. I should've been more scrutinizing of Shane's behavior.

"Shane," Terrance said, turning to face him. "The board is going to find out about the article sooner or later. Some of the partners have been aligning against me. Our firm is not a dictatorship. Remember? Each partner actually owns stock in us. They are shareholders, and the shareholders are going to want action. Each of their votes counts. You have become our highest profile lawyer overnight. I need you to act like it matters."

"You are right. The last thing that I want to do is cause you grief."

"Us grief? You are a part of this family too," Terrance said.

Shane nodded.

"Good. Now this is your chance to redeem yourself. Take Eline's case. Meet with her son and evaluate him. The police have some evidence on him. It's DNA evidence. It places him at the scene of one of the recent slayings," Terrance said.

"DNA evidence? That is not good."

The Secretary's son might actually be the real StoneCutter.

Gillard, I wronged you. We misjudged you.

Many people possessed a killer instinct, but most of the time the darkness inside of them never hatched. Perhaps, Gillard was one of those types. Perhaps, he wasn't even aware of his demon. I should have been more thorough!

"Yes, DNA evidence. He claims that he was sleeping with Angela Frost. They were having an affair. Mr. Frost had no idea."

"So, Angela Frost threatened to expose the Secretary's son to his family?" Shane speculated.

"Very good, Shane. Yes, the police are working on this theory. The Secretary's son had an affair with Angela Frost. He tried to cover it up by killing her the way that he killed his other victims," Terrance said.

"Is he the StoneCutter?" Shane asked.

"Who cares? He is your new client. Get him off so we can help you save face with the board. After all that you have accomplished, I want you to make partner. That *Vanity Fair* spread will cause difficulty. So meet with Eline's son and save him like you did Gillard Shutter, and Paul Verize. Save him. And save yourself."

No pressure.

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Shane was eager to kill the right murderer this time; the man who killed his parents and robbed him of a normal life had to die. It didn't matter whose son he was. It didn't matter that Terrance vouched for him. If Eline Kline's oldest son was the StoneCutter, then he would die at my reptilian hands.

Ever since our conversation with Terrance, I have been coming to Shane's surface, showing my teeth. I snapped at a few people already including the attendant at the 7/11. She talked on the phone while Shane waited for change. Also, I snapped at the homeless man who tried to panhandle us on our way to Shane's car.

We spent most of the afternoon getting our affairs in order.

For our escape, Shane bought one-way plane tickets out of the country. We were flying to Mexico. From there, we would head to Eastern Europe and backtrack into France. Of course, Shane purchased our tickets under an alias. No one who looked for us would find us. By the time that they had even gotten close; we would be long gone.

He moved large sums of money into offshore accounts, splitting it up into different accounts in case one was seized by the FBI.

Tonight, we would visit Eline Kline's son, Martin, in jail. Tonight he would die.

Earlier, Shane looked him up online. His face seared the screen of our laptop. He was a handsome, middle-aged man. He resembled a forty something Harrison Ford. It was so uncanny that Martin Kline could easily have doubled for Mr. Ford in a bio-picture about the actor.

Shane discovered that Martin had two children of his own and one grandson. It was just as Eline Kline had said. He had the picture-perfect life.

"Except you have a dark secret. Don't you?" Shane asked out loud. He stared at Martin's photo from the internet. We looked through the laptop's screen and deep into the pixels that formed Martin's eyes.

I could not see his creature, his killer, but he was there. He had to be.

The first thing we did, after buying plane tickets, was fire up the kiln. The flames hummed through the thick, steel walls of the large furnace. We stared at our trophies. All of the murder weapons that were never found in so many *unsolved* murders. At least these cases were unsolved by the police. Of course, we solved each one, killed each killer, and kept their weapons as our souvenirs.

This part was much harder for Shane than I had thought. He didn't want to part with them and neither did I, but we needed to disappear, to leave no trace behind. We couldn't leave a shred of evidence for anyone to find. We didn't want to entice the FBI into an international manhunt. A celebrity lawyer that killed his clients was not someone that they would just let go.

Before we went to visit the StoneCutter, Shane shredded all of the documents that could lead to any investigations into our devious acts. He burned everything that was in our lair. In the end, he grabbed the first murder weapon that we ever collected from a serial killer—a sharp, serrated hunting knife. He stared at it. He tossed it into the belly of the kiln, feeding the monster. The beastly furnace was not satisfied, but it would be. We had plenty more trophies for it to feast upon.

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Shane drove his Benz up to the gates of the county jail. A few armed guards patrolled the parameter of the high chain-linked fence. The sun rappelled down the sky into the west. The guards would begin to change shifts in the next hour. We wanted to be out of the prison by then. We wanted to be out before anyone discovered the body of Martin Kline. New guards meant fresh awareness. We needed to head for the airport by that time.

I wanted to watch the StoneCutter suffer, but time was a factor. This time I would kill him, and he would be gone forever. He would pay for the mistake that I made. I didn't feel any remorse for Gillard Shutter, but I could sense that Shane's guilt was turning into shame. Guilt and shame were not emotions that we had ever felt before. I needed to rid Shane of those feelings before they turned into cancerous remorse. So I had no choice but to right the wrong that we committed. I had to maintain balance in our existence. Killing the *right* StoneCutter would achieve that.

Shane pulled the car into the main gate. A lanky guard with glasses and a clipboard walked out to the driver's side window. Shane rolled it down.

"Yes sir. Can I help you?" he asked.

"I'm a legal defender from Graves and Associates. I'm here by request of Eline Kline," Shane answered. His black, leather gloves clinched tightly to the steering wheel as I began to take control.

His skin tightened, loosened, and then flattened out as if there was a physical transformation taking place. Shane steadily transformed into the beast inside.

The guard peered down at the clipboard. He flipped the pages a couple of times and then looked back at Shane. Suddenly, the only features that he could make out were Shane's eyes. The rest of his face was hidden by shadows.

"Mr. Lasher?"

"That's me," I answered.

"Good. They are expecting you. Drive forward. Park near the wall to the west. Go to the grey building. Follow the signs."

Shane pulled the car into the facility. The engine's hum died down into silence like the slowing of a heart monitor on a patient's death bed.

Shane stepped out of the car. We grabbed the kill-case. The inner lining of this briefcase hid a string of razor-sharp piano wire. In less than ten minutes, I would have the sharp chord around the StoneCutter's throat, strangling him. I couldn't wait to watch the black creature inside him wiggle to the surface and struggle for breath.

I salivated at the thought of watching Martin Kline's black eyes turn lifeless.

Shane pushed through the doors to the grey building and walked towards a security checkpoint. Two Secret Service agents stood outside of a white door. They stopped us and began frisking Shane and searching the kill-case. Luckily, we hid the compartment with the piano wire perfectly into the dark leather stitching of the case. They would never find it. An x-ray machine wouldn't find it. It would simply appear as a coiled up stitch of fabric.

A demented grin overtook my face as the agent finished looking through my briefcase. He found nothing suspicious. He approved the kill-case to enter the prison with us.

"Continue, Mr. Lasher," the closest agent said.

We nodded at him and picked up the kill-case.

They stepped aside and opened the door for us. It opened to a short hallway that led into a cafeteria. The entire room was cleared out, except for one prisoner—Martin Kline.

The Secretary's son sat at the far end of the room. Martin's back was turned to us. We could see the bright orange jumpsuit. It was so bright against the white background of the cafeteria that it appeared as if the StoneCutter was on fire. I liked the idea of him sitting alone in a prison cafeteria engulfed in flames.

As Shane crept slowly and quietly closer to his backside, I took over, completing the transformation. I had full control over Shane's body. I stopped several paces behind Martin and lowered the kill-case. Cautiously and defiantly, I pulled the piano wire out of the case.

Then I reeled the line in, winding it around my hands as tight as I could, making the wire ready to strangle the insidious killer in front of me.

As I neared Martin's back I lifted the wire up high over his head. I was a moment away from my first strike on the StoneCutter and then he spoke.

"Mr. Lasher? Please help me," he said. He slightly cocked his head so that I could see his profile.

Quickly, I dropped the wire out of his sight. I studied his features and my jaw dropped in disbelief. The suspect in front of me was not Martin Kline.

I retreated from Shane's surface. Then I stormed around to the front of the table where he sat and peered into the eyes of the Secretary's son. It was her youngest son, Alex.

"Alex Kline?" I asked.

"Yes. You are Shane Lasher right? My mother's lawyer?"

Shit! Alex was their suspect? Not Martin! Shit! This was not right. Alex was only twenty-one years old. It was impossible. He couldn't have been the StoneCutter. I was created years before he was even born.

The police had the wrong man. Once again I was left without the StoneCutter in my grasp.

Chapter 5

Lawyering Up.

"Murder is commoner among cooks than any other profession."

—W. H. Auden.

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Shane woke up early and skipped the gym. Instead we worked out at home. We began with five hundred pushups, three hundred pull-ups, and one thousand crunches. Afterwards we repeated the process. An hour later, Shane took a shower and we both tried to forget about Alex Kline, and the unsatisfied feeling that was left deep inside our shared body.

After leaving the jail, Shane and I felt the sting of insatiable hunger. It was a hunger that was only satisfied with gallons of blood. My appetite for blood leaked into Shane's gullet. The sensation left both of us frustrated and starving....craving.

A good night's sleep and a hard morning workout could calm any unwanted feelings, even a serial killer's bloodlust.

Shane went into his closet and picked out a dark Brioni suit with a sky blue silk tie.

After shaving and putting on the suit, Shane felt like his old self. Even though we were back at square one, at least we knew that the StoneCutter suspect was not the real StoneCutter. Alex Kline was far too young to be the right killer. Not to mention that he was far too dumb to have ever gotten away with murder for as long as the StoneCutter had.

Today, we would find out exactly what the police had on him. Why was he their suspect? The whole situation reeked of sabotage. It smelled of something evil lurking in the shadows. It was a foul smell that was all too familiar to me. I smelled it every day in Shane's head.

I suspected that someone was behind Alex's arrest. Someone was using him to cover their tracks.

This prospect excited me, because the only person that I could think of that would purposely frame Alex Kline was the real StoneCutter. I wondered if the real StoneCutter had manipulated the world into believing that Gillard Shutter was him.

I intended to find out.

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Outside of Shane's apartment, a surprise visitor awaited us.

Det. Sun Good leaned against a white Ford Mustang that she took from the police motor pool.

"Shane Lasher. What a strange thing seeing you here at your own front door instead of cowering underneath some rock, hoping that I don't locate you. Why have you been dodging me?" she asked.

"Sun, what are you doing here?"

"Right, like your office didn't tell you that I've been trying to get a hold of you for the last twenty-four hours. Where were you yesterday? No one seemed to know."

"Dentist. Getting my teeth whitened. What can I do for you Sun? I'm on my way to work," Shane said.

"Dentist? That's cute. You are so damn vain."

"What can I do for you?" Shane repeated. He went straight to the point. I liked points—sharp ones.

"I'm here about Shutter," Sun said. Her toned body twisted in the sunlight as she stretched. She was catlike. She must have been leaning against her car for an hour waiting for us to leave the apartment. She was like a lioness, stalking, prowling for Shane, ready to feed her starving cubs. Out of all of the short term romances that Shane has had over the years, Sun Good was by far my favorite. I enjoyed playing cat and mouse with her.

"Gillard Shutter? What about him?" Shane asked.

"Shane, the new StoneCutter murders shine a serious case of doubt on Shutter's conviction. Even though you got his sentence commuted to mental treatment, he was still convicted. The new suspect may have actually committed the murders that Shutter was accused of."

"Good point," Shane said. Another point. "So?"

"So? Shane, I need to speak to him. I'm building a case against the StoneCutter suspect, and I need to speak to Shutter. The D.C. police department is interested in revisiting his accounts of the murders. We need to reinterview him," Sun Good said, slowly approaching Shane.

Reinterview him? They wanted to interview our dead client? The one that we murdered. The one who might have actually been innocent. Good thing that dead men tell no tales.

Not only did I have to battle Shane's growing guilt, but I had to dodge the police and locate the real StoneCutter before they did.

"Reinterview him?"

"Yes."

"I'm sorry, but I'm not sure where he is," Shane said. He wasn't nervous, but still, neither of us wanted Det. Good snooping around for our missing client.

"I thought that you might say that. So I went ahead and had my partner check up on Mr. Shutter. In fact, my partner is not with me right now, because he drove all the way to New Jersey yesterday. Do you know what is in New Jersey?"

"The Jersey Devil?" Shane smirked.

"Shutter's family," she said. Sun Good moved in closer to Shane. She leaned in like she wanted him to kiss her. She caressed his tie with her boney fingers.

"Shutter's family?" Shane asked.

"Yes. If anyone knew where Shutter had gone, it would either be his lawyer or his mother. And you know what?"

"What?" Shane asked.

"His mother had no idea where the hell her serial killing son was. But I bet that you do. So?"

"So what?"

"So where the hell is he?" Sun Good tugged on his tie, tightening it like a noose around our neck. Her action forced Shane to lean down towards her. The tie passed in-between her fingers like an automated winch pulling a cable, lifting a muddy car out of the river.

"Sun, I have no earthly idea where Gillard Shutter is. In case you haven't noticed, my plate is full. I have things on my mind other than the whereabouts of a half-crazed serial killer from over a year ago," Shane replied. He snatched his tie away from her fingers.

"Only strange thing is not only has your most famous client vanished," she said, "but a new suspect could overturn his conviction and possibly award him millions in damages. Yet, he is still nowhere to be found. Why would he be hiding? So, I started thinking that maybe I should check up on Paul Verize as well. And, Mr. Lasher, no one has seen him either.

"Doesn't it strike you as odd that your clients keep vanishing?"

"Clients disappear sometimes," Shane responded. I began creeping out from behind his eyes. I was curious to see the expression on Sun's face. She was a good detective. It would be a shame to convince Shane to do something to her that he would fight against.

"I'm not going to lie to you. The department is very interested in how two of your clients, both accused of murder, have vanished into thin air. We are not going to dismiss this as coincidence. If you do not start cooperating with me on this, it is possible that the department will open an investigation into their disappearances. You better hope that they don't find anything."

Sun backed away. She stared off beyond her Mustang and then turned around to face Shane one more time.

"Are you threatening me?"

"I don't care about hurting you, but I will find Shutter," she said. She paused for a moment. "I will be in touch. I hope that you aren't hiding something from me."

"Detective, I have nothing to hide, but I am not required to tell you everything. It is your job to find evidence. It is my job to defend and protect my clients," Shane said. I snickered at Sun Good from inside the dark crevices of Shane's skull.

Sun Good retreated into her car and sped away.

We watched her vanish down the street. Shane was hiding something from her—me.

|||||

Shane walked into his office, brushing past Ally Embers.

She lingered in the doorway, circling the glass. She looked as though something detrimental was on her mind. It was so important that she barely let Shane take off his expensive coat.

"Shane?" she said, clambering into the office uninvited, which she knew better than to do.

"Ally! Wait five minutes. I'll call you in when I get the chance," Shane said with an authoritative tone. That was one of the powers that I gave him, influence. He

could yield my voice and command his listeners better, even control them from time to time.

"I just wanted you to know about the article in *The Post*."

Shane shut the door, but heard her words: "the article in *The Post*."

We were both curious.

Shane hung his coat up and loosened his tie. He set down his briefcase and approached the desk.

We saw the newspaper folded in half and lying on the edge of the desk, towards the chair. Ally had placed it within plain sight.

He sat down in the chair and unfolded the newspaper.

The headline almost made me jump straight through his skull and out of his head.

It read:

***"Lawyer hides serial
killer's whereabouts"***

Shane leapt out of the chair.

Someone talked to the press about our missing clients. It had to be Det. Sun Good. She was putting the squeeze on Shane about Gillard Shutter's disappearance. And now she knew about Paul Verize. She must have leaked it yesterday to a reporter in order to scare us.

She was conniving.

Shane took a look underneath the title to find out the name of the reporter. It was Katlyn Fox, the same reporter that uncovered the existence of the StoneCutter. The same reporter that made Shane famous with her coverage of Gillard Shutter, and more recently she had covered Paul Verize. So now we had to hunt the StoneCutter, dodge the police, free a wrongly accused suspect, free Shane from his guilt, keep Terrance happy, and avoid the press.

Fantastic!

Sun Good knew Katlyn. When Sun dated Shane, she used Sun Good for information. They were friends, not close friends, but friends nonetheless.

Sun Good leaked her discovery of our missing clients to Katelyn. We needed to know how much she told the reporter. We would have to speak to Sun Good again.

"Ally, get Det. Sun Good on the phone," Shane said through the intercom on his office phone, a high-tech, glossy looking device.

"Yes sir," Ally replied.

Within a minute Sun Good was on the phone.

"Shane? That was fast," she said. Shane could hear a snicker in her voice.

"Did you tell Katelyn about my clients?"

"Oh this is about the article in *The Post*," she replied.

I loved how she liked to toy with Shane. I adored it. She was like the mongoose that played with the cobra. It was believed that mongooses are the mortal enemy of the cobra, one of the deadliest snakes in the world. The cobra never feared a furry critter like a mongoose. Cobras feared nothing.

"The MPD doesn't leak information, especially with those kinds of allegations, not against anyone. If I leaked that information to Katelyn or any other member of

the press that would be considered libel and a breach of department policy," she said.

Sun leaked it. She just confirmed it.

"This could be very bad for me personally. You shouldn't have done that."

"You shouldn't be dodging me."

"Goodbye Detective," Shane said. He slammed down the phone.

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The police had DNA evidence from Alex Kline. He was sleeping with the Frost's underage daughter, not the wife like we had originally been told.

Alex claimed that he saw their daughter earlier the night that the StoneCutter buried her alive with the rest of the family. They fought over something stupid, and she broke up with him. Their fight had taken place hours before the family was murdered, but Alex possessed no alibi after the fight, during the time of the murder. He claimed that he went for a walk to clear his head. No one could back up his story.

We sat in the cell with Alex. His face was swollen from crying. He started to tell Shane about a phone conversation he had with his mother. I tuned out for that. This was the part of Shane's life that did not interest me. I paid attention to only the details that would help us find the StoneCutter. That vermin was out there, taunting us.

After about an hour of me ignoring Shane's client, our phone rang.

"I'm sorry, Alex. I have to take this," Shane said.

"That's ok, Mr. Lasher," Alex said. He was a polite boy. He was far too nice to be a murderer. The evidence that the police had on him didn't mean that he was the StoneCutter. It merely indicates that he was involved with the Frost girl and nothing more.

Shane stepped away from the boy and looked at his iPhone. The caller ID read: *Terrance Graves*.

"Terrance, what is going on?" Shane answered, trying to sound confident.

"Are you with the client?"

"Yes," Shane answered.

"Good. At least you are doing something right," Terrance said.

He must have known about *The Post* article. Both Shane and I were frustrated with that article. It jeopardized Shane's career and brought unnecessary attention to us.

"Shane," Terrance continued, "I have seen the article in *The Post*."

"I'm sorry about that Terrance, but I can't control what the papers print."

"The partners have also seen it. Shane, they have called a meeting."

"A meeting? About what?" Shane asked.

"The board wants to discuss you, and your status here."

"Me? What about me?"

"I don't even know where to begin. First, they are pissed off about your spread in *Vanity Fair*. Then yesterday someone from the D.C. police department called this office making accusations about two missing clients. Today there is this article in *The Post* claiming that you are hiding information of their whereabouts," Terrance said.

"I am working to rectify all of that," we said. Sun Good has caused a lot of problems for us. I wished Shane would let me kill her.

"Shane, there is one more thing. My office barely put in any effort investigating these claims and do you know what we found? Several missing clients, not just: Shutter and Verize, but others as well. They are all from your branch."

My nonexistent heart sank into the darkness of Shane's skull.

"When is the meeting?" we asked. I wanted to kill someone.

"That is why I am calling. I know that you are busy with Alex Kline, but that meeting is tomorrow. The partners do not require your presence, but it would greatly help your case if you show up and fight these accusations."

Shane sighed.

"Thank you, Terrance. I will be on a plane tonight."

We hung up the phone and glanced back at Alex Kline.

"Alex, I have to leave now. I have some important notes to look over. We will meet again in a couple of days," Shane said.

"I haven't told you my side of what happened yet."

"Tomorrow, my assistant will be here to interview you. Tell her. She is good and knows the right questions to ask you. For now we have to conclude. I have somewhere important to be."

Shane packed up his suitcase, and we left Alex hanging out to dry, but only for the moment. Ally could take care of the Secretary's son for now.

Before Shane got into his Mercedes, he called her.

"Ally, I need a roundtrip ticket to JFK airport. I will be leaving tonight. Returning tomorrow."

"Yes," she responded.

Shane got into his car, and we headed home to pack.

Terrance wanted us to face the partners. I didn't like the feeling that I had. It burrowed into the pits of my stomach. Facing the board of partners was as close to sitting in an inquisition as I ever wanted to feel.

Thankfully they can't sentence us to death.

Chapter 6

Partnerships.

"I am the monster in your head."
—Breaking Benjamin, Lights Out.

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New York City was one of my favorite cities in the world. I've never killed anyone there, not yet. I've always wanted to.

Shane sat in the lobby of an impressively modern building—the firm's headquarters. The decor of the interior melded together old works of art with modern technologies. The high-tech security in this building resembled that of a

top-secret government building. Yet, the art expressed hellish images from ancient Greece and even from the middle and dark ages.

Every time we visited the main office in New York, I felt a sense of hell—of home.

Shane arrived at JFK around 7:30 a.m. He had not slept. We had to take a redeye from D.C. The flight was short, but the plane was delayed for three hours.

Off in the distance the elevator doors opened, and a perfect specimen of a woman walked out toward Shane. She wore a white, low-cut dress. Shane couldn't help but watch her long legs as she walked towards us, elegantly, frightfully.

He was exhausted. I was losing my grip on his senses. Rarely, did Shane's sexual urges surpass my homicidal ones.

How human of him, I thought.

"Mr. Lasher?" the woman said. She spoke with a Hungarian accent. Her English was perfect. Most people would have confused her for Russian, but I knew better.

"That's me," Shane answered. He stood up and lifted his briefcase.

Shane's tall, lean frame was dressed in one of his most expensive suits. It was black with a blue shirt and matching tie. Shane wanted to look confident and strong. We had to impress the board today. There was no room for error. We had to maintain the appearance of success.

"Mr. Lasher, I'm Tina. I'm Mr. Graves' new assistant. We haven't met, but I've been on the phone with Ally a few times since I was hired," she reached her dainty hand out and shook Shane's.

We could have crushed the bones in her hands so easily, but Shane wanted something more sexual from her. I would have been satisfied with crushing her bones. The crackling sounds, the white dust, and her screams taunted my mind like a potent erotic, homicidal fantasy.

Maybe I was a little tired as well. Every monster needs his beauty sleep in order to be the beast. I was the beast in Shane's head.

"What happened to Evelyn?" Shane asked. She was Terrance's last assistant and also very attractive.

"We don't really speak of her, but I think she vanished one day. Her desk was empty and she never returned to work. No one in the office really knows what happened to her."

She probably quit because Terrance overworked her. He was a tyrant of a boss. He was a good provider for Shane. We had a good life, but he was difficult to live with, even more difficult to work for.

"This way, Mr. Lasher," Tina said. She walked us past two stocky security guards and toward a pair of glass elevators. She pressed the call button. We rode the elevators up to the top floor.

I watched through Shane's eyes and through the elevator's glass walls. The elevator rushed up into the bowels of the building. The lobby disappeared quickly into the darkness of the elevator shaft.

The inside of Shane's skull, my home, buzzed from the vibrations from the cables above us as they whipped like the long, rubber tentacles of an unseen monster. The monster's tentacles were like the veins that attached me to the inside of Shane's head. I held them tightly, whipped them back and forth. They were my reigns. I used them to drive my carriage of death.

"This is our floor, Mr. Lasher," Tina said. She got off and we followed her down a twisting corridor of expensive wall decor and heavy metal doors.

"I haven't been here in a long time. Where is Terrance?" Shane asked.

"Sorry, Mr. Lasher, I wish I could show you around, but the board is already in session. Mr. Graves is waiting for you in the boardroom. They started early, but have not been in there that long," Tina said. They stopped at a pair of majestic, dark oak doors. The heavy doors were kernalled and inscribed with pagan art. I'm certain that the doors were a replica of Auguste Rodin's *The Gates of Hell*. At the top of the door stood three little sculptures of the slave men that encrusted Rodin's Gates of Hell.

"Wait out here while I announce your arrival to the partners," she said. She pushed against the heavy doors. Slowly, they opened to let out a dim, cryptic light from inside the chamber beyond.

Shane peeked in, but only saw the long table where the partners congregated. He saw a dozen suits, but could not make out any of their faces.

The partners of Graves and Associates were well known throughout the firm. Our firm was one of the largest in America and we were expanding every year. There was talk of moving into the European courts next year.

Shane was nervous and I held us together, as usual. The dark, inquisition-like meeting that lay ahead of us did not scare me. I have kept Shane's composure in the company of Federal Agents, judges, juries, and politicians. I could handle Graves and Associates' board of partners.

After a moment, Tina returned to Shane in the hallway.

"Mr. Graves said that you may enter now," Tina said. She leaned in close to us as we began to pass her.

She whispered, "Remain calm."

Calm? I was a killer, an avenger, and a mass murderer. I was a freak of nature who never freaked out. I had the steady hand of a surgeon. We would remain calm.

Shane, however, was nervous. I knew it. I felt it in his bones, his blood, and in the dark corners of his brain. I would have to take over a little, just to keep his composure. I would have to answer some of the questions for him in order to keep us together.

Into the gates of hell we walked, hand in hand. It was good practice for us. Someday, we would walk through the real gates of hell and into eternal damnation. We would face the devil high on his throne. Shane would cringe, tremble, and wince. I would crawl out of his head and face my maker.

I would say, 'I don't believe in you, Father.'

|||||

Shane and I sat in the boardroom—the belly of the beast. The partners stared at Shane for a moment. Until Terrance, the Chairman of the Board and our savior spoke out.

"Dear partners, we are here because of serious allegations by *The Washington Post* that one of our most notable lawyers, Shane Lasher, has been complicit in the obstruction of justice.

"We are here to review this matter and to conclude the fate of Mr. Lasher," Terrance said. He looked at Shane.

"Shane, this is a formal meeting, but you can act causal. We are here because of the Board's concern over The Post's accusations and the bad press that has been following you around lately.

"Now, I have here a few questions to ask, and then you can give a statement. The Board has requested that I recuse myself from any voting or debating. However, they have agreed to allow me to ask all questions and I may give advice."

"Fine," Shane said. He remained calm like the eyes of the dead.

"First, the Board wants to share some privileged information with you. We are considering you for a partnership, and that is the reason for this meeting. In light of recent events, we need to redetermine your future with the firm."

Shane did not expect that he was being considered for a partnership. I knew that it was coming. He was very good at his job. Together, we would be killers and lawyers.

"Shane, are the accusations that The Post is making against you true? Are you hiding former clients from the police?"

"Mr. Graves, Partners, I am not hiding anyone. I imagine that many of my clients do not want to be found. Mr. Shutter was a mentally disturbed man. He suffered through a long, excruciating trial process. I imagine that he packed up his belongings and moved away. He probably changed his name. Obviously, he was innocent of the charges that now face my current client," Shane said. He remained seated with his back straight, showing incredible posture and strength. He was a great lawyer. This made him good at defending himself. I hoped that the day never came when we would have to really use his talents to defend our own neck.

"What about Paul Verize? He too is missing according to the D.C. police department," Terrance asked.

The atmosphere around the Board clouded over because of the dim light from the lamps. Darkness ossified and consumed the air. Maybe this really was hell.

"Mr. Graves, I am not responsible for the whereabouts of my clients," Shane said. "Maybe he decided to take a long vacation after being wrongly accused of murder. Maybe he really was guilty and decided to vanish into thin air. Either way it is not my job to help the police find people."

"Shane, tell the Board about your relationship with Det. Sun Good," Terrance asked.

I winced a little. I knew she would be our downfall.

"Det. Sun Good is an old friend. We used to be romantically linked, but no more. That is all that there is to tell. Now, she makes false accusations, because she is frustrated that she can't find the real StoneCutter.

"Everyone at the MPD is frustrated. They keep accusing the wrong men of murder. Certainly that bothers them. It has to. It is embarrassing," Shane said.

"Very well, Shane. Just one last question," Terrance said.

"Ok," Shane responded.

"Our office has done an internal investigation. We were hoping to help the MPD on our own and save face. Here is the thing: when my office tried to locate past clients of yours, we found none."

Terrance was getting too close to us. Did I have to kill him too?

"Mr. Graves, I will tell you that looking into the clients at my office won't tell you anything. I'm sure that if you looked into the clients at other locations, you will find that many clients who have beat murder charges disappear. They move away. They change their names. They go into hiding.

"I do acknowledge that it is strange that you can't find many of the ones from my office, but that is not unthinkable or very unusual. At least it is not for D.C.," Shane said. He was good at defense. That was why we complimented each other so well. I was good at offense.

"Ok, Shane. The Board is going to take some time now and talk. I want you to exit the room. Tina is waiting in the hall. She will escort you into my office where you can make yourself comfortable," Terrance said.

Shane stood up from the table. We walked out into the hall and found Tina waiting just as Terrance had said.

How long was this going to take? I wondered. Every second that we spent here trying to save Shane's future took us further and further down the road, and distracted us from finding the StoneCutter. His trail grew colder and colder.

Tina walked Shane down the winding corridor again, and we ended up inside of Terrance's large corner office.

"Mr. Graves wants you to wait here. He will come and get you whenever they are done," she said and she left us.

We had moved from the gates of hell into the magnificent office of the Gods—Mt. Olympus.

Floor to ceiling windows covered it. The only walls in the whole room were made of a dark oak wood. The floors were brick, giving the room a majestic, palace-like feel. This was not the office of a mere lawyer. It was the office of a titan.

Now, I understood why Shane wanted to make partner so badly. It had its perks. We already made good money. And Shane provided us with a formidable lair for our bloody deeds, but the kind of status and wealth that Terrance Graves carried would have afforded us tremendous power.

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The meeting with the partners did not go well for Shane. I have no feelings only impulses, urges and bloodlust, but I felt concerned for him. He worked hard for years in order to provide an optimal life for us. His hard work allowed me to carry out my homicidal tendencies without worry. He worked hard so that I could exist in his head. In many ways, he protected me as much as I protected him.

Shane marveled at Terrance's corner office. It allured him. What Shane did not know was that the home that I created in his head was similar. I had a penthouse with a prime corner office. The inside of Shane's skull provided me with the perfect access to his thoughts and emotions. I could control my vessel with the precision of a fighter pilot.

Shane gazed out of the two-story window. Even though Central Park was blocks away, we could see it perfectly. Our view from this office was flawless.

We watched as college kids played ultimate Frisbee, couples walked their dogs, and bums panhandled. They were sheep. All the while they remained unaware that they were watched by a hungry, bloodthirsty wolf.

Shane looked over at an enormous box-shaped desk—Terrance's desk. It was constructed of a thick cherry wood with brass handles and knobs.

Shane sat in his Godfather's chair, imagining the day that we would follow in Terrance's footsteps and take over the firm that his Godfather built, that his Father built.

First, we had to get through the Partner's inquisition.

Shane looked out across the office. He fantasized about running this firm. After all, it was his Father's firm for over a decade. We didn't know our Father, but Shane always felt a deep longing to fill his shoes, to make him proud.

As Shane imagined our future, he looked up and noticed something that we had never noticed before. Terrance had us here many times, but we never noticed the loft. It was neatly nestled above the office. It jetted out towards the large windows.

I wondered how Terrance got up there. Shane looked around for a staircase or a ladder. Then we saw it. In the back corner of his office, just beyond the massive bookshelf, there was an elevator. Someone had painted over the elevator to blend it into the wall. So it was nearly hidden.

Shane rose from the desk and approached the elevator. We rode the lift to the loft.

The loft was half the size of the office below. The first thing that we saw was more bookshelves, high ones. The shelves were filled with old books, many of which were out of print. Their spines glistened as if they were dusted often and with great care.

Shane twisted through the small maze of stacks and entered a new room. Paintings littered the walls. Interested in them, Shane moved closer to the largest one. Gold and red trim decorated the frame. It stuck out to us as if a spotlight shone down on it from heaven. I, however, preferred the fiery lights of hell.

The paintings were abstract. As we neared them, Shane and I saw that they were not paintings at all. They looked more like detailed drawings like rubbings or tracings over foreign textures.

Neither of us ever knew or suspected that Terrance created art in his spare time. Everyman needed a hobby. Shane's was to kill killers using their own methods of murder. Terrance created rubbings.

We tried to read one to figure out what it was an etching of, but then we noticed something in the middle of the room.

Lying across a heavy table was a large box-shaped object that was covered by an ivory white sheet. Portions of the sheet flowed from a breeze that suddenly engulfed the loft. The breeze casted ripples across the sheet like ripples in the water.

Shane felt the cold breath of my curiosity blowing through his head.

He became curious. It must have been a sculpture that Terrance was working on or perhaps he sanding a kayak for one of his weekend retreats. We approached it. Shane reached out to pull the sheet and uncover the mysterious object.

"Shane? What are you doing up here?" a voice said from behind us. I must have been so curious that I dropped my guard. It was rare for someone to sneak up on me. I hadn't even felt his presence. Instead, I felt the unfamiliar feeling of being startled.

Shane whipped around to see Terrance standing calmly with one of his hands in his coat pocket.

"Sorry Terrance. I didn't mean to snoop around. I just never noticed this loft before," Shane said. My curiosity retracted so that I could let Shane take over. Dealing with Terrance was really more of his thing. I had no emotional attachment to anyone. Shane loved his Godfather, our savior.

"Shane, this is my private art studio," Terrance said. He began to look around the room at his creations. "Up here I can be alone so I can sculpt and paint. No one bothers me. No more clients, lawyers, judges, or associates.

"Up here I don't have to be responsible for running a multimillion dollar firm."

"Sorry Terrance. I never considered how stressful your position must be. I'm so used to looking up to you that I just always assumed you were made of stone," Shane said.

"Every man has his vices. I am no different. I just keep my vices secret unlike you. Lately, your habits seem to be spilling out into the news and onto the front pages of the newspapers."

"I am sorry, Terrance. I'm glad that you invited me to come today. That was risky of you to warn me about the Partners' meeting," Shane said. It was all so heartwarming to sit in Shane's skull and listen to his tender exchanges with our Godfather.

I felt sickened.

"Shane, did you want to see my latest work of art? It is unfinished, but I suppose you can look at it," Terrance said, standing over the object underneath the long, flowing white sheet.

"No, Terrance. I didn't mean to pry. I understand a thing or two about keeping secrets. Your art is your private business. I apologize," Shane said against my wishes. I wanted to see the old man's precious hobby.

"Very well, Shane, let's return to my office," Terrance said.

He led Shane back down to the floor below. Terrance sat down at his desk and looked over at us.

"Terrance, just be straight with me. What did they decide?" Shane asked. He plopped down into the chair in front of Terrance's massive desk.

"Shane, the board is not pleased with your behavior of late. I can't say that I don't share their concerns. You should have never done the Vanity Fair issue. It was scandalous and too controversial. We are a prestigious, conservative firm. But that doesn't really matter. What does matter is that you have brought unnecessary attention to our firm and our interests.

"If you are hiding former clients like the police and press are insinuating, then you had better come clean about it," Terrance said, sternly, fatherly.

"Terrance, I have no idea where our old clients have gone. I'm not hiding anyone," Shane said, convincingly. "I swear to you that I am not aiding any of my former clients in remaining anonymous. If I knew where they were I would inform the police."

We were not lying. We were not hiding them. Our furnace hid them.

"Shane, you had better not be lying. If you know anything at all about Gillard Shutter, you had better cooperate with the MPD," Terrance warned. He furrowed his eyebrows and gazed deeply into Shane's eyes. This was the second time that I

ever thought that he was going to see me hiding behind Shane's eyes, staring back at him.

"I will cooperate fully," Shane said. "As I have been."

"One more thing, the Partners have decided to delay any decisions about your future here until after the Kline case is over," Terrance said. "As it turns out, Eline Kline has insisted that you remain her son's defender. And she carries a tremendous amount of weight with not only this firm, but many other potential clients. So the Partners feel that it is in our best interest to keep you on as the lead attorney in the StoneCutter case. But Shane, that is only temporary. You need to produce some results on this StoneCutter thing. And fast."

"Yes, Terrance," Shane said. The two men stood up and shook hands. I sensed that Shane was disappointed as if he had let down his own Father.

I was responsible for Shane. I needed him focused, in control, and at peak performance. I didn't want him feeling guilt and pressure from anyone, especially Terrance Graves. It was hard enough of late dealing with the guilt that continued to leak into my side of his brain.

Terrance's influence over our behavior could be detrimental to Shane's performance, not only in the courtroom, but in our extracurricular serial killer activities. So we had to make right with him, at least where Shane was concerned.

Tina met Shane at the door to Terrance's office and escorted us out of the building.

Tonight, Shane would catch a plane back to D.C. Tomorrow was another day. We had to find the StoneCutter. We had to kill him. But first we had to get the MPD and the nosey Det. Sun Good off our back.

I hated trying to convince Shane that she would have to die, but in the end he would listen to me. He would do what I wanted. After all, I was at the reigns. I was the driver.

Chapter 7

Enemies Close.

*"You can discover what your enemy fears most
by observing the means by which he tries to frighten you."*

—Eric Hofer.

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A men's fitness club called *The Roosevelt Club* was Washington D.C.'s oldest and most elite health club. For forty years, famous men frequented its lavish workout rooms. Shane was not sure which Roosevelt it was named after, but more than likely it was FDR. He was, ironically, the one of the two Roosevelts that was not athletic. He was also in a wheelchair. I personally liked Truman; he dropped the nuclear bomb, causing mass murder and destruction. I lusted for murder and destruction.

Rumors circulated about the members of this elite club for decades. Everyone wanted to be a member. Every major politician desired admittance beyond the glass doors. It was a sign of stature to belong to it. Freshman Senators and Congressmen tried to solicit memberships, but the club was very strict on the members that they accepted. Generally, The Roosevelt only admitted around a dozen new members every month. And it was always a roster of who's who in D.C.

The club was located off Constitution Avenue. It was not far out of our way. Most of D.C. was centrally located to us since we lived downtown. Most major monuments and important government buildings were within walking distance.

Whenever Shane decided to go for a run outdoors, the White House was usually on our route.

However, we would not be running out in public anytime soon. Too much unwanted attention focused on Shane to risk running into Det. Sun Good or a reporter. For the moment, Shane thought it best to avoid the detective at all costs. She caused trouble. Her snooping around our past clients, our past victims, almost cost Shane his position in the firm. Without Shane's position, I couldn't kill. I needed him to be successful. I needed him to be happy. In order for me to be satisfied, Shane must remain satisfied.

The Roosevelt Club never allowed women to step foot beyond its doors, not in decades, not since the doors first opened. In its forty years not even a cleaning lady stepped foot inside it.

As Shane worked out harder and harder, he began to count out loud the number of crunches that he executed.

"2975. 2976. 2977."

My view was obstructed every time that he contorted back to the starting position. With every rep he came back up and I saw the rest of the gym through his eyes. With every rep that he went down, I saw nothing but the ceiling.

I saw the other men working out throughout the gym. Some lifted heavy weights. Some did pull ups. Some stared at themselves in the wall-length mirrors. I saw men running on the treadmills. I saw them adjusting the small T.V. monitors embedded in the control console of their machines.

Shane's heart raced at a comfortable pace. Every muscle in his stomach burned. His form never faltered, never dwindled. He performed each and every crunch perfectly. His breathing maintained the correct rhythm.

I loved the blood pumping through his body. His vessels rushed like an angry tidal wave of blood, breaking for the shoreline of a nearby city. I wanted to grab my rowboat and ride the tide.

"2985."

Suddenly, as Shane rose up I saw a familiar figure storming in like the Greeks barreling through the large gates of Troy. The figure marched past the men working out. She moved through two staff members that attempted to halt her.

Shane stopped his crunches when he heard the staff shouting.

"You can't be in here!" one young, muscly staff member said.

"Get your damn hands off me!" the woman demanded.

Her voice resonated in Shane's ears, echoing throughout the inside of his skull. My home was flooded with the sound of her voice as if a supersonic bomb went off near my bedroom.

Det. Sun Good stopped in front of Shane's sweaty, shirtless body.

"You are an asshole!" she said.

Sun Good's stature was small, but she was toned. She stood close to Shane as he huffed from a hard morning workout. She knelt down and poked her finger in his chest.

"Sun—" Shane began.

"Don't interrupt me. You are an asshole! You filed a harassment complaint with my department?"

"Sun, this is not the appropriate place," Shane said.

I smirked behind his eyes. Filing the complaint was my idea. I assured Shane that it was the right move to make. Being a lawyer, he came up with the idea of calling Sun's commanding officer and threatening to sue the MPD for libel. We couldn't prove that Det. Sun Good tipped The Post about our missing clients, but we could prove that she dated Shane. That fact alone would make it plausible that she was harassing him.

I could see his twisted, legal mind at work, literally.

When speaking to her commander, Shane painted the picture that Sun Good was a jealous ex-girlfriend. We dumped her, so she became obsessed with Shane. It all started harmlessly until she manufactured this story that he was obstructing justice, hiding his ex-clients from her investigation, and so on.

Shane's legal mind impressed my savage one.

"You think that you can use your powerful friends and lawyer tactics to pull me off of you? You are mistaken. Now, I am really going to look at you closely. You and your friends," she threatened. The wrinkles above her head furrowed and jetted out towards Shane.

I thought that Asian women didn't get wrinkles. We must have really pissed her off.

"Sun, you have to let it go. I'm not interested in dating you anymore," Shane said, placating to the small crowd that gathered behind her—witnesses.

"I'll be everywhere. You won't be able to take a shit without me knowing it!" Sun Good said. Her fake breasts heaved back and forth as she panted. Her anger had gotten the best of her.

Shane watched closely as Sun Good stormed out of The Roosevelt Club. The glass double doors swung behind her. The staff followed her out. The spectators returned to their workouts.

Shane returned his gaze to the mirror. Then he resumed his workout.

"2986. 2987. 2988."

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Det. Sun Good watched us for days. She followed Shane everywhere. She never approached us, but she trailed close behind.

Shane thought it best to keep up the charade of a normal life. So that night, we went out with friends to a posh D.C. restaurant called Chefs of the Capital. It was a popular place and always busy. The room was packed with famous politicians and greedy lobbyists. They chomped at the heels of the powerful Congressmen like starving pit bulls clutching at table scraps.

Shane usually turned down invites from coworkers and other lawyers, but tonight we accepted an invite from one of the firm's more prestigious lawyers, Jack Crush.

Jack and Shane were bitter rivals. Jack was always jealous of Shane's immediate success in the Shutter case. That case put Shane on the map. Before we had freed America's most talked about serial killer, Jack Crush was Graves and Associates' number one defense attorney. He had worked for years to rise to such a role. He was truly a gifted lawyer.

Now, he lagged behind Shane. The Board denied Jack a partnership several times because he was too young. The rumor going around that they considered Shane for partner infuriated him.

"So how is it going with the new StoneCutter defendant?" Jack asked. He leaned forward. The tip of his tie scraped the white-linen covered table as he spoke.

Jack was younger than Shane. He graduated from law school only four years ago, but he was a prodigy, a rising star. He was ambitious and dangerous. He was definitely someone to lookout for.

I saw something in him. Something resided behind his eyes, deep in the chasms of his head. I knew that there was a creature similar to myself lurking in the darkness. Then again, most lawyers had something dark living inside them. I had never seen any evidence that Jack was homicidal, so he was not fair game. Not yet anyway. The jury was still out on him.

"Jack, I can't discuss the case with you or anyone else. You know that," Shane said.

Shane drank vodka with Red Bull. He looked beyond Jack Crush and watched the sexy Sun Good as she stared through her champagne glass and back at Shane. She winked at us.

She wore a turquoise blue tube-top with a zipper down the front. Sun's cleavage was nicely accented. Her long, black hair was down. She twirled it with her fingers as she studied Shane's activities from in the back of the dining room.

"Come on. Your client is a real celebrity's son. Give me some details," Jack begged. He was drunker than usual. The jealousy must really be getting to him or the creature that lives inside him.

"The only thing that I can tell you is that he is innocent. Now excuse me for a moment, Jack. I've got to piss," Shane said.

Shane stood straight up out of his chair without giving Jack a second glance. We walked to the men's room, passing the bar and the prying Det. Sun Good.

Shane snuck a peek at her. She followed us with her eyes. Her Capri blue jeans fit tightly to her thighs, showing off her muscular legs.

Shane was horny for her. I knew it.

We entered the men's room and Shane stared into the mirror. When most people looked into the mirror, they saw themselves. When I looked into the mirror, I saw my home, my real estate staring back at me.

Shane turned the water on. A slow stream cascaded out. He watched as the water circled and slid down the drain.

We needed to ditch Sun Good. She had to give up her quest. Shane thought hard, trying to figure out some way of eluding the great detective.

Dress code, I told him. That was our answer. We needed to go somewhere that she couldn't. Then we could give her the slip so that we could retreat and start searching for the StoneCutter. His trail grew colder every moment that we delayed.

Eating with *friends*, living this fantasy, drove us crazy. We needed to get back on the hunt.

Shane took out his iPhone and googled nearby nightclubs. As a part of being a lawyer, and one of D.C.'s elite citizens, Shane had memberships to all of the most decadent nightclubs. We decided to go to Rushmore's Ultra Lounge. It was at the top of the Lincoln Hotel. Tonight there was a strict dress code. Sun Good would not be able to get inside in her casual clothes.

Shane looked in the mirror and saw me smiling back at him from behind his eyes, the windows to my cave.

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I watched Shane tidy up his social encounter with Jack Crush and the four other elite snobs that we pretended to be friends with. Then he took a taxi to pick up a couple of special friends.

A half hour later, we walked straight into Rushmore's with two expensive hookers in-tow.

"Shane, we need to get some party favors," Lisa said as she caressed Nina, the blond one.

Both girls were fit and clean looking. They were merely props for Shane. We used them for appearance's sake. Shane hadn't seen the detective following us, but I knew that she was around. I sensed it. Her car trailed behind us at every turn, around every street corner.

The line to get into Rushmore's Club stretched out past the entrance to the building next door, a closed investment office. The wait just to get into the nightclub was an hour long for most people. For people like Shane, there was no wait.

Shane used his celebrity status to get us right to the beginning of the line. The bouncer pulled back the red rope and beckoned us to pass.

"Shane, I can't believe that you got us in," Nina said. Her skirt rode so high up her legs that we could see the bottom of her ass. Not my forte, but Shane didn't mind. Out of the two of us, he was the most human. He possessed human desires. I only had animal desires.

I looked around. I lost Det. Sun Good after we stepped out of the taxi. I knew that she still followed us. Shane and I imagined that she drove up to the nightclub, tried to get in and was turned away because of the strict dress code. Our plan worked.

We sat at a nice table in VIP for an hour. The girls danced with each other and drank the overpriced champagne. Occasionally their lips met, followed by an alluring kiss that caught the attention of the men below. Once or twice Nina's hand climbed up Lisa's tight skirt. This scene did little to arouse my attention. I focused on our cop problem.

Shane barely touched his drink. Instead, he thought of likely suspects for the StoneCutter. We knew that Alex was innocent of the StoneCutter's crimes, but

who was left? His brother, Martin was still on our list, but did he frame his own brother?

Our table was located on the second floor balcony overlooking the dance floor. The crowd chaotically danced to the techno sounds emitting from the D.J.'s booth.

The music thumped and shook the floor. I could feel its echo rattling Shane's teeth like a xylophone while I stood behind them, banging away.

After thirty minutes, and no sign of Det. Sun Good, I began to relax. I nestled comfortably near the back of Shane's brain, coiled like a snake. I believed that we had discouraged her, but I should have never underestimated the drive in her.

Catching a sudden movement in his peripherals, Shane looked down and saw her standing in the middle of the dance floor. She wore a silver dress with a halter top. It glimmered and reflected the multicolored lights that flashed across the nightclub.

She stood like a vision of a lady-killer's dead wife. The bitch returned for revenge. She stared straight into Shane. Their eyes locked like some sick romantic music video.

Marilyn Manson eat your heart out.

I wanted to kill her. She started to piss me off. We wasted all of this time trying to ditch the law. We should have been out searching for the StoneCutter. He was my prize, my trophy. Who was he?

"Shane, take us to the dance floor," Lisa begged.

Nina fixed her top. Part of her breast was exposed. I hadn't noticed. I was only looking at Sun Good.

"Ladies, that is a great idea," Shane replied. He stood up from his chair. In one swift gulp, he swallowed the remainder of his champagne. We led the girls down to the dance floor. Shane was ready to play the part of a prowling bachelor.

Sun Good moved to the bar. She fought off one drunken guy after the next. She was only interested in us. I had to admire her hunter instincts. She was good at her job, which made her dangerous to us.

The girls pulled Shane out to the middle of the dance floor. The techno music pumped with no real sense of lyrics. The rhythm filled Shane's blood. We danced with both of the girls closely tangled in our space. With the flashing strobe lights, arms and legs floundering about, Shane and the girls resembled a tangled tree of body parts. I relished this vision. I savored it. At night in Shane's sleep, I projected visions like this one across the skies of his dreams—images of body parts.

Shane could see Det. Sun Good scowling at us from across the room. He wasn't sure if it was a scowl out of jealousy, discernment, or sexual attraction. Perhaps, she judged us.

None of which would have surprised me. She was always attracted to Shane. Somewhere deep within the trenches of her desires, buried past the mud and soot, she harbored feelings for him. I knew it. I controlled Shane's killer instincts, and they were housed right next to his sexual ones. I sensed the attraction that grappled between Sun Good and my vessel.

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Sun Good grew up between two different plains of existence. In one, her homeland, she lived with her father in Japan. She grew up under a strict

upbringing. Her father treated her harshly and critically, judging all of her actions. He ruled over her like a dictator. She was his illegitimate child. He treated her like an outcast, a leper, an exiled daughter.

She lived most of her childhood believing that she was impure. Her father only raised her out of obligation for his sin. She had two half-sisters. They treated her like Cinderella. She cleaned, cooked, and scrubbed for their affections. Yet, Sun Good had no Prince Charming, no white knight, no one saved her. I hoped that she didn't think that Shane would be her savior now.

In her early teenage years, she found her mother on the internet. She lived in Sacramento, California. They started emailing. By that summer, Sun Good moved to the U.S.

In the States, Sun Good discovered her sexual powers over boys. Boys ignored her in Japan. Here, she was one of them. Here, they accepted her. They sought after her. They fought over her.

Sun seduced American men into doing what she wanted them to; when she wanted them too. She could will them into doing almost anything. The first American man to ever reject her powers of seduction was Shane Lasher. He confused her. He was perfect in every way. He had the perfect body, the perfect job, and money. Yet, something about him was strange, peculiar.

When she first met Shane, they dated for a short time. He never let her stay over at his place. As much as Shane liked her, neither of us trusted her. Normally, he left her place in the morning before she woke up.

Sun Good's detective instincts warned her about Shane's behavior. Her instincts told her that something was fishy about us. The host of her brain suspected Shane.

So I made Shane break up with his Asian toy. I thought that it was in our best interest to let her go before she discovered our secrets, before the controller of her brain discovered the master of Shane's.

Sun Good leaned against the bar when one particular guy approached her. They spoke for a while. She pretended to be interested in him. He was younger and well-dressed. Shane became slightly jealous, and he rarely got jealous. Lately, he experienced emotions that I never knew he had. I didn't like discovering that my vessel kept his own secrets.

We needed to find the StoneCutter and kill him, so that we could right the course of our life. We were losing balance. Shane was losing control. I was losing control. And all of it was because of a woman.

I'm not the kind of creature that loses control because of a woman. I'm the kind of creature that kills and devours anyone who gets in my way, including women.

Sun Good flirted back with the young man, tantalizing him, taunting Shane.

Shane danced, sandwiched between the two expensive hookers.

Suddenly, without my direction, he separated from them and marched toward Sun Good at the bar.

I wasn't sure what he was doing. He acted without my consent.

We walked up the steps toward the ivory-topped bar. Sun Good noticed us approaching. She leaned into the young man and kissed him.

I could feel the champagne coursing through Shane's veins. It was making my control over him even more difficult to maintain.

"What are you doing?" he asked in a dark, rough tone.

She ignored him. This angered both of us. No one ignored us—no one.

Shane grabbed her shoulder, breaking her free from the embrace of the guy that she just met.

"Hey buddy!" the man said. He stepped in close to Shane. It was too close. He threatened our space. I reacted out of instinct. I could have showed some restraint, but I protected Shane when we came into physical danger. No one was going to harm my vessel. He was mine alone to harm.

The nightclub's strobing lights glimmered off of Shane's face. Sun Good squinted in disbelief at what she witnessed. Shane's eyes turned black. His skin revealed creature-like features. My scales appeared across Shane's face, my face. Instead of the stubble that barely hinted from Shane's cheeks, she watched my tentacles growing out into the darkness. Only with every sweep of the light from the spinning strobes had she seen the detail in my features, but she wasn't sure what she saw.

I came out to protect Shane. I came out to play.

With two swift movements I grabbed hold of the man's thumb, snapped it back until it broke, and grappled his throat tightly with my other hand. The young man crashed into the bar's countertop. He winced in pain and squeezed his thumb. I almost crushed his throat. That would have killed him instantly, but I didn't want that.

Complete shock draped across Sun's face. She had no idea that Shane was so powerful and violent. Of course, she saw me, not Shane.

"Shane! Let him go!" Sun shouted. She grabbed onto Shane's forearm with both of her hands. Underneath her grip, she felt the texture of what she thought was Shane's cold skin. She actually touched my reptilian scales as they seeped back into Shane's body, like water down a drain.

"Sorry," Shane said. Slowly, he released the young man and backed away.

Like a switchblade, I retracted back into my hole. I left Shane to his apologies, something that I did not do. I never apologized. I felt no remorse.

The young man attempted to move his thumb, but it was broken.

"I'm going to call the cops on you," the young man exclaimed.

"I'm so....." Shane began to apologize, but was interrupted by Sun Good. She held out her badge to the young man.

"No, you won't! If you tell the police, then I will tell them about how you tried to solicit sex from an undercover officer. So beat it," Sun Good demanded.

The man looked at the badge and cringed. He turned and stormed off.

Sun Good turned back to Shane.

"I never knew that you were capable of violence, Shane," she said. She gripped the bottom of her skirt and pulled it down, adjusting it.

"I didn't realize that you were such a dirty cop, using your badge like that," he said.

She laughed.

"Sorry if I embarrassed you. I guess I'm a little drunk and seeing that guy's hands on you made me jealous. Just some old feelings, I apologize," Shane said. He hung his head in embarrassment. I'm not sure why.

"Shane," she began.

"Yes?" he asked.

"Let's have a drink," she said.

"Let's," Shane agreed.

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I watched as Shane and Sun Good chatted it up. They drank and flirted like high school teenagers. I slithered around Shane's brain sick of listening to their dribble. I imagined that I was biding my time until I could quickly stab her in the throat with a broken champagne glass and then silently hide her body among the night clubbers and drug-induced waitresses.

Of course, I would never be able to pull that off, but I reached the limits of how much more flirtation I could handle with this woman. I had this problem with Shane and one other girl when we were a lot younger. However, I took care of that problem early on.

I couldn't have Shane falling in love. Love was a danger to us. It complicated things. It hindered our natural ability to kill, to hunt.

"Why did we break up?" Sun Good asked.

Stab her Shane! Stab her now!

"I didn't want to be serious with anyone. You know how important my career is to me. A serious relationship, especially with a cop, is a huge conflict of interest. Take our current case for example. I'm defending Alex Kline from the accusations that your department is making, and you are trying to help prosecute him, an innocent boy," Shane said. That was a good answer. Shane's powerful, silver tongue and my savagery made us such an impressive killing machine. His sleazy, silver tongue and my slithering, snake-like body made quite the pair.

"I guess that makes sense. You could have just told me that back when we dated," she said.

He shrugged.

Sun Good accepted Shane's excuses. Looks like I won't have to force him to stab her after all. I realized that Shane's weapons of charm and words might actually shake Det. Sun Good off of our trail—the diplomatic approach.

"Sorry about how I abruptly ended our relationship. I got scared. I started to have feelings for you and that terrified me to my core," Shane said. In a way, he told her the truth. I lived at his core. Nothing terrified me, but the feelings that Shane spoke of did concern me. I had no room inside of him for weak feelings like infatuation or worse, love.

I needed my vessel to remain under my influence and no one else's, not his hearts or his loins.

Nina and Lisa grinded on each other for a while; then they ran off to the bathroom together. Shane noticed that they were gone a long time, probably to do cocaine, but he did not care. They served their purpose.

We had found a new strategy—seduction.

"I have to get up early in the morning. I have to meet with my client," Shane said, smirking.

"Oh, so now you want to leave?"

"I was trying to say that I know that you have to get up early, is all. I know that you have to follow me around all day and spy on me and what not."

"That is true," she responded, uncrossing her muscular legs. He noticed the glimmer of her silver thong.

"You could just wake up at my place. That would make it easier for you to know exactly what I was doing," Shane said, smiling at her.

"Hmmm," she muttered. She looked down at her shoes and smiled. "Let's go back to your place."

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In Shane's penthouse, beneath a large, long abstract painting that stretched the downstairs hallway, he kissed Sun Good against the wall passionately, borderline pornographically. Sun kissed him back with equal veracity. Her silver skirt slowly peeled upward as she wrapped her toned legs around him.

Deep underneath her skirt, not far from Shane's roaming hands, she hid a small revolver. It was tightly strapped to the inside of her thigh.

Deep underneath his trousers, Sun felt how hard he was. This was not a shock to me since I never did control Shane's lust. The only region where his lust roamed into my lands was when it involved murder, violence, or plain old rough sex.

Sun's concealed gun concerned me. I wanted to remove it out of her reach. In case the detective got a glimpse of me, I needed her to be unarmed, harmless.

As she kissed Shane and clawed at his back, my claws began to protrude through his fingertips. His eyes began to turn black. My lizard-tongue replaced Shane's and slithered down Sun's throat.

She moaned as I kissed her, my talon claws softly scratched across her skin and up her legs towards the revolver. Without her keen senses noticing, I slid the gun out of its holster and placed it on the middle of the metal stairs behind us.

Sun felt the weight missing and quickly opened her eyes. In a blink, I was safely hidden behind Shane's skin and bones. His eyes were back to their original deep blue color.

She surrendered and sank back into their kiss.

Moments later, they stumbled up the stairs, past the revolver, and ended up in the master bedroom. The room was a simple decor using dark colors and steel furniture and fixtures. It was modern.

Shane tossed Sun's half-naked body onto the king-sized platform bed. She got up on her knees.

"I missed our sex," she said, looking up at him.

"Take off your dress," Shane commanded. I helped him a little. After all rough sex did fall into my area of control. And Shane's sex with Det. Good was normally rough. So, I lent him a dark, wet hand.

Sun stripped her dress down. She was down to her silver thong. Her skin sparkled from her glittery body cream. Her fake breasts were exposed and also glittery, truly sinful.

"Take off your pants. Get over here!" Sun Good said, sitting up on her knees.

Shane pulled off his pants and took off his shirt, revealing his muscular frame. Sun Good grabbed onto him and whipped us down onto the bed. She clawed over his chest and stomach. She would need sharper claws if she wanted to pierce through Shane's skin and into my lair underneath.

Shane's heart began pumping faster and faster. His blood rushed through his body and across my feet and tentacles. His blood flowed like lava, rushing out of a volcano. I could feel chunks of it soaking between my webbed toes.

Sun Good ran her lips along Shane's stomach. She made strident animalistic sounds. Shane could feel her breasts softly brushing across his thighs as she moved downward on him.

I let Shane have his fun, but I wasn't excited about the thundering of Shane's heartbeat. Hearing his heart beating was like the echo of a subway car as it rumbled below a New York City apartment. It shook every piece of furniture that I owned.

After a while of Shane enjoying Sun Good's lips on him; he gripped her by the tuft of her hair and moved her up towards his face. He passionately kissed her.

I grappled onto Shane's brain, listening to the creature-like sounds that resonated from Sun and my vessel.

After forty-five minutes of listening to their beastly sounds and surviving their thrusting movements; finally they were finished.

"I hope that this changes things. Maybe now you can ease off of me a little?" Shane asked.

"I'm tired. Let's go to sleep," Sun said. "We can talk tomorrow."

Within seconds she was fast asleep.

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The cold hardwood floors of Shane's penthouse sent goose bumps from Sun's feet all the way up her legs. She stood near the large bay window in Shane's master bedroom. She stared out of it towards the second penthouse apartment across the roof, our secret lair. She noticed the large fireplace that protruded out of the roof.

Only for a moment did she wonder why Shane didn't have a fireplace in his penthouse.

Strange, she thought. *Why such a large fireplace for such a small penthouse?*

Those thoughts fled. Her suspicions died. Glancing back at Shane, he appeared to be in a coma-like sleep, but we were awake.

A single nightstand was near his side of the bed. She saw a thin glass stand that had the time emitting from it in LED light. The time was 2:45 a.m.

A cold breeze swept through the darkness and up Sun's naked skin. This was her chance to find out something about Shane. She knew that she had to take advantage of being inside his home while he slept soundly.

She rose from the bed and carefully tiptoed down the steel staircase. Each step was precisely placed on the metal planks in order to ensure silent movement.

She stopped and bent over to pick up her revolver. She wasn't sure if Shane was dangerous, but her instincts told her that she was better off with the gun.

At the bottom of the stairs she stopped and picked up her purse, placing the revolver inside.

Shane's penthouse was 2200 square feet with four bedrooms. She suspected that one of them had to be an office. That was where she would investigate.

The penthouse had more windows than walls. None of them had curtains or blinds. Shane acted like he had nothing to hide, but in Sun's experience the most

dangerous men were the ones who hid a secret so well that they were rarely suspicious. Shane allowed the outside world to see directly into his home at any time. In the daytime, the penthouse was filled with sunlight. That just meant that at night it was filled with darkness.

He hid something, and she was determined to find out what.

Sun walked through the living room, passing some very expensive looking furniture. She made her way to the hallway and found three doors. The first one led to a second bedroom, a guest room. It consisted of very plain furniture and bed covers.

The second room was a workout room. The room was comprised of a bench, numerous free weights, ab machines, and a rowing machine.

Sun Good gawked at Shane's vanity.

He already works out at the Roosevelt Club. Why does he have so much equipment here at home? She thought. Then she thought about how she appreciated his hard, sculpted body. It was like an Olympic god's.

The third room had to be the place where she would discover all of his secrets.

Where was he keeping records of the missing clients? They must have been in this room, she thought.

She turned the knob and suddenly froze. She felt something cold and daunting standing behind her. She heard faint breathing. Sun Good reached into her purse and whipped around with the revolver drawn.

To her surprise, there was no one standing there. The hallway behind her was completely empty. She relaxed her revolver and turned back to the third room.

"Bingo," she muttered.

The room was Shane's personal, just as she had hoped. A desk, without any drawers, rested near the back window. The only thing that sat on its flawless surface was a silver laptop.

Sun Good felt titillation, like a child discovering where his parents had hidden the Christmas presents. She hit the jackpot. She thought that his personal computer would be the place to find his hidden secrets.

She sat down behind the desk and turned on the computer.

She didn't notice it. But outside of the window, we crept through the night's shadows. We watched as the detective failed to open Shane's laptop. She tried password after password. She would never crack through our password. Technology kept Shane and me safe from D.C.'s hot shot detective.

We watched as the naked Sun Good appeared to grow frustrated by her failures to log on to our laptop. After a while, she gave up.

Shane breathed a deep sigh of relief. Perhaps now, she would back off of us.

However, just then, she pulled a small jump-drive out of her purse. Shane's eyes widened. He focused on the device and noticed that it was not a normal looking jump-drive. The device was unfamiliar to us. The lights on it blinked profusely. They blinked like they were in-sync to someone's pulse.

She inserted the device into the laptop, and the lights on the device jumped to life, pulsating even faster than before. Within moments a loading bar appeared on the blank screen of the laptop.

Twisting my claws into Shane's frontal lobe, like turning two focusing knobs on a projector; I zoomed his eyes closer to the symbol on the screen. It was not a

loading bar. It was a copying bar. The device that Sun Good had inserted into our laptop was copying everything off of our hard drive.

How did she acquire that kind of technology? What was this device? Shane wondered, panicked.

We were both worried. No surveillance device that we were aware of was capable of hacking beyond a password protected hard drive. It recorded everything that was in our computer's memory. This device had to be some kind of CIA technology that Sun Good had somehow gotten her hands on.

Even though there should not have been anything on it that incriminated us. We could not let Sun Good copy Shane's hard drive. There was no way to be sure that Shane hadn't missed some clue. Perhaps she would find something in his past Google searches. Perhaps she would find records of Shane's financial transgressions. Maybe she might find a receipt from when we stopped to gas up the Mercedes not far from the asylum on the morning that we picked up Gillard Shutter and killed him.

We had to take action. I couldn't take the chance that this woman would ruin us. Sun Good would have to die. She went too far. She crossed the line.

I dug my claws into Shane's psyche, beyond the layer of his ego, and forced him to listen to me, to do my bidding. For the first time that I could remember, he fought back. He resisted my attempts to convince him kill her.

Sun Good peered behind her to the window. For a fraction of a moment, she witnessed a struggle between a creature and a man, Jekyll and Hyde. Before her eyes could adjust to the struggle that went on outside of the window, we were out of sight. I gained control over Shane and we returned to the master bedroom.

Sun Good slid open the glass doors and looked outside. She searched around the side of the penthouse. There was no one there. A sense of uncertainty fell across her. She had witnessed something evil.

Silently, she returned to the master bedroom. She peeked over at Shane. He appeared to be fast asleep.

She decided to leave. She picked up her clothes and slipped them on. She squeezed the jump-drive device in the palm of her hand. She dropped it into her purse and left our presence. Grabbing her shoes at the bottom of the stairs, she snuck out of the penthouse.

After the elevator doors closed; Shane's eyes popped open. They grew black, marking his full transformation into the monster inside of him. My claws dug deep into his brain, fortifying my control. He would not fight me this time. This time there would be blood—Sun Good's blood.

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The Mercedes trailed far enough behind Sun Good's taxi to be unnoticed by the perceptive detective. We pulled off to the side alley near her apartment building. We watched as she paid the cab driver and exited the taxi.

She entered her apartment.

I pulled up closer and parked the car across the street. Wearing a black t-shirt and leather gloves, I picked the kill-case up off of the passenger seat.

Silently, I walked up to Sun's front door and picked the lock.

Her apartment was messy. She left food lying out. Makeup was sprawled out everywhere. Numerous case files and pictures of Shane were fanned out across her kitchen table, like she was some kind of sick stalker. I appreciated her obsession with my vessel. She even had Shane's Vanity Fair issue. It must have come out already. She left it sprawled out across the edge of her dining table.

Sun Good sat in the next room. I crept up to the doorway. I was well out of sight.

She faced the other direction, staring at her computer. The jump-drive was plugged into it. She ran some program that I had never seen before. Then suddenly, Shane's desktop appeared across her screen.

How was she doing that? What kind of program could copy entire desktops? Where did a cop from D.C. get this kind of technology? If the police possessed technology like this, then our job killing creatures like the StoneCutter would become extremely difficult.

She was going to finger us in our crimes for sure. She had to die.

I returned to the kill-case and opened it. Our gloved hands removed a syringe and tranquilizer. I jabbed the syringe into the bottle and filled it with the tranquilizer.

Most of Shane's private desktop had appeared on her computer.

Suddenly, she felt the same cold breath behind her that she felt back at Shane's penthouse. Then, for a brief moment, she saw me in the reflection of her computer screen. Before she could spin around, I injected her neck with the powerful sedative. She would be unconscious for hours, if I had planned on leaving her alive.

I grabbed her hair and pulled her head back.

This was it.

I drew a large, sharp hunting knife and placed the blade across her throat. I had waited to spill the inside of her neck for a long time. Now was the time. The cold, steel blade began to slice. Suddenly, I stared at Shane's reflection in the screen of her laptop. His human reflection stared back at me. Ordinarily, I saw my own, but somehow there he was, staring at me, begging me to stop. All of Shane's frailty stared directly into my eyes.

I tried, but I couldn't move his hand any further. He froze. Forcefully, I dug my claws into his mind, twisting and turning the wrinkles of his brain until he gave into my urges, but Shane's hands remained steady. He stalled out.

I don't know how, but he resisted me. Never before had he ever withstood my commands to kill.

Kill her! I screamed in his head. *Kill her!*

I couldn't get him to do what was necessary. I couldn't make him kill her.

What was it about this woman that gave him the strength to ignore me? I slithered around in his head and simply grabbed the reigns once more.

Fine. She can live. I thought. *You will regret this. But she can live.*

We snatched up the jump-drive and replaced it with a replica. Within a flash we were back in the Mercedes and on our way back to the penthouse, back to bed.

Shane won a small battle, but I was still in control. He still needed me to kill the StoneCutter. He still needed me to survive.

I let him have his little fling with the detective. Even a well-trained dog needs a bone, and she was his bone.

At least it seemed that she was finally off our backs.

I retreated to the dark, dry caverns beneath Shane's thoughts and waited until my strength returned to full capacity. Then I could come back at him and overpower his restraint. Never again would he be able to resist me. Never again would he deny my commands, or the next time I would break his precious bone.

Chapter 8

Tag.

"In this hole, lives the wicked king."

—David Berkowitz, the Son of Sam.

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The morning sunlight beamed into Shane's penthouse apartment, engulfing the downstairs with a bright light like a fiery inferno of orange colors. The light wrapped around the staircase and fluttered up the walls. It slowly penetrated Shane's bedroom.

The light swept across his face, some of it into his ear canal and into my secret dwelling. I was wide awake, but I let Shane sleep. He slept in. Normally, I sank my teeth into his brain matter, turning on his ignition. This time, I purposefully let him oversleep, messing up his usual routine.

He denied my controls last night. That angered me. He wanted to resist me. Fine. Then he would have to do things without my help. He was on his own.

Finally, Shane opened his eyes and saw that the clock read 9 a.m. The time was later than usual for him to rise from his sleep. I served as Shane's internal alarm clock. Today he would learn a valuable lesson. Today he would learn that he needed me. He was my dog, my faithful pet not the other way around.

"Shit...the time," Shane muttered, sitting up in bed.

He forced himself to get up and rushed to the closet. He picked out an outfit that I wouldn't have dared selected. He dressed and left the penthouse.

By the time we made our way down to the lobby of our building, Shane realized what I already knew. He left our floor unlocked. Now anyone could hit the penthouse button and enter our domain. He stopped in the doorway and peered at his watch. He was far too late to be concerned with locking the penthouse floor. I would have made him go back up, but I took the day off.

Shane signaled a taxi. It pulled over to the side of the road and he stepped in and instructed the driver to hurry to his office plaza.

At the office, Shane found Ally Embers in a state of distress, which was highly unusually for such a well put-together woman.

"Why are you so unraveled?" Shane asked.

She looked him up and down, almost not recognizing him because of his unmatched ensemble.

"Shane, the Secretary has been calling all morning. And now you have a special phone call," she said. "And they've waited on hold awhile."

Shane watched as a bead of perspiration slowly ran down her cleavage. Never before had either of us seen Ally so nervous. It made Shane nervous.

"I know that I'm late, but I just walked in the door. Tell the Secretary that I will call her back. She is not my client after all, her son is. So she can just wait."

"The caller on the phone is not the Secretary of State. I think that you had better pick it up in your office."

Shane sighed and stepped into his office. He picked up the phone and quickly changed his demeanor to a professional attorney.

"Shane Lasher," he announced to the caller.

"Hold for the President, Mr. Lasher," a female voice demanded.

Curious, neither of us had ever heard Terrance's assistant call him the president before. I guess that technically he was the president of our firm. Then again her Hungarian accent was gone. It must have been someone else.

"Mr. Lasher?" a strong, familiar voice asked, but it wasn't Terrance's.

"Yes. Who is this?" Shane asked, confused. I sat at attention in Shane's head, curious as to whom the caller was, but I still was on strike.

"Shane, this is Sean Striker—the President of the United States."

Shane's jaw dropped, and he peered through the one-way glass, staring Ally down. She leaned up against the opposite side of the window, trying to see in.

It was the President. We had heard his voice enough on CNN to be sure of that.

Shane covered the receiver and cleared his throat.

"Mr. President, what can I do for you?"

"Eline Kline says that she has been trying to call you this morning and to no avail."

"Ah, yes sir."

"She is a personal friend of mine, Shane. I want you to know that I love that woman and her sons. What has happened to Alex is a tragedy. She believes that boy is innocent, and I take her at her word," the President said, strongly.

"Yes, sir."

"Now, I realize that you can't discuss with me the details of your defense, and I don't want to know."

"Right, Mr. President," Shane said. I was coming to the forefront of him just enough so that I could hear the conversation. I still wasn't going to help him today.

"Mr. Lasher, I am not going to call your boss, Terrance Graves, or use any of my considerable power to interfere in your defense. You have quite a reputation for getting men off of these kinds of charges. So, I'm going to let you do your thing.

"But Shane, I will be following this case closely. I expect that you will do the right thing. I expect that you will give the Kline family your undivided attention. If you can do that and win Alex's freedom, I will consider it a great personal favor to me.

"Shane, I don't forget favors. Do you follow my drift?"

"Yes, Mr. President," Shane said. He realized that during the entire conversation with the President, he stood while holding the phone as if that was protocol.

"Good. Now Shane, call Eline and get her off my back. I'll be seeing you son," the President said. He hung up.

Shane remained standing for a moment and then looked at the phone. He returned it to the receiver and shook his head in amazement. Neither of us expected to start our day by taking a phone call from the President of the United States.

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Resting in my hiding place from Shane, I did nothing but dream. I dreamed of the StoneCutter, only it was real. I saw him in his life. I never saw his face, only his figure.

He stood in his own lair. He sanded a large, wooden box. Carefully, he ran his gloved hands along the sides of it, feeling the smooth edges of the box. The wood shimmered like it was freshly cut from the mill. It smelled like newly opened paper.

He leaned back for a moment and basked at the completed box. He worked on this project for weeks. He cut the lumber especially for this. He hauled it himself. He transported it in a rented truck.

Exactly four weeks ago, he rented a pickup truck under an alias and drove out beyond the city's outer edges. He drove until he was in West Hampton Beach.

The truck's engine buzzed silently like he had wanted. He pulled up to a gated manor and got out. A padlock secured the gate. He picked the lock in a matter of moments. Afterwards, he slid the chain out from around the gate and opened it.

He drove into the empty manor. He drove slowly to avoid leaving tire tracks. He was careful not to leave any trace that he had been there.

He backed the pickup truck into the yard, past the house, and into the backyard. The tailgate of the truck stopped a meter from where the dense tree line met the house's private beach.

The StoneCutter stared out over the beach and remembered a night that changed his life forever. He remembered killing that particular family.

A moment later, the voice inside him urged him to focus on why they were there. He reached into the truck and pulled out a chainsaw and a pair of goggles. He waded through the forest, looking for the perfect tree and found one.

He ripped the cord on the saw. The motor buzzed to life. The blade turned ferociously and ripped through the tree's thick bark. He stood back as it fell to the ground.

The StoneCutter studied the beach and saw that no one seemed to be coming to investigate the sound of the falling tree or the chainsaw.

He cut the engine on the chainsaw and returned it to its resting place inside the truck. Then he pulled out an axe and began hacking away at the tree. He wanted to make thinner more manageable pieces out of it.

The whole process took the entire day. Nightfall approached and he was ready to return to his regular, high-powered lifestyle. So he assessed that he had met his quota of wood and left the rest.

I still could not make out his face.

He lifted the long, slender boards and piled them in the back of the truck, filling it up.

Finally, he was ready to leave, but not before he said goodbye.

The StoneCutter walked calmly past the pickup truck. He stopped at a mound of dirt where bushes and weeds had sprouted up over the years.

He knelt down close to the mound. It was a grave. With a muffled voice, he whispered, "I have very special plans for your son. Very special."

He returned to the truck and drove past the manor and out of the gate. He stopped and stepped out of the truck. He relocked the padlock.

Before he drove off, the StoneCutter walked over to the old, unkempt mailbox and opened it. He reached in with gloved hands and pulled out the cobwebs and several poisonous spiders. Then he reached back in and pulled out some old mail. The envelopes were moldy from the rainwater that had seeped in over the decades.

None of the mail was legible, so he tossed it back into the mailbox. As he walked back to the truck, he glanced back at the mailbox one last time, and even though some of the letters were missing, he still could read the name on the old, rusted plaque. It read:

S. Lasher

The memory faded and the StoneCutter returned his focus on the present. He smiled at his finished, wooden box. As he stared at it and took in the whole thing, he realized that it was one of the finest coffins that he had ever constructed.

He stood up from his stool and walked past another workbench. Now, he had to finish his other project and the time would be ripe for him to act.

Sitting on the workbench was a large headstone. He had only begun carving into it. So far it read one single word:

Lawyer

|||||

Shane sat by a nervous Alex Kline in a large, empty courtroom. They picked jurors for his case. I was glad that I had avoided Shane, jury selection bored me. Besides, I needed to focus on my vision, study it, and determine my next move against the StoneCutter.

Shane usually needed my help. This would be a good opportunity for him to fail and realize how badly he needed me. Unfortunately, Terrance Graves made it hard for him to fail. He hired a very expensive jury consultant, the kind of man who picks the perfect jurors; ones that will mostly likely side with our defendant.

The jury consultant's name was John Curdick. He sickened me with his attempts to be everyone's friend. Of course, I knew him differently. I could see that there was something more sinister in him. Then again, I suspected most lawyers of having something dark inside them, just like Jack Crush, even Terrance had a dark side. In a world where I went around lying to everyone, hiding from everyone, even I didn't trust lawyers.

John was an older man, late fifties. He had a bald head and square glasses. Some lawyers considered him a genius in disguise. He acted goofy, but I never underestimated his ability to read people. It was probably a good thing that Shane was on his own today. John was one of the few people who were always uncomfortable around me. It was as if he could see me and sense my dark presence.

Shane and I had only met the man once before. We met him at the Shutter trial. He was there to help us with the jury selection. John's instincts were right on. Without him, we would have had a much harder time during the trial. His juror picks did not guarantee a win for us, but they were the right picks to hear Gillard Shutter's insanity defense.

John leaned in and said, "Shane don't pick the woman on the end with the black handbag. That handbag cost \$26,000. It is a Gucci. Her husband has money. Judging by her prejudicial manner, I'd say she is conservative. Her husband probably donates money to the Republican Party. The Kline's are a famous Democratic family. She's already decided that Alex is guilty."

Obviously, Shane was not going to need me today. Not as long as he had John by his side. I grew more and more frustrated at my attempts to show my vessel that he needed me. I grew impatient waiting for the moment that Shane realized how valuable I was to him. Jury selection was not going to help me show him his mistake in disobeying my orders to kill Det. Sun Good. Leaving her alive would one day come back to hurt us.

Suddenly, like an angel of mercy, she entered and stood near the back row of the courtroom. I hate angels.

Shane noticed her. He nodded in her direction and then returned to jury selection.

Following John's advice, he dismissed the conservative juror. She stormed out of the jury box and pranced out of the courtroom. Her high-heeled shoes clapped on the floor with every step, revealing her disappointment.

Afterward, Shane leaned over to Ally and said, "Take over for a moment. I need to talk to Det. Sun Good."

"Are you sure?" Ally responded. She glanced beyond Shane, jealously glaring at Sun Good. She was very protective of Shane. She had an undeniable attraction to him. She thought that it was hidden from us, but we both saw it. She has a schoolgirl crush.

Shane rarely gave her responsibilities beyond writing briefs and answering phones. However, she was a qualified paralegal as well as his personal assistant. Ally spent her nights taking law classes both online and in class at Howard University.

"I will be back shortly," Shane said.

He began walking towards Sun Good. She stepped away from the last pew and walked towards the rear courtroom doors to meet him.

Shane stepped through the doors and into the hallway. He stopped and gazed at Sun Good's amazing torso. While he thought of her different pieces, I thought of her in pieces. Shane liked her body in a sexual way. My way was much different, much more perverse and violent.

"I'm sorry that I left so abruptly last night," she said.

"That's okay. That's what I used to do to you. Remember?"

"That's not why I did it. To be honest I'm not really sure what happened. In the middle of the night, I remembered waking up at your place, but this morning I woke up in my own bed. I don't remember how I got there. I can't remember much of anything," Sun Good said.

"I know. We must have drunk a lot more than I thought. I don't remember a lot of what happened. I remember you, but the details are scattered," Shane lied.

"I'm sorry. I'm really mad at myself for letting us get physical. It shouldn't have happened. It was unprofessional given our recent business," she said. "Right now you are the object of my investigation. I could have really messed it up with this shit."

"I wanted it to happen. Not to hinder your investigation. I know that you are only doing your job. I know that you think that there is something going on with my past clients.

"I assure you that my clients are out there somewhere. They were both victims of wrongful charges. You think that Paul Verize is going to return to teaching after the entire country called him the 'Paul-Verizer'? I mean would you?"

"I see your point. And I don't regret last night. Under different circumstances I would even want to see you again.

"By the way, I know that you had the complaint against me retracted this morning. I appreciate that," Sun said.

"I never meant for it to get that far anyway. My firm wanted to threaten you, but I was never going to let it play out. I told them this morning that you were no longer going to cause me problems. Right?"

"I'm still worried about your missing clients, but I will back off of you and your rich friends for now.

"I will need to know about Gillard Shutter soon though. This is important. You should be helping me anyway since he was your client. Having a new suspect could clear Shutter's reputation, and he could have a civil suit on his side," she said.

"I will do what I can, but really I can't help you find a man who has gone underground," Shane said.

Literally, I thought.

"Besides, I'm a criminal lawyer. I could care less about civil suits. My associates may not like that, but I don't care. They have plenty of money and cases," Shane joked.

"Anyway, last night was a mistake. I don't think that we should see each other again. Not like that anyway. Our professions are at stake. My investigation is at stake, I still like you," she said, leaning in closer to him.

"I like you too," he revealed. He told the truth. He wanted to see her again. Deep down in parts of Shane that I dare not visit—his heart—Shane wanted to be with her. In our entire span of life, she was the only one who had come this close to breaking us apart.

"We can't though. I'm sorry. I will stop following you. Call me if you can think of anything else. I better get back, and you had better get back to your jury selection," Sun Good said.

"Friends then?" Shane blurted out as she turned away.

She looked back over her shoulder, continued walking, and said, "Yes, but I am still suspicious of you and your firm."

Shane watched as she put her sunglasses on and strolled down the hall and out of the courthouse.

|||||

Shane scored a victory today, or so he thought. I knew better. He always needed me. A dark and violent event had fused us together. I was the force that he would never escape. At the moment, he flew high and was satisfied with himself. I let him enjoy his feelings of "victory" over me. Soon he would realize who his true master was.

After a long day of jury selection, we returned home. Walking into our building, Shane smiled. Today, he managed to get Det. Sun Good off of our trail, at least for the moment. And we did it his way, leaving her alive against my will.

Everything seemed like it was going to work out for him, and with little help from me. At least that was what he thought until we returned home.

"Your package is already in your penthouse Mr. Lasher," the building doorman said as Shane strolled by the front desk, feeling accomplished. This feeling sank as soon as he heard the doorman's words.

"What?" Shane asked, stopping cold in his tracks. He turned to the doorman, a stocky man who sat so low behind the counter that it was easy to miss him.

"Your friend, he had a surprise for you. He said he had a key. He was just going to let himself in," the doorman said.

"Is he still up there?" Shane asked, remembering that he had forgotten to lock up this morning

"You know, I'm not quite sure. I never saw him leave."

Immediately, Shane turned and hopped on the elevator, riding it impatiently up to the penthouse. The metal doors slid open into our living room. Shane stepped off of the lift and took two steps in. He gazed around. Someone had definitely been in our home. Who was our mysterious visitor? He might have still been lingering around. Whoever, he was. He was not friendly. He was dangerous. At first, I suspected Sun Good, but that made little sense.

Shane reached into his briefcase and pulled out a three-inch retractable knife and whipped the blade out. It glimmered in the penthouse's low evening light. The sun was setting outside. It provided sharp, amber slivers of light for us to see, but left plenty of shadows, plenty of hiding places.

Shane quietly put down his briefcase and waited for me to seep out of his skin. With the low levels of light, Shane needed me. He needed my senses to help him navigate the approaching darkness. He needed my powers to deal with the unknown intruder. He expected me.

After all, I had always been there. I had always protected him, but not this time.

This time I remained dormant. For now, his mind was a bomb shelter and I hid in it, deep below the surface. If he really needed me I would come out. I wasn't going to let harm befall him. He was only mine to harm, but he needed to learn who was in charge. So I abandoned him to take the risk alone.

Shane began to tremble when he realized that I was not coming to the surface to help him and that he was on his own. He clutched the knife tightly. He looked

around and saw no signs of anyone. He checked up the stairs. He found no signs of the strange intruder.

Shane breathed a sigh of relief.

Maybe the doorman made a mistake, he thought.

He went into the kitchen and looked out of the window. A violent and sudden panic came over both of us. Someone was in our secret lair across the roof. The door was wide open. Shane gripped the knife and leapt into action. I leaned forward and prepared to intervene if necessary, to protect us.

We went out into the yard. Slowly, the lair's door flapped open. Someone had pried it open with a crowbar. The lock was completely destroyed. The door barely hung on its steel hinges.

Cautiously, Shane entered our lair. He checked each room thoroughly. We searched past the walk-in freezer and the large, steel furnace.

In the next room, we investigated our desk. It nested undisturbed. The computer's keyboard remained dusty. We rarely used this terminal.

He searched the last room, my equipment room. This was where our trophies used to hang before we destroyed them all. The only thing that remained was the cold, steel table in the center of the room.

Nothing seemed to be out of place except for one foreign object, something that definitely did not belong. A large package rested on the table. The intruder had wrapped it up in thick, brown paper.

The package nested on the table alone taunting me. The invader of my sanctuary left it like a calling card. It identified him as the invader of our secret, little world. Shane glared at it like he had uncovered a booby trap. At first we thought that our intruder had been Det. Sun Good returning to gather the evidence that was robbed from her, but this was different. We stared at the package and knew that the intruder was someone else, someone deadly.

I seeped through the pores in Shane's skin and took over. This was something that he needed me for. I stowed away my anger over his insubordination and united with my vessel. Once again he became the tool that I utilized to feed the insatiable bloodlust that coursed through my reptilian veins.

We leaned forward, weary of an ambush.

Cautiously, my talon hand reached out and grabbed the package. It was very heavy. Whoever lifted it had incredible strength. Not just anyone could lift it, carry it, and then leave it in our apartment. Using my considerable strength, I could barely lift it up off of the table. Even with all of Shane's muscles, I experienced tension when I tried to pick it up.

I clawed the ribbons around the package to shreds. They unraveled and fell to the ground, leaving only the wrapping paper.

I swiped my claws across the wrapping paper and watched as it tore open and unfolded. Quickly, I tore off the rest of the paper.

Resting on our table, one that we had used to dissect more than just a few villains was a large stone tablet. It was a tombstone, artfully engraved, it read:

**HERE LIES ELINE KLINE
MOTHER TO A BASTARD SON**

The StoneCutter was our mysterious visitor. He stopped by and left us with a serial killer's statement of intent. Somehow, he knew we existed. Somehow, he knew our identity. He knew that Shane was a killer, an avenger seeking his demise, seeking to fill a coffin with the StoneCutter's corpse.

Yet, he had not come here to harm us. He had not come here to warn us. He toyed with us. The demon inside him sensed me. That was how he knew about Shane in the first place. That was how he tracked us down. He left this message to me. He left it to say "Tag you're it."

Chapter 9

Buried Past.

"There is an idea of a Patrick Bateman; some kind of abstraction. But there is no real me: only an entity, something illusory. And though I can hide my cold gaze, and you can shake my hand and feel flesh gripping yours and maybe you can even sense our lifestyles are probably comparable... I simply am not there."

—Patrick Bateman American Psycho.

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The StoneCutter told us exactly who his next target was. Last night he invaded our sanctuary, gave us a clue as to where he would strike next. He targeted Eline Kline. So where ever she was; he would be. He planned to kill her and he wanted us to know. The trick now was to locate and protect the Secretary. We spent the entire night searching for her whereabouts with no luck.

Shane tried calling Eline directly. She never answered. Her cell phone went straight to voicemail. He left two messages, but she didn't respond.

We searched through numerous sources on the internet and nothing.

All we had learned so far was that because of Alex Kline's legal problems, his mother had experienced a number of death threats. In order to better protect her, the Secret Service moved her to a secret location. They guarded her closely, keeping her out of the public eye. No one seemed to know where they held her.

Shane texted Ally. He said:

Ally. I need to find the Secretary of State. The Secret Service has stashed her someplace. It is important that I find her. Ask around. No official channels. In no way is this related to the firm. Stay discrete. I don't want anyone to know that I am looking for her. Get back to me when you have something.

We waited. The morning hours seeped through the night sky. Slowly, it took over the day. The rays of the sun purged the darkness into glowing, fiery daylight. And still Ally found nothing.

We stayed up all night. Shane operated on virtually no sleep. I felt him growing weaker and weaker. His strength diminished. Soon I would have to take over completely just to keep him awake. His weariness concerned me. I needed him in tiptop shape to face the StoneCutter.

Earlier the StoneCutter beckoned us. He wanted a final showdown. Now, his trail grew cold again. I needed to find him. I needed to destroy my maker. Just thinking about the upcoming battle, whet the taste buds that surrounded the sharp teeth that lined my serpent-shaped mouth. My long tongue slithered out from my lips and licked the top of Shane's skull as if it were a delicious treat, a bone wafer. We waited for this day for almost three decades.

Even though we had not yet found the specific location of Eline Kline, we still prepared. We laid out our kill-tools next to the stone tablet that the StoneCutter had left for us. I wrote a mental checklist, literally carving it into the walls of Shane's skull like cavemen did in ancient times. I used the checklist like I had packed for a trip, a serial murder retreat. It read:

Hunting Knife

Scalpel

Utility Knife Garrote Wire Duct Tape

Tranquilizer

Red Scarf

Silver Colt 1911

Leather Gloves

I gazed over each item and scratched it off of my cave wall. Shane grimaced each time I did so. He must have felt a stinging sensation each time I scrapped my claws across his bones.

Each item was accounted for. We were prepared for the kill.

Shane turned to a large mirror on the wall. He barely recognized himself. I exuded through him. I grew in size, absorbing him like a deadly sponge. Soon Shane would have a backseat to my devilish deeds. He would be helpless to my actions.

His iPhone started to ring, interrupting his transformation into me. The caller ID read the number of the prison where Alex was held. He called from the payphone near his holding cell.

Shane ignored the call.

Thank God, I thought. The only call we wanted to take was Ally's with the location of Eline Kline, not our whiny, young client. If we didn't find the StoneCutter soon, I was going to kill Alex Kline for his annoying stupidity.

Ally dated a FBI agent two years ago. Shane hoped that she could use his heartache over their breakup to manipulate him into tracking the Secretary down for us. So far we had not heard from her. No luck there.

All avenues led us to a dead end.

Shane looked at the time. The early morning hastily changed into a working day.

We were supposed to be in court today. We couldn't cancel it. The only thing to do was to completely skip it. In our absence the judge would call a recess. It had

to be that way. If we showed up to trial, there would be no way for us to get out of it. We would be stuck, and we couldn't tell Ally our plans to skip out. She might blab about it to someone at the office. Then Terrance would have driven down and showed up at our penthouse and dragged us to the trial. The last thing that we needed was to worry about Shane's job.

Shane's iPhone vibrated again. Shane's palette had to remain clear. Finally, a text arrived from Ally. Shane opened the message it read:

Sorry Shane. No one knows where the Secret Service took Mrs. Kline.

Now, we were frustrated. Shane was at the end of his rope and ready to hang someone with it. The Secretary was going to die and the StoneCutter was going to get away again.

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Shane paced his penthouse. I slithered around on the inside of his thoughts. I felt like a snake that had been coiled for far too long. I needed to spring out and use my serrated teeth to inject my venom into the veins of the StoneCutter. If I didn't feed on him soon, I would just take the next person that we saw.

Both of Shane's phones—his iPhone and home phone—rang off of the hook throughout the day. Shane was due in court hours ago. The court, the Judge's office, Ally, the firm, Terrance—everyone had called. Dozens of voicemails waited for us. There were too many for us to listen to at the moment. We focused only on two things: finding the Secretary and finding the wretched StoneCutter.

Ally texted a few more times. We responded with:

The only thing I care about is the location of Eline Kline. Don't bother me with anything else right now.

Ally didn't text again.

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Without realizing it, Shane fell asleep dressed in his kill-suit. My facial features obtruded through his natural bone structure.

He lay on the couch until the door buzzer sounded. He woke up. Peering out of the windows, we saw that the night sky had once again covered the city.

Our hope of finding the Secretary in time faded. Surely the StoneCutter would wait until nightfall to kill her. Nightfall now descended on the city. Shane gazed at his Kenneth Cole watch; it was 7:30 p.m. The sun had set. We still had time. I was sure of it.

The door buzzed again. Shane studied the intercom near the elevator doors. He debated on answering it or just letting it buzz. He walked over to it and pressed the button.

"Who is there?" he asked.

A moment passed by, and he heard the aggressive voice of Det. Sun Good.

"Let me come up," she demanded.

"Sorry, Sun. I'm feeling under the weather," Shane said, trying to think of a better excuse. The truth was that we were both exhausted.

"The judge is going to hold you in contempt. Shane, buzz me in!"

Shane leaned his head against the intercom and exhaled in frustration.

Then suddenly his iPhone vibrated. He looked down. He got a notification text from his Facebook account. It read:

The StoneCutter wants to be your friend.

I leapt from behind his skin, moving to the surface. I took control. The message filled us with overwhelming exuberance. The StoneCutter taunted us, but it was certainly a clue.

I opened Shane's Facebook app and accepted his friend request.

The StoneCutter's profile showed a picture of an unmarked tombstone with tomorrow's date on it. A single wall post read that Eline Kline had been *checked* into Manchester, New Hampshire.

He left us a breadcrumb.

He lured us to him. He wanted us to find him.

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The StoneCutter's tag of her was not an exact pinpoint, but Shane did some research on Google and discovered that the Kline's owned a ranch in Manchester. A densely wooded area surrounded it; it was perfect for the StoneCutter to stage an ambush. Even with Secret Service on the grounds, I was skilled enough to infiltrate the ranch. And if we could do it, the StoneCutter could do it. I only imagined how skilled his demon must have been to have escaped captivity for decades. I wanted to use Shane's bare hands to pry open the StoneCutter's head and pull his creature out of him. I wanted to watch it struggle and whip around as Shane's hands rang its neck.

Shane plugged the address of the Kline's ranch into his Google maps. Immediately we left; driving for hours. In route we received a text message from Ally. It read:

Terrance's office called several times. He is pissed.....I found out where the Secretary is. She owns a ranch in New Hampshire somewhere. She goes there once a month to spend a weekend. My friend told me that she sees someone. A man. Not her husband.

Shane looked at the message puzzled. She meets someone? Was Eline Kline having an affair? Shane's brain began calculating, scheming. We both thought the same thing. The StoneCutter was going to make Eline's lover bury her alive and then kill the lover, just like he did with Shane's parents.

Then again maybe the StoneCutter was the lover. Maybe he knew all of the victims that way.

Maybe that was how he knew the layouts of their homes; he had been in them. Over the years he murdered numerous families. No one, not the police, not the FBI, not Sun Good, not the reporters, not even I, could ever figure out why he

killed the particular families that he had. The police assumed that it was because they were rich that he had picked them.

That never seemed right to me. Killing them in such a brutal fashion just to rob them? No, that wasn't right at all. No. No. He forced the husbands to bury their wives and children alive. He was much more than a twisted thief. He was a mass murderer, a deranged killer, a monster. He was like us.

The creature in his head was my doppelgänger, my exact double. He wanted me dead. He was powerful. His power surpassed mine, but I was younger and youth stood in my corner. The StoneCutter was old and tired, ready for retirement.

Shane drove with a renewed sense of power and exhilaration. After a while we reached the outskirts of Eline's property. The edge of the property line was only a few miles up the road.

Shane turned off the lights and drove slowly down the winding, dirt road. Living in D.C., Shane learned and studied Secret Service protocol. He knew that there was at least a half dozen agents guarding Mrs. Kline. Excitement filled our veins. The Secret Service didn't intimidate me.

The road ended just on the edge of the Kline's ranch. Our mud-covered tires rested in front of a large, swinging gate which led into a grazing pasture for the Kline's horses. Several of them roamed around freely.

Some were completely still, sleeping. Their dark images were perfectly lit by the full moon.

Shane stepped out of the car and retrieved a satchel filled with our killing tools. We left most behind in the car. We took only the items that we needed the most, including the shovel.

Before we left the car, Shane let go of himself completely. In the exalted presence of the moon, of the darkness, Shane transformed into the creature that resided within. Like a werewolf, Shane shape-shifted into me, the hungry beast from within. My talons pierced through his fingertips. My pitch black eyes peered through Shane's eye-sockets. My scaly skin absorbed his to form a hardened shell.

To protect Shane's identity, I wore his blood-red scarf around the bottom of my face. With the scarf pulled tightly around Shane's chin and mouth, my colossal, black eyes peered over the red scarf and into the darkness. I saw with crystal clear vision.

I grabbed the satchel and swung it over Shane's shoulder. His watch read 11:30 p.m. In order to sneak past the Secret Service's motion-sensor flood lights, I would have to tread slowly through the grounds of the ranch.

We hopped the fence and snuck past the horses. I was so careful and quiet, that not a single animal acknowledged my presence.

Past the horse's grazing field, I came to some thick trees. I stayed alert just in case I came across a patrolling Secret Service agent. I didn't want to kill any of them. Killing a federal agent would only piss off the other agencies, increasing their resolve. The FBI would engage in a manhunt just for us. Then I would have big problems. I did not want the kinds of problems that came with a FBI manhunt. They would hunt us down until they caught us, never giving up. Cops were like bloodhounds in this way.

For once, I wanted to prevent death. This was a new policy for us, for me. For once, we were going to do something heroic. The only person that was going to die tonight was the StoneCutter.

The trees grew darker and darker around me. I took a deep breath. With the satchel strapped over Shane's shoulder, we pressed on towards the ranch, on towards the StoneCutter and sweet, destructive vindication.

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The StoneCutter liked guns, but they were never our style. I preferred knives strangulation devices, and hatchets. To keep with my tradition of killing killers using their own twisted methods, I brought a gun. It was a shiny, nickel-plated Colt 1911, the same one that I used on Shutter. Shane had no memories of the day that we were born, only dark snapshots. I could imagine it as I imagined many other events that actually did take place. When I used the powers that I was born with, I could see things that were hidden from Shane. I could witness the actions of others. Their lives fed into my brain like it was a grinder. Their lives were the meat.

I processed exactly how the StoneCutter's murders played out. I could recall each and every one of them. The only thing that I could never see was his face. The faces of the other killers were always blackened out in my visions. It was because I saw his murders in my dreams that I knew exactly what kind of gun to bring.

Finally, we broke through the trees without incident. At the edge of the tree-line I looked at Shane's watch. It was just after midnight.

I watched a Secret Service agent as he rounded the house and walked off towards the guest villa. Using my natural senses, I could hear the radio chatter through his earpiece. They suspected nothing. As far as they knew all was calm.

The agents were lodged in the guest villa. If Eline Kline was meeting with her lover, she would have insisted that the agents stayed out of the main house. She must have forced them to setup in the villa.

I wasn't sure about my theory involving Eline's lover. I had no idea if the StoneCutter masked himself as her lover or if he intended to kill them both. The more I thought about it, the more the latter made sense to me. If the StoneCutter masqueraded as her lover, then who was he going to use to bury her alive? I felt that Shane concurred as he hid behind me.

The StoneCutter must have intended to use Eline's lover to bury her alive. He planned to shoot the lover as he did my father. He followed this sick ritual, never deviating from it. It was his kill ritual.

We moved closer to the house. The boards on the front porch squeaked underneath Shane's black shoes. We froze and surveyed the house. No one heard us. The lights were off.

A cold gust of wind breezed past us, lifting the back of Shane's jacket along and blowing his tie out of place.

We crept around the side of the house, following the porch as it winded around to the backyard.

Off in the distance a dog barked. I glanced in its direction and magnified Shane's vision. The dog was far away from the house. Focusing on his shadowy

silhouette, I saw that he was a German Sheppard, nothing to worry about. He was chained near the end of the barn.

We turned the corner of the house and saw that a light emitted from the kitchen. Candles flickered through an open window.

I approached. From the cover of darkness, I watched as Eline Kline sat at the kitchen table. Someone sat across from her, a well-dressed gentleman. I couldn't make out the details of his face. I had no idea who he was.

Their voices were muffled. I couldn't tell what they were saying, not without moving closer and giving us away. The StoneCutter would strike soon. I felt it.

We stepped backwards into the darkness. Quickly, I leapt up and grabbed hold of the bottom of the railing from the second floor balcony. Using Shane's upper body strength, I pulled us up. Within a moment, we stood inside an empty bedroom in the house.

An eerie, uneven silence fell across the second floor. It smelled of cinnamon and sand. Peculiar, I thought. The Kline's used those plug-in air fresheners. I hated the smell of cinnamon. Of course, I hated everything that smelled of sweetness.

The thought of letting the StoneCutter kill Eline Kline before we intervened, crossed my mind.

We snuck down the stairs and saw a light flickering from under the kitchen door. The door was ajar. I reached into Shane's jacket pocket and pulled out his gun. We crept slowly towards the kitchen.

As we neared the door, we heard soft music playing as if Eline and her lover were enjoying a nice, quiet dinner. I reached out and touched Shane's gloved fingertips to the back of the door. I wanted to nudge it open enough to where I could peek in.

As I pushed it, I noticed that Eline and her lover were not conversing at all. I thought it odd that they were so ambient. Then I realized that I didn't hear any sounds of clinking silverware or slurping from wine glasses. Something didn't feel right. I shoved the door open. I saw Eline sitting at the opposite end of the dinner table. Only she didn't move, not an inch.

I focused on her face. Her eyes were closed.

Candlelight flickered, creating shadows that danced across the carpet. I shoved the door open completely. I drew my gun and pointed it where her dinner guest sat, but no one was there. I pointed the gun at an empty chair with an undisturbed place setting.

I entered the room, ready to strike. Before I could see that there was an intruder standing off to the side, a sharp needle pierced the veins of Shane's neck. The syringe injected something sinister into his bloodstream, immediately numbing him.

I faltered and flailed about in his head. I saw the StoneCutter's shadowy face in my peripheral vision. In a flash, his image became hazy. I couldn't see the details of his face. Shane's vision was too blurry. I turned the gun in his direction, but I was too slow. With one flawless move, he swiped it out of Shane's hand before I could fire a single shot.

The fluid that he injected had taken Shane's senses hostage. Suddenly, nothing worked. He was unusable. My vessel's gages went haywire. I twisted and whipped

my body and tail inside his head as violently as I could, but nothing snapped him out of it.

A thick blackness swept through his body. He was immobilized. I neared the same state. The tranquilizer's fluid began to flood into my region of Shane's interior. I tried to swim in it, looking for an air pocket, but there was no hope of escape.

The fluid consumed me. I held my breath as long as I could. Eventually, I was forced to breathe it in. I inhaled two deep gasps of the fluid and it overtook me. I grew powerless to it. I feared that it would drown me, but it was breathable.

The fluid flooded my lungs and within seconds I was fast asleep.

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Shane woke up, dazed. He sat at the dinner table across from Eline Kline. His vision was fuzzy, but he could make out her features. She barely moved. She was drugged. They both were.

He shook his head in an attempt to fight the paralyzed feeling that overwhelmed him.

After several minutes, Shane realized that he was alone. The creature in his head was not there. He was the only one at the helm; nothing guided him, no acute senses, and no heightened abilities. The source of his fearless strength had vanished.

His fingers twitched. The drug wore off. He realized that he was not restrained to the chair. The StoneCutter was not afraid of him. As his strength returned to his muscles, he began to plan his escape.

"Careful son," a dark voice said. The voice sounded familiar, like the one in his head. But this voice emitted from over his shoulder.

Shane cocked his head to see who it was, to gaze upon the real StoneCutter. Before he could take a good look, a nickel-plated Colt 1911 scraped his cheek.

"Keep your eyes forward," the StoneCutter commanded. "At least for now."

As his human senses returned, Shane felt something that he had only felt when he was trapped in confined spaces—crippling fear. It ripped through the pores of his skin and invaded every blood vessel in him. He was scared. He was terrified.

The monster inside him, his Mr. Hyde, was nowhere to be found. He needed him now. He needed him for protection. The StoneCutter was right behind him.

"Shane Lasher, are you trembling? I never thought that I would see you tremble. Not you, son."

"Don't call me that!" Shane blurted out. His fear grew into anger. For once, he wished that his monster would awaken.

"Son, I have watched you for a long time. As long as you have searched for me. Even before. Can you guess who I am? Have you figured it out yet?"

Shane's dizziness subsided, and he noticed something on the table in front of him, an object that he hadn't noticed before. It was a sketch, resting in a nice frame. The drawing was an etching of a gravestone, the one that was left in his penthouse by the StoneCutter.

Without warning, a feeling of crushing fear overtook him. No, it wasn't a crushing fear. It was a stark realization. He had seen this same kind of etching

before. He saw them in New York in his Godfather's secret loft, the one in his office.

"Terrance?" he asked, frightened to hear the response.

"Yes, Shane," the StoneCutter answered in a cold, modulated way. He stepped out in front of Shane. Terrance Graves, Shane's mentor and Godfather, was his creator. He was the StoneCutter, murderer of his parents. He was the man who linked Shane to a cold, vengeful demon for the rest of his life.

"Terrance?" Shane repeated. His mouth hung open.

"I am the StoneCutter," Terrance said. He wore a black sweater and dark trousers. He pointed the gun directly at Shane. "Sorry Shane. I hope that you are not disappointed. I know that you had imagined that you would be the one pointing a gun at me. But I am the one pointing it at you."

"Terrance. Why?"

"For twenty-eight years, I watched as my only victim escaped me. You were the one that survived. From the very beginning I watched you: grade school, vacations, chicken pox, girls, and law school. I was always there."

Terrance created Shane; he created the monster. Like a puppet master, he toyed with Shane from the first days of his life. He set the events in motion, twenty-eight years ago, that would create Shane's twisted obsession for justice and death.

"I created you. I created the monster that lives inside you. Look at you.

"You are an avenger, a killer of killers, motivated by the lust for revenge," Terrance said. He slowly paced around the table toward Eline.

"You have to admit it. The media has a sick obsession with both of us. They call me "The StoneCutter" with no idea of who I really am.

"You, they've always known—Shane the defender of killers. Only they have no real idea of who you are. They have no idea that you are their white knight.

"In their eyes, you are the lawyer who defends the most despicable men on the planet. But they don't have a clue about the real you. You are a murderer and a betrayer, the man who gives serial killers their freedom only to take their lives," Terrance said. He stopped just behind Eline Kline and stood tall over her.

"You are a seeker of a sick kind of justice, a slasher," he continued.

Wake up! Shane thought. He feared that his monster abandoned him or worse—that he died.

"You killed my parents! You son-of-a-bitch!" Shane shouted.

"Son, lower your voice. We wouldn't want the Secret Service to interrupt our family reunion," Terrance said. He bent down and jerked Eline up out of her seat. Terrance was a lot stronger than he appeared. He lifted her up completely out of the chair while still pointing the gun straight at Shane.

"Don't call me son!" Shane exclaimed once again.

Terrance giggled and said, "But Shane, haven't you figured it out yet? Don't you know why I picked you?"

"What the hell are you talking about?" Shane asked.

"Stand," Terrance commanded. He motioned the gun towards the backdoor. "Walk out."

Shane mustered all of his strength and stood up. His legs were numb from the tranquilizer, but they worked. He stumbled a little, but slowly made his way towards the door.

"Terrance, figure what out? Where are we going?"

"I said walk!" Terrance kicked Shane in the rear. He stumbled out of the backdoor almost falling face first onto the back porch.

Then, suddenly, they were not alone.

"Freeze!" a stern voice said from the darkness of the backyard. It was a Secret Service agent out on his patrol.

The agent pointed his gun at Shane. Before he could call for backup over his radio, Terrance was in the doorway with his gun pointed back at the agent.

"Don't move!" the StoneCutter commanded, holding Eline like a human shield.

Shane looked up at him. In the darkness, Terrance's features changed. He looked animalistic, like a horrifying monster, a creature that out matched Shane's. His eyes were black and soulless.

The StoneCutter grinned, showing his razor-like teeth.

The agent saw that he held the Secretary, threatening her demise. He halted for her sake. She was his assigned detail. He released the radio and removed his finger off of the gun's trigger.

"That's a good boy. Now, toss the gun," Terrance said.

The agent tossed the gun into the darkness. It vanished into the high grass that surrounded the house.

Slowly, the agent put his hands up in the air.

"Walk towards me."

The agent followed the StoneCutter's instructions. As the agent got close enough, Terrance motioned for him to stop.

"On your knees," he said.

The agent didn't even question the orders. He simply closed his eyes and dropped to his knees. This was called an execution position. He knew it.

Never allow yourself to be taken in this position. He could hear the words of his hostage instructor as they echoed through his head. The Secret Service had trained him well. An agent finding himself in this position was done. His life was over, but he had no choice. He was sworn to protect his detail, even if that meant that laying down his life for his country, for her.

Without taking his eyes off of Shane, Terrance struck the agent directly in the throat with the bottom of the gun. He struck him so hard that he swallowed most of his larynx.

Shane watched as the StoneCutter, the man that raised him, sinisterly gazed upon the agent choking to death—watching it, relishing it. The StoneCutter was a monster. Shane wondered if that was what he looked like to other people, to his victims. He wondered what kind of monster he was.

A realization dropped on Shane like the apple falling from a tree and landing on Isaac Newton; he needed the monster inside him and the monster needed him. They were gravitationally drawn together.

The demon needed the small amount of humanity that existed in Shane's bones. Somewhere deep inside where the creature did not roam, Shane's human side was still alive. He had to protect it. And the monster in him would always protect it. They had to maintain the balance in order to survive.

He never wanted to end up like Terrance, a complete and hopeless monster, consumed by the raging desire to kill.

"Let's move," Terrance commanded. Shane rose to his feet and walked off in the direction that Terrance pointed. They left the dying agent behind.

"Where are we going?"

"Keep walking. We are almost there," the StoneCutter said.

They walked past the barn, past the barking dog. They marched over a hill and past a cluster of trees.

Terrance carried Eline the whole way without stopping to rest.

Shane saw a large tombstone in the distance. It jettied out of the ground up ahead, near the edge of the woods. They headed straight for it. It was their final destination.

When they reached it, Terrance said, "Stop here."

A shovel stuck out of the ground in front of the tombstone.

"Take the shovel and dig, son," Terrance commanded.

The crippling fear returned to fill Shane's bloodstream. Doom consumed him. He knew exactly what the StoneCutter planned. It was his parents all over again. There was no lover to bury Eline, so the StoneCutter wanted him to play that role. He played the role of his father, and would share the same fate.

"Dig, Shane!"

Shane said nothing. He reached over and grabbed the shovel. He stabbed the earth, praying that his monster would return to him, return in time. However, for now, he was on his own.

Terrance laid Eline on the ground. He stood near Shane and watched as his protégé shoveled the grave of Eline Kline.

A grin formed on his evil face, a grin shared by the creature that lurked inside of him. He thought about how fitting it was that the avenger would soon become his scapegoat.

After Shane buried Eline, Terrance conspired to bury him in an unmarked grave. He planned to tell the agents that Shane attacked them. He'd tell them that somehow he managed to escape the clutches of the famed lawyer/serial killer. Everyone would believe that Shane was really the notorious StoneCutter all along.

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It had been less than an hour, and Eline's grave was dug.

In the cold darkness, Shane felt fearful. He waited for his monster to reveal himself and save him. Desperately he longed for his dark side to come to the surface.

He heard Eline stirring. She regained some of her strength.

"It looks like the Secretary is waking. Put her in the grave," Terrance said. He aimed down the sights of the gun at Shane.

Shane saw the StoneCutter's cold gaze.

"Don't argue, Shane. Just do it. If you refuse I will shoot you in the stomach, and do it myself."

Reluctantly, Shane dropped the shovel and walked over to Eline. His scarf had fallen off of his face, no longer concealing his identity. His eyes were back to their normal deep blue. She looked up at him, appearing to have recognized him.

"No. No," she begged, looking directly at Shane. She didn't even see the StoneCutter. She must have assumed that Shane was the culprit doing this to her.

Shane lifted her up and carefully placed her in the hole. He climbed out.

"Now, cover her," Terrance said. He lifted the gun higher so that Shane would see that he was serious. There was no sign of a lid.

"With the dirt," Terrance continued.

Shane tossed the dirt back on top of Eline. She struggled to stand up. The drug's effects were still potent enough to keep her immobile. She was powerless to fight back and soon she was buried under a mound of dirt.

When Shane was in the hole, he dug an extra air pocket on the bottom while making it look like he patted the dirt a couple of times with the shovel. As long as she kept her face in it, she might have enough air to last ten to fifteen minutes. It wasn't long, but it could give Shane enough time to wake his creature, or so he hoped.

Wake up, he thought, feeling desperate.

"Now what? You plan on killing me as well?"

"Son, I'm not going to kill you. Frame you, but not kill you," Terrance replied, lying. He stepped closer to Shane. He approached him until the only thing between them was the mound of dirt.

Shane grinned in anger at Terrance for calling him son again. He said nothing this time.

"Walk towards the trees over there," Terrance said, pointing off in the darkest direction.

Shane turned and walked. He felt more than afraid now. He felt defeated. The StoneCutter had outdone him. He knew exactly what Terrance planned.

Terrance had already dug up a grave somewhere else for Shane. He was going to bury him in a special coffin, one that he carved himself.

After he shot Shane, buried him alive, and left him for dead, the StoneCutter would return to his normal life as Terrance Graves. He would simply settle back into his disguise and watch as the FBI scrambled to find Shane Lasher—suspected StoneCutter.

Shane stopped just in front of the open grave. He could hear Terrance snickering behind him.

The StoneCutter had won.

Shane's only hope was for his monster to awaken, and that seemed impossible now.

Terrance had killed Shane's parents. He had killed his father and taken over the firm as the sole president, dropping the Lasher name from the masthead, making it Graves and Associates. And now, he was going to kill Shane—the only remaining Lasher.

"Son, have you figured out what is happening to you? Have you figured out what sets me apart from other killers? How I choose my victims?"

"You are going to kill me like you did my father?" Shane replied as he inched closer to the edge of the open grave.

"Shane, I am your father," Terrance said. He watched the expression of complete shock rip through Shane's face.

The StoneCutter's dark words reached into Shane's head, grabbed hold of the monster inside of him, and like a defibrillator, jolted 10,000 volts into my body.

"No!" Shane shouted.

"He was getting close to me. Like you were. He suspected me. So I seduced and fucked a lonely, rich woman—your mother," Terrance continued.

His confession surged a second volt of electric waves through my body—20,000 volts. I felt my teeth rattle. My breathing suddenly returned. Still weak and unable to move, I laid still and listened to what Shane was forced to hear. I felt his emotions. I feared his fears.

"I wasn't satisfied with just fucking her. So seven months later, I killed them and tried to kill you. But then, you were born and I grew to love you, son. I don't want to kill you, but you leave me little choice," Terrance explained. He inched closer and closer to Shane with the gun pointed directly at his temple.

He was going to kill his son, my vessel, framing him for Eline's murder and for all of his other murders. The Kline kid must have been one of his illegitimate sons. Terrance's style was more than robbing rich families and burying them alive. He had affairs with the wives of powerful men, and then forced the men to bury the wives alive. That was how his monster got off. He secretly took his adversary's prized possessions including their women, and then he forced the husbands to kill their wives. Essentially, he robbed them of everything. He stripped away their power.

That was how he selected them. Every family that he killed wasn't only rich, but also powerful. He liked to take their power away, burying their power with them deep in the earth, hiding them from society.

"Yes, I can see you working it out in your head. Gillard Shutter was my last scapegoat. That was when I discovered your dark devil.

"Oh Shane, how I felt when I learned that you had something inside of you like I have inside of me," Terrance admitted. He turned his head for a quick moment and glanced at the moon as if he was contemplating something profound. He looked at it as if it were his temptress, his beacon of light in the dark, night sky.

"Sometimes, I feel like there really is a creature living inside of my head. It controls me. It gives me all of these sick and twisted thoughts. Do you have any idea what that is like?

"Whenever a serial killer is caught, he blames the voice in his head ... That is real. The voice is real. I feel the devil inside me as it turns and twists about. It seeks the perfect position to control me."

The strength slowly returned to my body. My claws twitched until I could fully move them. I awakened.

Shane felt my stirring inside him. He stared at Terrance and said nothing. He only hoped that I would jump back to life in time.

"As soon as the Secret Service finds out that you are the killer, and that I killed you in self-defense, I will be free of you. Finally," Terrance said.

My black eyes shot open. The tranquilizer had knocked me out of the cockpit and clear down to Shane's guts. I spun around and began to climb my way back to his brain, back to his thoughts, back to the controls.

"And the cops will stop looking for your past clients when they search your penthouse. They will link you to those two murders along with the ones that I committed over the years, leaving my firm alone.

"You were smart and promising. I knew that you would never stop looking for the StoneCutter until you had him. So I gave Gillard Shutter to you on a silver

platter. I thought that your devil would be satisfied. I thought that he was merely a vengeful creature. But you had to keep killing after Shutter. You couldn't be satisfied with avenging your parents. You killed Paul Verize," Terrance said.

He peeked down into the open grave. He planned on shooting Shane. He was only moments away from seeing his plan carried out, but he noticed that something wasn't right. Something was missing from the grave. Something was missing from the ritual.

"I didn't kill Shutter for revenge," Shane confessed. He began to inch away. Slowly, he backed towards the woods, towards the darkness.

"Yes, you did. You couldn't let it go and you hunted down and avenged your parents," Terrance said, peering down into the grave, trying to figure out what was missing.

Rapidly, I climbed up Shane's ribcage, passing his beating heart. I clawed at the entrance into his skull. I was almost back in the driver's seat.

"You are wrong. I never intended to kill you for revenge," Shane said, backing away.

"What then, justice?"

"Revenge is about killing the person who wronged you. If I was looking for revenge; then why the others, more than just Shutter and Verize?"

"Others? What others?" Terrance asked.

"Didn't you know, StoneCutter? I killed others before them," Shane said as his eyes turned a deep black color, my black. In the moonlight, it appeared that his facial features transformed into mine. I covered his surface, coming out with my teeth sharpened, claws extended.

"What others? The missing clients?" Terrance asked. An unexpected look of worry stretched across his face.

I nodded and grinned. My eyebrows furrowed, creating an animalistic glare across Shane's face.

"You only killed Shutter and Verize," Terrance insisted.

"And all the others," we replied, laughing.

"What others?"

"All of the missing clients. The killers anyway. You kill rich and powerful families. I kill killers," I said. I was in complete control of Shane now. My tentacles were firmly wrapped around his brain.

"But we have dozens of clients unaccounted for."

"Yes," I answered. I backed us far from Terrance. Now, we stood on the border of the tree line and the utter darkness beyond it.

He realized that we had moved further from him. He stared at us. He gasped as he tried to focus on my features. His monster gazed upon me. For the first time, he saw the horrifying thing that he'd created.

"I study them. I get them a not guilty verdict. I free them. And I murder them."

"For justice?" Terrance asked.

"Justice is for humans, StoneCutter. You and I are not human. We are something else. Something different," I said, as I stepped back once more. The sudden, thick darkness engulfed me into it like a sponge of blackness.

"We are monsters," I whispered.

Terrance heard my dark voice surrounding him. It echoed as if the trees housed numerous hidden speakers. He lost me. I left him with no idea where I was.

Looking down into the open grave, Terrance realized what was missing, the coffin that he had crafted for us. I pulled it out of the grave earlier in the night, before I approached the house. I hid this from Shane. I didn't want to spoil it for him.

The StoneCutter twisted and contorted his head to try and find me. He took a furious breath and began to chase after me. The creature inside him felt something that it had never felt before—fear.

He ducked and darted around the trees and beneath low hanging branches. He sprinted through the woods, following the warm path that I left for him. Terrance grew frustrated as he realized that I was nowhere in sight. He could not lose us. He had to find us.

Terrance began to sprint through the thick, dark night.

Abruptly, he tripped over something and fell into a deep hole. The sound of cracking bones sounded all around him. An intense pain shot through his body. His legs twisted and broke. He looked like a feeble tree that had toppled over and now was trying to escape the hard, dry soil. He panicked when he realized that he was not lying on dirt. He was lying in a coffin. It was the coffin that he had built special for us. Even though it was snug, it was now his coffin.

"No! No!" he screamed.

As his eyes adjusted to the dim light that fell from the moon and filtered through the branches overhead, he saw my lean figure standing over the open grave holding his gun. He hadn't even realized that he dropped it.

My eyes were completely black. Shane's blood-red scarf blew in the wind, naturally covering the bottom half of my face once again.

"Terrance Graves," I said. "You are lying in a grave. Your grave."

"You are not Shane! Who are you?!" Terrance demanded.

Without a moment's hesitation, I shot him in the chest, a merciful act unlike what he did to Sebastian Lasher, our real father. I glared into his soulless eyes and watched as the monster inside him breathed its last breath. I relished in its utter death. It was that short moment that gave my entire life meaning. Now, I was satisfied.

The gunshot had surely been heard across the ranch. A moment after it echoed throughout the landscape, the motion lights ignited, flooding most of the area with extreme white light.

Within minutes, Secret Service agents crawled all over the property, but we were already running towards Shane's car, leaving behind: a shovel, Terrance's handcrafted coffin, a dead Godfather, and a headstone that was created decades ago for Sebastian Lasher. With faded letters, it read:

Here lies the bastard lawyer

Sebastian Lasher's name had been completely rubbed off. No trace of it remained.

The Secret Service agents found Terrance dead in the coffin. Upon close examination, they also found that the coffin had a tag on it that read:

Exhibit B
The StoneCutter's Coffin

Shane was exhibit A.

Chapter 10

Final Verdict.

"This is the happiest moment of my life."
—George Engel. Right before he hung to death.

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We were in the last place that I ever wanted to be—jail.

Shane sat behind bars, normally we contemplated mass murder, but now he contemplated suicide. We did something that I never thought I would ever allow; we turned ourselves in. We allowed ourselves to be put in jail.

The price of playing the hero, I thought.

As soon as we returned from recess, the judge had us arrested. The only excuse regarding our absence from the trial that Shane had for him and the media was that we got caught up in a 48 hour lovemaking session with a couple of prostitutes. Of course, we paid those girls handsomely to agree to that very story. And both girls were so doped up the night before that they weren't sure who they were with, might as well have been a wealthy, young lawyer and celebrity.

First day of the trial, which was postponed due to our imprisonment, and the courtroom had been packed wall to wall with spectators. The courthouse steps had been overcrowded with news cameras and media personalities. The traffic on Hoover Avenue was completely jammed. It was like the Presidential Motorcade was left abandoned in front of the building. None of the cars budged. Cops were posted on every street corner trying to restrict the crowds from becoming too overbearing for their already exhausted police force.

On every major news channel, the stars of the media reported on this court case. Everyone out there was talking about the new StoneCutter murder.

And we missed it. At least we missed the media coverage.

Shane was being held in contempt for not showing up to court on Friday morning.

The interest in this case soared because Federal Agents revealed that over the weekend the U.S. Secretary of State was attacked by the StoneCutter.

Anderson Cooper told his CNN viewers that the StoneCutter murdered the senior partner of Graves and Associates. How he knew that much detail, I wasn't sure. Perhaps, he also had a creature inside him like me. Who know? One day Anderson might be in my crosshairs.

For now, we were stuck in jail.

"Lasher, you have a visitor," one of the guards announced, abruptly.

We looked up and saw a Secret Service agent escorting the weak-looking Eline Kline.

She had suffered from oxygen deprivation. She looked a bit shaken up. Otherwise she was perfectly fine for a woman who should have been dead and buried.

It was Shane's idea to make that air pocket for her. If we hadn't then she would have surely been dead.

She leaned into the bars and said, "Thank you, Mr. Lasher. You have freed my son."

"Mrs. Kline, I had nothing to do with freeing your son. The real StoneCutter attacked you and Terrance. If he hadn't your son would still be the police's suspect," Shane said and swallowed hard at the lie that he was about to tell.

"The real hero here is Terrance Graves. He saved your life. His sacrifice is the reason that you are still alive," Shane continued; feeling disgusted.

"Mr. Lasher, you are right, but he is not here. So I thank you. And in your own way of mishandling this case, I feel that you may have saved my son's life. I'm not sure why, but I feel that I must thank you. So just accept it," she insisted.

"Yes ma'am. I guess that it was just dumb luck," he said.

"At any rate. I owe you considerably. So much of what happened is still so fuzzy. Some of my memory makes no sense. Like sometimes, I remember Terrance attacking me, but then he was attacked too, so that can't be right."

"What happened doesn't matter. Your son is going to be free. And you are alive. Just be grateful for that," Shane said.

In a strange way, I was proud of him. Even though we were turning into semi-heroes, I felt proud to be living inside of him.

The Secretary turned to leave, but stopped halfway. She turned back and asked, "Is there anything that you need?"

"Go. Get well, Mrs. Kline," Shane said.

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I straddled Shane's brain with pride. We killed the StoneCutter and ended our nearly three decade quest to spill his blood.

Shane stared out of the jail cell and down the winding hallway when the guard approached once more with two new guests.

More visitors? Shane thought.

I saw Det. Sun Good before he did. She walked, more like strutted, towards Shane's cell.

"Det. Sun Good," Shane said when she reached the cell bars.

"Shane, finally you are where I've always wanted to put you," she said, laughing.

"It's nice to see you, Sun. Who is your friend?" Shane asked, acknowledging the unfamiliar man that followed close behind her. He wore a suit and tie. It made him look like a Fed. His build was athletic for an older man. He was probably in his late forties.

"Shane, this is Special Agent Kirk Cutter. He is the FBI's best serial killer profiler."

Great! I thought.

"It is nice to meet you, Mr. Lasher," Agent Cutter said. He looked quite serious.

At first, I was uninterested in both of them until she said 'best serial killer profiler'. Why was he here? Why did she bring him? Did she finally suspect us?

"Shane, we have noticed that some of your clients are missing, and I originally blamed you for hiding their whereabouts from us. I owe you an apology. I'm sorry," Sun said.

"Wow. Thank you, Sun," Shane said, slightly bewildered, but he smirked, jokingly. "So you finally realized that I had nothing to do with their disappearances?"

"It turns out that there are a lot more than a couple of clients missing," she said.

"There are twenty-seven confirmed missing clients, Mr. Lasher," Kirk Cutter interrupted. "And they are missing across the board. And your firm has a global reach with territory everywhere. Just here in the United States on the east coast, we have confirmed that number of missing clients. Each was a defendant that was acquitted on murder charges."

Shit. They are getting close to discovering what I do.

"That is a lot of missing clients," Shane admitted. We both knew that the number was far greater than twenty-seven. "So, what do you think?"

They had us in jail. We couldn't escape. We could only pray that they weren't suspecting us. Were they here to arrest us?

"We think that you can help us," Kirk Cutter said. Then I noticed that there was something off about him.

"Help you? How?"

"You can report to us. You can look around a little bit at your coworkers or through company files. Maybe you can uncover something for us," Sun Good suggested.

"You guys want me to spy for the FBI? Like an informant?"

"Mr. Lasher, something funny is going on at your firm. Now, it may turn out that Terrance Graves is behind the disappearances. It may turn out to be nothing. But it could turn out to be something else altogether.

"We just want you to keep your eyes peeled," Kirk Cutter said.

I would like to peel your eyes back off of your face, serial killer hunter, I thought.

"Just think about it, Shane. There is going to be an investigation. I'm just giving you the chance to help out," Sun Good said.

The two of them turned and left us behind bars. If they found anything in their investigation, it could end up leading them to us and we might spend the rest of our life behind bars.

We had just rid the world of a mass murderer. We saved Eline Kline's life. We freed her son from death row. Now we might get caught? We might end up on death row ourselves.

No good deed goes unpunished, I thought.

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Wednesday afternoon we were released from jail.

Back at our penthouse, we got a voicemail from Ally. She said that the partners wanted to see us first thing in the morning. So she booked a flight for us, another redeye.

Shane packed light and caught the plane.

When the morning arrived, we stared at the hellish double doors that led into the boardroom, waiting for the meeting to begin.

"Mr. Lasher," Tina said. Her face was still puffy from apparently crying over Terrance's death. "The partners will see you now."

She opened the large, terrifying doors. We entered the dark chamber—the same place we stood not so long ago when Terrance was alive. We stood here while he pretended to defend us. In fact, he had sabotaged us. He toyed with us, and I didn't even notice the monster that lived inside him.

The Board sat around the long table. They stared at us from the darkness that surrounded them.

Shane looked at the empty chair at the head of the table, the chair that used to belong to Terrance. He sat there, overseeing the Board, the Partners, overseeing our life.

"Shane, your recent activities have been less than favorable for this firm's reputation. However, in consideration for Terrance and your record with this firm, and with how things turned out for Mr. Alex Kline, we have an important task for you. We want you to fill Terrance's seat while we consider replacements.

"Would you be willing to take on this challenge?"

It was in that moment, in the darkness of Shane's soul that I peeked through the portals that were his eyes, and saw for the first time the monsters that sat in front of us. The Partners were all demonic. Every one of them had a creature living in them—a killer, like myself. I could hear their collective rattles as they warned me that this was their snake pit.

Terrance had not been alone. He was the leader of a firm filled with lawyers with killers living inside of them—killers like me. And why not? He built this firm. He filled it with the Associates.

The Partners were all capable of murder. We had to investigate. We had to keep our evil eyes on them. So Shane said, "Yes."

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Shane Lasher Will Return!!!!

