

A photograph of a cornfield with a dirt path leading to a blue van. The sky is blue with white clouds. The corn plants are green and yellow, indicating they are ripe. The path is made of dirt and leads straight to the van in the distance.

NO ESCAPE

A. J. RIVERS

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PROLOGUE

Their screams were meaningless.

It didn't matter how much of their breath they poured into them; it was as if only the stars above them were listening.

Running made it harder to get enough breath into their lungs so they could force their voices out louder. Sometimes they tried to scream, and it came out as nothing more than gasps that hit the backs of their throats and made their lungs ache.

They could hear others screaming, but they couldn't see them. They were right there with them and yet somewhere else. Invisible even though they were probably only steps away. The growl of a chainsaw underscored the high-pitched cries and deeper shouts. Rustling sounds from every angle made it impossible to know exactly what was going on and where. It was terrifying and disorienting. Confusion made their feet pound down into their own footprints over and over until they were obliterated.

Even if someone were looking for them, trying to track them by the patterns of their shoes or the way they stepped, they wouldn't be able to. Their paths were changed—blotted

out—within seconds of even being made. The dirt couldn't be trusted. It told too many different stories.

Hannah thought she knew where she was going. She thought she knew the way out. With the sound of the chainsaw getting closer and the others close at her heels, she turned a sharp corner and felt her feet go still beneath her. They skidded to a stop so quickly they nearly tangled under her, and she stumbled a step. A hand behind her grabbed her arm to tug her back and stop her from landing on the ground. But she barely noticed. All her attention was on the gruesome scarecrow just a few steps ahead of them.

The grotesque display hung on old boards pounded down into the dusty earth among the cornstalks. Standing there, face to face with it, it was hard to tell what it would scare more—the birds or the disoriented visitors who came this way. Perhaps both. An unfortunate soul who entered the corn and never left. Now a part of it.

The others reacted around her, but then turned and kept going. Hannah couldn't move. She was transfixed by the scarecrow in front of her. It wasn't like the ones propped up above the fields of real crops they drove past to get here. It was different from the decorative ones in smaller scale, sold in craft stores or the seasonal sections of big box department stores.

This one didn't have the same stiffness. Those were *legs*, not blue denim overalls stuffed with straw. Most scarecrows had work gloves at the ends of the sleeves, but this one didn't need them. Those were hands. Real hands. The head hung low toward the chest, and Hannah took a step toward it.

Another hand, or maybe the one that grabbed her before—she couldn't tell—wrapped around her wrist firmly and gave her a hard tug.

“Come on, Hannah. We've got to get out of here.”

Grace's voice rose above the screams and the whine of the chainsaw just enough to get through to Hannah. One more pull

got her feet moving again. She wasn't so much running as she was being dragged along behind the rest of the group. Even when her feet were under her and seemed to be moving under her own volition, Grace kept hold of her wrists, pulling her until her steps threatened to give way again. Ahead of her, Hannah could see Lance and Caleb, running shoulder-to-shoulder down the middle of the path as if they were creating some kind of barrier that would protect the girls behind them.

It felt more like they were in the way. Hannah felt suffocated when she couldn't see what was going on around her. She wanted to see what was ahead. She didn't like suspense. She hated surprises. She wanted control.

Some of the screams in the distance had gone silent. The sound of the chainsaw was still there, and the occasional dark laugh or rustle of the corn. There had to be a way out. The corn couldn't just go on forever into perpetuity. There was a place where it ended and the fields lay open beyond. But it still felt like they were trapped there inside the rows with no choice but to run. And that came with the simple question. Which would happen first? Would they find their way out? Or would they run until they couldn't run anymore?

Hannah pulled her arm out of Grace's grasp and pushed ahead until she was close behind the two boys. They were taller than she was, so she still couldn't see everything that they could, but there was more visibility here. She turned with them when they turned a corner and ran into Caleb's back when he stopped short.

Rather than the path leading to the exit or to another path that might twist them around, it opened out into a curved dead end. The clearing was spattered in blood, the metal of the farm implements used to decimate the bodies scattered across the ground glinting in the moonlight. None of them moved. There was too much to look at, too much going into their brains for them to be able to make another decision.

The only thing that broke through was the sudden pounding footsteps behind them. They turned and saw the man

with the chainsaw bearing down on them. He raised it up, coming toward them without yielding. They screamed and clustered together, trying to avoid getting too close to the bodies but trying to stay away from him. He swept the saw through the air back and forth a few times, then backed up and turned to walk into the stalks of corn to the side of the path.

Lance bent over at his waist, pressing his hands to his thighs and both laughing and sucking in breath at the same time.

“He really got you, there, didn’t he?” Caleb asked, slapping Lance on the back.

Lance straightened. “Says the guy who was hiding behind his girlfriend.”

“I was not!” Caleb looked to Grace for support, but she crossed her arms over her chest and glared at him. “What?”

“You grabbed me and put me in front of you,” she said.

“I did not. I was trying to turn you around and lead you in the other direction,” Caleb argued.

“You tried to use me as a human shield.”

“I guess it’s a good thing there wasn’t actually a blade in the saw,” Caleb said.

Grace shook her head. “That doesn’t make it better.”

“If we were actually in any kind of danger, I’d protect you,” he said.

She made a face. “Would you though?”

Lance laughed. “Face it. The only one of us who didn’t lose their shit was Hannah.”

Hannah had barely reacted to the man with the chainsaw. She had watched him come toward them and felt the sound of the modified tool vibrating in her bones, but she hadn’t screamed the way her friends had. She hadn’t stumbled backward as she stood and watched him, wondering how close he would get.

But even when he walked away into the cornstalks, her mind wasn't really on him. She couldn't stop thinking about the scarecrow. She wasn't having fun anymore.

"All right, I was positive this was the way out," Caleb said. "I feel like we have taken every other path."

"Obviously, we haven't," Grace said. "There has to be a way to get out of this thing."

"I don't hear anybody else," Lance said. "Are we the last ones here? Are we the only ones who haven't figured out how to escape from this maze?"

"That's what we get for deciding to buy tickets for the very last slot," Caleb said. "We were bound to get left in here at some point."

Grace wrapped her arms around herself and rubbed them. It could have been to ward off the cold. It could have been the new sense of fear settling over them like mist. None of them wanted to admit that the haunted attraction was actually starting to get to them. It was just some Halloween fun. Supposed to be a silly diversion from everything else. And that was how it started.

The person in the full-coverage Grim Reaper costume at the entrance to the maze had gestured dramatically with a long hand, beckoning them into the dark paths that wove through the corn.

No cell phones, they had been warned. No flashlights. They had to rely on the moonlight and the occasional light planted among the stalks. It started off as just silly fun. The group of longtime friends couldn't agree on which way to go to try to get through the maze, so it was a lot of playful bickering and going back and forth. When they got deeper into the cornfield and the actors started showing up, their casual walking turned into running and screaming. But it was still all in good fun. They could hear all the other people who had come to the attraction to get their seasonal dose of fright. They were there for the adrenaline rush.

It didn't feel that way anymore. At least, not to Hannah.

She had resisted going that night. Her friends said it was for her. They were going to take her to the haunted carnival to distract her, to get her mind off everything she was going through. Hannah didn't know if it was the best choice. Worrying about Theo was eating her from the inside out, and it didn't feel like a constant state of fear was going to do much good to help her out of that. But they insisted. That was exactly why they needed to do it.

This fear wasn't real. Even when her heart started pounding and the prickling feeling crept down the back of her neck, she wasn't *really* in any danger. It was all noise and makeup. But the adrenaline was real. The release was there. She could scream out everything buried down in the depths of her soul and feel like she was being cleansed. This was the kind of fear that brought relief.

But Hannah didn't feel relieved as they wove along the path that finally felt it led to the exit. That scarecrow looked far too real. It didn't just look like a decoration. She couldn't stop seeing it in the back of her mind. There was something about it she couldn't shake.

"Look, I think I see lights," Grace said. "I think we're actually on the right path."

"Holy hell, you're right," Caleb said. "We're going to make it out of this thing before Christmas after all."

Her friends picked up their speed, but Hannah's feet faltered. Her steps slowed. She didn't want to get out of the maze. It was pulling her back in. She backed up, watching them press on for several yards before turning around and running into the corn again.

"Wait, where did Hannah go?"

She could hear them the moment they noticed she wasn't with them anymore.

"Hannah?" Grace sounded nervous. This wasn't really her scene. It wasn't something she would have done if it weren't

for being so wrapped up in Caleb, and them convincing her that it would help Hannah. “Hannah, where are you? We found the way out. You don’t have to keep looking for it.”

Someone tromped around. “Where is she?”

Hannah could hear them, but she didn’t respond. They weren’t her focus. She needed to find her way back to the scarecrow. Her heart was pounding harder in her chest now than it had been since she first walked into the maze. Even the masked actors jumping out at her from behind the cornstalks or out of set pieces didn’t give her the same feeling now crawling through her veins.

“Hannah, come on. This isn’t funny. We’ve got to get out of here. I think the place is closing,” Grace yelled.

Hannah didn’t think that was true. If it were, the lights would have come on and someone would have come through to sweep them out of the maze. There were always staff members on hand at places like this to go in and find the stragglers who couldn’t find their way through the labyrinth, got too scared to think clearly, or were trying to melt into the background so they would be missed and could stay overnight. That hadn’t happened yet. And even if it did, it wouldn’t deter Hannah. She needed to find her way back to the scarecrow.

She backtracked, trying to find her own footprints among the indecipherable ones in the dirt and looking for anything that looked familiar and would tell her she was going back through the way she had come. That was the thing about corn mazes though—the reason they were as frightening as they were—it all looked the same. Cornstalks growing in perfect rows. Row after row. The paths formed by the way they were planted rather than removing any so that everything looked exactly uniform.

It was enough to drive you mad.

Hannah felt a tug in the center of her chest like a piece of iron wire had been hooked into her heart and was drawing her through the maze. Everything had fallen silent around her. Or

maybe it was just that she didn't notice any of the sounds anymore.

She came to a fork in the path that seemed familiar. Out of the corner of her eye, she caught a scare actor in a grisly pig mask coming slowly toward her, trying to scare her not with a sudden ambush, but with the eerie, tingling feeling that came from him easing closer to her space. Just his presence would have been enough to make Grace run. Hannah didn't even turn to look. She took the left path and walked straight toward another actor wielding a knife that would have looked real had it actually shined in the nearby light. Instead, the obvious rubber let glistening corn syrup slide off the tip into the dirt.

The actor took a step toward Hannah, lunging slightly to try to make her jump. Hannah walked around him, barely looking his way. She knew they couldn't touch her. That was part of it—part of the safety of these places. It felt real in so many ways. Your brain thought it was real because it didn't make sense otherwise. But there was no actual danger to it. The actors couldn't touch you. They couldn't let their fake weapons and modified tools touch you. They could only imply that at some point you might be in danger and let the thought of that sink in until it permeated every corner of the mind and tormented your thoughts. Even knowing that truth, there was always the question. What if?

Hannah kept going. She didn't ask herself, "What if?" because the heavy, burning rock in the pit of her stomach was telling her she didn't need to. There was already an answer.

She turned a corner and finally found herself facing the scarecrow again. A bead of sweat rolled down her spine as she slowly walked up to it. Before she could get to it, an actor in a long, black cloak that covered his face and his hands jumped out from the corn. It startled her only slightly, but not enough for her to really care. The actor waved his arms and looked like he was trying to make himself bigger as he moved around behind the scarecrow.

It was far from enough to deter her. Now that she was standing in front of it again, Hannah realized what had caught her attention the first time she came upon the display. It was more than just the overly realistic look of the scarecrow. It was the smell, which was evident over the dry dirt or the growing corn or even the strange metallic note that made the air seem tainted.

Something spicy and familiar.

The scarecrow's head was hanging down toward his chest, a straw hat obscuring it from view. She reached up toward it, and the scare actor made a sharp movement toward her. She realized he was holding a long knife in one hand. She wouldn't piece it together until later that the moonlight reflected off of the blade and the red liquid clinging to it was dried in some places. He turned the hilt just slightly, almost like he was trying to display it to her. She looked at it only for a second before turning her attention back to the scarecrow.

She reached for the brim of the hat again. The cloaked man made a sound in his throat, something like a growl, like he was warning her to stop. But she wouldn't. Hannah grabbed the hat and pulled it off. Now, she screamed.

Hannah stumbled back, the hat falling from her hand as the other flew up to cover her mouth. The world spun around her, and she felt her stomach lurch up into her throat. Eyes stinging and heart hitting her ribs so hard she thought they might break, she fell forward several steps again. Her hands reached out and grabbed the front of the scarecrow's clothes.

Not the scarecrow. That wasn't what it was.

She wanted to feel warmth beneath the shirt, anything that might give hope that life still existed there. Or that it could be brought back. But she didn't. It was hard and cold.

Hannah used all of her strength to try to pull the body from the frame, sobbing without realizing she had even begun to cry. She couldn't lift it away. Her hands came up to cup his cheeks, and her knees gave way. She heard her name being

called somewhere behind her, and she let out a primal scream, dropping to her knees in the dirt. Looking down at her hands, she saw the blood around them and streaks across her fingers she hadn't even realized were there.

“Theo,” she managed in a pained whisper.

Gasping for breath, she looked up into the face of her missing brother.



An hour later, Hannah was at the perimeter of the corn maze, wrapped in a blanket she didn't even remember being draped around her but she assumed came from one of the countless police officers now skittering around the attraction like rats. The lights around the old carnival grounds where the haunted attraction was set up had all been turned on; everything was awash with blue and red flashing from the squad cars clogging the entrance and dotting the gravel parking area.

Hannah didn't know where her friends were. They'd come running through the maze when they heard her screaming, and she knew one of them had pulled her up off the ground and into their arms. They tried to get her away from her brother's body, but she refused. She tried again to take hold of him and pull him down off the wooden frame, but he wouldn't move. He had thick ropes binding him to the wood and several massive nails through his arms. One had pierced the base of his throat between his collarbones and was buried into the wood behind him.

Whatever else had happened to him, there was enough blood to show he was alive when that nail was driven.

“How long has your brother been missing?” an officer asked.

“A week.”

“Has he ever done this before?”

Hannah's throat constricted painfully, and she drew in a breath. "Yes."

She knew how this was going to go. The police here didn't know Theo. But one town over, where they lived, they did. She imagined the second they heard his name the urgency would have been greatly diminished. After all, Theo Nakamura was what the afternoon specials and late-night news reports all liked to call a troubled youth. What that meant was he got in trouble all the time and was generally a pain in the ass of law enforcement. He shoplifted. He got drunk and acted like an idiot. He stole cars and did joyrides until he got bored, then left them by the side of the road. He spray-painted things he thought were funny on the sides of buildings and on empty billboards.

A couple of times he got into fights. Once he burned an old barn down just to see what it would be like. There weren't any people or animals inside it, and it was sitting on a piece of land that had been abandoned for decades. Law enforcement didn't care. The media really didn't care. The way they presented it, Theo and his buddies had torched a home with a family living in it and laughed while they watched them scramble for their lives.

The police were tired of dealing with him. Hannah remembered hiding up on the landing of the stairs, her back pressed against the wall and the fibers of the carpet pricking the backs of her thighs as she sat in her sleep shirt listening to the officers who came to talk to her parents after Theo was arrested for being in a group prowling downtown at night when a rock was thrown through a shop window.

He's just going to keep getting in trouble if you don't do something about this. This town's business owners work hard for what they have, and they have enough to think about. They shouldn't have to worry about getting their property vandalized and their products damaged or stolen by some hoodlum kids. He's lucky this time. The shop owner said he doesn't want to go through the hassle of pressing charges and going to court. His insurance is going to cover the damage.

But if any of those boys, yours included, is ever seen near there again looking even the slightest bit suspicious, he's going to call us.

I wouldn't have even given him that much consideration. I would have pressed every charge I could possibly come up with just to see those boys sitting behind bars for as long as possible. That's where they're going to end up. You mark my words. Your son especially. He seems to be doing everything he can to cause problems for people and it's going to bite him in the ass one of these days. I hope for your sake it's just a matter of him doing something stupid and finally getting snagged up by one of us. But I'll remind you that people have the right to protect themselves and their property. He keeps getting off easy, but he could go afoul of the wrong person and find himself on the business end of a rifle.

Hannah remembered the officer sounding almost hopeful about that. Like he thought that would be the best possible outcome. If Theo was up to mischief one night and someone put a couple of bullets in him, then the police wouldn't have to deal with him anymore. In their eyes, it would be just eliminating a whole lot of future crimes they were positive were going to happen. And if it wasn't one of the business owners or residents he victimized coming for him, he was going to piss off somebody bigger, meaner, and stronger during one of his asinine little escapades, and it would be over.

One way or another, Theo Nakamura was going to end up dead young.

But not like this. She never could have imagined it would be something like this.

“We've got another one.”

The words chipped into Hannah's brain like a bird pecking its way through her skull. The voice had come through the radio clipped to the chest of the officer interviewing her—the one she would eventually come to realize was the lead of the investigation, a detective rather than just one of the other officers. She would be sure in the coming days, weeks, and

months that he had, in fact, introduced himself and told her who he was before they started talking, but it didn't matter to her at the time. Nothing was sinking in fully.

He grabbed hold of the radio and dipped his head down to speak into it. Hannah's stomach turned at the way his chin tucked toward his chest, and she had to look away so she wouldn't get sick.

“Another one?”

“Another body. In one of the displays. It looked like one of the dummies, but it's real.”

“Shit.”

Hannah would never be able to remember time passing after that night. She was told the funeral for Theo was a week after he was taken down off the frame in the corn maze. All she knew was that by the time she watched the casket holding her twin brother get lowered into the cold November-damp ground, a third body had been found.



Two years later...

“Harper police are asking the public for any information about a gruesome murder discovered over the Halloween weekend. The body of eighteen-year-old Kenneth Chisolm was found by a woman looking for a cat who had run out of the house. The teenager had been brutally stabbed and propped into an elaborate Halloween display set up just a few blocks from her home. The woman says she went there because the last time her cat got out of the house, that open field was where she found him. The display had been up for several weeks, but she hadn't paid much attention to it.

“She does not celebrate Halloween and avoided the scary decorations as much as possible because they, as she put it, disturbed her. This was why she was not familiar with all the different elements of the display, making her think the body had been there the whole time. It wasn't until she approached

it and moved its leg aside to reach her cat where it was hiding that she realized it was, in fact, a real corpse.

“Neighbors say they can’t help but think of the horror of two Halloweens ago, when three local teens—Theo Nakamura, Penny Johnson, and Samuel Freedman—were found murdered and displayed in very similar ways. Police have drawn the same links and remind residents no killer was ever arrested for those murders. Due to the very similar demographics of the victims and method of the murder, they are now considering this a possible serial killer. There is a suspect, but investigators are keeping the identity of this person confidential as the investigation progresses. We will bring you any further developments regarding the Hallows Eve Killer as soon as they are available.”

Hannah Nakamura grabbed the remote from where it sat on the cushion beside her and turned off the TV, stopping the overly perky blonde anchor in the middle of starting coverage of some middle school fundraiser happening the following week. She sat staring at the black screen, her heart pounding in her chest. When she couldn’t take it anymore, she got up, took Theo’s jacket out of the hall closet, and walked out into the drizzly afternoon.



One year later...

“I don’t know...”

“Come on, Mom. The porch light is on.”

Hilary looked over the heads of her eleven-year-old son and eight-year-old daughter to the neat little white house up the long driveway. The porch light was on. And as Brett often reminded her, that was the universal sign for “welcome trick-or-treaters.” She hadn’t yet had the heart to explain to him that celebrating Halloween with candy given out by neighbors wasn’t exactly a universal experience.

“We don’t know her though. She just moved into town a few months ago,” Hilary said.

“Then shouldn’t you have already introduced yourself?” Hailey asked, looking up at her mother with wide blue eyes not showing even a trace of sarcasm.

That kind of purity is rare. By the time double-digits hit, it’s usually well on its way out of existence for most children. Hilary was hoping to cling to it in her daughter as much as she possibly could.

“Yes, honey. I should have. You’re right. It would have been the kind thing for me to do as her new neighbor to introduce myself and welcome her to the neighborhood. I’ll have to remember to do that this week,” Hilary said.

“Why not now?” Brett asked. “You can introduce yourself while we’re trick-or-treating.”

“We don’t even know if she’s celebrating Halloween. Her porch light is on, but that could just be because she likes to have the light on at night. I don’t see a pumpkin on her porch or any other decorations. I wouldn’t want to make her uncomfortable.”

There was something about the neat little house that made Hilary uneasy. She didn’t know why, and she felt ridiculous about it. She would never tell her children she felt that way. That wasn’t the kind of thing a parent said to their children. She didn’t want to teach them to be afraid of the unknown or wary of people just because they were new. There was a difference between being cautious of strangers and feeling hesitant about a new woman who just moved into town because she wasn’t born and raised there like you and everybody else you knew was. Because she was different.

That was the kind of thing you were supposed to embrace.

She wouldn’t tell them she hesitated at the bottom of the long gravel driveway, because even though she hadn’t met the woman who had moved into the house years after it was left empty by the sweet old man who lived there Hilary’s entire life, she’d seen her. And when she’d seen her, something about her made her shiver.

It wasn't something about the woman as a person. Nothing that would give Hilary a label or make her the ire of the sharp-tongued teenagers at the high school where she taught. The ones who thought they already knew everything about the world and how it worked by merit of existing within the exact right narrow window of time. The slightest step off the narrow path they lay, and they'd cut her to pieces.

But it wasn't like that. Not when she looked at the new neighbor who had smiled at Hilary across a display of oranges at the grocery store. Not when she watched her walk across the parking lot to her older, but well-cared-for car. And not when Hilary found herself driving along behind her at just enough of a distance to see her park and carry her two bags of groceries into the neat little house.

Something had both fascinated and unnerved Hilary about the new neighbor, and she wasn't exactly thrilled at the prospect of walking up that long driveway and climbing up onto the porch so the kids could ring the doorbell in hopes of a handful of tiny chocolate bars.

"Her porch light is on!" Brett insisted. "That means she's celebrating."

"And look," Hailey added. "There's a scarecrow on the porch. It's sitting in that rocking chair."

"See? She has to be waiting for trick-or-treaters. Come on!"

Hilary looked at her son staring back at her with wide brown eyes that she wished didn't look so much like his father's. He was so young, but she could already see his face getting more chiseled and his shoulders getting broader. She knew this was probably the last year he would be out trick-or-treating with her and his little sister. Next year he would say he was too old for that and want to go to a party with friends or start spending Halloween at those grotesque haunted attractions.

The teenagers who flocked to those kinds of things had to go out of town for them now. It had been a couple years since Harper allowed them. She wanted to think Brett didn't know anything about those deaths, but she knew that was probably an unrealistic hope on her part. Far more likely was that he'd been hearing about the Hallows Eve Killer in the school hallways since the first time the name was uttered. She tried to protect him from things like that. Preteen boys are sponges. They can soak up anything, but it's purely at the mercy of what's around them.

Hilary sighed. "All right. Go on."

Her children squealed with delight and started up the driveway. She'd taught them never to cross through someone's grass, even when trick-or-treating. Always go up the driveway and along the sidewalk. She followed behind them, but they'd already bounded onto the porch by the time she reached the paver stone walkway leading to the steps.

"Brett, you only need to ring the doorbell once," she said in a voice sagging under the weight of already having said those words twenty-six times that night.

It was like each time she repeated them, it left a residue, so when she said them again, they dropped heavily out of her mouth and didn't seem to even register to her son.

He moved away from the door to the window that made a glowing yellow square in the wall of the house. Hilary knew from visiting the old man who used to live there that the window on that side looked into the living room.

"Whoa, look!" Brett gushed.

"Brett, get away from her window," Hilary scolded. "You shouldn't look into people's windows like that."

"She didn't close the curtains," he said. "I rang the doorbell, and she didn't open the door yet."

"You just rang it. Maybe she's in a different part of the house. You have to at least give her a second to get here," Hilary said, getting to the bottom of the steps. "Or it could be

just like I said, and she doesn't actually celebrate Halloween, so she's just waiting for the two of you to get off her porch."

"She definitely celebrates Halloween," Brett said. "Look at this awesome display she has in her house. She wouldn't go to all this trouble if she didn't want people looking in."

Hilary's stomach turned just a little. "Display?"

"Yeah. Come see it. It's amazing."

"This is why she isn't opening the door," Hailey said. "Look, the candy bowl is over with the scarecrow."

"Honey, hold on. Don't go over there," Hilary said as she got up onto the porch and joined her son at the window.

It took everything in her not to let out the scream bubbling up inside her. She pressed a hand to her son's chest and pushed him back away from the window. He didn't need to keep looking. If he did, it would eventually sink in that the bloodied, broken-looking body sprawled on the living room carpet wasn't a decoration.

She looked so different than she had when she stared across the citrus display at Hilary.

Hilary pressed the boy back a bit more and started backing away from the house with the full intention of scooping up both children and running. But Hailey wasn't coming. She was standing in front of the scarecrow, her back to them, her shoulders hanging.

"Mommy," came her soft, tiny voice. "Mommy, this scarecrow is bleeding."



CHAPTER ONE

One year later...

“Owen?” I say, sure I had to hear Xavier wrong. “Owen Bardot is on the phone?”

I had to be mistaken. There’s no way he just walked back into Emma’s living room and casually said Owen had called. I’ve been searching for him for weeks and haven’t had a single shred of solid evidence about where he might be or what he’s been doing since he apparently fled town following his mother’s horrific murder. Even his father, Alexander Bardot, hasn’t been able to give me any kind of indication of where Owen could be.

But Xavier just said the phone call was from Owen.

“Hold please,” Xavier says. “Owen?” He pauses for a second, then looks back at me. “Not at the moment. Well, I suppose he could be if he made another call. But he’s not on this phone anymore.”

“You hung up?”

“*He* hung up. I answered, he identified himself and told me to tell you that he doesn’t want you looking for him. That

was it. I didn't even get the opportunity to ask how he was doing or tell him to have a good day," he says.

That's the kind of thing that's going to bother Xavier for days. He appreciates the dependability of social constructs. As long as markers like those are hit, he feels like he has a proper conversation.

"That was it? Nothing else?" I ask.

There's really no point in asking. If there's one thing that Xavier has the ability to be, it's thorough. He also can be so stunningly vague it's almost impossible to decipher what he means or even what conversation he's contributing to, but when Xavier supplies details, it's to the fiber level. He told me that was the conversation he had with Owen, so I know no other words were exchanged. I still feel the compulsion to ask. I'm just too stunned by the unexpected phone call not to stammer my way through a couple more confirmations.

He looks at me through lowered eyelashes like he's evaluating my stability and is not interested in further indulging my repeat inquiries. "You just witnessed the entire exchange."

"How did he get your phone number?" Emma asks.

"I don't know. I mean, I've left it with people to give him if they've heard from him. And I know Alexander has it. If he heard from him, maybe he gave it to him," I say. "But I don't think that's the case. If he talked to his father, then he would have just told him to tell me to stop looking for him. He would have no reason to call me himself."

"Unless he really wanted to make a point," Sam offers.

"I don't care; I have to find him. I need to know what he knows about his mother's murder and where he's been," I say.

"At least now you know he's alive," Xavier says. "I heard his voice. Of course, that doesn't necessarily mean anything considering I have never personally interacted with him or heard an accurate recording of his voice, so it could possibly have been somebody impersonating him. But I don't see how

that would be the realistic or logical thing to do, so the more reasonable explanation is that I did, in fact, speak with Owen Bardot.”

“Right as always,” I say. “All right, he’s alive, and he’s reaching out to me. It’s to tell me to leave him alone, but he’s still doing it. How did he sound? Was there stress in his voice? Did it sound like he was afraid or under any kind of duress?”

Emma narrows her eyes at me slightly. I tilt my head toward her and speak softly out of the corner of my mouth.

“Yes, I understand I am asking Xavier to interpret the tone of a human being’s voice. He’s the only one who spoke with Owen. I’ve got to take what I can get.”

“No duress,” Xavier says. “I don’t imagine someone was hovering over him and forcing him to give that statement. But there was a strain.”

“Strain?”

“He didn’t sound like an aggravated teenager,” Xavier says. “There was no big sigh or the kind of flippant tone that would probably be accompanied by an eye roll. He wasn’t frustrated. It was something else.”

“What?” I ask, my heart rate lifting a little. “What did he sound like?”

Xavier thinks about it for a second. I know this isn’t the easiest thing for him. He struggles with interpreting the emotions and motivations behind people who are speaking directly to him when he can see them. Trying to accurately decipher other people over the phone can be crippling to him. When the court assigned me to be his handler after his release from prison, that was one of the first things I learned. I’ve never seen someone go to such dramatic and creative lengths to avoid talking on the phone. Or answering a doorbell. Or crossing in front of a moving car in a parking lot.

That one in particular gets me. I’ve seen this man not pay attention to the point of walking right out in front of a stream of traffic, but if he is aware of a car that is coming toward him

across a parking lot, he will turn and walk alongside the flow of traffic until the car has passed and he can go behind it. It's like he's trying to avoid drowning in an undertow.

"Not quite desperate," Xavier finally says. "But something close."

"And I'm sure there's no indication on the phone of where he was when he called," I say.

"Turnstiles," Xavier says.

I frown. "What?"

"The little shiny metal things you push through when you're going through an entrance," he explains.

"No, I know what they are."

"I guess they don't always have to be shiny metal."

"I know what they are, Xavier. Why did you mention them?" I ask.

"You wondered about an indication on the phone of where Owen was when he called. I heard turnstiles," he says. "And voices."

"So, he was anywhere there is an entrance to something," Sam says. "Narrows that right on down."

"What else did you hear?" I ask. "Did you hear a whooshing sound? A clink? Bells?"

"The whooshing for sure," he says.

"The subway," I say without hesitation. "Owen called from a subway station. New York?"

"Or D.C.," Emma points out. "The Metro."

"San Francisco," Sam says. "And Chicago."

"All right. That's not bad."

"Newark, Philadelphia, Boston, Los Angeles, Baltimore, Miami, Cleveland, Atlanta," Xavier rattles off.

"Okay, so feeling less good about it," I say.

“It’s not that many,” Emma says. “It’s really not. It’s a lot better than thinking about the entire country.” We all go silent for a second. “He doesn’t have his passport, does he?”

I think for a second, then shake my head. “No. Alexander told me he keeps everybody’s passports in his office so they’ll stay safe. He checked Owen’s right after he realized he was missing, and it’s still there.”

“See?” Xavier says. “Practically found him.”

“I appreciate your positivity, X, but I still have a lot of looking to do,” I say.

“All right. Well, I’ll look with you.”

It’s nonspecific and doesn’t have a lot backing it up, but much like the sound of the turnstiles, it’s something.



Alexander Bardot answers the phone like he thinks I’m going to have something important to tell him. I know that tone. It’s the same one all my clients have when they answer the phone. People don’t hire private investigators when everything is going fantastically. I come into their lives when they are dealing with some of the worst things they can imagine. Infidelity. Missing loved ones. Murder. When they know they need answers and can’t find them on their own, they reach out to me. And from the second I’m on their case, they hope that the next time they hear the phone ring, it’s going to be me with all those answers.

I don’t have them for him today. Instead, I have questions. I need him to give me as much information as he can so I can get to know Owen better. If I can get better insight into who he is as a person, I may be able to figure out where he might have gone or what could have happened. This isn’t just about a teenage boy leaving home and his father not knowing where he is.

This teenage boy was accused of participating in a string of robberies in his neighborhood, and then his mother—my

ex-girlfriend, no less—was horrifically murdered in their own home after she told him quite publicly he wasn't allowed to spend time with other accused teenagers.

I've already done some digging into Owen's life, but I need to go further. I need to know what changed that led him down the path he apparently went on, and how he got associated with the "wrong crowd." Rebellion is one thing. Being raised in a wealthy, privileged family with essentially the entire world laid out in front of you and the pressure of keeping your family proud sitting on your back can not only feel suffocating; it can also be extremely boring. You are at once under a huge strain to honor your family's name and do what's expected of you, and also limited and boxed in because of those restraints and guidelines that have been in place since before you were born.

In my career, I've encountered more than a few spoiled rich kids who decide they need some extra excitement in life, so they go off the rails for a while. But that's not what this feels like. Owen doesn't strike me as a spoiled rich kid, even from the little I know about his life. Brielle and Alexander have more than enough money to keep the family comfortable, and he has certainly been given a full host of privileges and opportunities. But they aren't members of the exorbitantly wealthy tier that Brielle's family was when she was growing up. And Alexander didn't talk about Owen with the same type of overt demands and suffocating expectations that so many of the fathers in wealthy families do.

Comparatively speaking, Owen's life seemed to be far more about what he was interested in and the talents he had. That doesn't mean Owen didn't crave more attention from his parents, and it certainly doesn't mean that his father is saying—or even knows—the full story. I just feel like there's far more to this shift in his life than I will find just scratching the surface.



CHAPTER TWO

The name that keeps standing out to me as I searched through everything I've been able to gather about Owen is Edgar Wilson. This is the guy who had been arrested for the burglaries throughout the neighborhood, the only one out of the group who the police had managed to get their hands on and bring into custody. Since then, none of the others have been arrested or come forward. As far as I've been able to tell, they've been completely under the radar, though no one seems to be concerned about their whereabouts like we are about Owen.

Of course, none of the others have a murdered parent and the shadow of accusation hanging over them. But in my mind, if Owen is being accused of having something to do with Brielle's death, then all of them should be. It doesn't make sense that they would specifically talk about Owen as being a part of this rowdy group of teenage boys who terrorized the town with their simple crimes and disrespect to authority, but then completely ignore the other members of the group when one was brought into custody.

Wilson's family has refused to bail him out, so he is currently still in custody. Which works for me, as I can just reach out to the jail directly and get permission to speak with

him. He doesn't look thrilled to have a visitor when I walk into the conference room. Leaned back in his chair, his knees spread wide, Edgar Wilson has his arms crossed over his stomach and his head down with his chin against his chest in a defiant position. He's telling me from the second I enter the room that he's not willing to talk to me.

With a guard standing right outside, I go into the room and shut the door. I drop down into the chair across from Edgar Wilson and lean back in it, opening my drink and taking a long swig. Several seconds go by without me saying anything. At first, it's almost like he's asleep. Then I notice him shifting a bit, and his eyes lift to look at me. He gives a shrug and glances around.

"Aren't you gonna say anything?" he asks.

"I do my best not to waste my time on punks who don't give half a shit about what's going on around them," I reply.

His head lifts more, and he glares at me. He's trying to look angry, even intimidating, but I see in those dark eyes exactly what I thought I'd see. Pain.

"I'm not a punk," he says angrily.

"From where I'm sitting you just look like every other pissed-off kid who thinks the world gave him a raw deal because he did stupid shit, got caught, and ended up tossed in here without anybody to save his ass," I say.

He glares at me. "And what do you know? Who the hell are you?"

I lean forward and drop my hands to the table, the sound making him jump slightly. "I'm you. At least, I was. When I was your age, I looked at the world the same way you do. I did anything I wanted, whenever I wanted, and didn't care who I was causing trouble for. Then I watched people die. I blamed myself for it. It straightened me the hell out. I went into the Army and did Special Forces. I got half my leg blasted to shit. Now I'm a private investigator trying to stop the kind of people you are going to become if someone doesn't get in your

way, shove you down on your ass, and force you to see that you aren't half the badass you think you are."

Edgar tightens his arms up around his chest and slides his eyes over so he's staring at the wall to the side. He doesn't want to look at me, but I don't care. He doesn't need to for me to be able to know what he's feeling. Because I've felt it before. Far more times than I ever want to admit.

"I don't need you," he grumbles.

I open my arms up to the side to indicate the empty room around us. "Because you have so many people swarming in here offering to do something for you? Because at any second now your family is going to pop up and bail you out? They just got detoured along the way, but they're coming and everything's going to be fine?" I pause, waiting for a response I know isn't coming. "It looks like I'm the only one willing to do anything for you. I didn't have to come here. I could just leave you to rot like everybody else, but I'm willing to hear you out. I'm willing to help you. But I'm going to need your help too."

The room is silent for another few burning seconds before Edgar's eyes come back to me.

"What do you want?" he asks.

I'm not going to say he's softened. That's not what this is. But he's gradually dismantling the wall he put up to stop anyone from getting near him. It's easier to get through life that way. I know from experience. Don't get me wrong; I don't think this kid is some misunderstood puppy who just needs to be scooped up, wrapped in a warm blanket, and loved his way back to being a good and decent person. He's rude, entitled, aggressive, and violent. This isn't the first time he's been here, and even if his parents had paid his way out immediately, it wouldn't have been the last.

But there's still something there. If there was something in the kid who never knew his father, who spent his early years getting into trouble at every turn, who was left to fend for

himself after his mother was brutally killed, and was then accused of a murder he didn't remember but was nearly thrown away just because of the person he had been, there's something in Edgar. I got this far. I don't know what his potential is and where he might get in life, but he has a chance right now.

I'm not convinced he's meant to be here. At least not for what he's being accused of. And I think there's a chance he might be able to give me information that could change my pursuit of Owen and my investigation into Brielle's death. It's just up to him to give it to me.

"Tell me about Owen Bardot."

Edgar shifts uncomfortably in his chair. "Owen? What do you want to know about him?"

"Everything. I want to know how a kid from one of the wealthiest families in town gets wrapped up with you and your friends. And keep in mind before you answer that I have done my fair share of dabbling with the wealthier set, so I know bullshit when I smell it. I want to know how the two of you got to be friends, what you've actually done together, and where he is," I say.

"We met at school," he says. He looks at me through narrowed eyes and rolls them slightly. "Yes, I was known to actually go to class from time to time."

"Good choice," I say. "How did you meet?"

He shrugs. "Just talking."

"And what kinds of things did you get him into?" I ask.

"You can't seriously think I'm going to spill that to you while I'm sitting in a police station. I might not have been at the top of my class, but I'm not stupid enough to not think that there are cameras all over this place and anything I say is just going to get snatched up and thrown back in my face," he says.

“I’m not a plant,” I tell him. “I’m not some kind of undercover ringer sent in here to try to get you to confess to things. I just want to know the truth about Owen Bardot, what would have made him disappear after his mother’s death, and why you’re sitting in here rather than any of those other guys.”

He doesn’t answer, and his posture has gotten more defensive again.

“All right. We’ll circle back to that. Why don’t you just tell me if you know where he is.”

“I don’t,” he says. He looks at me, and I see sincerity I wasn’t expecting. “I really don’t. I’ve been worried about him too.”

“You haven’t heard from him?”

“No. And I can’t get in touch with him.”

“Did he say anything to you about his mother? About being angry at her or wanting her dead?” I ask. The words taste bad in my mouth, and it takes everything in me just to say them, but I manage to get them out.

“No.”

“Did he say anything about planning on running away or trying to get away from someone?” I ask.

“No.”

The door opens, and the guard gestures that the time I had is all up. I didn’t get a lot of information, but I got enough to know for sure now that there is a lot more to this whole story than what is being presented.

“Thank you for talking to me,” I say. I slide my card toward him. “If you think of anything. Or if you just want to talk. I’ll probably be back.”

“Suit yourself,” he mutters, but I notice as I head for the door he reaches out and takes the card.

I sit in my car for a few minutes, staring out the windshield at the jail. That went about as well as I could

probably hope. As nice as it would have been to sit down and have him sing like a canary, that really isn't realistic. I don't know the details, but that's a kid who's been through some stuff. From what I've heard, his parents have not only refused to bail him out, they won't even take his calls or visit him. The only attorney he's going to have is court-appointed because his family won't hire one for him. They aren't rolling in cash, but they also aren't destitute. They could afford legal counsel of some kind. But they've just left their son to the wolves.

That doesn't come without scars.

The feeling that I've stumbled onto something, that there's so much more for me to unravel about all of this, sits heavily in my stomach. I can't stop thinking about what I heard about Brielle and the way she treated Edgar Wilson and the other kids in his group. I can understand any parent being upset that their child is getting into trouble after hooking up with a new friend group, or feeling cautious about their child starting to spend time with people who have a reputation for being dangerous and committing crimes.

What I don't understand is the apparent harshness Brielle had in her treatment of these kids. Even if she was going to be wary of them, or even bar Owen from seeing them because of their pasts, I couldn't see it going the way it's been described. But, again, it's been a long time since we knew each other.

Brielle knew me well. I never kept anything from her. She knew everything I'd done and everything I was capable of. And she never judged me. There was never a sense that she thought she was better than me or that I didn't deserve to be in the same space as her. She tried hard to make sure I knew she didn't think less of me and that she never wanted to shame or embarrass me.

Yet, I'm supposed to believe she screamed at a group of kids out in the yard because she didn't think they were good enough to spend time with her child and wanted to make sure they would never show their faces around him again. It just

doesn't make sense. It's not like her. At least, not the version of her I knew. And loved.

She must have known something no one knows yet.

I'm not sure what I should do next, but I feel a tug in my chest. I pick up my phone and call Xavier, who has been hanging out at the hotel because he didn't think the meeting at the police station sounded like something he wanted to do. He's currently working on the four jigsaw puzzles whose pieces I dumped all together into a giant bag with small copies of the finished pictures so he has to sort through all of them to figure out each one. It won't stop him from finishing them lightning-fast, but it will slow him down at least a little.

"You doing all right?" I ask when he answers.

"With the puzzles or existentially?" Xavier asks.

"Either," I say.

"Yes."

"Good. I'm done at the station, but I think I'm going to go up to the park where I used to hang out when I was younger and just think for a bit. You want to come?" I ask.

"I don't want to intrude on your thinking about thinking," he says.

"You wouldn't be intruding."

"I also don't want to intrude on my puzzling."

"Fair enough. Do you need anything? I don't think I'll be too long," I say.

"Is it possible to order a pizza to a hotel room without having to go down to the front desk to get it?" he asks.

"I can probably figure out how to make that happen. Do you want a pizza?" I ask.

"No. Just expanding my knowledge base," he says.

"All right. Well, if you think of anything, just let me know. The park isn't far from the hotel. When I get back, I will fill

you in on how pleasant Edgar Wilson was to talk to,” I say.

“I’m going to go out on a limb and guess he wasn’t,” he says.

“Look at that! You spoiled the whole conversation!” I say with a laugh.

“I have a particular talent for that. Dean?”

“Mushrooms, olives, and onions?” I ask.

“Yes, please.”



CHAPTER THREE

I get the pizza order sorted, making sure the manager understands it should be brought up to the room like room service. When I'm confident they're going to actually deliver it that way and not call up to the room expecting Xavier to first answer the phone and then go downstairs to claim it, I head for the park.

This was one of my favorite places when I was living in Magnolia Glen. It's small, not the sprawling kind of park that has miles of paved walking paths and huge open green spaces or massive complexes of playgrounds for families. Instead, trails lined with wood chips weave through the trees where the ones that made those chips used to stand. It's dotted with occasional small meadows that are better for picnics and games of frisbee with dogs than they are soccer tournaments.

That was what I loved about it. I could come here and find corners where I was absolutely alone. When I wanted to think and not have to deal with anyone else, I could roam the paths for as long as I wanted to and feel like I was the only one in the world. Until Brielle.

I'd only known her a short time when I realized she needed this place too. This was where we would meet to see each other when we just wanted to be together without having

to fight the battle of her parents. It was where we would vent to each other and spend time pretending there was nothing else beyond the bubble we created. The pretending never really sank in. The pressure of everything else was always right there, just beyond what we acknowledged, but I still cherished it.

A lot of the time we spent together here was passed on the little rough-hewn wooden bench tucked far out of sight in one of the far corners. One path enters the area and leads around in curves and loops, sometimes splitting off, but coming back together onto the main path before leading out. It took a couple of visits after the first time I discovered it that I noticed remnants of wooden beams embedded in the ground at regular intervals.

They'd broken down considerably in the weather and over time, but once I noticed them, I was able to see that they formed large square flowerbeds. Among the tangled weeds and saplings growing up from nuts buried by squirrels and promptly forgotten were once clusters of azalea bushes. In the spring some of them still bloom.

I always imagined they were glorious when the beds were first laid. They're still here. It looks like someone else might have remembered them and started the process of reclaiming the area, but as I walk along the path now most of the beds are still filled with briars and densely tangled branches. A few brown, dried blooms from the spring cling to a few of the bushes. And ahead of me is our bench.

Happy it's still here and hasn't been taken down over the years or destroyed by the elements, I sit down and let the breath slide out of my lungs. I close my eyes and just feel the air around me for a few seconds. It's warmer here than it is at home in Virginia, and I miss the snap of the air and the spicy smell of the fall leaves; but the breeze that comes up rustles leaves just starting their transition to gold and red and stirs up the smell of damp earth I learned to associate with Magnolia Glen in the autumn months. It's almost like Brielle is here with me.

“So much has changed since the last time we were here together,” I say out loud like I’m talking to her. It’s comforting even with the space on the bench beside me empty. “In a lot of ways, I’m a totally different person. I’ve wondered what you would think of me if we’d found each other again along the way sometime. Things couldn’t have ever been the same between us. We would be something different. Something new. But you would have been a part of me again. You still are. Even now.

“I’m sorry that never happened, Bri. I’m sorry we never saw each other again. I should have done something to change that. I hope you know, even if I told myself that you weren’t relevant in my life anymore and I needed to just not think about you... I never forgot you. None of that was because what we had wasn’t real or that I didn’t want to still be in your life.

“I did it...” I let out another breath and hang my head for a second. “I did it because I thought it would be easier for you. When we went our separate ways, you told me it had to be that way because it was the only thing your family would ever tolerate. They would make your entire life miserable and never let you have a moment of happiness or contentment if you didn’t do what they said. I knew that meant it wasn’t what you really wanted, but in a way it was. You wanted what was easier.

“I don’t blame you for that. You went through so much I can’t ever begrudge you for just wanting to have something be easier. To not struggle. And if that was what you wanted, I didn’t want to get in your way or make anything more difficult for you. I figured I would have to just wait and see what life was going to bring both of us. And now I know.”

I pause and stare up at the branches of the trees breaking up the sky above me into slivers and random shapes like the kind of blanket my mother called a crazy quilt.

“I’m sorry I wasn’t at your funeral. I wanted to be there to pay my respects and just to be there for you, but I didn’t think

it was a good idea to be around your family. Not in that kind of situation. The last thing your memorial service needed was a brawl. That was your day. You deserved for it to be beautiful and all about you. Besides, I feel better being near you this way.”

It gives me peace to sit here talking to Brielle, to feel close to her this way. But considering everything we went through, and everything I’m now going through without her, it’s also really hard. My mind starts flooding with all the things I never said to her that I wish I had, or things I hope she knew but I wish I could say just to make sure.

The sunlight overhead suddenly swells into a blinding burst that makes me turn my eyes away from the sky. I look ahead of me and feel my heart drop when I see teenage Brielle walking toward me in the vibrant glow.



CHAPTER FOUR

It takes only a split second for me to realize the girl coming toward me is not actually a vision of Brielle. She's younger than Brielle ever was when I knew her, and her eyes are shaped slightly differently. She's walking toward me without hesitation, and when she's a few steps closer, I see she does look very much like Brielle except the tip of her nose turns up a bit more and her hair isn't quite the same color. I smile softly.

I've seen a few pictures of Brielle's daughter, but it hasn't occurred to me until now as she's standing in front of me in person just how much she really looks like her mother. There are a couple of small details of Alexander in there that differentiate her from Brielle, but the resemblance is strong enough to make my heart ache. Not just for me, but for her. In all the chaos surrounding Owen being missing and trying to find him, the thought of her other child drifted out of my head.

She's probably feeling forgotten and overlooked quite a bit these days. I'm sure I'm not the only one who has been pouring so much into thinking about Owen and what he might have had to do with Brielle's death that it didn't leave room for considering her young daughter. Colleen is struggling in a way that would be unimaginable for most people. She's only

just lost her mother to a brutal murder in her own home and then immediately had to wrap her head around the loss of her brother as well. There's nothing that can be said to her that will make this situation bearable.

A few steps behind her is Alexander. He is staring down at the phone in his hand as he follows his daughter, and when he looks up, his expression is surprised.

"Dean," he says. "What are you doing here?"

There's something close to suspicion in his voice, like he thinks that my being here is the result of some kind of plan.

"I used to come here all the time when I lived in town," I tell him. "It was one of my favorite places to just hang out and think. I haven't been in a long time, so I figured it might be nice to swing by for a visit while I'm here to do some interviews."

He nods, apparently satisfied by the explanation, and gestures toward Colleen with his phone. "This is my daughter, Colleen."

I stand and take a step toward them. "Hi, Colleen. I'm Dean."

"Brielle used to bring the kids here a lot when they were little. She liked it more than the bigger parks because they could just take walks and run around. Colleen told me she wanted to come back," Alexander says.

The young girl nods. "I thought it might make me feel closer to my mom."

She manages to get the words out calmly and with control of her voice, which is at once impressive and extremely sad for a thirteen-year-old. This isn't the time when she should be worried about showing her emotions or being on display. She shouldn't be concerned about what anybody else thinks or how she is being perceived. If there is any time in this girl's life when she should be only thinking about herself and just trying to get through, this is it.

“I understand that completely,” I say. “I lost my mother when I was young. And I went back to places we used to spend time together too. It can really make you feel better to be surrounded by those memories.”

“It does,” she says with a little bit of a smile.

“You know, I was actually hoping to talk to you a little bit—if that’s okay with your dad,” I say.

“Sure,” Alexander says. “I actually have a couple of calls to make for work. So, I can do that while the two of you chat.”

“Great,” I say. I look at Colleen. “Do you want to take a walk? I can show you where some of the best flower bushes are so you can come back in the spring and see them.”

She nods and glances over at her father who has already sat down on the bench. I tense up a little when I see him sitting there. I don’t want him occupying that space. It’s mine. Mine and Brielle’s. Even as that thought goes through my head, I remind myself how ridiculous it is and force it away. It’s a bench. One we haven’t sat on in years and that has been used by countless other people. Probably even Alexander.

I did take notice of the way Alexander talked about Brielle coming here with the children. He specifically said she would bring them when they were little. It wasn’t something the family did, and he seems to have a distance from it, like it’s something he didn’t have any part of—or he didn’t *want* any part of. For some reason, that makes me feel better.

“I’ll be right back,” Colleen says toward Alexander.

He glances up just long enough to nod his acknowledgment.

Colleen and I walk along the paths, just existing beside each other for a while so that we can get used to occupying the same space. What I need to talk to her about isn’t easy, and I want her to feel as comfortable and at ease as she can. Even then, I’m a little surprised when she looks up at me and is the first to speak.

“Did you know my mom?” she asks.

I look down at her. “Why do you ask that?”

“I just wanna know.”

I consider how I should handle the question. Obviously, I don’t want to lie to her. If I’m going to build trust and let her know that I’m somebody she can talk to, I have to be honest with her. But I also don’t feel like I should get into the full details of my history with her mother. Instead, I give her a small smile.

“Yes,” I say. “I knew her.”

“How?”

“We met when we were a lot younger. Just a few years older than you, actually. We got to be really good friends, and she helped me through some very difficult times in my life. She meant a lot to me. She still does.”

“Then why didn’t you ever come to see her? It doesn’t seem like you were friends anymore,” Colleen says.

It’s a pure, completely innocent statement, but it cuts.

“I know. Life kind of got in the way. I know that’s probably not the kind of answer you want. And you might not even really understand it. But it’s the only way I can explain it,” I say.

She looks ahead of us and gives a very slight nod, making a sound like something has just clicked. We stop by one of the flower beds and I point out a bush deep in the tangled branches. There are still a few blooms clinging to it. They were once the brilliant shade of fuchsia Brielle loved the most.

“It makes sense, you know,” Colleen finally says.

“The flowers?” I ask, not sure what she might mean.

“No. You. I heard Mom one time arguing with my grandparents. They didn’t know I could hear them. They were talking about a man named Dean. I was wondering if that was you,” she says.

“I guess it was,” I say.

“Why were they arguing about you?” she says.

I shrug. “I don’t know. Maybe they weren’t arguing. Maybe they were just talking loudly, and it sounded like they were arguing.”

She returns my shrug. She probably doesn’t really believe me, but she’s going to take the explanation for what it is. It gives her one less thing she needs to think and worry about.

We keep walking and are in silence for a few seconds before she speaks again.

“When she used to bring my brother and me here, she would say that this was her happy place. Even though there are lots of other parks and places we went to, this was her very favorite. She was always happier when we were here. Sometimes she would seem upset about something or even just like she wasn’t having a good day, and she’d suggest we come here. It would make her feel better, and she would seem like she’d forgotten what was bothering her... at least for a little while.”

“That’s how I felt about it too,” I say.

“Did you come here together?” she asks.

We’re venturing closer to my relationship with Brielle than I want to go, and I hesitate, choosing my words carefully.

“Sometimes,” I tell her.

“I’m glad you have the memories too,” she says.

I smile at her. “Thank you.”

She starts talking about the times she spent here with her mother and some of the traditions they had, including coming to walk around this area. She didn’t know about all the flowers, but she liked to walk around the paths. When she was little, her mother would sit on the bench while Colleen was allowed to go around and around by herself as long as she didn’t go back out onto the main path.

My throat tightens as I realize the significance of the time they spent together here. Brielle shared so much about her past and how she really felt with her children without ever saying it outright.

“It sounds like you had a lot of fun playing with your brother here too,” I say to detour the conversation back to why I wanted to talk to her in the first place.

“It was the best,” she says. “Owen used to pretend that he didn’t want to play with me and walk away, but then if I didn’t follow him, he would just wait right around the corner until I came so I would have to chase him. There’s another place on the other side of the park that has big willows with lots of space under them. When we would go over there, we would pretend we were in a fantasy adventure together. I was usually a fairy, and he would be an ogre or a giant or something. We’d wander around telling each other stories and coming up with all kinds of names for different plants and animals. We’d pretend they were magical and could do different things.

“Like those little wild strawberries that grow around were fireballs. If we ate them, we would be like dragons and could breathe fire for a while. Or we could throw them at things, and they would burst into flame.” She laughs softly at the memory, her cheeks suddenly flushing red like the emotion has hit her and now she’s fighting tears that hadn’t shown up before. “I really miss him too.”

“Do you know where he is?” I ask.

She shakes her head. “No. He didn’t even tell me he was leaving.” She lets out a breath. “Why are you here?” She looks up at me, her eyes sparkling, but serious and dark. “You didn’t come see my mom for all those years, and you never even talked on the phone. Why did you show up now? And why are you going around talking to people?”

“Talking to people?” I ask. It’s a very pointed question, and I’m curious what prompted her to ask it.

“You’ve been talking to people about both of them. My friend Audrey said her dad heard you were talking to the police when it first happened. And that you were asking around about those guys Owen was hanging out with who Mom didn’t like. Is that why you’re here? You think Owen did something?”

“No,” I tell her without hesitation. “I’m here because I don’t think he did anything at all. I want to help your mom and your brother. That’s my job. When something is going on that people don’t understand and they need answers about it, I’m the one who finds those answers.”

“So, you solve mysteries?” she asks.

I chuckle. “Yeah, something like that.”

“Good. Because I don’t think Owen did anything wrong either. I wish I knew where he was just so I could know that he’s safe, but I know he wouldn’t hurt our mom. He was always protective of her and would get really angry when she and Dad argued.”

That stands out to me, but I try not to let it show. “When they argued? Did that happen a lot?”

She shrugs. “I don’t know. I guess I was used to it. It was never like those cop shows or anything. They just yelled at each other, and Dad slammed doors. Sometimes they’d go into Dad’s office and stay in there for a really long time. They weren’t yelling, but that sometimes seemed worse. Like if they were yelling, at least I could hear them, and it was like they cared enough to yell. If they were just talking really quietly, I felt like they didn’t care enough about anything anymore to yell. Like... you yell when something matters, right?”

“Right,” I say when I realize she’s genuinely waiting for acknowledgment.

She seems to be working through her feelings about this, untangling thoughts that are far too complicated and intense for someone as young as her to have to face.

“So when they would get really quiet and have those long talks, it worried me more. I thought maybe they didn’t care about each other or us as much anymore and were just going to give up. That’s what Lindsey’s parents did right before they got divorced. She told me they would yell and scream at each other a lot, and then they started going into their bedroom and having long conversations she couldn’t hear. She thought maybe that was a good thing. But then they told her that they were getting divorced, and her father was moving out. She said her mom told her that it was just better that way—that they’d tried so hard—but neither of them could do it anymore. Then I noticed something else.”

She goes quiet, and I notice her chewing on her bottom lip.

“What did you notice?” I ask. “It’s okay. You can tell me.”

“It’s just... I don’t think I’m supposed to know,” she says.

“Okay,” I say. “And you think that someone might be upset with you if they found out that you know?”

“No,” she says, shaking her head. “They can’t be.”

“Your mother?”

Colleen nods. I stop and turn toward her, crouching down so I’m closer to her height. I hold onto her arms. “Colleen, listen to me. I know this is hard. I told you I lost my mother too. I know how much it hurts and how sad it is. But remember, I’m here to help. I’m trying to find out what happened to her. Someone did something really horrible to her, and unless we find out who did it and make sure that they can’t do it to anyone else, people might still be in danger.”

I don’t want to scare her or make her think she could be at any risk, but the truth is, I don’t know. There haven’t been any threats to the rest of the family, and nothing has happened to make it seem like whoever is responsible for Brielle’s death is still targeting them or the home. But without knowing any other details, I can’t pretend that everything is perfectly fine. Colleen seems so young, but I have to remind myself of what I went through and how I handled life when I was her age.

I'd never want anyone to have to face the challenges I did. It took away the little that was left of my childhood—something I'd tried to run away from thinking I didn't want to be associated with, but soon realized how desperately I wished I still had.

Colleen draws in a breath like she's steadying herself.

"Sometimes after she had those long talks with Dad, Mom would leave the house really early in the morning or right after Dad left for work. She'd say she was just running out on an errand and that she'd be right back. Every time she did it, she stopped at the door and stared at me for a long time. It was the only time she did it. Like she never did it when she went to the grocery store or anything. Just when she left to go on those errands. And she was always carrying something under her arm," she says.

"What was she carrying? Could you see it?" I ask.

"Not really. It was in a bag. One of those rectangle bags with the ties. The kind Dad carries when he's going to see clients."

I think about this description for a minute, trying to determine what she might be talking about.

"Like a file folder? The sides fold in and out?" I ask.

"Yeah. Like that."

"But you don't know what was in it?" I ask.

"No. And she never had it when she came back. I thought about asking her about it, but I never did."

"Colleen."

I turn around to see Alexander a few yards away. His expression is hard to read, but I notice Colleen tighten and take an almost imperceptible step back.

"I have to go," she says. "Thank you for showing me the flowers."

“Of course. Thank you for telling me about the games you played with Owen.”

I say this purposely, not wanting Alexander to think we were talking about anything of significance. Colleen goes to her father, and he puts his hands on her shoulders as she stands in front of him.

“I hear you went to talk with Edgar Wilson,” he says.

My spine straightens slightly. That conversation was a matter of hours ago, and he already knows it happened. I can’t help but feel the question is as much a statement as it is him genuinely wanting to know. He’s showing me how connected he is. He wants me to know how ingrained in this town he is and that he can track what I’m doing. He hired me to do a job, and he’s going to make sure I’m doing it to his satisfaction.

“I did,” I say. “Like I told you, I’m trying to find out as much as I possibly can about Owen and what was happening in his life. You said you were fine with him getting in a little bit of trouble and mischief, but it seems other people were more shocked when they found out that he had hooked up with that group and was accused of participating in the crimes. I’m trying to figure out exactly when that happened and what led up to it. It might help open up the right path to finding him and getting him home safely. Edgar Wilson is the only one of that group who is somewhere I can find him to talk to him, so that’s what I did.”

I don’t like the feeling of having to justify myself to him. I hate feeling scrutinized and like he’s grading me on my performance.

I remind myself this is something a lot of my clients do. Especially wealthy and entitled ones. They come from a place in life where they believe they know best about everything, or that they should be kept abreast of every tiny development in everything, or—probably the one that aggravates me to the fullest extent—that they have the right to contribute their thoughts and ideas about how I should be doing my job and

what I should do next. They think because they are paying me, they get a say.

They don't.

I'll take the information they can give me about the case. I'll accept lists of details that I wouldn't otherwise know. People, significant places, recent events. But when it comes to actually formulating my plan for each investigation, they need to step back.

I know this time it's getting to me more because it's Alexander. There's been something about him that hasn't sat well with me since the first moment I met him. And if I am being honest with myself, I went into that interaction already at odds with him. I never wanted to encounter Brielle's husband. I never wanted to have to come face to face with the life her family thought was better for her than what I could have given her.

Even now as I know in my heart she and I would never have ended up living the fairytale life together we imagined, I still don't like what he represents.

"Was he able to tell you anything?" Alexander asks.

"Nothing that seems significant right now," I say.

His eyes narrow just slightly like he's trying to figure out if I'm holding something back from him. Finally, he loosens his grip on Colleen and pats her on the back. He smiles at me.

"Thanks for working so hard on this. I didn't doubt it before, but I know for sure now I made the right decision hiring you to look into this," he says.

I make a sound of acknowledgment. "I'll keep you posted."

They both wave and walk out of the abandoned azalea garden. I watch them, feeling a heaviness in my chest. Brielle was hiding something. I already knew she was hiding something within herself, but now I know she was hiding something physical as well. From the description of the items

she carried out of the house and didn't bring back, it sounds like documents or money. Possibly both. The way Colleen was talking, it seems their marriage was far from the perfect image of domesticity Alexander would want people to believe.

And I'm learning more and more that I don't know who this man is or what he's capable of.



CHAPTER FIVE

Xavier and I have just gotten home to Harlan when I realize I somehow missed a call and a voicemail while we were in Georgia. Usually, I don't do that. I make it a point to be as accessible as I can be. Due to the nature of the work I do, even just a handful of minutes can mean detrimental consequences to the clients who need me. I've just wrapped up another case, leaving Alexander my only client at the moment, so I haven't missed any important developments in a current case. But the call and voicemail tell me someone else might need me. I can't let myself be so distracted.

The message is short and contains no details. Just a name, a phone number, and a request to call the woman back. I do as I unpack my suitcase into the hamper in my room.

"Hello?"

"Naomi Nakamura?" I ask.

"Yes," the woman who answered says.

"This is Dean Steele. I got your voicemail," I say.

"Yes," she says again, but this time the word comes out in a gust of breath, like she already feels relieved just having

gotten me on the phone. “Thank you so much for calling me back.”

“Of course. I’m sorry I missed your call. You didn’t give me much information in your message. What can I do for you?” I ask.

“It’s about my son Theo,” she says.

Maybe I’m about to embark on my second case of a missing teenager.

“All right. What’s going on with Theo?” I ask.

“He was murdered four years ago by a serial killer.”

Silence stretches over the phone line as I try to come up with the right way to respond to the wholly unexpected reply.

“Maybe it would be better if I came to talk to you in person,” I finally say.

“It probably would,” she says.

Convincing Xavier to leave again the next day wasn’t easy. With Halloween rapidly approaching, he says he should be utilizing his time to carve pumpkins with the elaborate designs he has been envisioning and buying candy. I offer to let him see if Nicole is available or to take him to Sherwood to stay at Emma and Sam’s house, but he says we haven’t spent enough time together recently, so he’s going to come along. Nicole will come care for the sourdough babies, and we’ll see Emma and Sam later.

To tell the truth, I’m glad he’s decided to come. Some of it is because I worry about him all the time. I know I don’t need to. He’s a lot more resilient and capable than people give him credit for. As long as he doesn’t have to make a phone call or use a map to navigate anything. Even then, I’ve seen some pretty phenomenal resourcefulness out of him. I shouldn’t worry about him nearly as much as I do.

It isn’t just worrying about him though. Xavier might have come into my life in an unexpected, somewhat accidental way, but he is fully cemented in my existence now. I understand

him better than most people. He says better than anybody. There's something to that. It's more than just being able to decipher what he says or to know when his heart condition is acting up and causing him anxiety so he needs salt. It goes beyond that, and we both understand it. And I feel like the same goes for him. He sees me in a way that no one else does.

We anchor each other. Which seems a bit ridiculous to say when a good portion of my life consists of trying to keep Xavier in reality. But that might be part of it. He doesn't care about my job or my past. It doesn't matter to him who my father is or anything that I went through. When he looks at me, he just sees me. It lets me have moments when I am completely grounded. I know that no matter what I am tangled up in or how far my brain spirals, in Xavier's existence, in his bubble, I am always the same.



The Nakamura family lives in a quiet suburb consisting of houses a bit larger than average, but not ostentatious. These are houses that people take a tremendous amount of pride in and dedicate a lot of time and effort to keeping as beautiful as they are. Their weekends during the spring and summer are spent mowing grass and tending to ornamental hedges and flower gardens, not paying a landscaper to do it for them.

Xavier and I walk up onto the porch and ring the doorbell. It's loud enough to hear it echoing through the house, but before the sound even dissipates, the door opens, and a woman looks out at us. It instantly strikes me that this woman, who I assume is Naomi Nakamura, matches her house perfectly. In tailored pink slacks and a cream and pink sweater with her hair combined sleek to her shoulders, and her makeup subtle but attractive, she is clearly well put together and takes good care of herself but isn't flashy or overdone.

"Mr. Steele?" she asks.

"Dean," I say. I gesture behind me. "And this is Xavier."

"Hello," she says to him. "I'm Naomi. Please come in."

We step inside and take off our shoes before continuing into a living room beautifully decorated in shades of cream and sage. She fits into it like she is part of a magazine spread. She sits down on a loveseat and gestures for us to take any of the other pieces of furniture arranged in a welcoming seating circle.

“Thank you for allowing me to come here and speak with you,” I say. “I really find that it’s not as effective to talk over the phone sometimes.”

“And yet you still won’t acknowledge my progress in being able to call both Bruce and Nicole,” Xavier says, adding significant emphasis to ‘and.’

I look over at him with an expression that would quiet anyone else, but he just stares back at me. He either isn’t interpreting it, or he doesn’t care. Maybe a little of both. The effect is the same. I turn back to Naomi and find her with a soft smile. She gestures at Xavier with one graceful hand.

“Is he your partner?” she asks with what I assume she thinks is a knowing smile flitting on her lips.

“Yes,” Xavier says without hesitation.

“No,” I say, our voices overlapping. “X.” He stares at me. I sigh. “He doesn’t mean that in the way you probably meant it, but, yeah, I guess we’ll go with it.”

Xavier leans slightly closer and tucks his head down toward my shoulder like it’s going to stop Naomi from being able to hear him.

“We played tennis doubles.”

“Yes, Xavier.”

“And charades.”

“Yes.”

“And Team Double Ultimate Challenge Monopoly.”

“You made that one up.”

There's a beat of silence. "You were still my partner."

"Yes, X."

Out of the corner of my eye, I see a man coming into the room, and I stand to shake his hand.

"Oh, here's my husband," Naomi says. "This is Rin. Rin, this is Dean Steele, the private investigator I was telling you about. And this is Xavier." She looks briefly troubled. "I'm sorry, I didn't catch your last name."

"I didn't throw it. Renton. Xavier Renton," he says. "I'm his partner."

My eyes close briefly, and I take a breath as I sit. This is going to be a thing now. He's going to make T-shirts. He might end up with business cards.

"I'm sorry I'm late," Rin says as he settles onto the floral cushion beside his wife. "I was wrapped up with work. Did I miss anything?"

"No. They just arrived," Naomi says.

"Good. We really appreciate you coming," Rin says. "This has all been so incredibly difficult for our family. We felt like there was nowhere else for us to turn. But we've heard about you and thought maybe there was a possibility you could help us."

Even for people who live in the same state as I do, it still strikes me as strange sometimes when I hear that they recognize me or have heard about the work I've done. I still operate for the most part in the mindset of the anonymity of my early career. Before I decided to track down the famed FBI agent Emma Griffin to try to understand why she was the focus of an obsession from a man I was learning to fear and despise, her uncle Jonah. My father.

We didn't know we were related when we first encountered each other on a horrifying train ride that I thought we might not survive. But over the last few years, we've become so close that I feel like I've always known her. And it

has done considerable things for my career. It isn't really the amount of work I'm getting that's noticeable, but my visibility. I've worked with Emma on multiple cases and have ended up profiled in the media because of it. I don't know if I'll ever get used to that.

Fortunately, it's not even close to the same level as her, so I still feel like I can drift a little. A brief thought about the partially finished manuscript sitting in my office at home tells me I might have to try to get used to it pretty soon.

"I will certainly try to do anything I can if there's something I can do," I say. "Again, though, I don't know anything about the situation. So, I can't really give any kind of advice or commitment yet. Why don't you tell me about your son and what happened to him?"

The couple looks at each other before Naomi meets my eyes again.

"As I mentioned on the phone, we lost our son Theo. Four years ago he was murdered," she says.

"You mentioned that he was killed by a serial killer," I note. "That's kind of a big statement to make. How do you know that?"

"Because another teenager was murdered the night he died and a third within the week. Then a fourth two years later," she says.

"That's more than the three required to officially be titled a serial killer," Xavier says like he's checking off a list.

"Yes," Naomi says, nodding. "The Hallows Eve Killer."

The name is familiar. I've heard it before. I can't bring to mind any of the details, but I know I've heard that title before.

"Seth Hoffman," Xavier says.

"You know him," Rin says.

"Not personally, no," Xavier says.

“Seth Hoffman murdered our son,” Naomi says. “I know people say it’s impossible, but I know it happened. And now the police are acting like the situation is done. The case is over. But it isn’t.”

“I don’t understand,” I say. “Tell me what happened. From the beginning.”

“Theo loved Halloween. It was always his favorite time of year. That year he’d gone off celebrating with his friends. Or, at least, that was what he was supposed to be doing. He was supposed to be enjoying the haunted attraction that used to be set up at the old carnival grounds. Instead, our daughter, Hannah, found him hanging on a wooden frame like a scarecrow—dead.”

“I’m so sorry,” I say. “That sounds horrible.”

“It was. Especially for Hannah. Theo was her twin. They’re our only children and grew up so close. She never really recovered from the shock of finding her brother’s body or the loss of not having him anymore. She seems to be moving on with her life. She’s going to school, she has a boyfriend now, she’s working.”

Naomi’s voice has taken on an almost optimistic, hopeful note, but her husband’s face hasn’t changed, and he wraps his hand tightly around hers.

“But it seems like a lot of it is very much on the surface. We think there’s a lot of damage that has been done, and it can’t really be repaired until the case has a resolution. We want to see that resolution so we can save the child we have left,” Rin says. “But there’s been no progress. It seems like the police have essentially given up. They don’t care about this case anymore.”

“But if you know this Seth Hoffman is the Hallows Eve Killer, what do you need to resolve the case?” I ask.

“Seth Hoffman is dead,” Naomi says.

I listen as she tells me about the murders, and about Hoffman being found strung up like a scarecrow and holding a

bowl of candy on the front porch of his girlfriend's house only two years later. Inside, the police found her body as well.

“He remains the only suspect the case has had,” Rin says. “And he was killed. He couldn't have done it to himself, but he was all they focused on after the first three murders. Theo, Penny Johnson, and Samuel Freedman. Then Kenneth Chisolm was killed, and it was all the town talked about. They were never able to come up with the kind of evidence they would need to charge him, but we believe his death has really affected the way the investigators see the case.”

“Do you believe he killed Theo?” I ask.

“Yes,” Naomi says with total confidence.

“I think there's still work to be done,” Rin says. “There's evidence to support it, but the fact that he was murdered and presented in a way that made him fit right in with the other victims makes it confusing. There've been no other leads at all. But I honestly don't know how hard anyone has looked for them. Sometimes it feels like they're looking at it like entertainment. A phantom committed the next murder. I want to know what happened to my son and why, and I want the same for the families of all the other victims of the Hallows Eve Killer as well.”

“I fully understand,” I say. “I am happy to do some digging and see what I can find out. I'll come back and talk to you tomorrow.”



CHAPTER SIX

It's a reality of the industry I've chosen for myself that I usually get the ground floor foundation of any investigation I'm working on from the people hiring me. They're the ones who have decided they need the help of a private investigator for their situation, so they are the ones who are going to fill me in on what has happened and what they'd like me to do. While this is helpful, I can't lose sight of the fact that it is also skewed.

They're giving me the information they want me to have, which means it's filtered through their perspective and emotions. Everybody has heard there are two sides to every story, just like a pancake. That's certainly true, but sometimes I find it goes well beyond that. There are cases that turn out to be more like those dice used for role-playing games. A whole lot of sides and all of them with different outcomes.

That doesn't mean what I'm told is a purposeful lie or misdirection. It's just the slant of what's going on from that person's view. As I learned from one of Emma's cases, the difference between how a person in their elder years describes a suspect and how a child describes that same person can be stark.

Neither one of them is lying. They're just giving the information they can.

That's why it's critical to me that I do my own research at the beginning of every case. I want to know the facts, but I also want to pull back from the situation and see it as a bigger picture rather than just the focused-in perspective of the person directly affected by it. No matter how up-front and honest someone thinks they're being, when I sit down with them for the first time, they are going to be telling their version of the story. It's going to be colored by their perspective and their feelings on the situation, which means they are very likely to miss details or not talk about other elements that could be critically important to the investigation.

By doing my own research, I can get a more well-rounded view of the situation and know not only whether I'm going to take the case or not, but also how I will move forward if I do.

As soon as I start looking into the murders, I realize it is a more complex and complicated situation than I first thought. The story I got from the Nakamuras was softened, almost sanitized. That makes sense. They were telling me about the brutal murder of their son. They have likely blocked out many of the most difficult details and may have even stopped following the case because it was too difficult, which would mean they only have a cursory understanding of what happened in the years that followed Theo's death.

I realize there are things about their son they don't want to talk about. Not necessarily that they don't want me to know, but that they couldn't force themselves to bring up to the surface while talking about him. Anyone who has lost someone very close to them knows how painful it is to think anything negative about that person after they are gone. Everything is magnified by death. Good memories are heightened into technicolor. The pain and guilt of negative feelings are deepened until unbearable.

As his parents, Naomi and Rin Nakamura wouldn't want to think anything bad about Theo. They want to remember him

as their great joy. But more than that, they want, rightly, for him to be remembered and thought of as the victim in the situation. Though that sounds like it should be unquestioned, unfortunately, that isn't always the case. Especially when the person who has been killed isn't one of the most upstanding members of society.

It shouldn't be, but the reality is murder victims are assigned value. By the police. By the media. By the members of the community they once belonged to, even if on the fringes. Some people are simply considered more important than others, and some victims are barely even looked at as a loss. Reading the articles about Theo's murder tells me where he fell on that continuum. Even in the descriptions of the brutality of his death, the reporters couldn't resist the opportunity to describe him as an outsider and a troubled teen—almost as though that made the murder more tolerable. More predictable.

An honor roll student with a sterling reputation who spent their time volunteering and giving back being murdered was a travesty. A petty criminal and juvenile delinquent who seemed to have lost his way before he even had the chance to find it being murdered was just another statistic.

It cuts deep reading the different ways the media talked about the victims and their deaths. It tells me this situation was likely colored far more by that than anything else.

The second victim, Penny Collins, was found within a couple dozen yards of Theo's body, hidden among another display that kept her body concealed even from the hundreds of thrill-seekers who walked past that night. According to the medical examiner, both of them were killed within several hours of being found, which meant they were somehow put into place in the corn maze while the entire attraction was being prepared for the night.

Without any type of surveillance equipment set up around the maze, they didn't have any way of knowing how the bodies were brought in or how they were set up without

anyone noticing. If it was one of the sleek, high-tech haunted attractions built around the structure of theme parks or that take over huge building complexes each season, I would be shocked at the lack of cameras. Usually, attractions like this are fully outfitted with cameras all around the perimeter as well as at every turn inside the maze itself. They have the dual purpose of providing safety and security for the scare actors and everyone participating, as well as allowing for real-time modification of the show.

Someone in a nerve center set up somewhere on the property watches the footage and can connect with the scare actors to let them know when people are approaching a scare scene, when someone is being too cocky and needs to get jostled, or if there's someone inside who isn't handling the environment and needs to be left alone and gotten out as quickly as possible.

But this wasn't one of those attractions. Built on an old, abandoned carnival ground, it was a fairly sprawling destination with a couple of indoor haunted houses, midway games, artisans, a haunted hayride through the woods, and, of course, the corn maze. But for as large and elaborate as it was, it was still very much a homegrown operation harkening back to the older days of Halloween when going to one of those attractions was all about simple, terrifying fun. There wasn't a lot of technology. There weren't a bunch of complicated tricks. It was about darkness, costumes, noise, and atmosphere.

Which is glorious for those wanting to immerse themselves in the traditional feeling of Halloween and to chase an adrenaline rush. Not as much for a murder investigation.

There isn't much information about the investigation itself. I can piece together that they cleared the entire corn maze, which was how they found Penny's body, and did a search of the entire attraction complex. There were no other bodies found, and they couldn't locate weapons or murder scenes. That only seemed to heighten the horror when the third body was found.

“Here he is,” I say to Xavier, pointing out a blog written about the lead suspect in the murders. “Seth Hoffman. The Hallows Eve Killer.”

“Or so they say,” he says.

I give him a questioning look. “I thought you said he was the killer.”

“I said he was the one the police were pursuing as the killer. I also pointed out that he, too, was murdered. And right in line with the methods of the first four killings,” he says.

“Yeah,” I say, reading through the blog. “That does seem to complicate things. Apparently, he was named a suspect after police uncovered he was at the attraction the night of the first two murders and had been described as behaving suspiciously by a few people even before the bodies were found. The manager had even asked him to leave. Then during the investigation itself, he seemed far too fascinated by the deaths and by what the police were doing.”

“And this is why I am constantly profiled by the loss prevention people at grocery stores,” Xavier says. “Suspicious behavior is not enough to make some a suspect.”

“You are profiled by the loss prevention people at grocery stores because you forget where you are, why you’re there, or where anything is, and wander up and down the aisles whispering to yourself,” I point out.

“I’m not whispering to myself. I’m talking to the products to see if they can help me,” he says.

“That doesn’t help the situation, X. But you’re right, suspicious behavior alone isn’t a reason to make someone a lead suspect in a serial murder case. People behave in all kinds of ways when they encounter stressful or difficult situations, and there’s really no way of knowing how anyone is going to react until they are actually in that situation. Sometimes a perfectly natural, normal reaction can come across as suspicious.

“But that’s not the only reason Hoffman was named the suspect and pursued by investigators. It turns out he was a filmmaker. An amateur, and without anything real to his credit, but apparently very serious about it. He was determined he was going to create movies that changed the whole cinematic landscape. He believed his work would be studied in film schools and there would be entire festivals dedicated to what he’d accomplished.”

“Humility really is such a lost art these days,” Xavier says.

“Well, it turns out he might not have been completely wrong. About the being studied part, anyway. Not for the reasons he thought, but I’m sure he’s going to show up in a few seminars. This article says it was one of his screenplays that changed him from just a suspicious person who the police wanted to keep their eye on to an official suspect,” I say.

“I thought you said he hadn’t made anything,” Xavier says.

“Don’t you already know about this case?” I ask. “You’re the one who just dropped his name.”

“It’s a compelling name for a serial killer, Dean. I latched onto it. I didn’t look into the details. The ‘corn maze’ category of murder information in my head is already fairly full. I’d like to diversify my knowledge a bit,” he says.

“Hm,” I say. “Well, this says the organizers of a writing contest approached the police several months after the first three murders to show them a screenplay that had been submitted for the contest. The judges going through the submissions found it really disturbing and pointed out several details that were in line with the murders. They turned it over to the organizers who brought it to police. They read through it and found it described the murders in extensive detail. Some things were altered only very slightly, but a lot of them, including things that hadn’t been mentioned by the investigators in public, were there.

“The fourth victim was murdered after the screenplay was uncovered, but there were some details in the screenplay that suggested how that victim was going to be killed. All of that is obviously completely circumstantial. There was no concrete evidence conclusively linking any of the murders to Seth Hoffman. No DNA. No pictures or security footage. No fingerprints. And, obviously, no confession. None directly from his mouth, anyway. There were plenty of investigators, not to mention the public, who felt the screenplay was his form of confessing.

“He became the unequivocal focus of the investigation as detectives desperately tried to find something that would let them arrest him and charge him. His name got out to the public, and he was completely ostracized. He was run out of town, and people thought it was over. There was no murder the next Halloween, and everyone took that as a sign they were right and everything was going to be okay because Hoffman was gone.”

“And then he showed up on the porch dressed like a scarecrow,” Xavier says.

“Exactly. The next anyone in town heard of him was a year later when he was found dead on a porch by some trick-or-treaters. It turns out he had been dating a woman who moved to Harper purely by coincidence.”

Xavier looks around. “Right. Sam’s not here. I’ll do it. ‘There’s no such thing as coincidences.’”

“So the theory goes,” I say. “But in this situation, there doesn’t seem to be any other real explanation. She had been living in Paedon where Seth met her, then she moved to Harper. The people in town who had met her said she never gave any clear reason why she had moved into town. Just that she wanted a change and thought this would be a nice place. Investigators found out when she moved here, Seth came along with her, but was living as much under the radar as he could. Her neighbors didn’t even know he was around.

“There’s no way of knowing, of course, since she was found hacked to death on her living room floor the same Halloween night Seth was killed, but the investigators don’t think she knew who he was. The police had made it a point to follow him around and do everything they could to try to nail him for the time he was still living in Harper, but when he moved out of town, they dropped it. The issue of jurisdiction and trying to carry on an investigation cooperating with another department was apparently just too much for them to handle. So, they said they were still working the case while not really doing much. Hoping something would pop up.”

“Like his corpse?” Xavier asks.

“Something like that.”

I’ve seen enough. I know I need to take this case.



CHAPTER SEVEN

Theo Nakamura's parents look hopeful but cautious when they open the door to us the next day. Rather than going into the living room as we did the first time we visited, they bring us into the kitchen at the back of the house. A pot of coffee is already brewing, and Naomi sets a platter of snacks in the center of a round table positioned in the curve of a picture window overlooking the backyard.

We sit down as Rin pours and distributes mugs of coffee. They settle across the table and stare at me, not speaking as they run their hands around the sides of their mugs like they're cold.

"I looked into the case, and I am willing to take it up," I say.

They both smile, their shoulders relaxing.

"Thank you," Rin says. "I know it's not going to bring Theo back, but I need to know what happened to my son."

"And that's what I'm going to try to find out for you. I have to admit... the issue of Seth Hoffman is confusing. There wasn't any real evidence in terms of forensics, a confession, audio or visual documentation. But from what I read about the

screenplay, it was a compelling lead. But then his murder complicates things considerably,” I say.

“Mom?” a voice calls from the front of the house as I hear a door open. “Dad? Where is everybody?”

A moment later a young woman walks into the kitchen with a man right behind her. She stops short when she sees Xavier and me sitting at the table.

“Hannah,” Naomi says, getting to her feet. “This is Dean Steele and Xavier Renton. They’re private investigators. Dean, this is our daughter, Hannah.”

“Private investigators?” Hannah asks, obviously surprised at the introduction.

“We weren’t expecting you today, honey,” Rin says. “We’re talking to Dean about Theo.”

Her eyes narrow and go impenetrably dark.

“You’re right. You weren’t expecting me, so I’ll just go,” she says, turning on her heel and starting for the door.

The man behind her takes her gently by her upper arms to stop her.

“Baby,” he whispers. “Stop.”

“I just want to go,” she says. “I don’t want to hear any of this bullshit.”

“I want to help,” I say.

She turns around to face me. Her jaw is tense and hard, her expression filled with hurt and rage.

“Help how? Even the police aren’t doing anything about it. Theo’s been forgotten. Nothing is going to change. Nothing is going to get better. I don’t understand why my parents won’t just let it go. They just keep bringing it up and bringing it up. It just makes it hurt more.”

“Honey, that’s not what we want to do,” Naomi says. “We don’t mean to cause you any more pain. But we can see how

much this affected you. How much it still affects you. And it affects us too. Theo is our son. We want to know what happened to him. And if the police aren't going to do their jobs and find out, then we have to find another way."

"I've investigated many murders," I tell her. "I obviously can't make any promises, but I can tell you that I will do everything I can to find out what happened. Your brother deserves justice. Even if that is just making sure that people know who killed him. And I think you could help me if you're willing to sit down and talk."

This seems to take some of the edge away from Hannah, but she is still tense as she shifts her weight and crosses her arms defensively over her chest.

"Fine," she says.

She turns and stalks out of the room, heading for the front of the house. I look at her parents, who shake their heads sadly.

"She's carrying so much anger," Rin says. "She was never like this before. It's like this is eating her alive."

"I don't want to lose both children," Naomi says solemnly.

"I'm not going to let that happen," I say.

"We'll leave you alone," Rin says. "She'll open up more without us there. Asher, please make sure she's okay."

The young man who came in with Hannah nods. They walk out of the room, and he looks at me, holding out his hand.

"Asher Dawson," he says. "I'm Hannah's boyfriend."

I shake his hand. "Good to meet you. I'm sorry for the shock. I didn't realize she didn't know her parents were getting me involved."

"It's not your fault. She's very... sensitive about her brother. And I agree with her parents. It's eating her from the inside. It's like it's always on her mind, no matter what. It's

been years, but because there wasn't a real resolution, she can't fully move past it. Rather than getting better, she seems to be getting angrier."

"Do you think she'll actually talk to me?" I ask.

I've had my fair share of encounters with people who don't have any interest in actually participating in an investigation. It makes the process that much more difficult, especially when the person is as close to the victim and would know as much as his twin sister. After my less-than-stellar interview with Edgar Wilson, I'd like to think I can go into this conversation hoping some benefit comes out of it.

"I think so," he says. "She doesn't like to talk about it. It really gets to her. But if she feels like you might be willing to actually give it the attention it deserves rather than just gloss over it like the police have for four years, you might get somewhere."

It isn't the most resounding endorsement I could have gotten, but I'll take it.

"She probably went to the living room?"

"Actually, I would check the sunroom on the side of the house. I'm going to make her some tea," he says.

I have a feeling he isn't making her tea just because he thinks she needs a refreshment. He's trying to give us some privacy but also wants to be there to protect her. I can imagine how hard it must be to watch her go through this. It has to leave Asher feeling helpless. He wants to do anything he can to make her feel better and get her through the struggle, but there's nothing he can do. All he has is the ability to comfort her.

"Bring her a couple of these," Xavier chimes in from the table, setting a few of the snacks off to the side. "And these. But not these."

He has organized the platter into distinct groupings of the different types of snacks, and it seems one particular one is separated away from the rest. I don't know if that's because he

doesn't like them and is trying to guard others from them, or if he is keeping them all for himself. Either way, he seems to have created an assortment just for Hannah before he stands up and walks out of the kitchen with me.

We head through the house and turn in the opposite direction that we did to get to the living room. It brings us down another hallway and past a dining room before we get to a large, glassed-in room jutting out from the side of the house. Hannah is curled up in a chair with a blanket draped over her lap, her chin propped in her hand as she stares out at the fall colors beyond the glass.

She looks over her shoulder as we walk in. "Where's Asher?"

"He's making you some tea," I say. "Mind if I sit down?"

"Does anyone ever actually say, 'No, you're not allowed to sit down'?" she asks.

"Actually, technically, the answer would be yes, not no," Xavier says. Hannah looks at him, tilting her head to the side. "Dean didn't ask if he was allowed to sit down. He asked if you minded if he sat down. Saying 'no' would mean you don't mind, thereby giving him implied permission to sit. If you did not want him to sit, you would say 'yes', indicating you did, in fact, mind if he sat, implicitly withholding, as the de facto host of the room, permission for him to sit."

"This is Xavier," I say, gesturing to him.

"Lovely fantail you've got there," he says.

"Excuse me?"

He swirls his finger in the direction of her legs. "The blanket. That's the stitch."

"Xavier crochets," I say.

Hannah looks down. "Oh. Yeah. My grandmother made it. It's always been my favorite."

“The definition is beautiful. Look at the stitchmanship,” he says.

I’ve tried to convince him he can’t just augment the lexicon with his own words by saying them enough times, but he says that’s how language evolved in the first place, and he can if he wants to. We’re at an impasse.

Right now the words he’s using don’t really matter to me. I’m watching his movements as he slowly walks toward her. He’s talking about the blanket, but his eyes are focused on Hannah. She nods, her face softening more as she runs her fingertips over the rows of shell stitches in the cream-colored blanket.

“One of my first memories is watching her make things like this. She would sit for hours in her rocking chair, and her hands moved so fast. I was always amazed that she could just sit there and have a conversation or watch TV, and the stitches would just happen. Like she didn’t have to pay attention to it at all. They just knew how to be made,” she says.

Xavier smiles. It’s like he’s approaching a wounded animal he wants to release from a trap. He has lulled her into trusting him, and he manages to get all the way to her until he touches the blanket, and she has seemed to relax enough that she isn’t fully on guard. He looks at me like he’s handing the conversation over to me.

“Hannah, I know this isn’t an easy thing for you to talk about, but could you tell me in your own words what happened to your brother?” I ask gently as I sit in a chair near hers.

She looks at me for a brief second like she’s trying to decide how much to trust me.

“He was stabbed and then nailed to a wooden post dressed like a scarecrow,” she says. “There was a nail going through his throat, and there was so much blood that the medical examiner said he was definitely alive when that happened. There were also signs that he had been beaten. There were no

sedatives or anything in his body, so he experienced every single second of it.”

Her words are monotone, almost mechanical, as she rattles them out. It’s like she’s said this speech dozens of times and just needs to get the words out.

“The police barely even cared. The lead detective acted like he did at first. But as soon as that girl was found and then the other victim, it was like Theo didn’t even exist anymore. They were dead, but they weren’t brutalized the way my brother was. But they also weren’t delinquents, as the police so often liked to say. They hadn’t been arrested or shown up in court. So, they mattered more. It seemed like they weren’t paying anywhere near as much attention to figuring out what happened to him as they were to the others. They just passed it off as another problem kid who got himself killed. As if he had somehow deserved what happened to him or was to blame for it. There were times when they even seemed like they were relieved—like they were whispering among themselves that they were never going to have to deal with another call dealing with Theo Nakamura again.”

I give her a sympathetic look. Emma is much better at this stuff than I am, but I’m trying.

“They had nothing to go on. They put on a big show like they were doing this elaborate investigation and they were closing in on somebody, but there wasn’t any progress. There weren’t any suspects—not even a person of interest. They would show up to the house and talk to my parents like they actually cared for a little while, but that happened less and less. And then they just stopped altogether. There was nothing for a long time before we found out about Seth Hoffman. As soon as they said his name, it made sense. That guy was a complete creep,” Hannah says.

“You knew Seth Hoffman?” I ask.

Asher comes into the room with a cup of fragrant peppermint tea and a plate. When he sets it down beside her, I

note it's the assortment Xavier picked out for her. He gives it an approving nod.

"Seth Hoffman?" Asher asks as he hands the tea to Hannah. "Everybody said that guy was weird as hell."

"I didn't know him personally," Hannah says. "But everything I heard about him... there's really no other way to describe him."

"How about you, Asher?" I ask. "You said he was weird. Did you ever hang out with him?"

"Seth Hoffman didn't hang out with anybody. According to the people he did interact with, he thought he was better than everybody. He saw himself as some sort of creative genius," Asher says.

"That's why he wrote that screenplay," Hannah adds. "Everything about him was creepy and strange. I heard his whole apartment was full of weird drawings and art he made that was all about killers and death. Like I said, I didn't know him personally, but I saw him around. He was a walking cliché Gothic freak. He wore black jeans, black T-shirts, and a long black trench coat and boots all the time.

"And I know there are plenty of people who dress like that because it's what they're comfortable in, but there was nothing authentic about Seth. He would walk around with this exaggerated gait trying to make the trench coat billow behind him. He would look around like he was either exploring some sort of alien territory or like he thought he was deeply impressive and intimidating. It made all the sense in the world when I found out the judges of that competition turned over the screenplay he wrote about him killing my brother and the others. I actually felt stupid for not thinking about it before.

"I know you're not supposed to judge people based on how they look or whatever. But he was such a weirdo and a creep. He might as well have had a neon sign flashing above his head all the time. And the thing is, I think he wanted it that way. I think he wanted to give off that feeling. He thought it

was mysterious and intriguing. He wanted people to wonder about him. Be a little afraid of him. Like that would somehow enhance what he saw as his art,” Hannah says bitterly.

“What happened after he left town?” I ask.

Hannah takes a sip of her tea and shrugs as she leans back in her chair. “Nothing. As soon as he was run out of town by everybody who knew he was a fucking murderer and was getting away with it, it just kind of passed. There weren’t any stories on the news about it anymore. The police didn’t come around to talk about it or make any statements on the news. It just kind of faded into the background. There were people who talked about it—of course—angry people who didn’t understand why the police weren’t hunting Hoffman down and throwing him in jail. They didn’t care that they didn’t have any real evidence. They said they should find a way to make it work.”

She gives me a significant look, and I know exactly what she means.

“It sounds like people thinking about forming a posse,” I say.

She shrugs. ““Something like that.”

“Do you think that’s what happened?” I ask. “There don’t seem to be any suspects in his murder, and it seems meaningful that he was dressed like a scarecrow when he was found on the porch.”

“I don’t know,” Hannah admits. “I don’t think it was an accident that he looked like that. But I don’t know who would have had that much of a grudge against his girlfriend. She hadn’t even lived in town for that long. Most people didn’t know her. If somebody was just going after him to get some sort of revenge, why hurt her too?”

“Possibly to punish him,” I say. “If she was murdered first, it could have been a way to torment him.”

“I know some people who believe his death to be a form of poetic justice,” Asher says. “They think someone must have

gotten tired of him getting away with hurting so many people and thought he was likely going to start doing it again. So they stopped him before he could. But there are others who believe someone else was responsible for all the murders and he was killed to taunt the police because they thought they had figured it out. It was a way the real killer was letting it be known he was the actual serial killer.”

“What do you think?” I ask.

“I think there’s somebody out there who knows what happened to him,” Asher says. “It’s just a matter of finding out who that is.”

He has his arm around Hannah, stroking her shoulder. I wish I hadn’t asked the question. It isn’t up to them to unravel something like this. Hannah is already struggling with the pain of losing her brother and the torment of no one being able to conclusively explain how it all happened. It only makes it worse to hear someone else admit to knowing nothing, and it puts Asher in a bad position having to be that person who can’t give her the answers she so desperately wants.

I move closer to the edge of the cushion and look directly into Hannah’s eyes, making sure she sees I’m focused on her. “I want you to know I am taking this very seriously. Your brother is no less than any of the other victims. I am here for him. I’m not the police. I don’t look down on him for anything he did or anything he went through. He deserves just as much respect and attention as anyone else. And I’m going to do everything I possibly can to give that to him.”

Her lips press together for a second, and she swallows hard. “Thank you.”

Anger is a tight ball in the center of my chest as I think of the police and the way they reacted to Theo’s death, as well as the deaths of the other victims. They’ve done little more than sweep it all under the rug because their original suspect was killed, and they didn’t know where to turn next.



CHAPTER EIGHT

“Are you busy later this afternoon?” Hannah asks.

“No,” I say. “I’m in town for this investigation. If there’s something that has to do with it, I’ll be there.”

“Okay. I’m going to spend some time with my parents because I haven’t seen them for a week, but then afterward, you can come by my house. I can give you some information I have that might be helpful.”

“Sure,” I say. “Give me your number and your address. You can just let me know when you’re ready, and I’ll find my way there.”

“Where are you staying?” Asher asks.

I tell him the name of our hotel and as much of a description of the area as I can think of. This is my first time in Harper, so I’m not familiar with where everything is. Fortunately, they both recognize the area immediately.

“That’s not too far,” she says. “About ten minutes’ drive.”

“Perfect. I’ll go back there and do some more research, grab something to eat. You give me a call when you’re home and ready for us,” I say.

Xavier and I leave and grab takeout before heading back to the hotel. I go back to reading through all the articles and blogs I've found about the case while I wait to hear from Hannah. The description she gave me of the murders and the aftermath was much rawer than the one I got from her parents, but that was exactly what I needed. I understand why her parents approached it the way they did, but I need the rough, dark, uncomfortable details. It's in those places where people don't want to venture that I find answers.

We've been at the hotel for a few hours when I get a message from Hannah telling me she's ready for us to come by. I input the address into the GPS. Just like she described, the house is only about ten minutes away from the hotel.

"Do you want to come, or do you want to stay here and work on your puzzle bag?" I ask.

This time I poured five puzzles of varying sizes and similar colors together. Either he'll love it, or I'll find the sealed bag tucked beside me in bed tomorrow morning.

"I'll come," he says. "I'm intrigued by this one."

"So, I guess you do still have space for more cornfields in the murder files of your brain," I say.

Xavier's head tilts slightly to the side, and his eyes drift up to the diagonal as if he's sorting through all the various and sundry information he has stuffed up there.

"Apparently," he finally says.

As we leave the hotel it occurs to me this is the first case he's experienced with me involving a surviving sibling searching for justice. I've only very recently learned that X had a sibling, an older sister named Mirabel, and he's gradually offering up more details about her and the rest of his life before we met. I wonder now if this case has drawn him into it because of the loss of his own sister. Rather than running away from those feelings and trying not to have to experience them, he's leaning into them. He would rather let

them do something good, to fuel him to help Hannah in any way he can.

Hannah lives in a small house tucked into an older neighborhood across town from her parents. This is one of those neighborhoods where huge, mature trees have been offering shade in the blistering summer and providing leaf piles perfect for jumping every fall to generations of the same family. These are the kinds of houses that are filled with the perpetually amazing smells from home-cooked meals and home-baked bread from warm kitchens. There are a few newer homes dotted along the streets, seeming to take up space that used to host older houses or plots that were once extra land around one of them.

Hannah's home is one of the smaller, original homes in the neighborhood. With cute window boxes that I'm sure hold flowers in the spring and a winding path up to the door, it has gingerbread house vibes. We walk up to the door and ring the bell. She answers in a pair of gray sweatpants and a baggy shirt, the glossy black hair that hung down straight nearly to her waist when I saw her earlier now swept up in a messy bun. She had clearly come home and gotten herself comfortable before she reached out to me.

The front door of the house leads directly into the living room, and she gestures for us to come in.

"You have a great house," I tell her as we walk in.

"Thank you," she says. "A lot of my friends think it's insane for someone my age to buy a house even when I'm not married or anything, but I figure it can't hurt to make an investment when I haven't screwed my credit up yet—plus I'll have a head start in life."

"Wise," Xavier says.

Hannah looks at him with the same pondering expression I've become accustomed to seeing when people first encounter Xavier. Or even after they've been around him multiple times and still haven't quite gotten into the groove of him. She turns

and walks over to a coffee table set in front of a couch draped with another blanket I'm sure was made by the grandmother she spoke of so fondly.

"Here you go," she says, sweeping her hand through the air over the top of a stack of folders set on the table. "I don't know how much of this you'll actually be able to use, but hopefully some of it will be helpful."

"Can I?" I ask, leaning over toward the stack and pointing to the top folder.

She opens her hand toward them again as she folds her legs under her and sits on the corner of the couch. "Yeah. Go ahead."

I pick up the folder and lower myself onto the overstuffed chair at the end of the table. Xavier walks around to sit on the other end of the couch. He and Hannah make eye contact, and he smiles at her.

Flipping back the front cover of the folder, I'm stunned at what I see inside.

"Crime scene photos?" I flip through the rest of the file and find images of all the victims.

"Is this the original autopsy report?" Xavier asks.

I look over at him and see that he's holding another one of the folders.

"Yeah. Well, I mean, a copy of it. I didn't snatch that from the medical examiner's office or anything," Hannah says. "I don't have that for the fourth victim, but I've got the rest."

I'm shocked she has these things just sitting around her house. This isn't the type of information you can just download off the internet or that the police will hand out easily. Even if they did, the families of most murder victims wouldn't be so quick to want to have these kinds of gruesome images and details of their loved ones in their possession. The pictures of Theo are rough. The photographer didn't hesitate to

get up close to the horrifying display and carefully document the nails through his body and the bruises rising up on his skin.

Hannah seems unaffected by having the information out like this, but I note she also doesn't look at either of the files or their contents.

“How do you have this stuff?” I ask.

“I needed to know more about the case. Especially after it seemed like no one was going to do anything more about it. So I sought it out. I wasn't able to access much of it for a while after Theo died. I was still under eighteen, and none of the cops were interested in providing this kind of information to a minor. But I kept looking and asking until I got what I wanted.”

“But how?” I ask. “This isn't the kind of stuff that's just readily available to the public. Even when I'm able to access files, they are usually redacted. How did you get your hands on this stuff?”

“I have my ways,” she says, looking at me defiantly.

I don't press her any further on it. I also have my ways.

I sift through the pictures again, then glance at the rest of the files, noticing interview notes, printouts of articles, and some other pictures that look like they were taken of the various body sites after the bodies had been removed—or possibly before they were there at all. I notice a couple of what must be the haunted attraction that look almost like promotional pictures.

“It's all right with you if I take these with me?” I confirm.

“Sure.”

“Perfect. Thank you. This is definitely going to be helpful. I appreciate you having us over here. We'll leave you to the rest of your day,” I say. “I'll be in touch with any questions or developments.”

“Thanks,” she says.

Hannah doesn't get up off the couch as I gather the files, and Xavier and I move toward the door. Her eyes are fixed on the empty space in the middle of the table where the files used to be. We say goodbye, and she murmurs something but doesn't look at us. As soon as we get into the car, I show Xavier one of the pictures of the haunted attraction.

“I want to see this place,” I say.



CHAPTER NINE

I already know from reading about the aftermath of the murders that radiated through the town of Harper that the haunted attraction was closed down. Though it's unlikely that people argued against it in that first year, or even the second year, the attraction was very popular, and most of the town assumed they would one day open back up.

The company that designed and ran the attraction didn't feel the same way. They abandoned the entire thing and moved on. Since the night of the deaths, only investigators had returned to the spot. It had been blocked off, and no one was allowed there. But the fairgrounds are an outdoor area. They can't have completely closed it off and be preventing anyone from getting inside.

Again, I have my ways.

We use directions and old maps of the area to circumvent the private access road that has been blocked with cement barriers staggered every few feet ahead and to either side. Thick chains connect the cement pieces to trees along the sides to prevent cars from just driving around them and attempting to weave their way down the road.

I park and we get out, immediately feeling the intense quiet—the kind of quiet that makes it feel as though time has just stopped here. Like it no longer really exists. As soon as the investigators left and the area was abandoned, it just stopped being. It's getting late in the afternoon, and the sun is starting to slide down toward the horizon, leaving shadows trapped over the trees and filling the space beneath them like smoke.

We walk cautiously along the path, staying in the center so we move back and forth between the cement pieces rather than navigating the trees. This space is more open and has more lingering sunlight. It also means empty space on either side of us, so we don't feel as much like we have to wonder if someone—or something—is hiding just on the other side of the trees.

The access road is longer than I anticipated it to be after the blockades end, but finally, it opens up into a gravel parking area. Over the last few years of disuse, the gravel patch has started to be taken over by grass and weeds. There are even a couple of small saplings growing up through the packed dirt. Nature is reclaiming the space, starting with this cleared area, trying to return it to the forest.

I take out my phone and see that the service out here is almost nonexistent. That isn't much of a surprise, but it does make me relieved that I pulled up the old maps of the haunted attraction and left them on my screen just in case. The website for the haunt is still accessible. There's a note on the front page in red lettering warning that the haunt would be closed until further notice. Of course, there is no further notice. The date of the note shows it was added the day after the first three bodies were found, and nothing has been updated since.

The rest of the website is completely intact, allowing me to click through the pages while I was in the hotel waiting for Hannah to message. It felt like a slight trip back in time as I browsed the descriptions of the various activities and attractions spread across the carnival grounds and into the woods beyond. Nothing has changed since four years ago

when the site aimed to attract visitors looking to have the living hell scared out of them all in the name of good autumn fun.

They weren't anticipating the level of fear that would actually exist there that year.

As we walk across the parking lot, we can see the remains of the attraction dotting the open field in front of us. To one side is a collection of haunted houses set up in a semi-circle with a gravel path down the center and walkways leading up to the entrance of each. Beyond that is an area that looks like a segment of a traditional fair with food booths and games in two rows facing each other. Another building set a couple hundred yards beyond isn't marked on the map. I'm assuming it's an operational building or storage of some kind.

We can't see it, but according to the map, in the distance is the entrance to the haunted hayride that used to meander through the thick woods. A little disclaimer on the page just saying this part of the attraction warns interested visitors that at any time the hayride could stop, and their phantom driver could demand they leave the wagon. If that happened, they would have to walk the way through the woods to safety. It's a fun addition to the traditional hayride, and I'm sure there were plenty of teenagers who puffed up their chests and boasted about wishing that would happen to them because they wanted to face the dark woods on foot. I'm also sure plenty of them climbed onto the wagon hoping with everything in them they wouldn't be the ones who would be stopped.

Far off to the right is where the corn maze used to be. I guess it still is, technically. But after years of neglect, I imagine it's choked with weeds, the stalks dead. There's an eerie feeling here. Everything is just as it was, and I'm genuinely shocked to see little if any sign of vandalism. I would think this would be a prime destination for illicit partying, amateur paranormal investigation, or people just wanting to destroy things because they were there. People very much like Theo.

But maybe that's it. The reason that this place has been left untouched is because of him. It's become a shrine in a way. His death wouldn't have ended the mischief and mayhem of the teenagers who were apparently the bane of law enforcement's existence in the town before the murders. Those people would continue on. And as they got older, they would be replaced by younger ones. But they wouldn't disrespect Theo by vandalizing the place where he died. He would be seen as a folk hero in a way. Definitely not the kind of ongoing legacy anybody would have wanted for him, but at least it's something. I hope Hannah knows. In a strange way, it might bring her comfort.

"Should we visit the cul-de-sac of the damned?" I ask, lifting my hand toward the haunted houses.

Xavier doesn't even crack a smile. His head turns slowly back and forth as he takes in the surroundings. His expression is serious, but not frightened or angry. It's a deep, thoughtful expression I've come to know well. Xavier is fully immersed in his thoughts and the way this place makes him feel. He experiences the world in a different way than anyone I have ever encountered. All of his senses activate, and he absorbs what's around him without many of the filters the rest of us have. It sounds completely trite and overdramatic to say he has a sixth sense, but it's really the simplest way to describe it. He doesn't just go through the conventional range of sensory interpretation. To him, feel doesn't just mean tactile. Xavier feels with his entire being.

He describes it as feeling the energy of a space. It's more than just the objects that are around him or the things he can see. He feels what exists on a plane we can't fully explain. I once heard someone ask if he was psychic, and he laughed uproariously until he realized the person was completely serious. He promptly refuted the idea of being clairvoyant, being able to read minds, or seeing the future. He's not one to outright reject the concept of those things being real. According to him, you can prove conclusively that something does exist. You can't prove that it doesn't. If you haven't seen

or experienced it yet, it simply means you haven't seen or experienced it yet. Not that no one else has.

But without coming out and saying those things aren't real, he made a very clear delineation between what people with those purported gifts can apparently do and what it is to live in his brain. He isn't doing anything mystical or magical. There's nothing otherworldly about it. It's just the way his mind works. He told me once to think about the feeling you get on the back of your neck when someone is looking at you or the nostalgia that comes over you when you go to a familiar place. Or the tension that forms in your shoulders when you go into a room full of people arguing.

That's the energy that exists all around us. It's there all the time, whether someone is perceiving it or not. Everyone can feel it in some capacity and in certain situations. He just happens to feel it far more intensely and more frequently. It tunes him into a space and can give him insight into what may have happened in a place that others might completely miss.

"I want to go to the corn maze," he says.

I nod and point. "It's that way."

Xavier heads toward it with a determined stride. I follow after him, catching up and walking alongside him in silence. As we get closer to the former maze, I start to notice lingering signs of the investigation. Deep tire tracks that tore up the grass and dug down into the dirt of the field scar the area, showing where the emergency vehicles raced across the carnival grounds to get to the bodies. They've started to fill in over time, but they're still obvious, providing visual context for the story Hannah told us of the police swarming to secure the entire area, clear the maze, and start the intensive task of talking to everyone who was there that night.

Dried cornstalks like sticks draped in pieces of old parchment rise up in front of us. Vines and weeds that have taken over add pops of green throughout, but that somehow only accentuates the gnarled cornstalks, making the entire thing look more dead and desolate.

A gap in the stalks marks the entrance to the maze. Over it, a wooden sign with faded paint offering a warning for all who enter to *Beware What Lurks Inside* hits differently now. A banquet table sits at an angle right outside the entrance. As I get closer, I see strands of thick fibers caught in the hinges of the legs. There was probably a fleece-backed tablecloth over it at one point. It isn't in the pictures, but I assume it would take away from the ominous effect they were trying to achieve with the marketing images.

“I read on the website that customers could buy an all-inclusive pass that would let them do everything except for the games, which were priced separately. They could also buy individual tickets to each attraction if they only wanted to do the corn maze or hayride. They even had bundle tickets that were those two things but nothing else. I'm guessing this table is where the staff for the attraction would sit and take tickets.”

“Where's the exit?” Xavier asks.

“I don't know. Probably around the other side. Sometimes you enter and exit through the same space, but it doesn't look like that's an option here.”

Xavier starts around the edge of the maze. I notice bits of crime scene tape tied around the frame of the sign over the entrance. The investigators might have removed most of it when they left for the final time, and what remained would have been tattered by four years of being exposed to the elements. As we make our way around the maze looking for the exit, I peer through what was once dense crop growth. The thinning of the stalks over the years makes it possible to see some of the sets and props put up throughout the maze. They've been left untouched to rot, making them even more gruesome than they were when first designed.

Some areas of the maze look trampled or torn up, and I realize the emergency responders might have gotten frustrated navigating their way to the bodies and simply made their own way through the corn. Even being told the victims were dead, there would still be some hope... at least for those good at

their jobs. For them, even when all the information they've been given says there's no hope, they still hold on to it. They have to. They have to cling to the thought that there might be something they can do to help people going through some of the worst times in their lives. Without that hope, they wouldn't be able to keep pushing through.

This time, there was nothing at the end of their rush and effort but recovery efforts.

The exit to the maze is on the side of the cornfield marked with another sign over the gap in the stalks. The side of the sign that faces out labels it as the exit, and when I step in and turn around to look at the other side, my stomach sinks a little.

Run.

“Do you want to go back to the entrance?” I ask Xavier.

“No,” he says. “This is fine.”

I'm surprised by the answer. Usually it would bother him to an insurmountable degree to enter something through the exit. It just doesn't sit right with him, and he can't get his mind to do it without, as he puts it, making his own crawl. But I'm not going to argue. Being here is clearly affecting him, and he needs to be given the space to experience it.

There are no clues or hints to help us navigate the maze. I can remember the first time I was in a maze like this with Xavier. It had little signs painted with questions that were supposed to make it easier to decide which way to go at various junctures within the maze. The questions ended up confusing him more because of vague wording or historical inaccuracies he just couldn't bring himself to overlook, and we ended up spending hours debating which way to go.

The areas of that maze that didn't have directional signs weren't much better. They didn't leave us standing in one spot weighing the significance of an ill-placed comma or trying to decide if the person who wrote the questions intended on capitalizing certain words as a hint toward the answer or if they were just not particularly adept with style rules. Instead, it

was just a free-for-all of Xavier not knowing where he was and having no concept of how to get out. At one point I found him lying in the middle of the maze staring up at the sky; I thought he had passed out or hurt himself until I realized it was his personal technique for trying to orient and decipher the layout of the labyrinth.

This maze has a far heavier, more foreboding sense than that one. It isn't just the fact that it's been abandoned and left to die away into nothingness. It isn't the thought of the scare actors who would have been, as the sign at the entrance warned, lurking all around here waiting for visitors to happen by so they could jump out at them. There's something more. A crushing feeling that closes in more with every step we walk deeper into the corn.

There's a permeating reality that this ground absorbed the blood of two murder victims. That this place became the backdrop for two human beings to be used as grotesque props in some sick fantasy.

The further we go, the more of the signs of the investigation we can find. Evidence markers in the form of bright pink flags on wooden stakes driven into the ground that were simply left behind along with everything else. Tattered flecks of crime scene tape. Bits of displays that were dismantled and tossed aside as the officers looked for additional victims and for people who needed to be cleared out and interviewed.

I'm sure that during that first tense hour of locking down the entire carnival grounds and interviewing everyone, there was the sense looming over them that they might find the person responsible hiding somewhere. The prickling feeling on the backs of their necks likely told them that if they just moved the right display, kicked over the right decoration, throttled the right mannequin, they would get the perpetrator scrambling and it would all be over.

But that didn't happen. At least, as far as they knew. I know from the research I've done that Seth Hoffman was here

when they performed the sweep of the grounds. He did several interviews with officers. He even provided a quote for an article that ran in the local newspaper describing the chaos and heightened emotion of the entire atmosphere when the police started arriving. Part of it stated others around him thought it was all part of some performance or show that was going on, but he knew it wasn't. If he truly was the one who killed the three victims that night, that statement is chilling.

We come to the place where Penny's body was found first. I recognize it as we approach, but I take the crime scene photo out of the file Hannah gave me so I can check to be sure. Of course, it looks different now, but there are enough markers in the area for me to be completely confident this is the right spot.

Looking around, I can trace the different paths coming from several angles to converge on this spot. There are also still remnants of the display her corpse had been integrated into like a decoration. I can't be completely sure as to whether the scene was meant to look like farm equipment had become possessed by evil and was going around killing people on its own, or if the intent was that the bloodthirsty creatures stalking visitors to the field were using the equipment as weapons—hand tools of their sick trade.

Whatever the theme, the scene that had been set with Penny's body involved a tractor and several large tools including a multi-tined pitchfork that had been used to impale Penny and pin her into the ground. Much like the notes about the nail going through Theo's throat, blood evidence at the scene proved Penny was still alive when the fork impaled her for the first time. She was dead when it was plunged into her back to secure her to the dirt. I can only think that, at least, was a blessing.

"The other props were already here when her body was placed here," I tell Xavier. "If you look at the picture, the ground is damp under where she was lying. You can see where it's darker in the area right where she was and surrounding it. But here where they shoved away a piece of the equipment

used as a prop, the ground is dry. You can see the trails in the dirt where it was moved. I bet if we check the weather for the night before this, or even that morning, we'll see that it had rained. She was brought in and placed on top of the wet dirt after that happened, but the other props were already in place."

"Not other," Xavier says.

"What?" I ask.

"You said other props. That the other props were already in place when it rained. She was not a prop."

"You're right," I say. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have worded it that way. Penny wasn't a prop. She was a person who was horribly mistreated and disrespected. And she deserves to have her story fully told."

He crouches down and rests his hands on the ground, spreading his fingers across the dirt where her body lay. He stays there for a few moments before standing and walking away. I follow behind him, staying close enough to where he is but also not crowding him. Sometimes when Xavier is in moments like this, he needs to be left alone.

The sets and props left to sink down into the dirt have vines and plants crawling over them like the tendrils of monsters coming up from beneath to draw them down. In one display, tendrils have wrapped their way around the wrist of a mannequin trapped beneath a large rotary blade. It looks like it's reaching for me. For an instant, my instinct to help surges up inside me, and I almost move toward it before remembering it isn't real. Not this time.

It's an odd, creepy feeling as we continue through the maze, inadvertently exploring what was left behind as relics of a different time. In Harper, there is a sharp division: before the murders and after. Walking through the maze straddles the line of both. There was a moment when Hannah walked through the entrance living one life, and as she went deeper into the maze, it changed her. By the time she left, everything was different and would never be the same again.

We finally find the spot where Theo's body was found. It's been reduced to nothing more than a round clearing at the end of the paths, creating a dead end that forced visitors to the maze to backtrack and causing them to rethink all of their decisions. The frame that had held him up was dismantled and brought in for forensic examination and to be used eventually as evidence. Now it's likely tagged, wrapped in plastic, and stuffed into a dusty corner at the back of an evidence vault.

Xavier stands over the hole in the earth where the beam holding up the frame once stood. He closes his eyes and fills his lungs. For a moment it seems like he has forgotten to breathe. When he opens his eyes again, they turn to me. I see a thousand years in them.

“Are you ready to go?”

He nods.



CHAPTER TEN

I'm up early the next morning sitting in the breakfast alcove just beyond the hotel lobby going over the notes included in the file Hannah gave me. Rather than being official notes from the investigation, many of them seem like things she wrote herself. She recorded her own thoughts and memories of the investigation as it was happening, as well as insights later as the case continued to unfold.

One of the details that particularly catches my attention is the team of original investigation assigned after the first two deaths. I decide to reach out to the lead detective who handled the case and see if he would be willing to talk to me and if he has any further insights. While there hasn't been any progress or activity on the investigation recently, it is still technically an open case. That means he is still in charge of it and may be able to tell me about developments that haven't made it to the public.

As frustrating as it can be for the family members, investigators often make it a point not to disclose everything that happens in a case in real time. They know that the loved ones of the victims want to know what happened and are eager to see movement toward resolution, but that can mean jumping to conclusions and acting rashly. To prevent cases from being

compromised and avoid unnecessary danger, investigators will keep details to themselves. That means Hannah might feel like nothing is happening in her brother's case when that actually isn't true.

Obviously, I can't guarantee he would talk to me either. He doesn't have any legal obligation to. I can only hope he will extend the professional courtesy to clue me in on what may help me with this investigation. Considering Hannah's defensiveness and her quick aggression toward the concept of anyone looking into the case at all, while also being furious and hurt over the lack of attention given to it, the detective might be far more willing to discuss the situation with someone outside of it all. I am working on behalf of the Nakamura family, but I'm not one of them. I'm not right in the emotional middle of it, and that might make it far easier to handle a conversation.

The phone number for Detective Roman Soto is in her notes, so I skip the thought of a courtesy email and decide to directly call him.

"Hello?" he answers after a couple of rings.

"Is this Detective Soto?" I ask.

"This is Roman Soto," he says.

The distinction sounds particularly intentional.

"Hi. My name is Dean Steele. I've been hired by Naomi and Rin Nakamura to look into the murder of—"

"Theo," he says. His voice sounds heavy as the name comes out more as an exhale than a word. "Their son. Theodore Nakamura."

"Yes," I say. "Their daughter Hannah shared with me that you are the lead investigator and that she has had extensive interaction with you throughout the case. I was hoping I might be able to talk to you about it."

"I was the lead investigator," he says. "I retired."

That explains him making the distinction, though I know of plenty of retired detectives who still use the title even after retirement. It's something they worked hard to earn, and they feel they don't lose that just because they are no longer working actively.

"Oh," I say. "I didn't realize that."

"You say you're a private investigator?" he asks.

"Yes."

"Dean..."

"Steele."

He makes a sound like a gravelly groan, something that reminds me of a massive ancient tree coming awake in a video game I used to play.

"I'll tell you, Mr. Steele. The Hallows Eve Killer is the case that ended my career. If you are very sure you want to take it up, I will help you. But understand what you are getting into. These weren't ordinary deaths. You're facing a frightened, angry town full of shadows. They can make it impossible to know where the truth lies," he says.

"I've faced my fair share of shadows," I tell him. "I want this case."

"Then I'll talk to you. Have you had breakfast?"

I look down at the plate of partially-eaten eggs and fruit in front of me. "No."

"There's a pancake house on Carter's Hill. I'll meet you there in half an hour," he says.

"I'll see you then."

Xavier is face-down on his bed finally asleep after a night of scribbling furiously in a notebook, so I don't disturb him. I don't know what he has in the notebooks he usually has close at hand, but I'm sure the thoughts behind most if not all of the gadgets and interesting features in the house are found somewhere in those pages or the pages of their predecessors.

For several months he and Emma's father, my Uncle Ian, spent a good amount of time during every occasion we were all together with their heads tucked close together, filling pages of a similar notebook.

I'll admit there was concern for a brief while about what they were conjuring up together. Ian Griffin may be a legend among members of the CIA and FBI, but that doesn't mean he has the cleanest and most pure reputation. He's no stranger to doing what needs to be done in a situation and has been known to spend stints of time—the number and length of them not fully known to us—in various prisons around the world. And Xavier is, well, Xavier. They could have come up with literally anything.

We later found out they were meticulously tracking the events and idiosyncrasies of a vintage supermarket game show so they could uncover the secret list of rules they were positive were in place and recreate it for home application. I'm not sure why they were so engrossed in it, but it seemed very meaningful to them at the time.

I write Xavier a note to let him know where I'm going to be and leave for the restaurant. Roman Soto is already inside when I get there, sitting at one of the booths lining the wall and sipping coffee from a white mug that has served many decades of black coffee. Harper isn't a very big place, so I tried my luck and mentioned his name when I went inside. The woman at the front podium immediately swept up a menu and led me over to him.

"Detective Soto, you have yourself a visitor," she says, laying the menu down on the table. I notice him wince when she says it. "Can I get you some coffee, honey?"

"That would be great," I say.

She walks away, and I slide into the booth across from him. I extend my hand across the table.

"Dean Steele."

“Roman Soto. Good to meet you,” he responds, giving me his hand.

“You too. Thank you for coming to talk to me,” I say.

“If you want to try to take on this case, then I hope I can be of some help to you. But honestly, I don’t know if I can. What do you want to know?” he asks.

“Anything you can tell me. Just start from the beginning.”

“I thought you said you had already read up about the case—that Hannah had made some notes,” he says.

“I did, but I’d rather hear it in your own words.”

The waitress comes back with my coffee and looks back and forth between us.

“Why don’t we go ahead and order before we get into all this,” Soto says.

“Sounds good to me.”

He orders a breakfast of pancakes, eggs, and bacon, and I just tell the waitress to give me the same thing. She walks away, and he takes a swig of coffee, drawing it between his teeth as he sets his mug back down on the table.

“I had never seen anything like this in my career,” he starts. “I’d seen murders. I’d even dealt with a serial killer where I was living before. But it wasn’t like this. That one was easy, if that’s how you can explain a serial killer. Shootings over the course of several months. Easy to trace once we got one piece of video evidence. The guy got into a standoff with us. Suicide by cop. There was no complicated investigation. No court case. It went from one step to the other. I had cases with one body that were much more difficult. And honestly, I was cocky walking into this.

“It was horrible, of course. I hated to hear that there was a dead kid. But I figured if his body was found in the corn maze, there was no way it was going to be hard to find out who did it. That place brought in hundreds of people every night—sometimes thousands if it was a weekend. How would it be

possible for a kid to get killed without anyone seeing it happen or knowing who did it? I figured it was a brawl that got too rough or a drug deal that went bad.”

“Drug deal?” I ask.

He sighs after a sip of his coffee. “There was a rash of drug activity that happened right in that area for a few months. We’d gotten a bunch of reports people were coming out to the grounds to do their deals because it was dark, loud, and busy. Perfect place to hide a crime. You see, when we first got the call in, nobody said there was somebody strung up like a scarecrow in the corn maze. They just said there was a body at the carnival grounds.

“It wasn’t until we were on our way to respond that we got an update that it was a teenager, and he was in the maze. And I’m not proud of it, but I’ll admit that when I heard Theo Nakamura’s name, it didn’t make me change my mind very much about thinking it may have had to do with drugs or gang activity. I’m sure you’ve heard that we had plenty of interactions with him. And it wasn’t because he was doing such a good job in Boy Scouts.”

The waitress brings our food and tops off our coffees. The former detective slathers his stack of pancakes in a deluge of warm syrup and promptly swirls a piece of crispy bacon through the puddle that forms on the plate.

“I did hear that,” I say. “Hannah believes that’s why his murder wasn’t thoroughly investigated. She thinks that everyone involved in the investigation essentially gave up the second they heard it was him because it was nothing more than a troubled kid.”

Roman pulls himself up straighter. It looks like my words have genuinely stung him, which wasn’t my intention. I just want him to understand where I’m coming from as I venture into this case.

“She told me that too,” he says. “It’s not true. I know I had that thought. And I told you, I’m not proud of myself for it. I

probably should have taken the entire thing more seriously when we first walked into it. Rather than thinking about Theo, I was thinking about everybody else who was at that attraction that night. It was just a couple of days before Halloween, so it was really busy. I knew that there were probably kids there who were up to mischief, but there were also going to be plenty of normal families.

“Without knowing how the deceased was killed or who did it, I had to operate under the assumption there was an ongoing threat. I had to assume that somebody was running around with a gun or waving a knife around. So I deployed as many men as I could to make sure the entire area was closed off, cleared out, and checked over. We looked through every building, under every structure, behind every tree.

“And, yes, that took precedence over what I should have been doing immediately, which was responding to Theo. I hate that. I hate that I didn’t take every step as quickly as I should have or as open-mindedly as I should have. I should not have had any sort of preconceived notion, regardless of who the victim was. And I did. And maybe that did have something to do with the case still going on. I could have compromised it in that moment. But I did what I felt like I had to do.”

He’s getting upset and worked up, but I can’t stop the conversation now. I can’t pull back or try to gently calm him down. I need him to tell me everything he remembers from that night and the rest of the investigation. Although he admitted to having an idea of what might have happened from the very beginning because he heard Theo’s name, that doesn’t mean he threw the entire investigation away. He made a decision, and now that’s what we have to build on, even now.

“Look, I know in all honesty, I probably would have done something very similar if it had been me who had to make those snap decisions. I would have secured the perimeter. I would have made sure I had eyes on every person who was on those carnival grounds. I would have made sure any threat that could have existed was detected and managed. My background is military. I react before I think a lot of the time. Saving lives

comes first. I understand that. I also know what it's like to hate a decision that I made. To wonder if I should have done something differently.

“But that's not the issue right now,” I tell him. “Right now, I'm trying to figure out how Theo ended up in that corn maze with Penny, and how Samuel Freedman figures into it, and what happened after to result in four more bodies, one of them being the man who supposedly killed the first three victims. I'm not here to judge anything you did. I'm here to pick up where you started and keep going.”

“I told you this is the case that ended my career,” he says.

“Yes.”

“I meant that. I did everything I could. I gave everything I could to this case. When I realized it was something far more than just a random killing, I poured myself into it. The Nakamuras might not believe that, but I did. What they don't understand is none of it made sense. There was all the evidence and none of it at the same time. I believed to the depths of my soul that I knew who this killer was, but there was nothing I could do about it. I had to live in the same town as him. I would walk down the street and see him.”

He stares me dead in the eye. “Do you have any idea what that's like? To have an entire town depending on you to make them feel safe? To have families looking at you, waiting for you to hold somebody responsible for slaughtering their child? To have the town seething, knowing the name of the person they believe did it, and have to look that person in the face every single day and not do anything about it?”

“It was torture. It only got worse when the town rose up and forced Seth Hoffman out. It felt like they were doing my job for me because I was too incompetent to do it myself. So, I kept going. I kept trying everything I could think of to find a way to prove Seth Hoffman had killed those four people. I still couldn't figure it out. And then he was murdered. It felt like everything I'd been working so hard for was just ripped apart.

I really believed that man was a killer, and then suddenly, it all turned to turmoil.

“I couldn’t take it anymore. I wasn’t able to stop the killings. I couldn’t bring any kind of relief to the families. It felt like I wasn’t good enough at my job and that I had chosen the wrong path. That I wasn’t fit for the position anymore. I didn’t want to be responsible for any more deaths, so I handed over the case and took early retirement.”

“You just stopped?” I ask. “After all of that?”

“I didn’t have a choice. It was either walk away, or I was going to end up dead too. I needed to feel like this was in someone else’s hands—that new eyes were looking at it—and maybe they would see something I wasn’t able to see. It wasn’t easy. I loved being a cop. I always wanted to be a detective. From the time I was just a little boy. I wanted to investigate murders.”

Roman lets out a mirthless chuckle. “That’s not really the kind of thing teachers love to hear when you’re in elementary school. They think it’s just fine when someone says they want to be a police officer because that means traffic stops and arresting people. It’s not as adorable when a child says they want to investigate killers. But it was all I wanted. And I thought I was good at it. I’d stopped people. I had a really high closure rate. It was enough to make me feel like this was definitely the path I was supposed to follow in life. It was so painful to think about not having it anymore. I went over the decision so many times in my head. I couldn’t even imagine what my life would look like if I wasn’t getting up every morning, putting my suit on, and going to investigate crimes. It was like I was cutting out a piece of myself and having to learn to live without it.

“But I had to come to terms with the reality that this wasn’t going to be another success for me. I wasn’t going to be able to carry this one all the way. I had to walk away and give it a chance to be solved. And give myself a chance to survive. I told myself I was going to enjoy the time off. That I

had worked hard my entire life and had earned sitting back and relaxing. I was going to do a lot of fishing and maybe some traveling. It didn't work out for me.

"I stayed completely retired for a while, but it didn't take long for me to realize it didn't suit me. So, now I'm a greeter at the big box department store down the road. It gives me somewhere to go and something to do on a regular basis. I never got married or had any kids, so this is my life. And in a way, it makes me feel like I am still serving the community and I can keep my eye on some of the people who were always thorns in my side way back in the day."

"That sounds a lot more familiar than I can tell you," I say.

I know exactly what he's feeling. He's trying to keep his mind active and busy so he doesn't have to think too much about what happened. Even with the years passing, Roman will still be thinking about this case. It's the one that got him. I know how that feels. I often find myself doing anything I can to distract myself when my thoughts start to wander, and I feel myself getting dragged down into them.

"I take it none of the Nakamura family told you that I retired, and another investigator was handling the case," he says.

"No," I tell him. "They didn't mention any investigators by name. They just said they felt like nothing had been done and there wasn't enough progress being made on Theo's case. Hannah gave me some notes she'd made, and that's how I found your contact information. It's why I want to hear everything from you. Without telling you anything I know or any ideas I might have, I want you to lay it out for me. Give me your perspective on it. I don't know exactly what's going on with the new investigator, but what I can tell you is I'm here to figure this out. And I'm going to."

"Wish I could say I believe that, kid. But it's been so long. I know it's only been four years, and that's barely anything in a serial murder case, but it has felt like an eternity. I don't

want to be too hopeful and watch you hit the same snags I did. I don't want this to tear you apart too," Roman says.

"I appreciate that, but you don't need to worry about me. I don't come apart easily. And with your help, this won't be an exception. I am here to figure this out," I reiterate. "I will find the killer, and I will make sure they are stopped. Just tell me everything."

Over breakfast, several cups of coffee, and a follow-up of slices of pumpkin pie gifted to us by the waitress, Roman details the case and his involvement in it. He lays bare his own feelings about the deaths of the first three victims and the shift he felt after the screenplay surfaced and another victim still died.

"That screenplay is a major piece in this," I say. "Are there any copies of it that were kept in evidence that I might be able to get my hands on?"

"If you want to read it, I know I have a copy of it somewhere. I'll find it and get it to you. I'll warn you: it's messed up. The idea, the writing, all of it. Then when you realize you're essentially reading a fantasy describing actual serial murders, it will give you the fucking shivers."

I can't help but smile a little. "I definitely want to read it."



CHAPTER ELEVEN

Wanting to understand him better, I take some time when I get back to the hotel to search more about Theo Nakamura. Not just his death, but anything I can find about his life. Unfortunately, I encounter much of the same of what I already have. Arrest reports. Social media posts slinging accusations and making threats both to Theo and about him. Newspaper articles detailing the new increase in crime occurring throughout the town and how disruptive it was to everyone's lives, specifically calling him out along with some of the others I've come to recognize as members of his group.

I'm not going to call them a gang. That's a word I don't throw around lightly. I've spent too much time embroiled in the horror and intense politics of real gangs to know that just a group of kids getting together to rob a couple of places and be a general menace doesn't make them a gang. It's not a title of honor. It's also not an insult to be hurled at someone to belittle them.

I've seen no evidence that shows Theo was actually a member of a gang or that there was any kind of larger schemes in mind beyond the short-term adrenaline rush or monetary gain of each crime they committed. His name is linked to some drug dealers and possible possession, but he had never

been arrested or served time for drug possession or trafficking. There was no sex trade happening. It struck me very much as being the same story that plays out against the backdrop of a large percentage of small towns across the country. Teenagers get bored, they want more than what they feel is offered to them in their hometown, so they get into trouble. For some of them, it's a matter of being the children of working parents who don't spend much time at home, or parents who suffer their own substance abuse problems, leaving their children to feel alone and without a family.

They find that family in each other.

I know Theo didn't want for attention and love from his parents. He wasn't one of the children who ended up pushed out onto the streets, desperately looking for any kind of attachment and support. Something else fed into his proclivity for the kind of lifestyle he chose. Not that it was anyone's fault but his own. He was old enough to make his own decisions and be responsible for every single one of them. And there were things he had done that were truly reprehensible.

I still feel a slight twinge for him. Reading about him hits close to home. But it also brings my mind back to that small interrogation room and the pain-filled eyes of Edgar Wilson staring back at me. He was sitting in jail for allegedly taking part in the string of burglaries before Brielle's death, but there seemed to be something far more going on. There was something about it—something that hadn't left the back of my mind—since I walked out of that police station.

There's something I don't know. Not just about Brielle, but about Wilson and the others. I know they've had some trouble, but I'm not buying them being responsible for everything they've been accused of. Especially the burglaries. I want to look into the crimes and the accused more so I can get the information I need to decipher not only the situation itself, but what it might have to do with Brielle's death.

But above all are still my questions about Owen. My search for him hasn't slowed with taking on this case. I am

still looking for any lead I can possibly find, any tidbit of information that could send me in the right direction. I won't stop until I find him and can get the answers I've been looking for. I don't understand why he left and why the only contact he's had with any of us is that single phone call to tell me to stop looking for him. I would think even if he didn't want to communicate with his father, at least he would want to talk to his little sister to reassure her and make sure she wasn't worried about him.

I can't wrap my head around his motivation. What would be the point in running away from his life, especially right after his mother was killed?

Unless he left before she died and has a distinct reason for not returning.



When Xavier is out of bed, has eaten the food I brought back from the restaurant for him, and is past that part of the day when he isn't fully functional as a human being, I grab the notepad where I've jotted down some new questions, tuck it into the file folder where I've put some of the crime scene photos, and we head back to the carnival grounds.

We park in the same place we did before, and the walk into the center of the grounds doesn't feel as long this time. Even though I feel oriented in the space, I have a prickling sense of someone watching us as we make our way down the access road.

Out of the corner of my eye, I think I see a flicker of movement among the trees. Something dark that doesn't have a clear shape but seems to be moving very deliberately. I remember Roman's words.

This is a town of shadows.

Not mentioning the shape to Xavier, I head on into the gravel parking area and then into the field. There's more sunlight this time than on our last visit, but the feeling is still heavy and foreboding. I'd intended on going right back to the

corn maze, but on the way here I changed my mind. We didn't explore the rest of the grounds the last time we were here, and I feel like seeing all of it will give me a better grasp on how the events unfolded.

There's still the massive overhanging question of how Seth Hoffman, or whoever actually killed Theo and Penny that night, managed to transport their bodies onto the grounds and stage them within the corn maze without being detected. The medical examiner's reports show both victims were still alive when they suffered the most grotesque of their injuries. For Theo, the nail through his throat. For Penny, the first impalement from the pitchfork. But they were dead when put on display. Most of Theo's wounds were made postmortem. Which means he was dead for at least part of being hung up on the frame. And while Penny was stabbed again by the pitchfork in order to pin her to the ground, those injuries don't show any signs of healing or bleeding. They happened after her heart already stopped beating.

Somehow the massive wooden frame, with Theo already on it, was carried into the cornfield and hammered into the ground. To say that was a difficult undertaking would be a tremendous understatement. Transporting and staging Penny's body would be much easier. She was far smaller, and it was unlikely the farming implement was already in her when she was placed into the field. She was probably carried in, put in place among the other set pieces and props, and then the pitchfork was run through her back into the ground.

The feeling of eyes on me rushes by the back of my neck again as we get closer to the haunted houses. I catch another flash of movement ahead. I stop and reach out to take hold of Xavier's arm.

"Did you see that?" I ask.

"See what?" he asks.

I pause, waiting for it to happen again, but everything remains still. I shake my head.

“Nothing. I thought I saw something moving up there between the game buildings,” I say.

“Was it an animal?” Xavier asks.

“Maybe,” I say.

The feeling stays with me as we walk onto the replica neighborhood street. The houses aren't full-size, but their detail is so well done that stepping onto the street feels like crossing a barrier into something real. The smaller size of the houses doesn't register. They feel like they are looming over us. The attention put into these was exceptional. It's easy to see why people liked to come here year after year.

Xavier and I walk up a set of steps onto a front porch designed to be deep and wide without looking like it from the front. It would allow for a group of people to stand outside the door waiting to get in while still preserving the intended appearance of the house. I'm expecting to see a padlock on the door, thinking the investigators would have sealed them off or the owners of the property would have seen to it that they were secured before leaving. But there's nothing. I turn the handle, and the door opens.

Inside the building is musty and several degrees warmer than outside thanks to the heavy drapery and considerable amount of furniture and other props in each space. I know there's supposed to be a specific theme to each of the haunted houses. I read about them on the attraction website, but I can't remember at this second what it's supposed to be.

The dark wine purple and black color scheme of the front foyer feeds directly into a living room with an oversized wingback chair prominently placed in the middle. In front of it is a round marble table with an intricate metal stand holding up a glass orb. I can imagine there's some kind of lighting effect used in this space to create the atmosphere of a séance and wonder if the theme of this house is fortune telling.

I find it harder to breathe as Xavier and I walk through each of the rooms. The damp smell feels heavy in my lungs.

There's very little light inside, so I use the flashlight on my phone to guide us through the winding progression of rooms that lead to a set of steps leading to an upper floor.

"Do we go up?" I ask.

"There's a second floor," Xavier says. "So we go to the second floor."

"You know that's the kind of logic that will get you picked off fast in a horror movie," I say as he steps onto the bottom stair.

Xavier looks over his shoulder at me. "It does not seem that we are currently being pursued by an incredibly slow-moving man in a mask, so I'm okay with my decision."

We climb the rest of the steps and find the upper floor is a long hallway with a series of doors on either side. Xavier and I start turning the knobs, finding all of them locked. As we each get to the opposite end of the hall, I think I hear the door downstairs open. A sense of danger comes over me.

It may just be the eerie, uncomfortable feeling that comes from being in a place that was so suddenly abandoned, especially one that is designed to look terrifying, but the feeling is strong. I listen and hear footsteps moving gradually down the front hallway. Xavier hadn't reacted to the sound of the door, but he pauses now, listening for a second before looking at me.

I nod before he even asks if I hear it too. I hold up a hand to tell him not to move from where he is and start toward the top of the steps. A figure comes around the corner toward the stairs, and I turn my flashlight directly toward its face. Yelling and holding up his arms to cover his face, the figure stumbles back a step, and I charge down the stairs toward it. Before I get to the bottom of the steps, I can see the figure is wearing a police uniform.

He also has his gun pointed directly at my chest.

"Stop right there!" comes his voice. I turn the beam of the flashlight down to the floor and remain still.

“We’re unarmed,” I announce. It doesn’t seem to ease the tension any.

“Who the hell are you, and what are you doing here?” the man demands.

He looks young, but there’s no shaking in his voice or trembling in the hand holding the service pistol on me.

“My name is Dean Steele. I am a private investigator. I was hired to look into the murders that happened here and the ones that followed,” I say.

“Who gave you permission to be here?”

“I thought this place was abandoned,” I say.

I know that doesn’t actually give blanket permission to go there. Even an abandoned location like this generally has an owner, and that owner has the right to restrict any and all access to the property regardless of how or if they are using it. But I’m willing to stand on that justification right now.

“I know you’ve been here before,” the officer says. “You should know you are trespassing on private property.”

“Yes,” I say. “But...”

“I seriously don’t care about anything that’s about to come out of your mouth,” he says. “You’re lucky as all get out that I didn’t just unload this gun right in your ass the second I saw you step foot on the grounds.”

“That’s a bit uncalled for,” Xavier says.

“And who’s that? Your loyal sidekick?” the officer snaps. “Just another criminal is all I see. I should still shoot you—teach you to traipse around places you don’t belong.”

I hold up a hand toward him, no longer caring about propriety.

“Don’t talk to him like that. And don’t you dare threaten me or anyone else. You’re not a thug or a little kid playing cops and robbers. You’re a public servant sworn to fucking serve and protect, so fucking act like it,” I say.

“Who do you think you are talking to me like that?” he asks. “I might know you’ve been prowling around here, but I don’t recognize you and know you aren’t from around here. Which means you’re in my territory, so you better watch your mouth while you’re walking around in my county.”

“I’ll talk to you however I damn well please. It might be dark in here, but I can still see your uniform and know you for damn sure aren’t in charge of anything,” I fire back. “You’re a basic beat cop who’s a whole lot more likely to give me a traffic ticket for going through a red light than you are to take anybody in for something that actually matters. And even if you were chief, I wouldn’t tolerate you talking to either of us like that or disrespecting your office the way you did.”

“You seem to have a real high opinion of yourself,” he says, his accent starting to thicken.

I know that to mean only a few things, and considering the context, I’m going to guess it means the officer is getting seriously angry. I don’t have the bandwidth right now to care.

The confrontation goes downhill from there, and before I know it, Xavier and I find ourselves in the back of the officer’s squad car heading for the station. I’m fuming when I’m tossed into a tiny room and left to stew. I don’t become any more pleasant when a detective comes in demanding I explain myself to him. As the friction between us reaches the point of explosion, I slam my hands onto the table and glare at him.

“You might be happy to know that your officer was not only proclaiming himself to be the ultimate power in charge of this entire area, but he was doing so while threatening two citizens with his service weapon. I suggest you make sure any others are far better trained than that one, because one of these days he’s going to cross somebody with far less patience and self-control than I have, and it’s going to end very poorly for him,” I say.

“Are you threatening a law enforcement officer?” he asks through gritted teeth.

“I’m giving fair warning that others aren’t as tolerant as I am,” I say. “And if you still feel like I am threatening the officer who didn’t announce or identify himself, brandished his weapon immediately, then stated he should still shoot us even after it was clearly demonstrated that neither of us had a weapon or were advancing him in any threatening manner, you are welcome to call my cousin to talk it over. Her number is in my phone. She’s under Emma. It’s her personal number, but if you’d prefer, you can call her office. I’m sure you’re familiar with the FBI headquarters.”

His jaw tightens hard. His face had already started to go pale when I first mentioned the officer’s slaphappy way with his gun, but now it’s flushed red. He gets up and storms out of the room. A few moments later, the officer who confronted me at the haunted house comes in.

“Are you going to accuse me of trespassing here too?” I ask. “I notice you don’t have your gun. Would you like me to wait here while you run and get it?”

“Look,” he says. “I feel like we got off on the wrong foot.”

“No shit.”

He pauses, centering himself. “Let me introduce myself. I’m Beau Ryan.”

“I already introduced myself, but what the hell. Dean Steele. Private investigator.”

He looks even younger here at the station. I have a feeling he has only been on the job for a couple of years.

“Can we sit down for a minute?” he asks.

I begrudgingly sit, and he takes the chair across from me.

“I apologize for the way I spoke to you and your friend in the haunted house. I was extremely unprofessional, and I should have done better. I will admit I often watch over the carnival grounds and what’s left of the haunted attraction. I feel extremely protective of it and have a strong sense of attachment to it. I went into policing because of it,” he says.

The admission fascinates me. I have now met one officer who ended his career and another who began his because of the same case.



CHAPTER TWELVE

They keep us at the station for a little longer, vacillating between trying to get me to forget about the run-in with the baby cop who shouldn't be trusted with any kind of projectile and attempting to intimidate me into staying away from the carnival grounds and the case itself.

I don't intend on following either instruction. But I don't want to risk actually getting arrested on a trespassing charge, so as soon as Xavier and I are deposited back at our car by another officer who seems much more put together than the first, I look up the parent company of the haunted attraction.

Though it isn't to the scale or technological advancement of the big professional haunted houses, the scope of the attraction and the exceptional attention to detail and quality of what I saw tells me this isn't just a mom-and-pop sort of operation. A little bit of research shows I'm correct in my assessment. The carnival grounds were once privately owned by a family in the area and leased out to the county to use for small fairs and festivals throughout the year, but when much larger and better-appointed fairgrounds opened on the other side of the county, the family had to find something else to do with the tract of land.

Enter Ghoulish Delights.

A small company in comparison to some of the giants in macabre entertainment that has grown exponentially in recent years, Ghoulish Delights is still making a major name for itself in the industry, impressing hardcore fans and other professionals alike with their scare experiences. They lean in to the traditional, not backing away from using classic designs, basic sets, practical effects, and simple atmospheric elements to produce frightening attractions.

Their philosophy, according to their overarching website that I found, is that people these days aren't desensitized to fright in general. Instead, they've gotten so accustomed to the extreme versions of haunted attractions, scare actors that can touch you, computerized effects, animatronics, and other overly contemporary elements, that these things no longer affect them. So many people who count themselves among those who love horror, the macabre, or even just Halloween no longer care when there's an over-the-top gory scene in a haunted house or lighting effects and machines that chase them in mazes. These things just don't matter to them.

But it isn't the fright. It's the style. According to Ghoulish Delights, all these people need is a return to the roots of fear. Pure haunts. Attractions that remind people why they fell in love with Halloween and the pursuit of fear for entertainment in the first place. They design their attractions and experiences with the thought of getting into their customers' souls. A classic jump scare shouldn't be a primary element of a haunt. It should be a pop, a punctuation. Even a release.

More important is the intensity of the buildup. The most terrifying place, the place where a person is least safe, is within their own mind. The designers seek to put and keep them there.

The Harper attraction was one of their first endeavors. It is certainly not as polished as newer versions, which is probably why they were so quick to walk away from the entire thing when faced with a messy situation. Even years later, they're still the owners of the property and haven't transferred their ownership or any management to any entity. Since Beau Ryan

admitted he wasn't actually on assignment, but rather patrolled the carnival grounds on his own during his time off, I have no problem calling to explain my situation and to ask for permission to access the grounds.

It feels a little like getting a note from Mom to be late for class, but it gives me a sense of security and takes an added dose of power away from the officers who seem hell-bent on interfering with my case.

Once I've gotten verbal permission and have requested an email confirming the permission be sent to me, I end the call and immediately notice I have a message from Roman Soto. It says he found the copy of the screenplay he'd kept from his investigation, and I can come by to pick it up whenever I want to.

Soto lives in a small apartment complex designed to look like an old village. The guard at a gatehouse at the front entrance looks out at me with what is probably just a perpetual state of suspicion when my car slides up next to his station.

"What's your business here?" he asks.

I can't tell if he is being serious with the delivery of the question or if he does have an undercurrent of humor and just likes to pretend he's standing at a drawbridge protecting the townsfolk from impending enemies.

"I'm here to see Roman Soto," I say. "He's expecting me."

He hands me a bright green square of cardstock with a number on it and gestures through the gate and down the road.

"Put this in your windshield. Left at the end of the road. Follow the signs," he says.

He steps back and hits a button to open the gate. I realize the card has the number of Soto's building on it so security could easily find out why a vehicle without a resident sticker is there and what building they're visiting.

Each building has four units across two floors. Soto's is the back half of the top floor, overlooking the woods beyond.

He welcomes us inside and offers us something to drink. It's warm inside the apartment, taking the chill of the unexpectedly cold fall day from my skin. I accept a drink and sit when he gestures at the furniture in the living room. A stack of paper held together with a heavy black clip sits on a coffee table in front of a couch.

"Is this it?" I ask.

"Yeah," he says. "Again, though, go into that thing with caution."

"I've seen a lot in my day," I tell him. "I can handle a screenplay."

Soto holds up his hands like he's surrendering.

"No one listens to me. I tried to warn Hannah that she really shouldn't be reading it. Of all people, she didn't need to have any of that in her head."

I look up at him sharply. "Hannah? Hannah Nakamura?"

"Yeah," he says, lowering himself down into a large recliner with his own drink. "She knew I had a copy of it and asked to borrow it. I didn't think it was a good idea, but she was really insistent. And I figured, she's an adult. It's not up to me to tell her what to do or what's good for her."

The fact that Hannah didn't mention borrowing the screenplay from Soto and reading it during the investigation is still bothering me when we get back into the car, so before starting the engine, I call her.

"Hey," I say when she answers. "I need to ask you about something."

"Go ahead," she says.

"I got in touch with Roman Soto. You didn't tell me he retired and that someone else had taken over the investigation," I say.

"I've barely even spoken with the person who replaced him. Roman Soto ran away from the case when it got too

difficult and he wasn't getting the results he wanted," she says hotly. "He just abandoned my brother and didn't care that he was leaving everything unanswered. I don't have a lot of good things to say about him."

"Yet you spent a lot of time talking to him during the investigation, and you thought enough of him to ask to borrow his copy of Seth Hoffman's screenplay so you could read it. And you didn't mention to me that you've read it," I say.

Hannah is silent for a moment. "I interacted with him a good amount when he was still running the case, yes. He was the one who was in charge of finding out what happened to my brother. And, yeah, I read the screenplay. I figured you would know that since we talked about it, and I described what was in it to you."

"You told me that it was creepy and that it had descriptions of your brother's murder. That's common knowledge anyone who has even casually followed this case would know," I say.

"Well, why does it matter if I've read it or not?" she asks.

"Because if I'm going to investigate this case, I need to know that I'm getting the full story from everybody. I need to be able to trust you and believe that you're being honest with me."

"I am being honest with you," she insists. "I read the screenplay. I didn't realize it was that big of a deal."

"From now on, I need you to be upfront with me. Remember, I'm coming into this with a four-year disadvantage. I wasn't around when it was happening in real time, and I don't know all the nuances and details that came up during the initial investigation. I need to be able to catch up and investigate at the same time. That's going to require some cooperation."

"All right."

"He was her twin brother," Xavier says when I hang up and let out a heavy breath.

I grip the steering wheel. “I know. Which means they had a special bond.”

“Actually, it just means that two eggs happened to be fertilized at the same time, resulting in two completely separate humans forming at the same time. It was essentially just a dual pregnancy of two singleton children. As fraternal twins, they are biologically no more related or linked than any sibling pairs, and though developing within the same uterus at the same time and being raised alongside each other would generate a certain degree of closeness that perhaps does supersede that of other siblings, that is far more likely a function of the age and physical proximity than anything related to their twin birth,” he says. “I just felt the modifier exists, so it should be used.”

“Just a statement to reiterate the familial structure?” I ask.

“No. Though this could get complicated, so it wouldn’t hurt to make a brain web. It was a reminder of their relationship. Theo was Hannah’s twin brother. She would want to know everything she could about the investigation. The existence of the screenplay and its contents were a central element of the case, and it was believed it pointed to the killer. Even if it was ill-advised, it would make sense that she would want that information,” he says. “Like people wanting to see their loved ones’ dead bodies.”

“I guess. I still find it disturbing.”

I start the car and pull out of the parking spot.

“Where to now?” Xavier asks.

“Back to the hotel. I have some reading to do.”



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The disturbed feeling doesn't dissipate as I read the script. It is just as horrifying as Roman made it out to be, telling an unflinching, detailed account of Theo Nakamura and Penny Collins's murders. Far beyond just dialogue, the screenplay includes extensive stage directions and setting details, including a vivid description of the corn maze itself. Having walked through the attraction, I can follow the description in my mind and see that it is the exact path taken to both of the bodies.

As I get farther into the story, I find mention of the other activities at the attraction, including the haunted houses and the hayride. Seth Hoffman took great delight in describing the gruesome theming and decorations of these attractions. He referred to the main character as a lone wolf creative who believed himself beyond the understanding and awareness of others, who sought ways to express himself and give voice to what he wanted to say through alternative art. I can only assume he considered vicious murder his medium.

But bizarre characters with disturbing motivations aren't new for entertainment. There are plenty of books, TV shows, and movies that build entire worlds around characters with those kinds of motivations. Slasher films and gory horror

books can be fun. That part doesn't bother me. What makes a shiver run down the back of my neck is the decadent way the screenplay itself delves into intricate explanations of the entire haunted attraction—the activities, the details, the people—and describes it as an opportunity just waiting for him to take it.

It sounds like a threat. Seth Hoffman was planning on making the haunted attraction his own personal hunting ground, returning to it night after night, year after year, to strike down others who crossed his path. I understand better now why the whole place was just abandoned rather than being revived in following years. There have been many locations that were the site of brutal murders and accidental deaths that were closed down for a short amount of time only to be reopened later with little to no mention of what happened.

It could have been possible for that to happen at the carnival grounds. They could have kept it closed for the year, possibly the next, then opened again with modifications. They likely would have removed the corn maze, but they could have kept going.

Now I see that they made the right decision.

“I can definitely see why the judges for that writing competition turned this thing in,” I say. “Anybody who knew even the slightest amount about the case would be able to recognize it instantly. He barely even changed the names of the victims. And everything is just as it was. The teenage boy turned into a scarecrow and displayed in the corn maze to be discovered by his unsuspecting sister. The quiet, sweet girl stabbed multiple times with a pitchfork and left among mangled mannequins to be gawked at and laughed at by people who had no idea what they were looking at.

“It's step by step. There are a couple of the details that are off. Some things don't perfectly line up with what actually happened, but that makes sense. If he wrote this as a blueprint, his master plan for what he was going to do, it wouldn't be

possible to make everything work out exactly the way he outlined it. But it's still shockingly accurate."

"I don't think it was a plan," Xavier says. "I don't think this was written before the murders. Seth Hoffman wrote this by memory, not in preparation of doing something. There are too many details that would be beyond his control that line up with what's in the reports and the crime scene pictures. The weather that night. The clothing that the victims and the people who found them were wearing. The time that the police showed up and the questions that were asked. All of those are facts he would have little to no ability to determine ahead of time.

"The details that are wrong were purposely recorded incorrectly. These are things someone with this obvious level of attention to detail and knowledge of murder and death would not get wrong. The description of the blood patterning and the wounds suggests cinematic effect as opposed to actual biological response to murder. Yet other elements of the screenplay show intricate understanding of how the body responds to different assaults and types of torture. The same person would not present those two things without it being intentional."

"You think he made the details wrong to make the movie better?" I ask.

"Partially," Xavier says. "But I think it's more likely that he thought the inconsistencies would make him look interested in the murders if anybody had noticed, but not responsible for them because the reporting was not exactly correct. I think it was a way of covering himself."

"But there are some of those details that aren't exactly right," I point out. "Like his description of the clothes that Theo was wearing. Everything he said about Penny's clothes was right, but when he described what Theo was wearing, he talked about his jacket having a patch on it. He goes to pretty precise lengths to make sure every detail of that patch is

documented. But you've seen the pictures of his body and his clothing. That jacket didn't have any such patch on it."

"That still doesn't indicate a plan though. I highly doubt the clothing he was wearing all belonged to him. Theo Nakamura doesn't exactly strike me as the type who would run around in denim overalls and flannel very often. He chose that clothing when he was making him into a scarecrow. If anything, he added the patch for artistic license. But, again, that suggests follow-up writing rather than forethought," Xavier says.

"But what was the point?" I ask. "I keep asking myself that. What was the point of the murders? And why did he write a screenplay about it? If he made those errors on purpose, that shows even further premeditation and organization. Why go through all that? He never took credit for the murders. As far as I can tell, he never even talked about them outside of turning in this script. Someone who did this for attention or to make a point. Or even, if he's framing himself as this visionary creative, to express his innermost being through murder, would obsess over the murders. They'd talk about them, post about them, collect memorabilia, and confess to someone.

"Seth Hoffman never admitted to anything, went through interviews without a glitch, was followed ruthlessly by police, and never made any kind of suspicious move. There was no visiting the carnival grounds, no disposing of any kind of evidence, no stalking the families of the victims. He never acted cagey or like it was bothering him that he was being followed and clearly investigated. That doesn't fit with this type of murderer. To be so flashy and uninhibited on one hand and so cool and restrained on the other doesn't make sense."

"There's also the issue of the gap year," Xavier points out.

"That's right. The year after this happened no one was killed. But then the next year there was another murder. I suppose it's possible that he did kill someone during that year, and they were just never discovered. The body could have gone unnoticed. But I also don't think that fits either. He put

these victims on display. Very publicly, very obviously. He wanted them to be seen. Not just to be found. There is a distinction between those. He wanted them to be observed and experienced. If he had killed someone else during that year, he would have made sure that they were found too. And if it didn't happen immediately, he would have done something to attract attention. It's the only reason he killed. Right?"

"Maybe that's not the kind of killer he was," Xavier says.

"Then what kind was he?" I ask.

Xavier shrugs. "I don't know."

I look down at the pages again. "And all of this is making the declaration that Seth Hoffman was definitely the Hallows Eve Killer. But then we have to ask: who chopped up his girlfriend and turned him into a scarecrow the next year?"



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Four years ago...

When the people who were working at the haunt that night thought back on it, they would remember they didn't even know what they were seeing.

One of the funnest elements of working at the haunted attraction throughout the Halloween season was doing things to keep it exciting and thrilling for the people who returned night after night. Rather than just leaving everything stagnant all season, the staff would change things up, add new elements, move things around. Scare actors would rotate from place to place so their performance didn't stay the same. Set pieces would move from the corn maze to the hayride or vice versa. Elements from the haunted houses would show up in one of those locations.

The point was to keep the experience from ever becoming predictable.

They wanted their guests to crave another run of terror through the maze, or to take their chances at several trips through the woods. Maybe one of the times they would be in the wagonload of guests that stopped in the depths of the trees, and everyone would have to get out and walk. They wanted

people to think about the haunted houses long after they left and wonder about the doors they didn't go through or the features they were sure would do something but didn't so they'd return to try it again.

He knew all of that.

He used it to his advantage.

The guests wouldn't start arriving for the night's festivities until the sun was going down and the flames started flickering on the top of the torches lining the walk from the parking area. But hours before then, the staff parked their cars behind the prep and storage building and started setting up for the day. It took a massive amount of work to get everything running smoothly so that by the time the first guests tentatively climbed out of their cars not knowing what to expect or enthusiastically bounded into the open space ready for another thrill, every element was up and going.

Each one of the staff members was so busy, so wrapped up in what they were doing, that they barely noticed what was happening around them. It didn't register when someone else walked by with a prop or somebody was testing out a new costume or scare tactic in the maze. Everybody did their own thing so that it could all get done on time.

That meant when they looked back on that day, none of the staff members would be able to give a clear description of the person seen transporting a new scarecrow into the staff entrance of the corn maze. A face concealed in the recesses of a hood pulled up on a black sweatshirt wasn't exactly an unusual sight. There wasn't anything strange about the way they moved or what they were doing. Nothing that would make them stand out.

Most of the staff couldn't even remember if they actually saw the person or if it was just such a generic image on those days that it was registering as a false memory. What they all knew was that none of them realized the scarecrow nailed to the weathered wooden frame being dragged into the maze on a large rolling cart was a real corpse.

Later they would wonder if they walked past him while he was loading it onto the cart. Or if they helped. In the flashing blue and red glow of the police cars late that night as he watched from the perimeter, still fully visible and yet unnoticed, he saw some of them look down at their hands like they were searching for blood. They were wondering if they'd helped him hoist the body onto the cart, but no one could remember seeing it come out of a car. They were wondering if they'd helped him carry the bloodied body of the girl and put her in place. But no one could remember seeing her before she was in the display. And even then, it never registered that she was anything more than a mannequin like the countless others scattered throughout the grounds.

It was easier than he'd anticipated it being.

There was little doubt in his mind he would be able to get his victims into place without much hassle, since he had observed and planned that part so extensively. It was the actual transformation of Theo and Penny into victims that he thought would be more challenging.

The media would later describe Theo as his first victim because he was the first one within the maze to be discovered, but it was actually Penny who took that honor. He'd been prepared to have to really work for her, but she fell into his open palms like delicate flower petals drifting through the air in spring. Pink and soft. Sweet smelling and so perfect it was almost painful. But that was what made her exactly what he needed.

All he had to do was offer her some help. She didn't look at him the way others did. She didn't roll her eyes at him or cringe when he got close. And in an instant, she was his.

The pitchfork was heavy. He'd held it and practiced maneuvering it many times before, of course. He wouldn't just go into this without any kind of preparation. He needed to be familiar with his method of choice just as he was with the old barn he chose as his workshop. It would have been more convenient if he had just been able to use his garage for both,

but there would have been too many complications. His timeline was already so tight.

The barn offered the perfect combination of privacy and thematic detail. Surrounded by the sagging wood and disintegrating piles of straw infested by rodents and insects, it felt perfect. Oddly welcoming.

The first stab was while he was looking into her face. He wanted to watch her features as they changed and the emotions and thoughts that registered over them as she realized what was happening. She didn't scream. That surprised him. And yet, there was the possibility he'd punctured her lungs to a degree that would prevent enough air from getting into them to expel into a scream. Instead, she gurgled and tried to draw in breath as her hands clasped around the handle of the fork. There was a moment when it seemed she was at once trying to hold the fork in place and yank it out.

Neither would do any good for her. She couldn't be saved.

She dropped to her knees, and he tried to pull the tines out of her. Her tissue closing in around the tines and the suction of the blood made it more difficult than he anticipated, and he had to press her thigh into the ground with one foot to give himself leverage to wrench it out. That impression of his boot on her jeans was something he hadn't anticipated. It required a shift in his plan. But that was all right. That was why he was doing this.

Penny ended up in the cornfield wearing only her matching pink panties and bra with her pink sweater pulled up over her shoulders and head, still covering her outstretched arms but exposing her back.

Theo came next. It had taken more manipulation to get the rough teen to the garage he'd prepared. But it was the mention of his sister and the pictures he had of her that finally did it. Whether he actually had those pictures or not was truly irrelevant. The threat of them was just as potent. And when Theo showed up at the door of the garage and saw the plastic sheeting hanging from the walls and covering the floor, all it

took was seeing Penny, strategically placed and concealed just enough to make her resemble Hannah, for him to come inside.

By the time the door dropped into place, there was nothing left for Theo to do. He couldn't get out. The knife in his pocket was useless once the metal bar bashed his skull just enough to render him dizzy and confused. But not enough to fully knock him out for longer than it took to dress him. That would have taken away all of his reaction.

He was glad he'd planned to tie Theo to the frame with ropes before using the nails. He'd seen it done that way when examining the actual scarecrows at various farms and wanted it to look as authentic as it could, but it proved very useful when Theo tried to get up and fight back. It required another shift. Another change in his approach.

Two strategic stab wounds slowed his resistance. The nail driven through the soft dip of his throat into the wood behind finished him. He added a few more nails for good measure and made sure his feet were securely placed on the small platform that would support his weight so that his body didn't fall off during transport.

He was tired when it was over. He knew he wouldn't be able to do anything for a few more hours, so he showered and rested, trembling slightly with the adrenaline as he slept off the effort and prepared himself to go to the carnival grounds later that afternoon.

This would be the simple part. Even with the staff milling around, rushing to get everything in place, implementing new plans and ideas, getting in costume and makeup, he didn't worry about being seen. It was exquisitely satisfying. While most killers go to great lengths to try to distance themselves from the victims and never be seen anywhere near the body, he didn't worry about that. He had been walking around the attraction since the beginning of the season, planting himself as a routine image in the minds of the people who would be there that day.

It made him invisible. There were so many people carrying props and display pieces, wearing hoodies to ward off the chill, he wasn't even noticed. He blended in so completely that the people who walked right past him, even one who gave Theo's leg an approving pat as he walked by, didn't register it.

When they were in place, the hardest part began. Waiting.

He didn't know how long it would take for someone to realize what they were seeing. He couldn't believe his incredible fortune when he saw Hannah Nakamura arrive. He never would have imagined it would be her. That was too good. Yet, there she was.

Her friends looked so happy to be there. They were excited and filled with the kind of buzzing, overabundant energy that would only last a couple more years before mellowing. Hannah didn't have that same excitement about her. Though she was trying to smile and laugh with them, there was obvious concern etched on her face. He knew why. Her brother had been missing for several days. At least, missing to her. He knew where he was. He couldn't account for Theo's whereabouts during the first few days, but he had been able to get in touch with him a couple of days before, and he knew very confidently where he was now.

And Hannah would know soon too.

Waiting for her to get to Theo was even harder than the wait for people to arrive. He lurked among the cornstalks, his costume seamlessly fitting in among all the other scare actors who took their place in the maze that night. They were expecting such a huge crowd of visitors that they bumped up the number of actors in each of the attractions. They didn't want visitors to go without the proper attention.

They didn't notice they had gotten one extra.

He was disappointed the first time she went through. He saw in her face there was something that caught her—like an invisible claw had reached out and clutched her heart. She'd approached. She looked at the frame and then the clothing.

She could see something. Or sense it. Either way, he could tell she knew something wasn't right. But it was ruined. Before she could get close enough to know for sure, one of the real actors took advantage of her pause and distraction to come after her. Her friends were there to drag her away, and he was left without the moment he wanted so much.

But she came back. He'd waited there, walking back and forth, running his hands through the stalks to make them rustle. He was almost invisible, but the people who noticed him were terrified. That amused him. He didn't have to jump out. He didn't have to swing a chainsaw or wear a gruesome mask and get so close to them that people might think he would actually wrap his hands around their necks and strangle them there. All he had to do was give the suggestion of something being right there. Just beyond their awareness. Something they couldn't see or control. And it terrified them.

Hannah would have been so perfect, but he convinced himself that he could get a good effect from any of the people walking through the maze. And he could still see Hannah's reaction too. He could find her when she heard the news. But she came back. That feeling drew her back. One of the actors tried to stop her again, but she wouldn't let them. None of the false torment meant anything to her anymore. And he got exactly what he wanted.

He left the corn when she ran for help. He needed to be out among the crowd when emergency services arrived.

He didn't know there was someone else watching.

He hadn't seen them just a couple of yards away. And no one was there to see them step through the stalks into the clearing. Steeped in screams and chaos, they looked at Theo. They ran their fingers along the patch on his jacket. They'd seen it before. As people started coming back to see what happened, they grasped the edge of the patch with their fingers and tore it off the jacket. Stuffing it into their pocket, they dipped back into the corn and disappeared.



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Now

When I first heard about the string of burglaries that happened in Brielle's neighborhood leading up to her death, it didn't occur to me to question what I was told about them. The explanation sounded so familiar and so plausible, I just automatically went along with it. It became part of the narrative of the entire situation because I had nothing else to go on. But the more I've learned about it, the more I've delved into Brielle's life and who Owen is, the less I've believed he was a part of any of it.

And the less I believe it could have been that group of teenage boys either.

It doesn't matter to me how much the police are pushing the idea that Edgar Wilson is a bad seed with no future and no possibilities in life. They've created an image of him as being capable of anything, and that if something went wrong in the town, it was more than likely done by his hand or as a result of his instructions. I don't see it.

I know I can't be positive about that based on one conversation, but I'm good at my job. I was good at the one before this one. And I've been able to help Emma with her

investigations too. That's because I have strong instincts, and I trust them. I have seen and experienced far too much to limit myself to just what is predictable or expected. That just wastes a lot of time.

As an investigator, I go into every new case with what I have learned from the one before, but also a mind that is completely open. I don't have preconceived notions. I refuse to believe I am ahead of the game for any reason. The only place to start is the beginning, and I forgot that when I first started investigating Brielle's death and Owen's disappearance.

Now despite all the progress I've made, I have also returned myself to square one so I can look at everything clearly. One way I'm doing that is by going back over the conversation I had with Colleen at the park. It's stuck with me since she walked away with her father. She probably doesn't realize some of the things she said and the significance they hold. It wouldn't even occur to her what kind of impact her seemingly simple statements would make.

One I keep coming back to is the way she talked about the items Brielle carried out of the house with her every time she left when Alexander wasn't around. Colleen described them as folders with sides that expand. She also talked about her father's clients, and the fact that the files that her mother carried looked like the ones that he had when he went to speak with those clients.

Up until now, I've gone on the assumption that Alexander Bardot is a businessman like other members of his family and Brielle's family. Overseers of massive corporate empires that dip into the hospitality industry, restaurants, and entertainment complexes, as well as diversifying by gathering up unrelated but profitable smaller entities they could just stack up and keep milking for money. Sports teams, clothing lines, small product lines, even a publishing house to ensure that no matter what kind of condition any given industry was in, they have something else somewhere else to keep their pockets bulging.

The whole concept of asking what a child wants to be when they grow up is a fairly foreign thing to very wealthy families, I've noticed. They may ask it. They may even listen and smile when their little child tells them they want to be a singer or a firefighter. But they don't actually take it seriously. It's just a cute game to them. They know their children are going to become the next generation to run the family business. They start teaching them when they are so young they just slide naturally into place when the time comes.

Since my case has been focusing on Brielle and Owen, I've only really skirted the edges of Alexander and his life. I've seen his name and his glossy, professionally taken picture on several websites for large companies and organizations all linked to his family as well as Brielle's. As is considered tasteful in many of these circles, his exact job isn't laid out in the bios attached to the pictures. Instead, they focus on things like his love of swimming and his happy family life.

As far as I've seen, there haven't been any updates to these bios since Brielle's death. They all still describe him as being happily married and raising two beautiful children. Virtually the same wording on every page, regardless of the context. Prepackaged marketing for his life just like for the businesses.

Now I look at these with more scrutiny, digging deeper into what I can find about him and anything he's been doing for the last several years. With Colleen's words in my mind, I decide to search at a different angle and find something I wasn't expecting: Alexander Bardot isn't one of the executives or a random suit with a position essentially crafted for him at any of the investments or businesses under his family's name.

Alexander is a lawyer. And by the looks of things, he's aligned himself with some questionable situations and clients over the last several years. It will take more digging to confirm the suspicions that are starting to build in the pit of my stomach, but the possibly shady things he's done and the way he's craftily negotiated his way through various situations has me feeling even more guarded about him than I was before. I think again about what Colleen said about her parents fighting

and the long conversations followed by her mother bringing things out of the house that never came back.

It seems like Brielle was taking steps to get out of the marriage. But what was she hiding? And where would I find it?

I've been sitting out on the hotel balcony as I work trying to get some fresh air despite the chill. Behind me the door opens, and Xavier steps out with my phone pressed to his ear. His eyes look dark, and my first thought is that Owen has called again. I stand up and take a step toward him.

"Here he is," he says. He holds the phone out to me. "It's Hannah."

I can hear the sound of sobbing coming through the phone before I even get it all the way to my ear.

"Hannah?" She gasps like she's trying to get enough air in to speak. "Hannah? It's Dean. What's going on?"

"I need you," she finally manages to say. "I need you to come here."

"Come where? Where are you?" I ask, already holding the phone pressed between my ear and my shoulder so I can gather my computer and folders from the table and carry them inside.

"My house," she says.

"What's happening? Are you hurt?"

"I need you to come here. Please hurry."

"Hannah, are you hurt?" I repeat, shoving my feet into my shoes and grabbing my keys from the TV stand.

"Please, just get here."

"I'm on my way."

Xavier and I don't wait for the elevator. My feet seem to miss most of the steps as I fly down them and run across the

parking lot to my car. Hannah sounded terrified. I need to get to her and make sure she isn't in any danger.

Hannah is sitting on her front porch when we pull up in front of her house. I'm parked at an angle, but I don't care. What matters right now is finding out what has gotten Hannah so upset. She stands when she sees me get out of the car and jog toward her. Her arms are wrapped tightly around her body, and they don't move even as she comes down the steps and approaches me.

"Are you hurt? What's wrong?" I ask. When I'm close, I notice red streaks on her hands. "Hannah, is that blood? What happened?"

"It isn't mine," she says. Her voice is shaking, and she sounds seconds away from bursting into tears again.

"Asher? Where's Asher?" I ask.

She shakes her head hard. "It isn't him. Behind the house. Across the alley."

I don't wait for any other instructions.

"Xavier, stay with her," I command as I take off running around the side of Hannah's house.

If someone attacked her, they may still be there, and I need them to not get away. The houses are arranged along main roads, but then back up to narrow alleys that separate the sections of the neighborhood. When I get to Hannah's backyard, I'm expecting to see another house across the alley. Instead, I see an empty plot. There are signs that a house used to be there, but it was removed quite a while ago. It may have burned down or just been demolished without ever having been developed.

But there's one thing there that I know has nothing to do with construction. Lying in the grass is a body.

I run across the yard and hop the fence. Within seconds I'm across the alley and kneeling next to the prone form of a young man. There's blood around his neck and down the back

of his shirt. I look around and notice candy strewn in the grass. No one has come out of any of the surrounding houses, but I don't want to get their attention and have them start to crowd around. I have no idea what of this area is relevant, if this is the actual crime scene or just a dumping ground, or any other details. I can't risk having the area contaminated by neighbors streaming over.

And the last thing I need to add to this situation right now is nosy people who don't recognize their own disturbing voyeuristic streaks whipping out their phones and posting pictures of the body. I notice smears in the blood and realize Hannah must have taken the man's pulse when she found him. I take out my phone and call Xavier.

"X, can you bring Hannah back here, please?" I ask.

He confirms, and I end the call, immediately dialing 911 to report the body. I don't know where I am technically, so I have to tell them Hannah's address and describe the location, telling them to go down the alley behind her house for the most direct access. Xavier and Hannah come through the yard and across the alley just as I'm putting my phone back in my pocket. She hesitates, pulling back from her steps and shaking her head slightly.

"It's okay," Xavier tells her in a soothing tone.

"I don't want to see it again. Can't you cover it up with your shirt or something?" she asks.

I understand the compulsion. It's natural to want to protect people from seeing a body and also to offer respect to the deceased by covering them. But the immediate covering of bodies as soon as they are found is another one of the common misunderstandings of the process that are bred by far too many crime dramatization shows. In reality, the body is rarely covered until it is placed in a body bag and removed from the scene.

"I can't," I tell her. "It could contaminate the body and compromise fiber evidence or remove existing trace evidence.

You don't have to look at him." I stand so I'm blocking her direct view of the body. "Just focus on me. Tell me what happened."

"I was taking a walk. I do that sometimes when I have a lot on my mind. I just walk around the neighborhood and think. Usually I come up the alley and go back into the house through the back. When I got near my house, I noticed something in the grass and then saw it was..." She gestures at the body. "I wasn't able to get Asher. He's in meetings all day for work today, so I left him a message to call me back, but I wasn't able to talk to him. I panicked and called you."

"That's fine," I tell her. "You can always call me if you need something. But why didn't you call the police?"

She's obviously shaken up by the whole situation. "I don't know. I got scared, and I just didn't think."

I hear sirens in the distance, and a moment later a rescue squad comes down the alley. I wave to get their attention, and they stop right in front of the vacant lot. The team is getting out and bringing equipment that will do absolutely no good over to us when two squad cars come in and park right behind them.



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The next hour is a blur. The EMTs quickly realized there was nothing they were going to be able to do for the man and bowed out of the situation. While the officers got statements from each of the three of us separately, the crime scene unit showed up and started going through the steps of managing a homicide scene. They photographed everything and collected what evidence they were able to, including fishing his wallet out of his back pocket to identify the man.

“Connor Morgan,” the detective reads, and Hannah lets out a gasp, falling back a step into Xavier.

He grabs her to help her stand up, and I go to her side.

“Do you know him?” I ask.

She stammers for a second like she hasn’t fully processed her reaction. “Yes. I mean, kind of. I knew him in high school. We haven’t really interacted much recently. Not since...”

Her voice trails off.

“Not since your brother died,” Xavier says.

Xavier has an incredible ability to confront words no one else wants to without hesitation. He can say things when no one else can or no one else is willing to. Whether he

understands the feelings and thoughts behind them or not, he's able to give people a voice in the moments when they don't have one.

"Yes," she says. "Connor actually worked at the haunt. He was there that night. I talked to him right before I went into the maze."

"And you haven't seen him since?" the responding officer asks.

"No, I have. But just briefly. When we drive by each other we'll wave, and sometimes when I'm walking around the neighborhood he'll be outside his house, and we'll chat for a second. Nothing really personal, just small talk about the weather or whatever," she says.

"He lives in the neighborhood?" I ask.

Hannah nods, wiping a tear from under her eye. "His parents bought the house next door to theirs before he was even born to use as a rental property. He lives there." She pauses. "Lived there."

"Someone is going to have to give notification to them," the officer says.

No law enforcement agent relishes the thought of being the one who has to go to someone and tell them that their family member is dead, and this officer sounds like he is just as resistant as any other.

"Let me do it," I say.

He looks at me strangely. "You? Why would you want to do it? You're not a cop. You're not even from here."

"No, I'm not," I tell him. "I'm a private investigator. And you're right; I'm not from here. But that's why I think I should do it. I am a neutral source. And because I'm not in law enforcement, they're not going to expect details about the investigation immediately. They'll be able to focus just on processing the news. Besides, if I do it, you can stay here and continue working the scene."

He thinks about this for a second, then nods, gesturing with one hand like he's brushing me toward the house. "All right. Go ahead. But come right back here after and check in."

"Xavier?"

"I'm going to stay here," he says.

I notice Hannah has one hand wrapped around his wrist. His arm is stiff like he's not fully comfortable with the contact, but he understands that she needs it right now, so he doesn't pull his arm away.

"All right, I'll be back in a bit. Hannah, where can I find his parents' house?"

Hannah gives me the address and a set of quick directions for how to get there. I decide it will be easier to walk and spend the next few minutes breathing in the fresh air and preparing what I'm going to say to the parents whose world I am about to destroy.

Daisy and Kieran Morgan are younger than I expected them to be. I realize they must have had Connor when they were just around his age, putting them at only five or six years older than me. It's sobering to think of the entire life they've lived through their son and how it was just ripped away from them.

What I did expect is the devastation that comes over them when I give them the news of Connor's death. I am honest in telling them that I don't know his cause of death. Though there was blood on him, and it appeared he has several deep puncture wounds to his chest and back, no weapon was recovered from the area, and until the medical examiner performs an autopsy, I can't make any conclusive guesses as to how he died.

They want to go to the scene, but I tell them it isn't an option. By now, Connor's body has already been removed and the scene itself has been closed off to prevent any kind of further damage to possible evidence.

Kieran wraps his arm around his wife and holds her close to his side. She tucks her head into the curve of his neck and sobs.

“I thought we were safe. I thought it was over,” she whispers.

Kieran must have caught the questioning look on my face.

“We’ve lived here a long time. We got married right out of high school, and Daisy’s parents helped us buy this house. About a year later, we were able to buy the house next door to make some extra income by renting it out. We almost moved when everything was going on. We know what people said about Theo Nakamura, but we knew that kid. We watched him grow up. Yes, he got in some trouble and was on a bad path, but he wasn’t a bad person. He would have straightened out.

“Then the police named Seth Hoffman as the suspect, and we were terrified. We wanted to get out of this neighborhood. We put both of the houses on the market, but no one wanted to buy them. They didn’t want to move so close to all the turmoil,” he says.

“I’m sorry, but I just want to make sure I’m understanding you correctly. Theo Nakamura lived in this neighborhood? And Seth Hoffman?” I ask.

Daisy lifts her head from her husband’s shoulder and nods. “Yes. The Nakamuras lived on the next street over, and the Hoffmans lived across the alley behind them. It’s why no one wanted to come here. They didn’t feel safe. But then he left town. We took the houses off the market. Our tenant for the rental house had already left, so Connor moved in. We thought it was great that we would be his first experience with renting property.” She sniffs through a deeply sad laugh. “We even made him fill out an application and did an interview with him so he would know how to do it. We tried to move on. As horrible as it sounds, when we found out Seth Hoffman was dead, we were relieved. It doesn’t make sense. But it felt like some order had been brought back to Harper.”



I leave the Morgans and head back to Hannah's house. All the activity in the empty lot has gotten the attention of the neighbors, and several officers have created a perimeter to try to keep them back. The body is already gone, but they still don't want interference.

I check in with the detective who tells me Xavier has brought Hannah back to her house. We exchange contact information, and I head toward Hannah's back door. Xavier opens it and resumes searching through the kitchen cabinets.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

"Looking for cookies," he says. "I made her some tea, but she needs cookies."

"Does she want cookies?" I ask.

He stops and looks over his shoulder at me with a withering stare. "She found a body across from her backyard, Dean. She needs cookies to go with her tea."

It's said without humor. Without whimsy. This is Xavier, holding things together.

"Where is she?" I ask.

"I'm here," Hannah says, coming into the kitchen.

She has changed clothes, and the hair around the edge of her face is wet from her washing off her makeup. Xavier pours tea into a mug and hands it to her. She thanks him and goes to the counter where a jar of honey sits along with flour and sugar canisters. She stares at the wall while she stirs a heaping spoonful into her hot tea.

"I notified the Morgans," I say.

She looks over at me. "Hmmm?" What I said registers, and she closes her eyes briefly before bobbing her head, catching one bob with her mug and using the edge to tip it back. "That's good. That's amazing that you could do that. I

have a feeling you were a lot gentler and more compassionate than those officers would have been.”

“Do you know them?” I ask.

“In passing,” she says. “But it’s not like we’re friends or anything.”

“But you were friends with Connor Morgan,” I say.

She gives me a strange look. “Yes. I told you; we were when we were younger.”

“You said you knew him in high school,” I point out. “You didn’t mention that you lived in this neighborhood then too.”

“Does that matter?” she asks.

“It does when I find out that the original suspect in your brother’s murder and a contemporary murder victim lived in the same neighborhood as your family did at the time of your brother’s death,” I say. “That’s significant.”

Hannah sighs and lowers herself onto the seat under the window on the side wall. She stares out at the gathering dusk for a second before turning back to me.

“My family lived a few blocks from here. It was the place Theo and I grew up. Our backyard was just an alley away from the Hoffman’s backyard.”

“Seth and his family,” I say.

“Seth and his father,” she clarifies. “But none of us saw his father more than a couple of times throughout my entire childhood. He had a whole bunch of different health problems, and by the time we were teenagers, he was bedbound. There was a nurse who came to take care of him, but Seth was very adamant about not wanting her to live in the house.”

“Why?” I ask.

Hannah shrugs. “I told you, he was weird. He was just a creepy, strange guy. Again, I didn’t really know him. Even living in the same neighborhood, it’s not like we grew up together. He was about five years older than me and went to a

different high school. We didn't know each other. But I heard all about him, and my parents had known his father when he was younger and healthier."

"Why did you go to different high schools if you were living so close?" I ask.

"He went to some specialty arts program in the high school in the next county. It's not really all that far from the high school here, so a lot of kids here get waivers to go there," she says.

"And Seth was there for filmmaking," I say.

"Yes. Everyone thinks that's where everything started. He was always weird, but high school brought it to a whole other level. And then..." She takes a breath and clears her throat as she fights through emotion that seems to be trying to take over. "They think Seth spent a lot of time watching people from that house. Especially Theo and me. They think he started crafting the fantasies of the kills from there. The screenplay didn't describe the bodies being put into place at the haunt, but it did go into pretty graphic detail about the murders themselves, if you remember."

"Yes, I remember."

"Then you know that Ted, the male victim who was hung up like a scarecrow, was murdered in the killer's garage after he covered it with plastic sheeting. If there's the same kind of accuracy in that part as there was in the rest of it, that means Theo was murdered in the garage that my parents could see from their bedroom window. We moved shortly after they found out about that detail. No forensic evidence was ever found to suggest that was actually where he killed him, but..."

"That would make sense if the entire thing was covered in plastic sheeting," I offer. She nods.

"They're still convinced that's where he died. And then all of a sudden we moved. They tried to make moving seem like a happy adventure, saying they had wanted to buy a bigger house for a long time and there was finally the opportunity to

do it. But I knew the truth. They couldn't do it anymore. They couldn't stay close to the place where Theo was tortured and killed. It was too painful."

"Then I don't understand," I say. "Why would you come back here when it was time for you to buy a house? You could have chosen one anywhere. Why here?"

"I've had a lot of people ask me that. They think it's really strange that I'd want to come back here to live, especially in a house so close to the one where we lived. But you have to remember: it was their choice for us to leave, not mine. I didn't get to have any input. They just scooped me up and took me away from everything I knew. It felt like I was leaving Theo behind.

"This whole thing took a lot more from me than just my brother. It also took away my home, my sense of security, and the future I'd always imagined for myself. This neighborhood was mine. I loved it here. I have the best memories with my brother here. I was picked up for my first date here. This was where my life was, and I thought we would stay here until we left for college and then we'd bring our children here to visit with their grandparents.

"My parents had talked a lot about buying a bigger house in the newer neighborhood, but I never really thought they would do it. It sounded like one of those pie-in-the-sky kind of dreams people never really follow through on. Moving me away from here was awful. So when I had the opportunity to be out on my own and buy my own house, the first place I looked—the *only* place I looked—was in this neighborhood. Running away didn't change what happened. And I wasn't going to allow myself to be afraid anymore. And now we're here. And there are more murders."

I nod slowly. "I don't know if it's connected. There are some distinct differences between this death and the others. He wasn't exactly put into a display, but there was definitely a Halloween element to it, with the candy scattered all around. It seems like a serial killer has come back for Halloween."



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The front door bursts open, making us jump. I square my body toward the door to the kitchen, but a split second later, I hear a voice calling from the front of the house.

“Hannah? Hannah, where are you?”

Hannah puts her tea down and pops up from the table, rushing toward the door. Asher comes into the room, and they embrace, gathering each other up in their arms. He holds her tight, his hand tangling in her hair and his other arm gripping her firmly around the waist.

“Are you okay? I’m so sorry I missed your calls and your messages,” he says.

“It’s not your fault. You aren’t allowed to have your phone out at work,” she says.

“Which is bullshit. Things like this happen, and I should have been here. I should have been here for you when you needed me. I was about to call you back when Mel texted me. He asked me if I knew what was going on with all the cop cars behind your house. I swear, I almost had a heart attack. I thought something had happened to you. I didn’t even call because I wanted to get here as fast as I possibly could,” he said. “What’s going on?”

“I found Connor Morgan’s body in the vacant lot behind the house,” she says.

“You have to be freaking kidding me!” he gasps. “That’s it. I’m done. Go upstairs and pack your bags.”

Hannah rolls her eyes and steps away from him.

“No,” she says. “I told you before I’m not going to do that.”

“I hate that you live in this neighborhood,” he insists. “I hate that you’re surrounding yourself with this again. And now somebody’s murdered fifty yards from your house when you’re home alone? Absolutely not. I can’t stand the thought of you being here anymore. You need to come live with me,” Asher says.

“As sweet as that proposition is, I’m still going to say no. I’m not going to move in with you because you don’t like the neighborhood I live in or because you think it’s some sort of necessity. And I’m definitely not going to be forced to run from this neighborhood again. You might hate it, but I love it. This is where I grew up, and I’m not going to let some psycho take me away from it again.”

Asher lets out a breath and steps closer to her again, reaching out to take both of her hands in his.

“That’s not the only reason I want to live with you,” he says. “Of course, it isn’t. I want you to come live with me because I want us to be together all the time. I’ve wanted to live together for months... you know that.”

“If we’re going to move in together, wouldn’t it make more sense to move in together here rather than at your apartment?”

“I thought you liked my apartment,” Asher says.

“I do like your apartment,” Hannah says. “But it’s much smaller than my house. That I *own*.” She pulls him in for a kiss but shakes her head as she takes her lips away. “No. I’m not leaving.”

“I never found any cookies,” Xavier proclaims from inside the pantry at the far side of the kitchen.

He was so fully committed to his mission of making sure Hannah had cookies to go with her tea that I almost forgot he was even here.

“That’s all right,” Hannah says. “Thank you for looking.”

“I could make some,” Xavier offers.

“No. You don’t need to go to that trouble. But I am suddenly really hungry.” She cringes a little. “Does that say something awful about me? That I just discovered the brutalized body of someone I used to know, and now I want to eat?”

“No,” I reassure her. “It’s been hours, not seconds. And he’s not here in front of you. You’re not standing over him pounding a two-foot sub. The adrenaline has left you, and now you need to get your blood sugar back up to stay awake. That’s perfectly normal. What sounds good?”

She glances up at Asher. “That burger place with the sweet potato fries?”

“Sure,” he says. “I’ll go pick it up.”

“I’ll come with you,” I say. “X, you hungry?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll pick something for you.”

Asher kisses Hannah before we go outside and get into his car. He grips the steering wheel hard as he stares through the windshield. His jaw is set, and he looks angry about the situation.

“Thanks for letting me come with you. I was hoping to be able to get some time just with you to talk,” I say.

“What do you want to talk about?” he asks.

“I’ve already spent a good amount of time talking to her parents. They’re the ones who decided to hire me, and I got

my first information from them. And then I got Hannah's perspective of it all. You know her differently than anybody else, so I would like to hear from you. Tell me about her. Tell me about how her brother's death affected her, if there's anything that she might not have thought to tell me. Is there anything I should know as I conduct this investigation? Because as you can imagine, it just got a lot more serious and a lot more complicated. And I need to know anything I can to bring this to an end."

He moves his head back and forth as if trying to settle the thoughts in a particular order. "I didn't know Hannah at the time of her brother's murder. I lived in town and knew what was going on, of course; I just hadn't met her. We met in class at the community center about two years ago. It actually wasn't a great start to our relationship. I got to class late, and the only seat that was available was right behind her. I ended up tripping over her bag and causing a bit of a scene. It clearly frustrated her, but, of course, I was totally smitten with her from the second I saw her.

"Then later during class, I overheard somebody make a snide comment about her and her family. I can't even remember exactly what they said, but it definitely wasn't friendly. She got really angry and upset, and I tried to help her brush it off and make her feel better, which just made it worse. She asked me if I knew who she was, and I didn't. So she told me her name, and then it clicked.

"Things between us got better after that. Within a couple of months, we were dating, and we've been together ever since. But it took a while for her to open up to me about what happened to Theo. It's really deep inside her. It has affected her on her most base level, and there are times when I feel like everything she ever thinks or does is impacted by losing him. And *how* she lost him. She is willing to talk to me about it now, but I honestly don't know if I actually know everything she feels or has gone through. There are some things I think she keeps locked away and doesn't share with anybody."

“How about the night she found him?” I ask. “Has she ever told you what happened that day? Before she went to the haunt? When was the last time she spoke to Theo before his death?”

“She didn’t see or talk to him the day his body was found. That’s actually why she was there that night,” Asher says. “Her friends wanted to get her mind off him.”

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“Theo was missing for five days before his death,” he tells me.

I remember seeing a note about that, but it was brief and didn’t really give any details.

“He was missing?” I ask. “Did they ever find out what that was about?”

“From what Hannah told me, he’d gotten into a fight the week before. It was pretty rough, and he was really angry. His parents tried to use some tough love on him, and that just pushed him over the edge even more. He said he was going to handle it for himself and left.”

“Any idea what the fight was about or who he was handling things with?” I ask.

“No. But when Hannah talked about it, she didn’t seem too worked up about it, if that makes sense. Like this wasn’t that out of the ordinary. And he’d had a few run-ins with the law over the months leading up to this. Not enough for them to be able to put him away, which she thinks really frustrated the cops. It was like they thought he was outsmarting them and getting away with too much. That it made them look stupid.

“What she was upset about was how long he was missing. She was used to him leaving home and being gone for a couple of days at most. He might leave on a Friday and not get home again until Monday. But this time, he’d been gone for much longer, and he hadn’t contacted her. Usually, he would at least check in with her to let her know he was all right or tell her what was going on. This time she heard from him the day

he left, but he didn't tell her where he was, and then she didn't hear from him again.

“She was really upset about the situation, and her friends were trying to distract her when they invited her to go to the haunt with them. They thought it would be fun and get her mind off of everything. They knew she was worried, but they've talked about it since, and her friends admitted none of them actually thought anything was wrong. They just figured since it was Halloween season, Theo had gone off partying and causing trouble and would be back after he worked out all his mischief and frustration.”

“Hm,” is all I can respond with.



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

I'm at the police station early the next morning. I've been thinking about Connor Morgan and how his murder connects with the others since yesterday. I have no doubt that despite the discrepancies, he was another victim of the serial killer, but that only furthers the question of who this killer is and if that one person was responsible for all the murders or just Seth Hoffman, his girlfriend, and Connor Morgan.

Talking to Asher yesterday did give me some more insight into Hannah, but I still need more. Hence why I'm back at the police station despite our contentious first encounter. The officers I spoke with at Connor Morgan's crime scene were at least a little easier to deal with than Beau Ryan, so my hope is that I'll be able to get somewhere with the police.

But from the moment the detective comes into the conference room where I was directed, I know this isn't going to go smoothly. He looks exhausted and angry. His tie is loosened around the neck of his wrinkled shirt, and there's a heaviness to his shoulders that looks like the world is sitting on them. This is a man who has not gotten much sleep and who feels the intense pressure of his caseload.

"Detective Bryson," he says without extending his hand to shake mine. "And you are?"

“Dean Steele,” I tell him. “I’m a private investigator.”

He looks at me for a second like he’s working through what I’ve just said, and recognition flickers over his eyes.

“Steele. You’re the guy who was creeping around the old carnival grounds the other day saying you were looking into the Hallows Eve Killer,” he says.

The sarcasm and degradation drips from his voice in an all too natural way. He’s accustomed to thinking the worst of people and seeing himself as far above anyone else, especially someone as lowly as a private investigator. He’s a homicide detective. In his mind, that far outranks me even though we are in different spheres and aren’t in direct competition with each other.

“I was not creeping around. I was investigating,” I clarify. “I was hired to look into those murders. And before there’s any more disagreement about whether or not I should have been there, I have blanket permission to access those grounds and everything on them from the owner of the property. Both verbal and written. And just to be clear, according to them, no one else has had permission to access those grounds at any point, since they were given notification that all investigative efforts were complete, and the grounds were released to them as no longer being considered an active crime scene.”

He knows this means Officer Beau Ryan was outside of his jurisdiction when on the property and was technically trespassing. Especially considering he was not on active duty when he came onto the grounds—yet he was wearing his uniform and identified himself as though he were. Things are just getting continuously worse for Officer Ryan.

“What can I do for you this morning, Mr. Steele?” Detective Bryson asks.

Apparently, he has decided he’s not going to address the issue of my trespassing anymore.

“I’m sure you’re aware of the murder that happened yesterday,” I say. “Connor Morgan.”

“Yeah,” he says, running his hand down his face and letting out a sigh of exasperation. “I’m aware.”

“Are you considering him a new victim of the Hallows Eve Killer?”

He looks at me strangely. “Why would we do that?”

I stare at him incredulously. “Because it’s so obvious that he is.”

“It wasn’t obvious to any of the officers or the responding detective yesterday,” he says. “According to them, it looks like a random stabbing death. They didn’t report noticing any of the hallmarks of the Hallows Eve Killer on the body or at the scene.”

“None of the hallmarks?” I ask. I’m not believing what I’m hearing. “How about the random candy scattered all around the body? Do you think he was just eating an armful of it when he was attacked?”

“It’s Halloween time. There’s candy all over the place everywhere,” the detective says. “It’s entirely possible that candy was already in the empty field when he was killed. Or he could have been carrying it. We don’t know. But that doesn’t mean it’s connected with the other murders. Those bodies were found posed like Halloween decorations.”

“That is one of the most ridiculous things I have ever heard,” I say. “You have a serial killer on your hands. People have died every Halloween except for one in the last five years, and you’re going to try to draw a line between a man who was murdered a hundred yards from the sister of the first victim because he wasn’t dressed up or among a bunch of props even though he was surrounded by Halloween candy?”

“Murder investigations don’t always make sense to people on the outside,” Detective Bryson says. “There are a lot of things at play.”

I stand up sharply and lean across the table toward him. “Don’t you dare lecture me on the complexity of murder investigations. I came here this morning because I wanted to

cooperate with the police to find out who is doing this and why there aren't more victims. Because there will be."

"Is that a threat, Mr. Steele?" Detective Bryson asks, his lip curling and his voice edging close to a snarl.

"It's not a threat. It's an acknowledgment. Because that's how serial killers work. They kill until they are stopped. And I came here to try to make sure that doesn't happen again. You're welcome to contact me when you're ready to work together to stop this maniac."

I walk out of the conference room and storm past many officers to get out of the building. I feel like if I don't, I'm going to explode. It's obvious I'm not going to get any cooperation from anyone at this precinct. They're not going to help me, and they aren't going to accept my help. But I'm not deterred. It just means I'm going to have to resort to some of my old-school methods to investigate. The police can follow the protocols. I'll do what needs to be done to find this killer.



CHAPTER NINETEEN

My hotel room doesn't have the space to accommodate my growing collection of evidence for my investigation, so I talked to the manager and was given permission to take over one of the meeting rooms on the bottom floor. The one condition is I use the room at the back of the business center area so others aren't disturbed by seeing what I'm doing. That was probably a good call.

I found a massive roll of butcher paper at the department store where Roman Soto works, so I spread it across the conference table to create the brain web Xavier suggested. Hannah and Asher called me earlier to ask if they could come by and talk to me, so I told them to meet me in the conference room so I could continue my work.

"What's all this?" Hannah asks when she comes through the door and sees the massive paper.

Xavier has taken over one of the corners of the paper and has a stack of markers beside him as he doodles.

"Pumpkin designs," he says without looking up.

I look at them. "Xavier takes his jack-o'-lantern game very seriously. He's also bored because we've been in here for several hours, and he finished his puzzles."

“I’m not bored. I don’t get bored,” Xavier says. “I get cognitively squishy. Then I have to find ways to solidify things again.”

“Hence the pumpkin designs,” Asher says.

Xavier holds a hand up toward him to demonstrate he had gotten the concept. I gesture toward my own work.

“I’m charting out what I know about the murders and finding all the ways I can connect them. I need to piece together the relationships of the victims. Though almost all serial killers have a fairly specific demographic of victims that they stick to throughout their career, it isn’t always super clear what the link is during the investigation. Finding it can be extremely helpful.

“Sometimes it’s very simple. Ted Bundy preferred dark-haired, slender girls around college age. The fact that his final victim deviated from that standard to a significant degree is why many people still question whether he was even responsible for that crime. John Wayne Gacy preyed on young, slim men who often appeared much younger and usually in need of money. It was those details that enabled police to connect him with several murders of victims whose bodies weren’t even found in or around his home.”

Xavier doesn’t even look up from his doodling. “The Atlanta Child Killer, Wayne Williams, chose young Black children,” he begins. “The fact that there were only two girls in nearly thirty murders makes a lot of people think he had nothing to do with those. Danny Rolling also chose college-age people. He inspired the movie *Scream*. Though, honestly, the comparisons between the two narratives are questionable at best; I have the feeling that ‘inspiration’ was really just the fact that people died, not necessarily anything specific to Rolling’s choices. Jeffrey Dahmer...”

“Thank you, Xavier,” I say.

If I don’t stop him now, the full compendium of his knowledge of serial killers is going to come spilling out, and

we don't have the time or the stomach for that right now. He hasn't even looked up from his drawing, so he's not too bothered with the conversation taking a turn.

"Is there anything we can do to help?" Hannah asks.

"I really appreciate the offer, but I'm not sure there's anything you can do right now. You've been really helpful in talking to me and answering my questions. When I come up with more, I'll let you know. And if you think of anything that seems like it might matter, don't hesitate to tell me. Sometimes things seem really minor, like they can't possibly have anything to do with a case—and turn out to be the exact detail I needed to get me headed in the right direction."

They lean against the side of the table to look over the web I've been creating. Asher points to Kenneth Chisolm, the fourth victim.

"I knew him. Not really well, but we were on the same baseball team when we were kids. Have you talked to his family?"

"Not in person. They aren't interested in getting involved with me. But I read their statements from the original investigation," I say.

"How about his brother?" Asher asks. "He's a few years younger, but I'm sure he was old enough to remember what was going on then."

"What's his name?" I ask.

"Tyler," he says.

"Chisolm?"

"Yep."

I jot that down. "Thank you. I'll see what I can do about tracking him down."

Hannah takes out her phone. "Give me a second. I might be able to find him on social media. Or at least somebody who's connected to him."

It only takes a few minutes for her to work through a network of connections to find Tyler Chisolm.

“Does it have his number listed?” I ask.

“No, but I can send him a message. Actually, Asher, you send him the message. You knew his brother. He’ll probably recognize your name.”

“Smart,” he says, taking out his phone and glancing at hers to find the exact path to him. His fingers click rapidly over the keys for a few seconds. He takes out my card and looks at it before typing again. “There you go. I gave him your number and told him to get in touch with you.”

“Perfect. Hopefully, he’s not the type to take a long time checking messages,” I say. “Actually, does it say on there where he works?”

Asher glances at his phone again. “Mama Rizzoli’s Pizza.”

“Great. Let’s go see if he’s working. X, you up for some pizza?”

“Always.”

“You two want to join?” I ask.

Hannah looks at her phone and pulls a regretful face. “As much as sausage and spinach on stuffed crust sounds like the gods right now, I actually have some things to do for work too.”

“All right. Well, I’ll keep you updated.”

I make sure the meeting room is locked and the lights are off so no one can glance through the glass door and see the brain web laid out on the table, then bring my notes and the crime scene photos back up to my room so they are more secure.

The restaurant is across town from the hotel, and by the time we get there, it’s right at the dinner rush. The small parking lot is nearly full, and I manage to get the last parking spot. I thought it was going to be a takeout and delivery type

of place, but now I realize it's a retro-vibe pizza parlor with large stained glass lighting fixtures in the colors of the Italian flag over booths, and a back dedicated to vintage arcade games. The smell when we walk in is like breathing in teenagerhood.

There's a long line of people waiting to be seated or to put in an order for takeout. More people keep streaming in behind, having apparently either crafted parking spaces for themselves or parked elsewhere and made the trek inside. I have a feeling there are some nearby businesses with parking lots that end up as de facto overflow parking for Mama Rizzoli's on nights like this—whether they want to be or not.

The line is starting to turn more into a loosely organized clump operating under the regulations of line-place honor. As much as I have the impulse to right now, I'm not going to be that person who walks past the entire line to lean on the counter and say I just want to talk to somebody. So, I take my place in line and accept a menu from a hostess who already looks like she's going to cry. I have a feeling she hasn't been here long... and won't be here much longer.

Learning is not what Xavier is going to be doing if he stays here among the growing mob for much longer. A line, to Xavier, needs to be a line. There is no room for other shapes. He doesn't even appreciate it when the queue at a theme park is rearranged by clipping the chains in different places. Add to that the very strong possibility of him being touched by several strangers in a confined space, and the situation is not great. I look to the arcade section and see our salvation. An ATM and a quarter dispenser. I point him toward it and send him on his way to pass the rest of the time in the bubble of Pac-Man.

I turn my attention back to the menu and get my order ready in my mind. I didn't get a look at Tyler Chisolm's social media profile, so I don't know what he looks like, but I glance around the restaurant to see if I spot someone with a "Tyler" name tag. I'm still looking when it's finally my turn to approach the counter. Not wanting to attract the ire of the very

stone-faced woman behind the register, I put my order in first. She calls me “Honey,” and I take that as an opportunity to slide in my request to sit in Tyler’s section.

“He doesn’t have a section,” she says. “He’s in the kitchen. He’ll be busy for a while, but I’ll send him your way when his break comes.”

I thank her and stand off to the side to wait for a table to open. It takes nearly the same amount of time to snag a place to sit as it does for our food to be ready, so I’m not waiting long before salads and pizza arrive at the table. It’s interesting to have received them at the same time, but I’m not going to complain about it. I text Xavier to let him know where to find me, and he appears a few seconds later. We don’t have to wait long for Tyler to also make his appearance.

The teenager looks bewildered as he comes to the side of the table.

“Bess said you wanted to talk to me? Is there something wrong with your pizza?” he asks.

“No. It’s not about the pizza. I’m Dean Steele. I’m a private investigator. I know you’re on your break, but can I take just a few minutes of it to talk to you about your brother?” I ask.

He shifts around uncomfortably. His eyes flick back toward the counter where the crowd has lessened but he’s obviously hoping the woman behind the register, who I assume is Bess, will tell him to hurry up and get back behind the line. She doesn’t, and he looks back at me.

“Sure, I guess,” he says.

“Great. Have a seat.”

He sits down, and I offer him some pizza. He takes a slice.

“Did you do the toppings?” Xavier asks.

“Mmm-hmmmm,” Tyler answers, his mouth full.

“Nice mushroom distribution.”

“Thank you.”

“I know this isn’t an easy thing to talk about, and I appreciate you being willing to sit with me for a few minutes. I was hired to look into the murders that happened a few years ago starting with Theo Nakamura and Penny Collins at the haunted attraction,” I say. “You actually have a message in your social media about me. It’s from Asher Dawson.”

“Asher?” he asks. “Wow. I haven’t heard that name in a while.”

“He told me he and your brother played baseball together.”

Tyler nods. “They did. I mean, for the part of the season Asher was on the team. He got hurt and ended up benched for the rest of it. The next year Kenny didn’t play. He decided to join the swim team instead.” He gives me a questioning look. “Why were you talking to Asher about my brother?”

“I wasn’t exactly talking to him about Kenneth. I’m researching all the victims and piecing together how they are connected so I can hopefully figure out what happened to all of them, including Seth Hoffman. Asher is dating the daughter of the family who hired me. Hannah Nakamura,” I say.

He nods, reaching for a second slice of pizza. “I remember Hannah. I didn’t know her, but I remember hearing about her, especially after her brother died. She’s dating Asher now? Everybody thought she and Beau were going to go the distance.”

“Beau?” I ask.

Tyler nods. “Beau Ryan. They were together back when the first murders happened.”

Tucking that information in the back of my mind, I circle back to Kenneth and ask Tyler to tell me everything he remembers from when his brother was murdered. He tells me about his relationship with his older brother and how devastating it was when he found out.

There isn't much about his story that differentiates it from those of the families of the other victims. Except for Theo, all of them seemed like basic teenagers, if from different schools and social scenes. Nothing stood out about any of them. They weren't troublemakers, but they also weren't at the top of the ladder either.

Tyler's break ends, and he says he'll text if he thinks of anything else to add. Xavier and I finish eating and pack the leftovers before lingering for another twenty minutes over the Pac-Man machine. He is on a particular mission, but I'm anxious to contact Hannah. Neither she nor Beau Ryan mentioned they'd been in a relationship at the time of Theo's death.

I drive over to Hannah's house and call her from outside, asking her to come out and talk to me. She steps out on the porch with a confused expression and a thick cardigan to wrap around her as she descends the steps toward me.

"Is everything alright?" she asks. "Why are we meeting out here? It's cold. Let's go inside."

"I'm only going to be here for a minute," I say. "Why didn't you tell me you and Beau Ryan were together when Theo died?"

"Me and Beau?" she asks, her voice getting softer, but not out of tenderness.

"Yeah. I just spoke with Tyler Chisolm, and he told me the two of you were a pretty serious couple back then," I say.

She rolls her eyes. "As serious as two seventeen-year-olds can be."

I bite the inside of my lip to stop myself from lashing out at that comment.

"I told you about my run-in with him at the abandoned haunt. Why didn't you mention that you once had a relationship with a police officer who has ties to the case?" I ask.

“He wasn’t a police officer then,” she says. “He was a kid. Like I was. And he doesn’t have ties to the case, as far as I know. He was really attached to that place, and I guess he still is, but there wasn’t a point in the last four years when I heard he had anything to do with the investigation. I’d heard he’d become a cop, but he hasn’t been on the force long. He’s not going to be doing murder cases. Our breakup and the time after were really hard for me. I’d just lost Theo, and things were imploding around me. I don’t like thinking about it, and I really don’t like you dredging things like that up.

“I appreciate what you’re doing for Theo and the others, but don’t forget that it’s for them. Not me. I don’t need to be investigated. You aren’t entitled to my entire life because you’re trying to find out what happened when my brother was murdered.”

“I’m trying to find out what happened when four people were murdered, then the only suspect in the entire case was murdered alongside his girlfriend, and now another person has followed suit. That’s more than just Theo. And I need you to understand that the investigation as a whole is important. You can’t just decide what matters in a case. I’ve already told you: I can’t do my job if I’m not getting honesty and transparency.”

She tightens her arms around her and looks off to the side like she’s embarrassed.

“I’m sorry. I just really don’t understand what my relationship status then has to do with the murders.”

“Probably nothing,” I say. “But the fact that you weren’t talking about it makes me wonder.”



CHAPTER TWENTY

A message from Roman Soto the next morning has me at his house before breakfast. He said he had found a few extra files pertaining to the case and I might find them interesting, so I was welcome to come get them.

“Coffee?” he asks when he lets me in.

“No, thanks. I’m good,” I say. “I appreciate you calling about the files.”

“No problem. I told you I was willing to help any way I can. Especially...” he stops, seeming to rethink what he was going to say.

“Especially what?” I ask.

“I don’t want to stick myself in the middle of things,” he says. “I have to remind myself I retired.”

“No, go ahead. I want to hear what you have to say.”

“Especially with that man being murdered the other day,” he sighs. “Right in the neighborhood where Theo Nakamura and Seth Hoffman used to live. But that might not have anything to do with it. I’m just rambling like I used to when I was investigating. I found saying thoughts out loud could help me decide if they really made sense or not.”

“I do the same thing sometimes,” I assure him. “And I don’t think you’re off track. My first thought is that Connor Morgan isn’t a new case. He’s just the most recent victim of this one. I tried to talk to the current investigative team about it, and they wouldn’t listen to me. In fact, they essentially told me I was an idiot who should be chasing little old ladies to return their lost wallets and that I needed to leave them alone. Add that to my fun little run-in with Beau Ryan, and I don’t exactly have the best taste in my mouth about the law enforcement around here.”

“Beau Ryan,” he says, cringing just slightly.

“You’re familiar?”

“Yes. Both as an officer and before he joined up. Not great memories from either era. Back when this case first started, he was a serious thorn in my ass. He was constantly hanging around, asking questions, leaving tips that didn’t have anything to do with anything. He was dating Hannah, so he thought he had a good reason to be clinging to every step of the investigation. Like he thought he was a member of the family and was speaking for them. Or was going to help solve the case. Kid was beyond obnoxious. I know it makes me sound like a complete jerk considering what she was going through, but I was really relieved when they broke up,” Soto says.

“It sounds like he hasn’t done much personal growth since then. He’s just as obnoxious now,” I say.

“Well, I’m glad he hasn’t found a way to weasel himself into the investigation.” Soto shakes his head and picks up a couple of notebooks and a file folder from the counter. He looks down at them. “I have to say I am a little reluctant to give these to you. These aren’t official by any means. They are just my personal thoughts and ideas. Nothing admissible, and I highly doubt there is any evidence anymore to back up most of them.”

“It’s still valuable,” I say.

He hands the stack over.

“The investigation always focused so much on the people involved, but I always thought the haunted attraction itself had more secrets to tell. I just didn’t know how to find them,” he says.



As I’m going through the notes later, Roman’s words keep repeating in my head.

The haunt has secrets.

I gather everything and stuff it into my messenger bag. “Come on, X. We’re going back to the carnival grounds.”

This time we go right to the buildings to the side of the grounds. We skip the haunted house we already explored and go through the rest of them. They have the same musty, heavy feeling as the first, but these are more elaborately and clearly themed. It’s sad to see them in this state of disrepair. Here, more than anywhere else on the grounds, I can see the incredible effort that went into creating these experiences. For those people who enjoy this kind of thing, this place would have been so much fun. It’s a shame to see it go to waste.

Not having found anything in any of the houses, we move on to the larger building set back away from the attractions. As I suspected, this was for storage and for staff to prepare and get into costume and makeup. This is the one building I find padlocked shut, but it doesn’t take much to remove it. The lock was placed there more for the appearance than for any actual security measure. Xavier still looks at me with a raised eyebrow.

“I got permission,” I tell him. He’s still looking at me. “Hey, I helped Emma break into a creepy-ass church for you.”

“You’ve been waiting a long time to pull that card,” he says.

Warped from moisture and disuse, the door gives me a little resistance, but I’m finally able to yank it open. The

building is essentially a cement block much like a very large shed, so there are no windows to let in any light. Even the haunted houses have windows. They are draped in black fabric or boarded up, but that still allows them to let in a small amount of light. This place is pitch black.

My phone's flashlight cuts through the darkness, and I see we're in what looks like a cramped waiting room for a doctor's office. There's a cheap industrial desk to one side and a large bulletin board hanging up on the wall. Several molded metal chairs line the opposite wall. I go over to the bulletin board and see it's covered in documents about the haunt. There's a large calendar in the center that includes all the nights they were open with notes about any special events or promotions they were having on those nights.

A few of the days also had names jotted in the corners. I assume those are members of the cast who had to take off those particular nights. Other papers outline which area of the haunt each member of the staff was assigned to, the costume pieces they should use, their allotted time with the makeup artist, and details about the storyline that could help them design their character in their head and plan for how they were going to fulfill the role.

The date on the top of the papers is the night Theo and Penny were found.

That detail hits even harder than the abandoned props in the corn maze and the quiet, empty haunted houses. It adds such an intense human element to it, putting finality to what was once fluid and thrilling.

At the far side of the room is a door, and we go through it into a hallway. A room to one side has various tables, a refrigerator, a coffeemaker, and boxes of snacks that had been brought for the staff. Holes in the boxes and skittering sounds in the darkness tell me the building isn't as sealed as it seems, and the snacks aren't going fully to waste.

We continue on and find a locker room, pieces of tape across the front of each bearing names of the staff members. I

open a few of them and find them empty except for bits of trash and one hat lying on the bottom. It seems when the police cleared the grounds, they allowed the staff to remove their things before closing everything up. Maybe they thought they were just taking their belongings home with them for the night. But maybe they knew even then that the haunt would never open again.

A turn in the hallway leads to a short corridor with a door at the end marked “Warehouse.” I walk past it and instead go through the partially open door with a small plaque beside it reading “Costuming.” The room beyond is large and split into smaller areas by strategically placed racks of costumes, shelves of accessories, and furniture. I walk along one of the racks, looking at the costumes. They look so benign hanging there with no one inside to embody the monstrous creatures they’re designed to emulate.

Disguises are a powerful thing. They can give someone the power to do something they would never do if others would recognize them.

Even something as simple as a hood on a jacket pulled up or a bandana over the bottom half of their face can make a massive impact on an investigation. Concealing just one feature creates doubt of a person’s identity even if we are confident we know who it is. It can make the difference between readily recognizing our suspect and struggling to even know where to start.

These costumes, though, are something completely different. They totally conceal the person within. Some are even made with heavy elements or design pieces that would change the wearer’s gait and how they hold themselves—generally telltale markers of an individual.

“Dean, look at this,” Xavier calls over.

I follow the glow of his phone to the corner of the room where he’s standing over several makeup stations. Mirrors surrounded by darkened lightbulbs reflect back elevated chairs. One is still draped with a smock that would have

covered a costume or clothing while the person was transformed into their gruesome lurker of the night. I look through some of the products on one table.

“Spirit gum,” I say, holding up a tube. I move a larger tub toward him. “And latex. They didn’t just wear masks. They used prosthetics.”

There’s a lounging couch that reminds me of the kind in old psychiatrist’s offices pushed into the corner of the room. Costume pieces are piled on one end, but I also notice several pieces of balled-up paper. It looks like trash one of the staff just tossed aside while they were getting ready and likely didn’t think about again. I pick up a few of the pieces and don’t find much interest. Some receipts. A couple of scribbled notes probably written by someone having latex applied to their face so they couldn’t speak.

It’s one of the last pieces of trash on the couch that makes me pause.

“They never even went through any of this,” I mutter.

“What?” Xavier asks.

“The police. When they were first investigating, they never even examined these rooms. At least not with any attention to detail. If they had, maybe they would have found this interesting.”

I hold out a receipt I had smoothed out. It’s for a local take-out restaurant. An order was made the day Theo Nakamura was found dead, hours before the haunt opened for the night. And it was signed by Hannah.

“Hannah Nakamura ate dinner in the costume room?” Xavier asks.

“I think she brought someone dinner... hours before she supposedly arrived with her friends. This whole time she’s been talking like she was moping around at home all day when she wasn’t roaming the town searching for her brother, and never once did she mention that she came here.”

“She could have bought the food and given it to someone to bring it,” Xavier says.

“She could have. But even then... who was she sending it to?”

I slip the receipts into my pocket.



CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

“Who did you buy food for the night you found Theo?” I ask, walking past Hannah into her house.

“Um, hi,” she says.

“Why is it that I feel like I’m constantly showing up at your house to ask you questions about things you should have told me about?” I ask.

“Yeah, I feel like that too,” she says.

“Then maybe you should stop keeping things from me and actually let me do my job.”

She walks through the house into the kitchen and puts a tea kettle on the stove.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she says.

“Yes, you do. You said you were so worried about Theo because he was missing that your friends decided to buy last-minute tickets to go to the haunt and try out the corn maze to distract you and help you relax. You all showed up just before the last entry slot for the maze.”

“Right,” she says. “Theo had just gotten into that huge fight, and my parents were kind of hard on him. He left, and I hadn’t heard from him. That was really not like him, so I was

worried. I spent days searching for him and trying to reach out to him, but he never got back to me. My friends thought I was thinking about it too much, so they wanted to make me feel better. We got the last tickets that were available.”

“Then who signed your name on this receipt?”

I take the receipt out of my pocket and show it to her. She stares at it for a few seconds, some of the color draining from her face. She swallows hard.

“Where did you get that?” she asks.

“The costume room in the staff building at the carnival grounds. But I think you already knew that. Because I think you bought dinner for somebody that night, and you brought it to them well before your friends ever came up with the idea of bringing you there. They thought you were moping around or getting too in your head about your brother being missing because you were too busy with whoever this was for to respond to their calls or texts. So, who was it?” I ask.

She turns back to the stove and stares down at the kettle. She seems to remember she didn’t put water in it and mutters something to herself, picking it up and bringing it over to the sink to fill.

“I don’t remember. That was years ago, and that was a pretty stressful night,” she says.

“Enough, Hannah. I don’t know why you don’t seem to understand that you’re standing in my way. You say you want me to find out what happened to Theo and who can be held responsible for it, but at every turn, I’m finding something else you aren’t being open with me about. This isn’t just about your brother. There are six other victims, including Seth Hoffman. Six other people have died because of this mess, and the reality is, there could be more coming. You know who you brought this food to that night.”

She still won’t answer.

“Fine. I found the bulletin board that listed everybody who was working at the haunted attraction that night. I did some

cross-checking, and you know what I found? Cain Weber. He was assigned to the Haunted Inn section for the night where he was dressed as a partially decomposed zombie bellhop who followed guests around with luggage from which he would occasionally pull a bat embedded with nails or a very large knife he would threaten them with.

“Sounds scary. But maybe not as scary as when he brandished a gun out the window of a vehicle or held a guy hostage for four hours because he accused him of stealing his phone. Or any of the other baby thug bullshit he got himself into. And guess who was arrested with him several times? Your brother. Now. We’re going to try this again, Hannah. Who did you bring food to that night?”

Hannah leans on the edge of the counter, her head hanging, and lets out a breath before turning around to face me.

“All right. Yes. I was there before my friends decided to bring me that night. I was cheating on Beau with Cain. Beau was away with his family for the weekend, so I went to spend more time with Cain. He was friends with my brother, so people didn’t really think anything of it when they saw us talking. They just figured I was trying to find Theo.

“That day I didn’t think I had anything planned, so I wanted to see Cain. He had gotten really into the whole haunted attraction thing. He went a lot when it first opened and thought it seemed like fun. Getting to scare the living shit out of people and get paid for it was like a dream come true to him. But the thing is, there was more to it than that. There was more to him than that. He had a bad reputation, and he for sure earned it, but there was also a side of him that not many people got to see. I got to see it.

“He messaged me that day to let me know he’d been assigned to one of the haunted houses, so we wouldn’t be able to meet up like we usually did. When he worked in the woods for the hayride or the corn maze, he’d sneak me tickets and I’d go meet up with him. But there wasn’t that kind of access or

privacy in the houses. I told him I still wanted to see him and offered to bring him dinner before he had to get into his costume and makeup.”

“Which was in the middle of the evening,” I say. “So, he’d have time before it and after it.”

“Yes,” Hannah says. “I got him his favorite food, and I went through the staff entrance to the grounds to meet him in the staff building. I was with him for a couple of hours before he had to get in costume. It wasn’t until I was leaving that I realized my friends had been calling and messaging me to get me to do something with them, and they happened to suggest the haunt.”

I sigh. “See? Can’t you have just told me this before?”

She lowers her head. “I was embarrassed to tell you. Cain didn’t have anything to do with my brother’s death or any of the others. He wouldn’t have had time to get him into the corn maze, and he would have no reason to go after the others. That wasn’t him. He wasn’t a killer. But I knew then, and I know now, there are plenty of people who would happily jump to the conclusion that if a guy is willing to rob or beat someone up, murder isn’t really that big of a leap. That’s completely asinine, but that wouldn’t matter. If anyone found out, they would just lump him right into the mess. It was a long time ago, but I still don’t want anyone’s feelings to get hurt, or for anyone to make assumptions that could destroy lives.”

I make an acknowledging grunt, but Hannah seems insistent on justifying everything to me. I decide to let her talk.

“Cain is a good man. He might have gotten into a lot of trouble as a teenager and done some seriously messed up things to a lot of people, but he straightened himself out. Theo’s death hit him hard, and he spiraled downhill in a really scary way. He hit rock bottom, and he’s pulled himself out of it. He has a good job. He’s going to school. I didn’t want to say anything that was going to jeopardize any of that for him. I had fallen in love with Cain and I was already having an extremely hard time with the whole situation before Theo

died. It just got harder after. There were so many people throwing around rumors and accusations, and I felt like I was constantly under a microscope. Everything I did or said was scrutinized. I was constantly being followed by the news. And Beau was right there beside me. He supported me and stepped up to be everything I needed. Or at least everything he thought I needed,” Hannah says.

“I thought you broke up pretty soon after Theo died,” I say.

“It was a few months,” she says. “It was just too much. It put too much strain on us. Our breakup was extremely hard on him, and some people say he’s still not fully over me. I managed to keep everything with Cain away from him. I didn’t want him to hear about it and be even more hurt than he already was. But I also felt like I needed to protect myself.”

“Protect yourself?” I ask. “Did you think he would hurt you if he found out?”

“I mean protect my reputation. From what people would say about me.”

Her words don’t sit well with me. It seems like a very odd sentiment for the sister of a murder victim to express.

As I sit in the hotel reading Roman Soto’s notebooks later, I start to realize the tension and difficult situation Hannah described having with the detective over the years had a different motivation that she insists was there. Roman wasn’t disconnected from the case or unwilling to keep the family updated because he didn’t care.

Roman was suspicious of Hannah.



CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Roman's copious pour of syrup over his pancakes the next morning is clearly impressive to Xavier who did not have the opportunity to witness it the first time.

"I didn't want to mention my concerns about Hannah because I didn't want to influence you," he explains. "I know from experience how easily one wayward comment can start feeling like fact or can distract you, no matter how unbiased you try to be. I needed you to already be in the midst of this case and coming to your own conclusions before that came up, if it ever did."

"I understand," I tell him. "I know you didn't want to lead me. But I wish I'd had more of an understanding of your approach to the case and what led you to walk away from it. I've been finding things out about Hannah that have bothered me, and she hasn't been totally honest with me from day one."

"She was very upset you were a part of it at all," Xavier says, pouring his own syrup in his preferred spiral pattern.

"That's true," I say. "Her parents didn't tell her they were hiring me, and she happened to show up during my meeting with them. She was very unhappy about the whole thing and basically said she wished her parents would just back off and

put this behind them—like she didn't want it investigated. But then when I was talking to her about her brother dying, she told me how angry and hurt it made her that she felt her family was pushed aside by investigators and no one was even trying to solve it.”

Roman considers this for a moment. “I know that’s how she felt about it. She didn’t think we were working hard enough to prove that Seth Hoffman killed Theo. She said she felt like we had forgotten about him and that the other victims meant more to us than he did, even though we weren’t solving it for them either. But they were mentioned more often, ended up on the news more often, had memorials put around town for them. Everything was focused on Penny Collins and Samuel Freedman.

“Of course, there was a lot of attention put on the murders when Halloween came around again. It was the first anniversary of the three deaths and people wanted to honor them. But they also wanted answers. They wanted to raise awareness of these lives that were taken and find out why no one had been arrested for the murders, especially Seth Hoffman, who seemed like such an obvious culprit. By then everybody knew about the screenplay. Few had read it. The copies that were submitted to the police by the writing competition were the only ones they had. Both were put into official evidence. One is the one you have, and the other stayed in the locker.

“Seth Hoffman’s computer was seized, but there were no copies of the script on his computer, his hard drive, removable media of any kind, or anywhere in his home. He had wiped all sign of it. There was no way he could say he didn’t write it because the submission process for the writing competition required a scan of their ID and a short video introduction of them as an artist as well as their piece to prevent plagiarism.”

“So, why would he go to the effort of taking it off his computer and not having any other hard copies around?” I ask.

“Your guess is as good as mine,” he says. “It did make sense. And yet...”

“What?” I say to Xavier, who looks like he has a comment on the tip of his tongue.

“He enjoyed the control,” Xavier says. “He already knew you had the script and had read it. Like you said, there wasn’t any doubt. He also knew you didn’t need to actually arrest him to start doing searches. You’d take his computer, mine it for evidence, try to find other copies of the script that had other versions of the murder scenes. He liked the idea that you’d get there and not be able to find anything. It’s Schrodinger’s screenplay. It both exists and doesn’t. It’s the bird and the sasquatch.”

“Oh, yes, that old chestnut,” Soto says and makes a bewildered face.

“You put a birdfeeder out in your yard hoping to attract songbirds to come,” Xavier begins. “Every morning you wake up, and seed is missing. There are small feathers on the ground. You’re sure you heard the birds singing as you were getting out of bed. You know the birds are coming. But your neighbor doesn’t believe you. It could be Sasquatch coming and eating the seeds. The feathers could be stuck to his fur and fall off when he’s eating. The sounds could be him mimicking what he’s heard in other yards.”

“Mhm,” Soto says slowly.

“You think this is ridiculous. It’s a birdfeeder full of special seed just for songbirds. It’s the kind that’s designed to attract them from all over. You will become the favorite house, and all the birds will know that. But when you try to see the birds, you can’t. You get up early and don’t see them. You try at night and don’t see them. But you know you’ve seen the feathers and the seed gone. Your neighbor keeps telling you unless you can actually see the birds eating at the bird feeder, then you’re just making up stories and jumping to conclusions. Pretty soon, you’re sure it’s Sasquatch too.”

Roman Soto thinks about this for a few seconds, then leans slightly toward Xavier.

“What if there are two sasquatches?” he asks. “And one of them says they’re trying to protect the birds, but you start seeing some birdseed in their fur and wonder where it came from?”

Xavier eats a bite of his pancakes as he considers the question. “The second one can’t know you’ve noticed the seed. Not until you’re sure where it came from.”



Breakfast with Roman reframed my thinking about how much involvement the Nakamura family had with the investigation and how dedicated the team really was. It was easy for them to assume they’d been abandoned when the information stopped coming in; and then they heard Soto had retired without bringing the case to a close. I realize now he was doing exactly what he needed to do. He very much wanted to help the family, but when he started seeing Hannah as a potential suspect, he had to stop being so forthcoming with them. He couldn’t let them know what he was thinking or what he had noticed. But without evidence for either one of his suspects, there was nothing he could do.

Finally, it broke him.

I don’t let what I’ve learned from Soto and his feelings show when Hannah and Asher come back to the hotel to see me that afternoon. I’m still working on my web of victims, but now it’s more about writing down the details of each of the murders and how they align with each other and with the events of that first night. It feels significant that there were three deaths at first and then a long stretch before the next.

I could cover up my information or tell them the case had gotten too sensitive and they needed to not see what I was doing. But that wouldn’t work. Hannah’s family hired me to do this. I’m not law enforcement. The work I’m doing technically isn’t protected by anything, and by merit of her

parents, Hannah is entitled to know everything I've come up with.

So, I'll try to use that to my advantage. I'll give her the information she wants. Then I'll see what she gives back to me.

"You see it, don't you?" I ask. "You can see the pattern?"

Asher shakes his head. "No. They aren't all connected. Theo, Penny, and Samuel didn't have any links. They didn't even know each other."

"Kenneth and Penny knew each other," Hannah offers. "And Samuel went to the same high school as Seth. I remember during one of the memorials his mother did a speech wearing his letter jacket." She shakes her head a little. "Nobody is connected to Theo."

"That's because everybody is connected to him," I say.

"What do you mean?"

"The first four victims were chosen individually. I don't know why yet. But they were chosen to be the first victims. Then after that, the victims were chosen already," I say.

"Their connection to the first murders," Hannah says softly.

"Exactly. Seth Hoffman marked the beginning of a new wave of murders, all of which were of people connected to the first victims. His girlfriend was connected through him."

She meets my eyes. "Should I be worried?"

"How about me?" Asher asks.

"I still don't know why the first victims were chosen or why the murders started again after Seth was killed. I say don't shut down and lock yourself away being afraid. But be cautious. Be aware of your surroundings. And watch who you're getting close to," I say.



This case and the situation with Brielle has consumed my energy and brain space so much I have completely neglected the work I'm supposed to be doing finishing the manuscript for Charlie Newman's second book. It was left unfinished when he was murdered, and the publishing house asked me to take it up and tell the story for him. My version isn't the story people are expecting to hear, especially not the ones who have already read Charlie's first book. And it's definitely not the one his wife Emily wants me to write. But I believe I'll at least get close to what Charlie wanted to say before he was silenced.

I decide to dedicate the evening to working on the book, but as I'm going through my notes about Zachary Brewer, my mind wanders to what I've heard about Seth Hoffman. I never want to put myself into the mind of a serial killer and feel like I could think the way they think, move the way they move, and make the same decisions. But to find and stop them, I have to try to understand them. I have to believe that at their core, human beings are just that. Human. There are some that are born broken beyond repair, who are somehow steeped in evil and will grow up with no chance of being anything but a predator.

Those are few and far between. For the rest, even those who believe they kill indiscriminately and only because they are born to, there's a motivation beyond just the kill. To find that motivation and truly choose to feel empathy for that killer as a human as much as their victims is to understand, at least on a functional level, why they do what they do so they can be identified and stopped.

But I don't concern myself with knowing how they can stomach the kill. The people who do want to think of their own inability to inflict that kind of pain and suffering, or simply to take a life. I am trying to understand their purpose—what the murders mean to them. Though in some instances it is, as grotesque as it might sound, as basic to them as the desire to indulge in an ice cream sundae may be to someone else, usually there is a far more complex motivation behind what

they do. The pleasure is there, but they get satisfaction out of knowing they've fulfilled a goal or purpose.

Zachary Brewer was not a killer. But he was struck down by one merely for his devotion to his fascination with the darker side of the military and conspiracy theories he believed wove the underlying tapestry of our culture. I remember going through his apartment. Most people's homes reflect who they are, and that was more than true about Brewer. Every inch of his small apartment was dedicated to his research and displays of his obsession. Artwork, stacks of books, maps. All of it reinforcing strange ideas and confirming in him his belief that the rest of the world was living in ignorance, but he'd seen through the lies.

I go back to Seth Hoffman. I've read something in the notes about him or heard something about the strange things in his home. I know I have.

Trading my lounge pants and undershirt for actual clothes, I gather up my notes.

"I'm going down to the meeting room," I tell Xavier.

He doesn't trade his clothes. As far as he is concerned, if people are roaming the hotel at this time of night, they are welcome to a display of his matching set of powder blue, old-man pajamas. He adds a pair of slippers and a bathrobe for the full effect, and we're ready to go.

"What are you doing?" he asks when I use my keycard to get into the meeting room and set my notes down.

I pick up the roll of butcher paper, roll up the brain web taking up most of the table, and spread out a new layer.

"Finding out more about Seth Hoffman," I say. "It seems so obvious that he is a murderer, and yet to some investigators, it's obvious he didn't do it. One of the articles I read had an interview with a crime analyst who had gone over the case to give their opinion about it. They said they weren't at all impressed by the screenplay. According to them, it was just a fantasy of the investigators that he would have actually

committed those murders and then documented them. It was so beyond convenient—or stupid depending on how you want to look at it—that it couldn't possibly be real.

“The details included in that screenplay could easily have been discerned from watching the news, talking to people who were there that night, and even just guessing. People saw him at the haunt before Theo's body was found. Obviously, he was there. He could have even been in the maze when the body was found and seen who was in the group with Hannah, which would have let him include them in the script. He was inspired by all of it to write the screenplay and got swept up in the investigation. According to that theory, he didn't kill anyone.

“On the other side are the people who believe he absolutely killed Theo Nakamura, Penny Collins, and Samuel Freedman, then wrote the screenplay about it because he was so arrogant he believed no one would actually piece it together or be able to prove he did it even if they could. He then found himself enjoying it so much that he killed Kenneth Chisolm the next year. But then someone got tired of the police not catching him and decided to kill him, likely murdering his girlfriend first as a means of torture before he was killed.”

“And Connor Morgan?” Xavier asks.

I let out a breath. “Either just a stand-alone murder with an unfortunate connection to the crimes and to Hannah, or the completion of a serial killer. That's the division. Who did what? And why? Was Seth Hoffman a killer, or was he a convenient fall guy because of what people thought of him? He thought of himself as a brilliant filmmaker. When did that start? And did that have anything to do with what happened?”

I take out all the notes I have about Seth and open my laptop so I can continue my search. Hannah said he went to a specialty high school. I search the school and find an archived yearbook from Seth's senior year.

“AV Club,” Xavier reads as we find a picture of a younger Seth Hoffman grinning smugly on the scanned page.

“He was in a writing program at the school. But it looks like he put a heavy emphasis on screenwriting and production even then.”

“Right. He thought he was going to become the most amazing screenwriter of all time and be studied,” Xavier reminds me.

“Exactly. A screenwriter. An artist. He took those projects extremely seriously. All the interviews about him and everything people have said or posted about him have been about how odd he was. He was an outsider. He held himself above everybody and everything else like he thought he was on a different level. He didn’t need to waste his time trying to fit in or engage with the people he thought were beneath him.”

“Not the victim of bullying,” Xavier says.

“Same thing I was thinking. If you look at the way the original investigation team approached it, and the way it was portrayed in the media, this was a case of a strange, misunderstood boy who was ostracized from society and tormented by the other kids. He took it out on them with a string of murders.” I sift through Soto’s notebooks until I find the entry I’d been thinking about. “Look. ‘Hoffman appears an easy suspect to believe is responsible. No one seems to know him or be his friend. Everyone describes him as weird, strange, creepy, and the like. They described seeing him making sketches of murder scenes and videos talking about the motivations of killers. He is someone no one wants around. But one teacher at his high school says he was a complete outsider and kept himself at a distance from his peers.’”

“But,” Xavier says.

I nod. “But. He wasn’t bullied. He wasn’t tortured and made miserable by the people around him. People probably made fun of him. But, honestly, that’s sort of a given when you’re in high school. Which means it’s extremely unlikely it had that much of an effect on Seth Hoffman.

“He thought he was *better* than everybody else. He didn’t think he should be wasting his time trying to make friends with the kids around him. Even though they were also at a school with specialized programs, meaning they were probably very talented in their own ways, he saw himself as exceptional. He was more than them. So, them not accepting him probably didn’t even register. To Seth, *he* was the one rejecting *them*. He would have no reason to want to commit these murders as some sort of vengeance for the bullied underdogs, then put their bodies on display as a way to humiliate them.”

“But he did kill them,” Xavier says.

I nod. “He did.” I scroll through more of the yearbook and find Hoffman in several other extracurricular groups. “Creative writing club, photography club, and a peer mentoring and support group. That’s the one.”

“Peer support?”

“Yes. When the government agency staged the plane crash for my group and those woods, they already had a set of experiments and tests in mind. This wasn’t a vacuum. They didn’t just drop us in the middle of nowhere and see what was going to happen.

“They put us through specific trials in order to observe us and see how we would react to various situations. They wanted to see what we would do if we encountered things like a plane crash, serious injuries, lack of food and supplies, lack of contact, apparent attacks by unknown enemies, missing people. Things that could conceivably happen during a deployment situation. They wanted to be able to create training methods that would address those natural reactions and instincts so people would be better prepared in the event they found themselves in that kind of situation for real.”

I take out the screenplay and flip through to where the body of Ted, the character so obviously based on Theo, was discovered in the corn maze. “Now, look at this. Read the way the scene is described. Remember that this is not a novel or a

short story. This is meant to be a producible script.” I trace the section with my finger and watch while he reads it. He pulls back. “What do you see?”

“Stage direction,” he says. “A lot of them. And director’s notes.”

“That’s not something that you would generally see in a screenplay like this. Stage directions, sure. Maybe a couple of suggestions as to how something should be done or a particular type of gesture if it’s important to the scene. The writer is generally mostly focused on the dialogue and the basic structure of the story, not the intricate details of how characters should react and what they should do from second to second,” I say. “But look how specific these instructions are. It talks about exactly how the character should react to finding the body dressed like a scarecrow. Their facial expression, how they move. Everything. But you know what it doesn’t specify?”

“That it’s her brother,” Xavier says.

“Right. It goes into these really tiny nuances of what each person there should do to react to this moment of finding the body, but then leaves out the most impactful element of it, which is that it’s his sister who finds him. Ted is only described as a local troubled teen who has been dressed up like a scarecrow. The fact that it was Hannah who found him wasn’t intentional. Not necessarily unwanted, it did make for a great reaction, but that was not the plan.

“Seth Hoffman killed those people. Not for vengeance. Not for attention. He killed them and staged the bodies so that he could get the true reaction of what was happening and then put it in his screenplay. Just like he went to that support group. He wasn’t there to ask for help from the others or to provide support for his peers. He was there to watch their emotions and reactions to different things. He didn’t do it for shock value. He did it for research.

“The same for the videos he made about serial killers and wanting to know what it was like to kill. He was so intensely

invested in the realism and quality of his films he was willing to literally step into the role and kill to make sure he got every detail right. The sketches were likely storyboards, visuals of the scenes he was coming up with in his head. Maybe some mock-ups of posters and promotional art. He was going to ensure his work was remembered and studied.”

“He did a good job with that one,” Xavier says.

“He did. He died for it.”

“So did six other people. And I don’t think any of them were willing martyrs for his art.”

I stare down at the notes I’ve been taking on the butcher paper and then go back to my original brain web.

“X, you’re amazing.”

“Generally speaking.”

“There are three murders in this screenplay. The two bodies found in the corn maze and the third found after. That’s it. So, where’s Kenneth Chisolm?” I ask.

“Sequel.”

“With a different creator,” I say. “That year without a murder wasn’t Seth Hoffman taking a break. Someone else took over with Kenneth. And they had a very different motivation.”



CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Cups of strong black coffee and Styrofoam takeout boxes brought to us by Roman Soto fill the meeting room with the invigorating smell of breakfast. It would seem like a good start to a day if Xavier and I hadn't been in here since we came down in the middle of the night. When I reached out to Roman about an hour ago, he didn't hesitate to say he'd come and help. He showed up with massive cups of coffee and a stack of breakfast foods. I haven't eaten this many pancakes in the last year, but I'll take the carb load right now.

"What can you tell me about Cain Weber?" I ask. "Hannah Nakamura was cheating on her boyfriend with him at the time of Theo's death, and she admits she was in love with him."

"Cain Weber? That surprises me. I can't imagine Theo would have thought too kindly about his little sister getting wrapped up with somebody like Cain," Soto says.

"That's kind of the point. He didn't know. The way Hannah tells it, nobody knew. They'd been seeing each other completely in secret and hadn't noticed any kind of suspicion from anybody." I show him the receipt. "That weekend, Beau was away with his family. That's why he wasn't at the haunt with her when Theo was found, and there are no interviews with him from that night or the day after. He didn't get home

until the next day. Hannah went to see Cain, but then had to pretend like she was somewhere else and show up with her friends later.”

“So, Hoffman killed Theo and Penny and staged them in the maze so he could watch their reaction. Which means he was there when they were found,” Soto says.

“Yes. There were so many costumes in that staff room. And there was a schedule on the wall of when people were going to be in the makeup and prosthetics department getting ready for the night. There was also a list of assignments of where everybody was going to be. All he had to do was find a time when he could get into that room and take a costume that wasn’t assigned to someone else for the night.

“There was a calendar that listed people who weren’t going to be there on specific nights. I didn’t check, but if we go back and look at it, we may find there was someone who called out sick that night but was already assigned their character. He could have easily just taken one of their costumes. No one would have even noticed.”

“All right, then how about Samuel Freedman?” Soto asks. “Was he hiding there somewhere too?”

“I don’t think so. If you look at the screenplay where it describes the third victim’s death, it doesn’t focus on the reaction at the moment of them being found, but the reaction of the larger town to the reports of the death. How the police responded. How neighbors grouped around trying to see. Media coverage. That kind of thing. He didn’t need to be around to see how the men who found him reacted. That wasn’t what was important,” I say.

“How about Kenneth Chisolm?” Soto says.

“That’s where things veer off,” I say. “I don’t think Seth Hoffman killed Kenneth. That murder doesn’t show up anywhere in this screenplay, and there’s no evidence that Hoffman was working on another one. He wasn’t posting fiction or making any artwork or anything that would be

inspired by these murders. Remember, he killed as a means of research. He wasn't killing for the individual experience. It wasn't about him. It was about being able to take those visceral observations and translate them into what he saw as art.

“So, if he had killed Kenneth Chisholm, we would know. We would have gotten details about it through Seth Hoffman himself. Which brings me to why I wanted you to come help this morning. Xavier and I believe the only people Seth Hoffman killed were the first three. Kenneth Chisholm, Seth Hoffman himself, his girlfriend, and Connor Morgan were all victims of a separate killer. With a separate motivation.”

“Revenge,” Xavier says.

“Hannah,” Soto says immediately.

“Hannah admitted that she and Beau broke up within a few months of the murders. That it was just too difficult on their relationship and they couldn't see it through. But she never told me when she and Cain stopped seeing each other. She said she was in love with him. And if he was going to go out of his way to be in a secret relationship with the little sister of not only a friend, but a friend with a more severe criminal history than his, one who was known for his violence even more than he was, I think it's safe to say Cain was in love with her too.

“I looked into Theo's past and some of the people he had conflicts with. It seems there was a pretty severe beef going on, and Cain acted as Theo's second. One of the ones who was most verbal in threatening Theo was found dead two months before Kenneth Chisolm.”

“Harvey Miller,” Roman says.

I nod. “Yeah. It was considered a gang-related shooting.”

“Even though they weren't in recognized gangs,” he replies, his voice softening as the pieces start to fall in place for him the way they fell for me.

“Do you think they helped each other?” I begin. “Hannah was devastated about the death of her brother and didn’t think enough attention was being given to his case. It had gone so quiet after a year of no murders, and she felt like there was never going to be a resolution. Cain was also hurt by the loss of his friend and felt like he needed to do what Theo hadn’t had the chance to do: settle the conflict with Harvey Miller and his crew.

“Maybe they didn’t want the murders to get confused with each other. Maybe it was just how the timing worked out. But they shot him. Then they identified Kenneth Chisolm as someone who would get the attention of the community and the police again. If he were to be murdered, the case would heat back up, and Seth Hoffman would finally get the punishment he deserved. So, they killed him and staged it to make it look like one of Hoffman’s kills... only, they didn’t take the screenplay seriously enough to realize its significance.

“The next year when Hoffman still hadn’t been arrested, Hannah couldn’t take it anymore and decided it was time to take matters into her own hands in a much more direct and intentional way. Seth Hoffman had been out living his life and having a good time without any consequences for what he had done. He even got himself a girlfriend and had the nerve to come back to town. That was all she needed to push her over the edge. She and Cain killed his girlfriend and then him, dressed him as a scarecrow to honor Theo in a sick way, and left knowing the town was just going to be happy he was dead rather than take any time to find out who did it. And they were right.”

“What about Connor Morgan?” Soto asks. “Why would they kill him?”

“Maybe he knew something. Or because Hannah’s parents had hired me to look into the murders, there needed to be something else to push the investigation forward and redirect it. Having someone killed right near her house would take any suspicion off her. Especially if Cain was actually the one who did the killing while she had an alibi.”

“How sure are you about this?” he asks.

“It’s a theory,” I admit. “Right now, I’m not sure of anything. I need to talk to her.”



The sky is getting dark with growing clouds, and the air is heavy when I pull up in front of Hannah’s house later. Xavier has stayed behind to sleep, and I hope the storm the weather report has been blasting warnings about doesn’t start while I’m out. I texted Hannah before leaving this time, so she isn’t surprised to see me. There’s curiosity in her eyes when she opens the door and invites me in.

“Is Asher here?” I ask.

“No,” she says, closing the door behind me and pushing the sleeves up on her heavy oatmeal-colored sweater. “He’s at work. Why? What’s going on?”

“I want to talk to you about something I don’t think you want him to hear,” I say.

“Okay. Want to sit down? Can I get you something?”

“I’m fine,” I say. We go into the living room, and I perch on the edge of the same cushion where I’ve sat every time I’ve come here. “We need to talk about Cain Weber.”

Hannah pauses, then lets out a sigh as she lowers herself into her own seat. “Why? I’ve already told you about him. You know we were seeing each other and that it’s not something I’m particularly proud of. I told you already I don’t want anybody to find out about it. I don’t want people getting their feelings hurt or stirring up anything that’s going to cause more trouble.”

“You did tell me that. But you didn’t tell me when the two of you stopped seeing each other. Is that because it kept on going long after your brother’s death?” I ask.

“Why does when Cain and I stopped seeing each other have anything to do with Theo’s murder?”

“You said Beau was such a great source of support for you right after your brother died and during the beginning of the investigation. He was right there with you all the time and really helped you get through those difficult months. Roman Soto—you remember him—he even said that Beau was around pretty much constantly. He was always there trying to get updates on the case or help out in any way he could. It sounds like he was already putting himself through training for his law enforcement career. But the two of you broke up not too long after that.

“So, what I’m wondering is, who was there for you the next Halloween when everybody was waiting for there to be another murder? Or the next year when Kenneth Chisholm was found dead? That would be an extremely difficult and emotionally challenging time for the surviving sister of a murder victim whose killer was still on the loose. It just makes me wonder who was there to give you that support and strength. And you know what? I also found out that right before Kenneth’s murder, there was another death in town. A shooting. Somebody who Cain used to know.

“From what I hear, the two of them didn’t get along very well, but he had an even worse relationship with your brother. Even still, finding out someone you know has been shot dead, likely for things you do on a pretty regular basis yourself, has to shake you up. It doesn’t matter how tough you are; you’re going to need people to be there for you during that time. So, who was there for Cain?”

“You’d really have to ask him,” she says, her voice getting slightly tremulous.

“I intend to,” I say.

She narrows her eyes at me. “Do you think I had something to do with those murders? You think Cain and I killed my own brother?”

I shake my head. “I don’t think you killed Theo. I am convinced Seth Hoffman did that. I’m sure he’s responsible for the first three deaths.”

“The first three?” she asks, sounding confused. “Why would I have any reason to kill Kenneth? Why would Cain?”

“You tell me,” I say, not wanting to give away any of the theory I’d come up with so far.

“I wouldn’t have one. Yes, I was furious at the police force for not arresting Seth Hoffman. It was incredibly painful to know he was just out in the world and that an entire town was terrified because he was still around. I don’t even know how to describe what it was like to be here the year after the first murders. It was like a massive weight was pushing down on all of Harper,” she says. “This place used to light up around Halloween. People would get so excited. Decorations would start going up at the beginning of September. All the stores had tons of spooky things, costumes, candy. The schools had little festivals and pumpkin patches opened. The haunted attraction opening was something people looked forward to so much. For weeks leading up to it, people would plan to be there opening night. Tickets always sold out. Then this happened, and Halloween disappeared. Rather than being happy and excited, people were afraid. The news warned people not to put up displays in their yards. Stores just skipped the entire thing. Some sold candy, but there weren’t any decorations and almost no costumes. Kids weren’t even allowed to trick-or-treat around the neighborhoods. There was a party at the community center, but it was harvest themed. Nothing even vaguely spooky. Everybody clustered in there like they weren’t even breathing, just waiting for the whole season to be over.

“When it was and nothing happened, it was the biggest relief. As soon as the anniversary of Samuel’s murder passed, the whole town seemed to explode with Christmas. It was like a two-month-long celebration. I didn’t really get to feel that way. Of course, I was happy that nobody else was killed, but the reality was my brother was still gone. And the person who did it hadn’t even spent a single night in jail for it. Or for anything. He wasn’t in town anymore, but what did that really

matter? He was still living whatever kind of life he wanted to live.

“And you know what? That made the next year even worse. Everybody felt like we got through that first year. We all survived. Literally. Halloween was nothing like it used to be, but it started to come back a little bit. A few little decorative displays. More costumes in the stores. We were getting back to life as usual. And then Kenneth was murdered. It hit so much harder than it would have the year before. After what I went through with Theo, I would never wish that on somebody else. I was angry. I was hurt. I was sad. And I was frustrated. But I wouldn’t put another family through what I live with every day,” she says.

“And Cain?” I ask. “What about Harvey Miller?”

She stays silent for a few seconds. “Like I said. You would have to ask Cain. We haven’t spoken in years.”

“Why?”

Tears are starting to sparkle in her eyes. It’s obvious the love she felt for him hasn’t gone away. Even with the struggle of what their relationship represented, her feelings for him were, and clearly still are, very real.

“Because I was stupid. And afraid. Because I cared too much about what people would think. Cain wanted to be with me. Really with me. When Beau and I broke up, Cain told me he didn’t want to hide our relationship anymore and he wanted us to be together. Seriously together. He was ready to talk about a true future. And I panicked. I loved him. I did. And I broke his heart. I let him walk away rather than having the courage to face the world with him,” she says.

I swallow hard, trying to keep Brielle’s face out of my mind.

Hannah reaches up with both hands and wipes away tears from her cheeks. I notice a ring I haven’t seen her wearing before.

“It looks like someone else is ready to be serious with you,” I say, gesturing at the ring.

She holds that hand and looks down at the ring. “Yeah. It isn’t an engagement ring. But I really don’t want to call it a promise ring. That makes me feel like I’m about twelve. It’s just a... ‘we’re more’ ring. After we talked about moving in together and I told Asher I’m not going to move in with him just because he thinks I’m not safe in my house, he bought me this. He said he wants me to know how serious he is about me and that he really does want a future with me.”

“Congratulations,” I say. “I’m going to go. Be sure you have everything you might need. The weather sounds like it’s really going to get bad.”

“I will,” Hannah says as we walk toward the door.

As I drive back toward the hotel, I can’t decide if I fully believe her. She sounds sincere, but the more I think about the details of that night, the more I wonder if I’m still not thinking about it from the right angle. Seth Hoffman is a killer. There’s no doubt about that. And another picked up the reins later. But the description of the character representing Theo still sticks with me.

It makes sense that Hoffman would make some changes to the details of the scenes. Maybe as a way to conceal his involvement and create reasonable doubt through subtle inaccuracy. Maybe as another way to manipulate and show that he was in control. Either way, the fact that there are things that don’t line up isn’t a surprise. But what stands out to me is the odd inclusion of the patch on the character’s jacket.

It seems to have no purpose. There’s no further description of it or inclusion of it in the investigation. It doesn’t represent anything impactful. It’s just a line included in the costume description of the character that is otherwise exactly accurate.

Now I can’t help but wonder if there was someone else there that night.



CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Hannah

Hannah walked out of the bathroom and tossed the towels from her shower into the basket in front of the washing machine in her laundry room. She didn't feel like doing laundry tonight. Going from the humid heat of the bathroom to the rest of the house with her skin still damp and her hair wet sent a chill through her despite the warm sweatsuit she'd put on.

Grabbing a blanket out of the hall closet, she went to the living room and checked her phone to see if the pizza she ordered was on its way. She probably should have cooked something. She'd just gone shopping, and her kitchen was full of the ingredients for all the dishes she told herself she'd make for the next couple of weeks. But after a long day of work and the conversation with Dean earlier that day still rattling around in her head, she just didn't have it in her.

The text let her know the pizza would be another few minutes, so she grabbed the remote and curled up under the blanket hoping to warm up a bit before she had to get up and answer the door. Holding the blanket up close to her chin, she turned on the TV and flipped through the channels trying to find something she felt like watching.

A new episode of one of her favorite true crime shows had just started, so she chose that and settled in. Hannah figured it wouldn't be too long before one of these shows came calling hoping to take the story of Harper and make it into an episode. Or even a miniseries. She'd watched a limited series a few months before that managed to take half of what happened in Harper over the last four years and stretch it into a six-episode run.

She dreaded the thought of that. She didn't want to be trotted out for people sitting at home eating junk food to watch and judge. She recognized the incredible hypocrisy in that, considering that was exactly how she spent a good portion of her evenings. Maybe not with the judging. And maybe with it. Sometimes, the people on those shows just needed to be judged.

A sound like tapping on a window at the back of the house made her jump. It was just two sounds, high-pitched and thin. She sat up straighter, listening again, but she didn't hear anything else. Chastising herself for already letting the show get to her, she settled back again and continued watching, glancing over at her phone to see if there were any more updates from the delivery driver.

It wasn't that Hannah was embarrassed about what happened. It wasn't like she had any control over her brother's death or how the investigation went. But she still didn't want to talk about it in front of cameras. She hated the idea that anything Seth Hoffman dreamed of would happen. He wanted to be commemorated in movies. It wouldn't be quite the same thing, but it was close enough that it made her skin crawl thinking about it. He didn't deserve to have his name said or heard. He didn't deserve to have anyone watching anything about him. It would have given him far too much satisfaction, and that's something Hannah never wanted him to have.

The tapping sound came again. This time it sounded closer, like it was on one of the windows in her bathroom rather than her bedroom. She started to get off the couch, and the lights flickered slightly. She knew the weather was getting

bad. The forecast had warned about serious storms and even the potential for a hurricane for days now. But it hadn't started raining. Maybe there was just so much electricity in the air that it was interfering with the power.

She didn't know if that was actually a realistic explanation or not, but it made her feel slightly better. Usually, she enjoyed her time alone. She loved being with Asher, but there was something refreshing and centering about just having the opportunity to be by herself for a while. She didn't have to keep up with the conversation or wonder what another person was thinking of her. She could just wear whatever she wanted, eat whatever she wanted, and do whatever she wanted.

That was part of why she was hesitating to move in with Asher. She knew that. Living with him would mean having to sacrifice her treasured time by herself. She shuddered at the thought of referring to it as "me time," but it was the same sentiment. She wasn't enjoying it quite so much right then. The lights stabilized, and she got up and started toward the bathroom, her phone clamped in her hand. She always kept the bathroom door closed. It was just a habit she picked up from her mother. Now she hesitated outside of the closed door, her hand hovering right over the doorknob, waiting for more of the tapping sounds.

When they didn't come, she quickly turned the knob and shoved the door open. It was quiet and empty, the only light coming from the small night light plugged in next to the mirror and the light from outside filtering through the window. Hannah flipped up the light switch, walked over to the shower, and wrenched the curtain open. Her shoulders sagged, and she let out a self-deprecating laugh. She was being ridiculous.

She turned the light off, but as soon as she closed the door behind her, the lights flickered again. A knock on her front door made her gasp and jump, but she realized it was her pizza. Taking a deep breath to calm down, she went to her purse to grab cash for the tip, then went to the front door. She rose up on her toes to look through the peephole, expecting to

see the bright green sweatshirt that all delivery drivers for the pizza place wore. Instead, she saw only her front porch.

Hannah looked around, but there was nothing. No driver. No pizza on her porch. There was no one.

She looked down at her phone to see if the driver had messaged her. No updates since the last message to tell her he was on his way. Hannah reached for the lock on the door and hesitated, then threw it and opened the door. She stepped out onto the porch and looked back and forth over her yard. She didn't see anyone, and the street was still. Porch lights lined either side, and a few sidewalks glowed with the additional solar-powered lights many people had added to provide extra illumination at night when it no longer felt so safe and cozy in the little town of Harper.

Hannah stepped back into the house and called Asher.

"Hey, babe," he said. "You going to bed already?"

They had a tradition on nights they didn't spend together: the one who was going to bed first called the other to say goodnight. It was how they maintained their connection and reassured each other they were doing all right at the end of the day.

"No, not yet," Hannah said. "I ordered a pizza and am going to curl up on the couch and hang out for the night."

"That sounds good," Asher said. "You've been running yourself ragged lately. You deserve some relaxation."

"Would you want to join me?" she asked. "I think there's a marathon of that baking show tonight."

"Damn. I wish you called me an hour ago. I'm out with Darian and Brent. Brent's having some girl trouble, so naturally, we brought him out drinking," Asher said.

"Because nothing goes with emotional distress better than alcohol," Hannah remarked.

"Hey, I'm not the one who makes the rules," Asher said. "I just follow them."

He laughed, and she couldn't help but smile. His cheesy jokes always got her.

"All right. Well, you have fun," she said.

"You okay? You sound like something's bothering you."

"No. No, I'm good. I just missed you," Hannah said. The doorbell rang. "The pizza just got here. I've got to go. Love you."

"Love you, babe. We'll talk before bed."

"Bye."

Hannah ended the call and pulled the door open. She was tucking her phone away in the pocket of her sweatshirt so she could hand the cash to the driver, and when she looked up, there was no one in front of her. Hannah's stomach twisted, and her heart beat a little faster. Maybe she didn't actually hear it, she told herself. She could have heard something on the TV or in the background of the call and just thought it was the doorbell because she was expecting it.

Going back inside, she shut the door and pressed her back to it, drawing in a slow breath to try to get herself together. Within seconds, the bell rang again. Hannah turned and yanked the door open as fast as she could.

"This isn't fucking funny!" she shouted into what she thought was going to be the empty darkness.

Instead, a startled-looking delivery driver stood on the porch.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Did I get the address wrong? Uh... large sausage and spinach with stuffed crust and breadsticks with extra garlic sauce?"

Her cheeks burning, Hannah pushed bits of hair that had escaped from her ponytail out of her face. "No. Um. Yeah, that's my order. I'm so sorry. I thought you were... someone else."

He held the food out to her, and Hannah accepted it, stuffing the cash for the tip into his hand in return.

“Have a good night,” he said awkwardly.

“Thanks.”

Hannah closed the door and propped the boxes on her hip to free her hand so she could lock the door. She carried the boxes toward the living room, flipping open the smaller one on top to rip off a piece of hot breadstick as she went. She’d just put the boxes down when the lights flickered again. They stopped as her doorbell rang. Hannah walked slowly to the door and peered through the peephole, her heart in her throat. The breath gushed out of her when she saw Asher smiling up at her.

“I’ve come for a piece of pizza,” he declared when she opened the door, then gathered her into his arms for a hug.

“How did you get here so fast?” she asked.

Asher stepped back and stared at her with his eyebrows knitted together. “The bar is like five blocks from here, babe. It took me longer to walk out to the car than it did to drive here.”

He walked into the house and headed straight for the pizza box in the living room. He flipped the top open and snagged a slice, taking a bite.

“I thought you were hanging out with the guys tonight,” Hannah said, not wanting to sound as relieved as she was.

They valued their time apart, and she was the one who emphasized how much stronger and healthier it made their relationship. She didn’t want to start sounding clingy now. But she also didn’t want to stay alone with the creepy feeling that had settled over her.

“I am,” Asher said. He stepped back up to her and wrapped his arm around her waist to pull her closer, kissing her on her head. “But you sounded like you’d had a long day and could use a quick visit. I just wanted to come say hi.”

“And take my pizza,” she said.

He grinned and held his partial slice up. “Okay, I’ve gotta go. They’re gonna start worrying about me. But I just wanted to make sure you were really all right.”

She put on a smile. “I am. Everything’s fine. Go take care of Brent. But don’t get too drunk.”

“I think that’s pretty much off the table. Brent decided he didn’t want to hang at the bar because the bartender on duty tonight reminds him too much of his ex. So we’re going to head up to Darian’s lake house. Just for the night. It’ll be a good chance for Brent to get out of the bubble and just kick back and relax for a while. But I’ll be back probably late tomorrow afternoon. Do you wanna do something?”

“Yeah. Give me a call when you’re headed back into town, and we’ll think of something,” Hannah said.

Asher kissed her. “You’re the best. Love you. I’m still gonna call you before bed.”

“Okay. Drive carefully.”

Asher left, and Hannah locked the door, checked it, and went back into the living room. She sat down and pulled the blanket back over her legs. She listened for a second, waiting for something to happen and hoping it didn’t. When everything stayed fine, she took out a piece of pizza and settled in for the evening she’d been planning.

She’d almost forgotten the unnerving feeling of the empty porch and the sound of the tapping when the lights flickered again. She realized it had started raining. The storm must have started. That settled her nerves a little even with the continued flickering. She got up and went to the cabinet under her TV where she kept a flashlight. As the flickering got more serious, she took the flashlight out and flipped the switch. Nothing. Hannah hit the switch back and forth a few more times, shook it hard, and still couldn’t get it to light up.

“Damn it,” she muttered. She opened the battery compartment and found it empty. “Perfect.”

Rifling through everything else in the cabinet didn't produce any batteries, but she managed to find some emergency candles and a lighter. Not ideal, but at least it would be something. Just as she was setting up a row of candles on the table, the power went out completely. She had pulled the curtains closed over the large windows at the side of the house, so not even the light from her neighbors' houses or the streetlight outside could come through.

Hannah struggled to get the candles in place and light them. The small amount of light they produced was comforting. Before she could light the last of the candles she had sat up, Hannah heard a loud *thunk* outside.

“What the hell?” she hissed.

Her phone's battery was low, which was why she didn't immediately think of using it as a flashlight, but right now she needed a light. She pulled the phone out of her pocket and lit it up, using the illumination to walk across the room to the window.

Hannah opened the curtains and fell backward with a scream.

Just inches from the glass was a featureless gray mask, staring menacingly right back at her.

She stumbled, dropping her phone and crushing it with her heel as she fell to the floor. She scrambled to get to her feet and saw the figure in the mask clad in a dark robe head for the front door. The doorknob shook as the figure tried to get inside, but it was locked, so at least there was that barrier. She grabbed for her phone, desperately praying to whomever might be listening that somehow it survived the direct impact of her heel into the center of it.

The broken glass sliced through her fingers as she tried to get the screen to light up. It remained dark, and Hannah bit out a profanity, dropping the useless phone to the floor as she ran for the back of the house. The doorknob had gone silent, but she didn't trust the front door. Instead, she darted through the

dark house toward the back door in the kitchen. She was all the way there before she realized she hadn't grabbed her key ring on the way. The door had three locks, including two requiring a key.

Hannah always thought she was being responsible, keeping herself safe with the multiple layers of locks. Her father had installed them when she first bought the house. He reminded her that since the back door had panes of glass in it, if the door locks operated just by thumb turns, somebody could easily punch through the window and turn the locks, allowing themselves in. The only way to keep a door like that locked securely was with a key—a key she was to never keep hanging from a nail by the side of the door; a point he made while tapping on the very nail that was already in place and had apparently been in frequent use by the original owners.

Now the locks weren't making her feel safe. They weren't protecting her. They were keeping her inside.

Her key ring was in the living room, but she also kept a spare key in the drawer. She dug through it, not caring what was falling out as she searched for the key. A smashing sound at the front of the house sounded like the window in her bedroom or one of the spare rooms shattering. Feeling desperate now, Hannah yanked the drawer completely out and dumped it over onto the floor. Without much light, it was difficult to see what she was searching through, but she could not find the key.

Heavy footsteps made her heart leap into her throat. She got to her feet and lunged for another drawer to take out a knife. Her hand wrapped around the hilt just as the figure in the gray mask appeared in the doorway to the kitchen. It was large, filling the space with a wide-legged posture.

Hannah looked around, trying to figure out what she was supposed to do. Without the key, she couldn't get out the back door, but there was only one other way out of the kitchen, and the man was blocking it. Her eyes went to the window over her sink. She wouldn't be able to simply smash through them.

Unlike the decorative window in the back door, this one was made with impact-resistant storm panes. The mullions were even sandwiched between the panes.

The figure came toward her, and Hannah swung the knife toward him. Terror sent sweat pouring down her body, but she was shivering hard enough to make it difficult to keep the weapon in her hand. He came closer, lifting his own massive blade over his head. She ducked down, just barely avoiding the blow, and managed to crawl across the floor past his feet. He kicked one heavy boot at her, catching her in the hip. Hannah cried out as she smashed into the cabinets and sank to the floor.

He came toward her, and she rolled away. Her fear didn't matter. She couldn't let him take her. Her parents had already lost Theo. She wasn't going to let them suffer through the loss of both of their children. And she refused to give even the seething spirit of Seth Hoffman the joy of claiming someone else.

She kicked upward with all her strength and managed to hit him in the lower stomach. He doubled over for just long enough to give her time to push away and scramble toward the door. He was right behind her as she ran for the living room. The tip of his blade caught her shoulder and she screamed, but didn't stop. As they got into the living room, he dodged around her so he could get in front of her and block access to the door. With her knife lying on the kitchen floor where she dropped it when she fell, Hannah was left with nothing to protect her.

She caught sight of the candles glowing on the table and grabbed one. As the figure came toward her, she launched the candle at him. It wasn't big, but it was enough to catch the sleeve of his robe on fire. The cheap synthetic costume fabric quickly melted away, leaving pools of molten material sticking to the skin of his arm. He growled at the pain and stepped back. Light flashed over the window like headlights, and his attention went right to them.

Hannah ran around the table and onto the couch, jumping off the top to land closer to the door. She turned the lock and ran out into the cold, driving rain. The lights came toward her, and as soon as she realized they weren't headlights but the beam of a flashlight bouncing as someone ran across the yard shouting her name, her legs gave out, and she dropped to the wet grass.

"Hannah!"

Someone crouched down beside her, and she looked up into the face of her next-door neighbor.

"Adrian," she gasped.

"Hannah, are you alright? What happened? I heard you screaming."

"Help," she muttered.

"I'm here," he said. "I'm here."

Hannah shook her head. "Help."

Adrian took her by her arm, easing her up to her feet. The movement caused the deep cut on the back of her shoulder to surge with pain, and she hissed. The rain poured down her face and into her eyes as he half-carried her across the street to his house. His wife waited on the porch, and when she saw them, she ran back into the house, appearing back outside in time to wrap Hannah in a thick towel as she got to the porch.

"Take her and call the police," Adrian said. "I'm going back over there."

"No!" both women shouted.

"No," Hannah said. "Please."

"What happened?"

"Adrian, call the police," Stephanie demanded, sliding up close to Hannah and wrapping her arm around her. Hannah winced at the touch, and Stephanie moved back. "What is it?"

"My shoulder."

Stephanie peeled away the towel and gasped. “Oh, God.”

Hannah’s thoughts were getting fuzzy. She felt like she was losing her grip on consciousness. The chill of the rain had gotten all the way to her bones, and her body was vibrating. But as the edges of her mind got dimmer, a warm feeling started to come over her. It flowed through her veins and tingled on her skin. It felt good, but she knew it was a bad sign.

“I need Dean,” she said, hoping it came out as more than a whisper. “Please. Dean Steele.”

Hannah didn’t know she had passed out until she opened her eyes later. She was in a hospital bed with an IV in her arm and a throbbing headache. She winced at the bright lights overhead, and they dimmed. A moment of panic flashed through her until she realized Dean had flipped a couple of the light switches down.

“Is that better?” he asked.

She had been extremely hurt and angry to realize Dean had suspected her of having something to do with the murders, but seeing him now put her at ease. At least he was doing something. He was trying. And that was more than she could say about the investigators with the police force who were actually on the case.

“You’re here,” she croaked.

He came toward the bed. “They said you asked for me. They had to look me up because you didn’t give them my number.”

“My phone was destroyed,” Hannah said.

Dean was quiet and seemed calm, but it was a fragile, unreliable type of calm. The type of calm that was a struggle to maintain and could break at any second. She didn’t want to see that happen. At least, not here.

“What happened?” he asked.

She described the terrifying night to him. “I lost consciousness at some point.”

“Blood loss and shock,” Dean said. “The doctor stitched you up. They also gave you some sedatives and pain medication, so you were asleep, not just passed out.”

“I guess that’s a good thing.”

She was clawing for normalcy, fighting to keep everything together so she didn’t fall apart.

“Hannah,” Dean said, stepping up to the side of the bed. “Who did this?”

It was enough to make her eyes fill with tears. “I don’t know.”



CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

I'm sitting at the side of Hannah's hospital bed, going over what she experienced again to try to help her find more details when two police officers step into the room. One of them is Beau Ryan, and I see Hannah's face drop, her eyes going dark.

"Of course, *you're* here," he says snidely.

"I'm surprised you still have your badge," I say.

"I'm a good cop," he says through gritted teeth.

"Or the only thing they could scrape off the bottom of the barrel around here. Trust me when I tell you I'm going to make sure you answer for the way you've handled yourself," I shoot back.

"You need to step out," Ryan says. "Officer Palmer and I need to talk to Hannah about what happened tonight."

"A real detective isn't even going to bother to come?" she asks.

"The detective is in the waiting room with your parents," Palmer tells her, earning an eye roll and an indignant shift of his weight from Beau. "He'll be in here in a minute. He just wanted us to get your basic statement."

"My parents don't know anything," she says.

“We’ll decide that,” Beau says.

Her eyes cut a scathing line through the air as she turns her head to look at him. She told me their relationship ended because it was just too hard to hold it together with the pressure and intensity of the murders around them, but that look is not one that speaks to a gentle, undramatic ending.

“*You’ll* decide what my parents know about my attack?” she asks.

“I only mean you may not be aware of what kind of information they have that could be helpful in this investigation,” he says.

“I can tell you they have no information about it. I haven’t even spoken to my parents today.” She lifts the hand of the arm that isn’t injured and pulls out her messy, tangled ponytail. “Why did you have to be here tonight? Of all the other officers in the force, why you?”

“There’s no reason for you to be like that. I’m here in a professional capacity. Our personal history has no bearing on this situation,” Beau says.

“Our personal relationship had no bearing on any situation, and yet you couldn’t keep your hands out of that one either,” she counters. “I don’t want you here. And I don’t want to talk to you about this.”

“You don’t have to talk to him,” I tell her. “You can wait until the detective gets in here.”

Beau rounds on me. “And who do you think you are telling her what she can and can’t do? I already told you that you need to leave. We need to have a discussion with Hannah.”

“I don’t have to do a single fucking thing you tell me,” I say.

“I want him here,” Hannah says. “Go get the detective and tell him I will only talk to him.”

Knowing there's nothing they can do to compel Hannah to speak with them, both officers leave the room. I notice her shaking, and I rest my hand close to her. Not touching her, but near enough that she can feel the weight of it pressing down on the mattress.

"What was that about?" I ask. "I didn't think things were bad between the two of you."

"We broke up," Hannah points out. "That rarely produces a good buddy situation afterwards."

"But that seemed a lot worse than just not buddies."

Hannah lets out a breath. "The end of our relationship wasn't good. To say the least. He was so extremely attached, but the far bigger issue was I didn't feel like he was attached to me because of any particular feelings toward me. He was attached to the thought of me—to the image of me—and definitely to the attention he got by being associated with the sister of the murder victim," she says. "It got to the point where sometimes he would be the first one to speak during an interview. Like the whole thing was affecting him so deeply and he was trying to carry a new burden through life, even though it was *my* twin brother that got killed.

"I confronted him about it, and he said I was being ungrateful for all the support he had gone out of his way to provide for me, and that I was just mad because I wasn't getting all the attention. That people were interested in hearing what he had experienced. That part got much worse after he decided he wanted to become a police officer. He'd mentioned having some sort of official career like that at times, but there was never any real commitment to it until all this. It turned into a massive bone of contention for us."

"That he wanted to be a cop?" I ask.

"No. That he was acting like he was living a little boy's cops and robbers game rather than actually doing the work of being an adult, forming relationships, and being honest and authentic," she says.

“Do you think there is any possibility at all...”

“No,” Hannah says before I even finish the question. “Beau didn’t have anything to do with the murders. First of all, I don’t think he has that much creativity and nerve in him. He likes to talk a big game, but when it comes right down to actually doing things, there’s not much substance there. Like you told me about him threatening you with his gun. You probably could have walked right up to him, wrapped your hand around the gun, and spun him around in circles with it and he wouldn’t have done anything. He wants people to just bow to him because he speaks; he doesn’t want to actually have to exert any force. He loves attention, but he really prefers not having to put any effort into earning it.

“And second, his life was very well documented when he was younger. He has one of those moms who likes to post everything online. Including several hundred pictures of the trip he was on the weekend Theo and Penny Collins were found, the birthday dinner he was having for his aunt the day police believe Samuel Freedman was murdered, and the Halloween party he was at, trying to get back with me the night Seth Hoffman and his girlfriend were murdered.”

“All right,” I say. “I had to ask.”

She rests her head back against the pillow. “I know.”

The detective comes in, and she immediately tells him I’m staying in the room while they talk. I step to the side so I’m not in his way, but I listen carefully to everything he asks and the way she answers. This situation is getting extremely dangerous. Connor Morgan was not just a fluke. This killer is active, and he’s going to keep taking people out as long as he has the opportunity. It’s obvious my suspicion of Hannah was misplaced. There were clues there, but they were circumstantial and don’t actually point to anything.

Even if she hadn’t been able to convince me herself, the events that unfolded tonight are enough. She didn’t attack herself. The severity of the wound on her back and her detailed account of how the attack happened support that.

Statements from her neighbor who heard her screams and the evidence in her house further show it.

I always hesitate to say anything is proven within an investigation until I've gotten to the end. Even in this situation, there's a chance I'm wrong. There might be the possibility of a massive cover-up to distract me and push me off the track that would eventually show her to be guilty. It isn't completely out of the realm of imagination. I've heard of people faking attacks on themselves to throw off suspicion, but I don't feel like that's what's happening right now.

Again, the evidence that puts suspicion on Hannah is circumstantial at best. There's nothing really concrete to point to her doing anything. It would be a pretty extreme response for her to fake something like this, resulting in injury and also major damage to her home, just to keep people off her scent.

More than that, though, Hannah is the ultimate connection to the original murders. This killer is hunting people who were involved. She is intricately woven into the entire situation and the investigation. This puts a massive target directly on her.

I stay with Hannah after the detective leaves until her parents come into the room. They greet me affectionately, grateful I'm here with their daughter.

"Honey, you're not going to be able to go back to your house when you're discharged," Rin tells Hannah gently. "That window is broken, the breaker box has been tampered with, there's signs of a few of the other windows being compromised, and there's fire damage in the living room. After you threw the candle on him and ran out, he must have taken the costume off and dropped it on the floor before leaving. It started burning, but fortunately, another of your neighbors heard everything going on, saw the smoke, and was able to extinguish it. There's a lot of repairs that are going to need to be done before you can go back there."

Hannah shudders. "I don't want to go back there."

“Good,” Naomi says, sounding as though she was anticipating an argument from her daughter. “Then you come home with us. You stay as long as you want to. We’ll keep you safe.”

She fights tears as she runs her hand back over Hannah’s hair. I squeeze Hannah’s hand.

“I’m going to go. Call me if you need anything. I’ll be in touch.”

“Thank you,” Rin says, shaking my hand.

“Of course.”

I walk out of the room and go down the elevator into the lobby. Before I can make it to the door, Beau Ryan, Officer Palmer, and Detective Casey bear down on me. I roll my eyes and sigh, but keep going.

“Where are you going?” Detective Casey demands.

“To my car,” I tell him.

“Stop.”

“No.”

They follow me outside. I have no intention of having a conversation with them inside the hospital that I know is going to be unpleasant.

“You are being told by law enforcement to stop,” Beau Ryan says.

“If one of you is going to arrest me, go for it,” I reply blithely.

I keep going until I get to my car and then turn around to face them.

“There,” Ryan says as if I’ve complied with him out of some sort of intimidation.

“What is it that you want?” I ask.

“An explanation. What were you doing at Hannah Nakamura’s house tonight?” Detective Casey asks.

“I already gave a statement at the scene,” I say. “And in that statement, I explained that I was not at Hannah Nakamura’s house tonight when this happened. The neighbor who rescued her, Adrian Vella, called me because she asked him to. I was only there for a very short time before the ambulance brought Hannah to the hospital. I didn’t get the story of what happened until she was awake.”

“Why would she want to talk to you?” Ryan asks, sounding bitter about the way she interacted with him.

“You’re wasting my time,” I say, clicking the button on my key ring to unlock my car.

“Now listen to me,” Detective Casey says angrily. “I’ve heard your name more times in the last week than I’ve heard my own. According to my colleagues, you just keep popping up where you don’t belong. You’re sticking your fingers into all kinds of investigations and acting like you’re somebody. You need to get it through your head that you aren’t doing any good and, in fact, are probably causing a lot of these problems. I’m going to tell you the same thing my colleagues did. Get out of our way.”

I take a step toward him. “And I’m going to tell you the same thing I’ve told every uniform I’ve had the unpleasant fortune of having to interact with over the last week. I am where I belong. I was hired by the Nakamura family to do what should have been done already by *your* department. I’m not sticking my fingers into anything, but if that’s how you insist on seeing it, you need to wrap your head around the fact that Connor Morgan is not a stand-alone investigation. He was murdered by a serial killer. The same one who killed three other people and attacked Hannah tonight, and if he isn’t stopped, he’s going to kill again.

“I’m not causing anything. These crimes are happening on *your* watch. If you’re going to be so checked out that you can’t do your jobs right, I’ll do them for you. Get away from my car.”

I go back to my door, pull it open, and get inside. They don't move until my engine roars and my taillights pop on. I drive away knowing I'm their target now. And I'm fine with that.



CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

The brief respite in the weather while Hannah was in the hospital gave me hope that the storm was going to pass over us, but the next day it has just gotten worse. I'm in the meeting room at the hotel poring over everything and trying to find that little detail that's going to blow this case wide open when my phone rings. I look at the screen and see that it's Roman Soto.

I hit the speaker button. "Hey, Roman."

"Dean?"

The connection is spotty, and his voice crackles, sounding like it's at a far distance. I pause and look at the phone.

"Roman? Are you okay?"

There's more crackling, and it sounds like he's speaking again, but I can't make out the words. Xavier looks over at me, his eyebrows pulled together in concern. The call clicks off, and before I can even call him back, a text message comes through. There are no words, only a picture: a close-up image of a hand lying in a pool of blood. In response to my reaction, Xavier comes over and looks at it. He points to something in the background.

"Those are clothing displays," he says.

“He’s at the store. Come on.”

Roman is the greeter, and unofficial security, at the department store, so it makes sense he’s there at work today. But the store should be closed by now, and with the weather getting as severe as it is, I would think they might have closed early to make sure the employees could get home safely. But that picture suggests otherwise. The rain is coming down in hard sheets, and visibility is next to nothing as I drive toward the store. I have to get there. Roman is clearly in danger, and I can’t leave him without help when he reached out to me—especially considering I’m the only one who seems willing to do it.

I call emergency services as soon as we get into the car, but it’s cut off as soon as I say I don’t actually know what was happening. The woman on the other end tartly told me it is going to take a while for anyone to get to the store to respond. With the weather as bad as it is right now, all first responders are spread extremely thin with multiple car accidents, fallen limbs, fires, and injuries. Xavier supplies his name for them to call back and check in before the dispatcher hangs up.

“At least they won’t see your name and decide they’re just going to ignore the call,” he says.

“Thank you, buddy,” I say.

I let out an angry, exasperated sound and slam my hands on the steering wheel. I’m furious, but there’s nothing I can do about it. My only option is to go to the store myself, see what’s happening, and do what I can. I’ve tried to call Roman back several times, but the phone just rings.

The crawling pace I have to maintain because of the darkness and driving rain keep cranking up my anxiety until I want to climb out of my own skin by the time we approach the store. The parking lot is desolate. I know there’s a smaller staff lot to the back of the store, but the customer lot is completely empty. Light posts at regular intervals across the pavement create a hazy glow in the growing storm, and I can see past

them to the windows at the front of the store. Some lights are on inside, but not as many as if the store were open.

I pull right up to the curb and get out. Xavier follows as I jog up to the door. The inside looks empty, which means the doors should be locked, but they automatically slide open as we approach. I run inside.

“Roman?” I shout. “Roman, it’s Dean. Where are you?”

There’s no response. The empty interior is eerie in the partial light. Aisles that are usually full of shoppers sit empty, but the lights and the freezers are still on, and several shopping carts are sitting around as if other people who had been using them just suddenly walked away from them.

“Do you see anybody?” I ask Xavier.

“No.”

He starts off farther into the store at a determined pace.

“Where are you going?” I ask.

“The picture had the clothing racks in the background. I’m going to that section,” he says.

We’ve only been to this store once, and it wasn’t to get clothes. I’m surprised at the calm confidence of his stride as he heads down the main aisle, then turns to one side.

“How do you know where you’re going?” I ask.

“What was visible of the clothing looks like men’s athletic pants, so I’m following the skies.”

I wasn’t aware the constellations could point to different departments in a store, but I glance up and realize he’s talking about the signs suspended from the ceiling. We follow them until we turn into the men’s section at the back corner of the store. The pool of blood in the center of the aisle makes my stomach turn. A drag mark through it seems to show where Roman was lying.

Running up to the blood, I look around, ducking down to peer under the clothing displays, hoping he’s somewhere

nearby. With this much blood, he's clearly hurt, but maybe he was able to drag himself somewhere.

"Roman!" I call out. But there's no response.

Outside the rain is hammering the roof, and thunder is crashing so hard it's making the ground rumble beneath my feet. Flashes of lightning outside look threatening, like they are there for the express purpose of keeping us inside.

He isn't anywhere around, and I take off toward the back of the store where there will be an office for management. The doors were unlocked, which means a member of management should still be here. I need to find them and find out how many people are supposed to be here. The door to the manager's office is standing open, and there's no one inside. I look at the desk, hoping to find a staff list or a calendar, but there's nothing written. Everything must be on the computer, but there's no way for me to access it.

The lights flicker, and I run back out into the store. As I turn back toward the men's section, something on the floor catches my attention out of the corner of my eye. A large broom is lying across the aisle, a mound of dust in front of it. I move toward it and see a small amount of blood on the pale floor. It looks like spatter from an impact, like the custodian's head hit the resin-covered concrete. That's at least three people who should be at the store right now.

Roman Soto, the store manager, and the custodian.

The lights flicker again, and I run back to the men's section. Xavier didn't follow me into the manager's office, and my stomach feels sick until I see him weaving through the displays.

"X," I call, jogging over to him. "There should be three people here at least. The manager's office is empty. I just found a broom and some blood on the floor in another aisle. I'm going to call the police again."

I pick up my phone to make the call, but it won't go through. The storm has interrupted the reception, and it won't

connect. As I'm putting my phone back into my pocket, I hear a strange mechanical sound followed by a heavy thud. Xavier and I meet eyes.

"The cage," he says.

"What? What cage?"

He takes off toward the front of the store again. All we have to do is turn into the main aisle for me to see what he's talking about. The metal security gate has dropped down over the doors. I run up to them and grab the bars, yanking to see if I can lift them, but the panel is securely locked in place. And then I hear a cascade of strings and saxophones, the soft brushing of drums, and a gentle, crooning voice absolutely blasting over the loudspeakers, so loud it nearly distorts my ears.

"What the fuck?" I ask aloud.

Xavier and I didn't just walk into the aftermath of a crime.

There's someone here.



CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

The music cranks up louder, and Xavier cringes, rolling his head back and forth as his eyes squeeze closed and he tries to hold himself together. I highly doubt whoever is doing this turned the music on to torment him. The people in Harper who have encountered him know Xavier isn't like them, but they have no idea how immediate and intense his sensory overload can be.

It isn't being played to bother him or to stop him from being able to think. I think it's being played to stop us from being able to hear footsteps. The hard floor makes footsteps echo through a space like this when it's empty and quiet, which would give us the advantage of knowing where this person is even if we can't see them. With the music playing, we don't have that. All we have is the voice of Frank Sinatra telling us all about strangers in the night.

An instant later, the lights go out, plunging us into darkness broken only by the meager emergency lights up toward the top of the walls. They provide a small amount of red glow that would be enough to help people inside evacuate if it were an option, but not enough to be able to actually see what's around us.

The storm rages on outside. And we are locked inside the store with a killer we can't hear or see until they are right on top of us.

"Let's check the other door," I tell Xavier.

I know the security gate is going to be over it, but we have to do something; and if I can get him thinking about something specific, it will help him focus beyond the obnoxious music. Keeping our backs turned to the front wall of the store so we can look out over the open space as much as possible, we move toward the other set of sliding doors on the opposite side. The gate is locked in place just like the front doors. I try them anyway. This is not the time to skip something simple and possibly end this. They don't budge.

"We have to get to the back," I say. "We'll check the employee entrance and the loading dock."

It means crossing through the store, but there's no other choice. My phone won't connect, but it still works, so I turn it on and shine the flashlight beam in front of me. Xavier follows suit, and we sweep the lights back and forth as we start down the main aisle. It's the most exposed route, but it's also the most direct.

As we make our way down the aisle, it occurs to me that this is the feeling haunted houses try to create. But this is real. I'm not looking at props or waiting for somebody in a mask with a fake weapon to pop out of a closet at me, then disappear back into it just as quickly. I just want to get to the back of the store and find a way out.

My flashlight sweeps through the grocery section to one side while Xavier's splashes brief streams of illumination through the tightly arranged racks of clothes to the other. When it catches the dark figure standing in the center of one of the freezer aisles, my mind doesn't process it until a second later. By the time I turn my light back, the figure is gone.

"Xavier. He's over there," I say.

We move farther to the side of the aisle closer to the clothes and move faster. I keep my flashlight trained beside me, and soon the figure cuts through the beam, running out from the end of another aisle ahead of us. He's wearing a Halloween costume just like the one Hannah described, but I know that one was burned and left in her house, so he must have replaced it. The featureless gray mask looks like stone, creating an unnerving image as he descends on us with his knife held high.

"Run!" I tell Xavier and push him into the clothing section.

The beam of his light goes dark. I don't like not being able to see where he is, but it's a brilliant move. If I can't see him, the man in the costume can't either. The music is loud enough to cover Xavier's movements, so he fully disappears within a few seconds. I act like I'm going to run right toward the figure, but at the last second dip to the side and run down one of the freezer aisles. Having the light to guide me is reassuring, but I know I can't keep it on.

Having the light on will just make me easier to chase. It will be more difficult to navigate the store in the dark, but with the emergency lights, I'll manage. I get to the back of the store, change direction so he sees my light, then turn it off and immediately press myself to the end of one of the freezer displays. I've gotten accustomed to the sound of the music enough that my brain is able to filter it so I can focus more on sounds that don't fit with the repeated rhythm. The outlying sounds are him. They move away from me, pause, then turn and start toward me.

Aware that if I'm able to pick out sounds, he likely is, too, I hold my breath and stand as still as possible. I want to confuse him, to keep him from knowing how to chase after me so easily. The sound of his steps pauses again. There's just enough red light coming from one of the emergency panels that I can see a slight shift of movement a few aisles down. I can't just stand here and wait. I slide around the corner of the freezer and take off again.

I turn at the main aisle and move away from the back of the store. That's where I need to go, but I'm sure he heard me tell Xavier that. Which means that's where he's going. Instead, I go toward the front of the store and run directly along the cash registers. When I am about halfway across the store, I turn and run for the rows of display racks taking up the center section. I run into several of them, sending the clothing toppling to the floor and making noise. Speed has to take precedence over stealth sometimes.

I want to call out for Xavier. I need to know he's okay and let him know that I am still here, but I stay quiet. In front of me, I hear the crash of a rack falling and know the killer has caught on to my path. I run into the shadows. I'm getting used to the different degrees of darkness, so I'm able to see the movement to my side. I shove one of the displays at him to block his path and dart for the next aisle.

Ahead of me to one side is a darker area that I remember from walking through the store earlier; it's the women's fitting room. I head toward it, knowing it is a direct path from that structure to the doors that lead into the warehouse section of the back. As I'm passing by it, I feel a hand clamp down on my shoulder and take me off my feet. I shout as I crash to the floor, but another hand covers my mouth to silence me as I'm dragged backward.

Dropping me in a heap against a wall, the hand leaves me, and a brief flash of light glows under Xavier's face in front of me. There's something on his head. He climbs up onto the bench, and I climb up with him. Moving close up beside me, he puts his head near mine.

"I borrowed headphones. I'll need to pay for them," he whispers into my ear.

A second later the glow returns, but it's contained rather than beaming upward. I realize he has tucked it under his shirt, essentially producing a lantern. Another shirt draped over the top of it blocks all light from escaping over the top of the fitting room so we remain invisible. He quickly steps down

from the bench and slides the lock of the door into place. He gets back onto the bench and comes to my ear again.

“Be right back.”

“No, Xavier, don’t go out there,” I say even though I know he can’t hear me over the music and the noise-silencing headphones he took from electronics to help himself cope.

I try to grab hold of him to stop him from leaving, but he gets down from the bench. Instead of going through the door, he lowers himself onto the floor. Flat on his belly, he slithers his way under the adjoining wall between this cubicle and the next. He’s gone for long enough that I’m getting nervous, but then I see him wiggle his way back through like a glowworm. I realize he was locking the doors of each of the cubicles. Anything to confuse and take up time.

I lift up one of his headphones so I can speak directly into his ear. “We’re going to have to get out of here.”

“Garden center,” Xavier says back.

“What?”

“There’s always a door to the outside in the garden center. It’s on the other side of the store.”

I think this over for a few seconds and realize adjusting the plan is the best thing to do. I hadn’t even thought about an alternative entrance, but he’s right. There is always access to the outside from the garden section. At this time of year, it won’t be full of seeds and gardening implements but Halloween decorations and inflatables for those preparing well in advance for the impending Christmas season.

I nod and am about to step down from the bench when I hear the door on the opposite end of the structure shake. I grab Xavier’s arm, and he reaches under his shirt to turn off his phone. Everything goes dark. My eyes are no longer used to the dimness, so it feels even inkier than before. I close them, waiting for the flickering of lights on the backs of my eyelids to stop before opening them again. By then the sound of the door has changed to a smash, like he’s trying to kick the door

down. I pull Xavier close and point to the top of the partial wall. It's ridiculous and dangerous, but it's going to be our best option.

"I'll go over first," I say into Xavier's ear. "Follow right behind me."

I put the headphone back down and reach up, grabbing the top of the partial wall so I can pull myself up and over. Rather than just dropping, I let myself hang there for a second, feeling beneath me with my feet. If I'm remembering the angle correctly, there should be a table almost up against the wall where the employees stack discarded hangers and clothes that had been left in the cubicles. If I can get my feet on it, I can lower onto that rather than jumping down. It will reduce the chance of me getting hurt, but probably more importantly, it will keep down the noise considerably.

My toes hit the table and relief comes over me. I take a slight leap of faith by putting the balls of both feet on the edge and letting go. I sway back and manage to drop into place on the table. Once balanced, I stand up so I can help Xavier over. I can just see enough in the dark to make out his form. He pulls up, enough for his head to come over, then one leg appears. There's a tense moment where I'm not sure which direction he's going to end up, but he manages to make it over, and I grab him, pulling him down.

We climb down from the table and start running. He has made it to the aisle in front of me when the man comes around toward us. A sharp feeling bites into the back of my shoulder, just like Hannah's injury. It doesn't feel as long or as deep as I manage to twist away from the impact of the knife. I twist and come up with a hard punch just beneath his chin. The man stumbles back and drops, just as Dean Martin is singing something about a kick in the head.

As much as I want to continue with him for a few more seconds, this is our opportunity to find our way out. I can see Xavier's glowworm shirt in the distance, and I chase after it. When I'm close, it turns off. When I get to him, I notice him

stuffing something into his pocket. I don't have time to question it right now. I know I didn't get enough of the killer's jaw to completely render him unconscious. He's just dazed, but will be back up on his feet soon.

The end of the store where the garden center is located is slightly lighter than the other side. Though the storm is still intense outside, some light from the outside edge of the building and the parking lot is filtering through the outdoor area and into the large bank of doors.

The doors are locked just like the other ones, but when I push against them, I notice them move just slightly.

"X, help me," I say. "Push back on the doors."

I put all my force into pushing against the door, and it moves just slightly. We push again, and it moves a bit more. But it's only inches, and we need feet. I can hear him coming now. The song has changed to a softer tune that is still intensely loud, but makes it easier to pick out the different sounds of him crashing through the displays and running along the hard floor.

"Keep going," I say. "Keep pushing."

I grunt against my gritted teeth as pain rushes through the cut on my back at the exertion of my muscles, but I don't stop pushing. The door moves another small amount. I look up and see the man bearing down on us. I turn to him and rush him, tucking my shoulder to catch him in the stomach. We both hit the ground, and I hear the knife fall from his hand and skitter across the floor. I don't waste a second to scramble to it on my hands and knees, but I don't want to use it.

It's too dangerous to even have a weapon in my hands during a conflict like this. No matter how much control I think I have, he could get the knife back. To prevent that, I stand up partway and throw the knife as hard as I can into the depths of the store. The man lets out an angry roar, but over it, I hear Xavier shouting my name.

I look over my shoulder and see that he's managed to push the doors apart several inches. It's nowhere near enough space for me to push through, but he might be able to.

"Go!" I shout, gesturing at him to run. "Go!"

The costumed man forces me off him and comes down on top of me. As I grab hold of his arms and struggle with him, I look over at the door and see Xavier manage to shove himself through the small open space. It's a very tight fit, but he does it and runs for the door to the fenced outdoor area. The man and I grapple, and I get a few good punches in, biting through the pain of taking a couple as well. I try to claw the mask away from his face, but it's a hood, surrounding his head completely and going beneath his shirt. I can't get it off even after pushing away the looser hood of his cloak.

I finally manage to throw him off and get to my feet. Xavier is coming back to the door, and I run over to him.

"It's bars," he says. "It's metal bars. You can fit."

"I can't fit through here," I tell him. "You go. Find a place your phone works and call for help."

"I'm not leaving you."

"Go!"

"Dean!"

Xavier reaches a hand out to gesture behind me, and I turn just in time to catch something massive and hard across the side of my head. I drop to my knees, my vision going gray. Another blow, and I'm done.

I come to with a hand around my ankle as I'm dragged across the floor. I try to fight free, but the grip and angle make it so I can't get control of my body. Behind me, there's a sudden loud smashing sound. My leg drops out of the man's grasp, and there's a blast of gunfire. He runs, and I pull myself to my feet as fast as I can. I'm still dizzy, but I manage to orient myself to the doors.

But instead of open doors, I see a hole and a cinderblock. It hasn't shattered the reinforced glass, but it broke through enough that Xavier is pushing large chunks of it out of the way. I get to him, and he reaches through, taking my hand to pull me to the other side.

"Xavier, why the hell do you have a gun?" I ask.

He points to a vibrant orange piece of plastic lying on the smooth cement floor a few feet away.

"Flare gun. I'm also going to have to pay for that," he says.

"You found that out here?" I ask.

"Some people are very irresponsible, Dean."

I don't know if that's confirmation that somebody had brought the flare gun out into the garden section and just left it among the Halloween decorations, or if it is basic commentary about society as a whole. It doesn't really matter. The sound was enough to get me away from the attacker.

Xavier and I are climbing through the black metal bars of the garden center when two squad cars with lights and sirens race into the parking lot. I stop on the sidewalk and can't help but roll my eyes. The storm has eased up a bit, but it is still pouring and thunder rolls around us. I'm glad for the feeling of the rain and the chill of the air on my overheated face.

That bit of calm is short-lived. Soon it's a flutter of officers with their guns pulled on us, screaming accusations and making us lay down on the concrete. We identify ourselves, and it doesn't seem to make things better. Xavier and I spend the next half an hour trying to explain what happened. Somebody is able to get the lights back on in the store, and we show them the abandoned broom with blood splatter and the pool of blood. I compare it to the picture Roman Soto sent to me.

"But I found this," Xavier says, reaching into his pocket. "It was on the floor."

I forgot that I saw him putting something into his pocket, and now when I lean forward to see what it is, I feel something between hope and fury. It's a capsule from a package of fake blood. There are countless more of them hanging on a display in the Halloween costume section. I saw the blood on the floor in a picture and then in a moment of heightened worry. I bet if I go back and look at it now, I'll be able to see that it doesn't look exactly right. It is fake.

I can only hope that means Roman is still alive, and I will be able to find him.

"If this is some kind of hoax..." the officer starts.

"This isn't a hoax. It might be fake blood on the floor, but I didn't send myself this picture. And none of the employees who should be here right now, including the manager, the custodian, and retired detective Roman Soto, aren't anywhere to be found. I can't get in touch with Roman. The person who attacked us perfectly matched the description of the person who broke into Hannah Nakamura's house earlier," I say.

"And I know for a fact," the officer shoots back, "the costume that person was wearing was burned and found in her living room. It is now sitting in an evidence locker at the police precinct."

"There are dozens of that exact costume right over there in the Halloween section. It wouldn't be difficult for the killer to get another one," I point out.

"Or for somebody else to get one and play what they think is a really funny joke," the officer says.

I turn to show him the blood running down my back. "This is not a joke. I threw the knife in that direction. If you go look for it, you'll find it. You're not going to find any fingerprints on it because he was wearing gloves. But I assure you I did not stab myself."

"Hey, sir," one of the younger officers who was sent to search the entire store says as he comes back toward us. "Looks like something happened in one of the freezers."

“The freezer?”

“Yeah. One of them is standing open, and it looks like blood inside. Not the fake stuff.”

“I suggest you check the Halloween section,” I say. “Look at all the decorations and set pieces. Make sure none of them are recently living.”

It’s a relief when we get confirmation that none of the missing people were found integrated into Halloween decorations at the store, but it still leaves three people unaccounted for. An ambulance arrives, and despite my protests, they load me into the back and bring me to the hospital.



CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

No matter how much I told them I felt fine, the medical team insisted on putting a couple of stitches in my back and keeping me in the hospital overnight for observation. They were concerned about the blows to my head since I reported blacking out for a few seconds, but scans came back normal, and now I've been sitting up in bed for the last several hours waiting for them to discharge me.

Xavier has a couple of scrapes from forcing his way through the door, but was cleaned up and discharged within an hour. They let him stay in the room with me, and he's asleep on the couch, curled up in a tight ball under a white blanket. I wish I had my notes with me. All I can do is scan through my phone, running searches on any phrases or ideas that come into my head. I've read all the news coverage of what happened last night over and over. It isn't much. When the storm finally died down, most of the attention of the media went to the extensive damage caused throughout the town.

A few brief articles give vague, veiled details about what they call an apparent break-in at the store and some evidence of a violent altercation. There is a single line mention of the possibility of missing individuals, with the caveat that none have been reported missing by family but have simply not

responded to attempts to reach them. Xavier and I are not mentioned by name, and no link is made to the attack on Hannah or the Hallows Eve Murders.

It's still early, and I can understand the police not wanting to create even more hysteria and fear as Halloween gets closer, but the dismissiveness pricks at my skin.

Xavier wakes up, and we have an unsatisfying hospital breakfast before the doctor finally comes in for a final check and says I'm cleared for discharge. I would have happily just taken the IV out myself and gone about my day, but I have to wait for the nurse to come and do all the finishing touches before I can get dressed. Those minutes of waiting before I know I get to leave feel almost as long as the rest of this stay.

As we are crossing through the lobby on the way out of the hospital, I see Hannah and Asher come inside. Her eyes light up when she sees me, and she rushes over to hug me. I groan as she grabs my bandaged cut, and she steps back.

"I'm sorry. Are you okay?"

"A souvenir of last night. Matches yours just about perfectly," I say.

She looks like she's fighting back tears as she lets out a short laugh.

"Well, it seems I'm returning the favor, huh?"

I look around at the lobby I passed through not long ago when I came to check on Hannah after her attack.

"Yeah, we really need to stop meeting like this. How did you know I was here?" I ask.

"Xavier texted me," she says.

I glance over at him. "Progress."

"What happened?" she asks, lowering her voice.

"If we can get out of here, I'll tell you the whole story," I say. "I hate hospitals when I'm the one getting prodded and being told I can't leave."

She nods, and we go out into the parking lot. I suggest we go somewhere for coffee, and she points me in the direction of a nearby coffee shop. We drive there separately and meet just a couple minutes later. They are taking their heating system very seriously inside the coffee shop, and I feel like I can't breathe almost immediately when we go inside. We tell the waitress we're going to move outside to the patio and find a table near one of the firepits they have set up. The outdoor area is much more comfortable with plenty of heat coming from the propane-controlled flames.

Asher pushes up the sleeves of his sweater as he sits down across from me.

"Dean, I wanted to say thank you so much for being there for Hannah the other night. I hate so much that I wasn't here. I was there earlier in the night, and I left because one of my buddies was having trouble with his girlfriend. Hannah asked me to stay, and I wish so much that I had. I couldn't even check in with her. The lake house didn't have any reception, so I had no idea that anything even happened until I called Hannah to let her know I was getting close to home. I really appreciate that you were there for her," he says.

"I am too," I say.

I notice the way Xavier is looking at him, and later when it's just the two of us again in the meeting room of the hotel, I see him staring at the victim brain web.

"What is it?" I ask.

He shakes his head. "I don't know. Something."

He continues to contemplate while I add the apparent victims from the store, trying to piece together why they would be the targets of the same killer. Roman Soto is fairly obvious. He was the original investigator for the first three murders and also worked on the second set of murders before his retirement. But I don't understand why the manager or the custodian would fit with his motivation.

It takes a little while, but finally, I find at least a vague connection. It isn't a link to the murders themselves, but to Seth Hoffman.

"The custodian, Robert Glenn, was in AV Club with Seth Hoffman," I say. "Look, there's a picture of them doing one of their projects on the school archive site." I show Xavier the image on the website. "But that's the only connection I can find. It doesn't look like they were particularly close, but it also doesn't look like they had any sort of issues between them. He's not listed in any of the coverage of the first crimes, including the interview lists from the people who were at the haunt. I don't understand why he would be targeted."

"Kenneth Chisholm's brother said that Kenneth played baseball with Asher, right?" Xavier asks.

"Right. Which gives him two links to the murders. One from a few years ago, and one from now with Hannah."

Xavier is staring down at the paper again, biting down on his bottom lip and nodding subtly like a bobblehead doll. I think of the interaction at the coffee shop that seemed to bother Xavier. The way Asher was acting felt strange to me, but I couldn't exactly place it. There was something overeager about the way he was talking. Though he was saying he had been worried about Hannah, his tone didn't match the words. I've known Xavier long enough to know you can't always judge a person's feelings and intentions by the tone of their voice, but having interacted several times with Asher already, the way he was talking stood out.

On a whim, I search for Asher in the archives. I know he attended the same school as Kenneth Chisholm because they were on the baseball team together, which means he also went to school with Hoffman. It only takes a quick search to locate a page dedicated to the baseball team from the year Kenneth and Asher played together. Each one of the players has a short description with a picture of them, and I pull up the one for Asher.

As you would expect, it starts with a description of his contributions to the baseball team and a bit of sad commentary on the injury that cost him most of his season. But it's the second part of the biography that interests me.

“Apparently, Asher has quite the artistic streak,” I tell Xavier. “This says he was known among his teammates for his creativity and was particularly celebrated for legendary costumes at the annual Halloween party.”

Our eyes meet, and I can see he has the same thought I do. Asher was a few years behind Seth Hoffman, so we find the membership rosters for the AV Club for the years he was in school. I'm disappointed when his name doesn't show up on any of them.

“Wait,” Xavier says. “Not film. Seth Hoffman was in AV Club and the writing groups because he was interested in writing screenplays and creating films. If Asher was known for his Halloween costumes —”

“The theater department,” I say.

The search takes seconds, and there he is: *Asher Dawson, costume design, makeup, prosthetics.*

I immediately grab my phone. My first thought was to call Roman Soto, but my chest tightens like a metal band is cinched over it when I remember he's still missing. Instead, I search through the staff list for the haunt and find the head of the costuming department. I search for her in the school's theater department and find her there two years ahead of Asher. Her profile immediately shows up on social media, and as soon as I send her a message asking for her help, she calls me. I hang up after a brief call with my heart beating a little faster.

“Asher was never an official staff member of the haunt, but Camille Brown, the head of the costume department for the haunt, remembered him from high school. She said he had incredible skills. He could create monsters and zombies out of just makeup and latex. He looked like he had gone to school

for years for it. As soon as she took over the costuming department, she wanted him to work there, but he said it wasn't something he was interested in.

“But, he did come in at the beginning of every season three years in a row to help with the makeup and prosthetic design. Then on some of the busiest days of the season, he would come in and help if he was available.”

“He was that talented and known for his ability to do those particular effects, but wasn't interested when he was offered an actual job doing it?” Xavier asks, sounding unsure.

“Yep. Camille told me she was really surprised by that, considering how much he loved gruesome stuff and how much he used to talk about things like serial killers,” I say.

“Those aren't the same,” Xavier says.

I shake my head. “No, they aren't.”

As the afternoon wears on, my research focuses fully on Asher. Spiraling deep into recesses of the internet most people don't know exist, I discover a different person living just beneath the smiling surface. A person whose obsession with murder and the people who commit them goes far beyond any I'd ever encountered. He doesn't just like to read about them or watch TV shows about them the way many people do. He's entranced by them.

Much of his writings are secured by password protection only for members of websites I have no interest in associating myself with on my personal computer. But I see enough.

While Xavier explores social media, creating a timeline of his movements over the last few weeks, I call the community center to inquire about the class where Hannah and Asher apparently met. They are able to check their roll of registered students and confirm the two of them were registered for the same class and according to their records, both fulfilled all requirements for it.

The records also show Asher joined the class nearly a week after Hannah. And yet, her name appears in two of the

blog posts I found from well before this. The rest is written in a form of code I'm sure we'll be able to crack with a little attention. There are also several incidences of him liking pictures on other people's profiles that include Hannah, though not on her profile directly. To me, it looks like subtle stalking behavior.

"Did you find either of them?" I ask Xavier.

"Yes," he says, tilting the end of his marker toward the timeline he's been sketching on the paper.

It's exceptionally detailed, as I would expect from Xavier, down to chronicling the meals Asher posted about and any time he, Hannah, or anything having to do with either of them were mentioned.

"Gold Room until ten," I read. "The night Hannah was attacked?"

"Mmmm-hmmm," Xavier says.

"That's hours after Hannah says he came over and told her they were leaving for the lake house," I say.

"How far away is the lake house?" Xavier asks.

I shrug. "A couple of hours maybe."

"Well, it looks like it took Asher at least three," he says.

"What do you mean?"

He turns his phone toward me to show me a post made by Damian, one of the friends Asher was hanging out with that night. The timestamp and comment note that Damian and Brent arrived at the lake house at nearly midnight. Xavier's finger comes up over the top of the phone and tugs the screen up to scroll through the posts. I see the next post is from almost an hour later.

Did you get lost, Asher? Leave it to you to forget how to get somewhere you've been to a dozen times.

In the comment section is a response from Asher.

Be there in ten, ass. Had to hit the head. PSA: don't make a meal of all the appetizers on bar menus.

I hand the phone back to Xavier and pick up my own. Hannah answers on the first ring.

“Dean?”

“Are your parents home with you?” I ask.

“No,” she says. “I mean, I’m not at my parents’ house anymore. Asher was really worked up about everything happening and really wanted me to come be here with him. I thought about it, and I know I’m a target. This guy left me alive once. I have a feeling he isn’t the type that likes to leave things unfinished. I don’t want to bring anything like that near my parents. Asher and I have a far better chance of protecting ourselves without getting them involved.”

The back of my neck stings, and my heart feels high up in my chest.

“Is Asher there with you?” I ask.

“No. He’s at work. But I have all the doors and windows locked, the curtains all closed, and the security system on.”

“Good. I need you to go into a room that locks, lock it, and don’t come out no matter what,” I say.

“What? What are you talking about?” she asks.

“Hannah, please listen to me. I am coming over there right now. I need you to lock yourself into a room and do not come out, not for anyone, until I get there. Unless you hear my voice, do not open the door. I will call you when I get there, and then you can come get me from the door. Do you understand?” I ask.

“No,” she says. “I don’t understand. What is going on?”

“I can’t explain right now. I just need you to trust me and do this for me.”

“Okay,” she finally says.

“Thank you.”

Xavier and I rush for the car. I think I know what’s going on, and it is more horrifying than I even imagined.



CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Hannah looks understandably confused and upset when she comes to the door to let me in. Xavier and I go inside and I make sure she locks the doors again before we sit down.

“Do you remember the night you found Connor Morgan’s body, and Asher went to get food?”

“Yes,” she says.

“And I went with him.”

“I know.”

“While we were in the car, he and I talked about your relationship. He told me how you met—that you haven’t known each other for long—only a couple of years,” I say.

“Yeah. We didn’t know each other when we were younger. I don’t even think I knew he existed. We went to different high schools.”

“I know that. You met at a class at the community center. But did you know that he signed up for that class almost a week after it started? Well after you signed up for it? And then you just happened to have so many things in common and get along so well?” I ask.

“What are you saying?” she asks.

I tell her everything I uncovered about Asher and his connection to Seth Hoffman, noting the makeup and costuming he did for many of the AV Club projects and the fact that both of them show up in several of the blogs and forums discussing murderers. I showed her the pictures we found, the social media posts, and pictures of the timelines.

“Do you think any of this is a coincidence?” I ask.

Hannah draws in a breath that rattles in her throat. “It’s possible. It’s always possible.” The breath drains from her. “But it would also be very easy for someone to find me since I was splashed all over the news after Theo’s death.”

She’s visibly upset, her face flushed, and tears start to form in her eyes. I notice her starting to twirl the ring from Asher around her finger as she rocks back and forth on the couch.

“Should I make her tea?” Xavier asks.

I nod, and he heads for the kitchen. I move closer to Hannah on the couch.

“What are you thinking?” I ask.

“I didn’t want it to be true,” she whispers.

Those words are like ice water running down my spine.

“What do you mean?” I ask.

She glances at me, then looks at her phone where it sits on the table. “I might have found something.”

“Show me.”

She picks up her phone and scrolls through a few pages of social media until she finds a picture of Penny Collins, the second victim. She zooms in and points to her hand. She’s wearing the ring Asher gave Hannah.

“It isn’t just like it. It’s the exact same,” she says. “You can see right here where it was resized and the jeweler didn’t smooth the gold well. If you look at the picture, it’s there.”

She runs her fingertip along the same flaw in the picture that's apparent on the ring on her finger. She takes it off and hands it to me. I flip it back and forth in my palm a couple times before closing my fingers over it.

"Does Asher have any kind of storage room here? A locked closet? Anything like that?" I ask.

"Not here. But he does have a storage unit," she says.

"Do you have a key to it?"

"No."

I think for a second. "Can you show me where it is?"



Asher's storage unit is a tiny, indoor compartment at a family-owned center in the next town over. Hannah explains to me that he told her he'd had the unit since right after high school, when it was the only one he could afford because he was a stubborn kid who didn't want to accept help from his parents. She never had any reason to question it. There wasn't any reason to.

Now she presses her hand to her stomach like she feels sick as we stand outside the door and look at the lock on it.

"Does this place have security cameras?" I ask.

"I doubt it," Hannah says. "This doesn't exactly look like the kind of place that would go to the trouble of hiding them."

"Hey, X," I say.

"On it."

Xavier wriggles his way in between Hannah and the door and draws a small kit of tools out of his pocket. It looks like a credit card holder and contains various tiny implements. It was a gift from me the second Christmas we spent together. After everything he has taught me and all the ways he's made me see the world and life differently, I wanted to feel like I had at least some of the same effect on him. He told me I did, more

than I'd ever know, but there was something he particularly admired and would love to learn.

How to pick locks.

Like I've said, I have my ways.

It turns out, he's even better at it than I am. The fact that he knew he couldn't use his skill on the complex computer-controlled locks of the security gates was an extra level of torment for him in the store. But he doesn't face the same resistance now. A few clicks later, the door is open.

A white cord dangles down from a single lightbulb in the middle of the room. Tugging it creates a haze of sickly light throughout a space barely bigger than a walk-in closet. It isn't large, but rows of shelves and a table at the back holding crates and boxes are packed full.

"What are we looking for?" Hannah asks.

"Anything," I say and take a crate down from the nearest shelf. "Just start looking."

The first couple of boxes we go through are full of the mundane kinds of items you'd expect to find in any storage unit. Old clothes. Some holiday decorations that look like he was gifted them as a child or inherited them from an older relative. Yearbooks from school. I was starting to think I might have been far off base again when Hannah opens a plastic bag that was sitting on the floor and pulls out the robe I remember seeing on the figure at the store.

She shudders. "It's the same one. It looks exactly like what my attacker was wearing." At the bottom of the bag is the gray mask. "It smells like smoke."

It's just one thing, but it's enough to reinvigorate the search. The next box I open is stuffed with envelopes. As I take them out and read the addresses, I can't believe what I'm seeing.

"Every one of these is a letter from a convicted killer," I say. I open one of the envelopes and read the letter inside.

“Asher. Thank you for your letter. You have no idea how much it means to me to know someone is out there thinking about me and knows the truth about what I did.”

“Trying to say he’s innocent?” Hannah asks.

“No. Defending what he did as the right thing,” I say. I look through the box. “There are dozens of them. Different killers. Some for years.”

As we continue to go through the unit, our pile of evidence continues to grow. Drawings. Journals full of musings about Asher’s aspirations to kill. Videos of Asher showing off weapons and chillingly recording places like wooded areas, a park, a lake, and an abandoned building. A conversation with Seth detailing what they appreciate about the styles of different famous serial killers and what they would do differently or the same.

Hannah opens a small box and gasps, her hand coming up to cover her mouth. She draws an earring out of the box and shows it to me.

“Do you recognize it?” I ask.

“It’s mine,” she says. “I was wearing it the night I found Theo. I lost it in the maze when I was in there with Cain before going with my friends. The only way Asher could have it now is if he was there that night. And the only reason he would keep it is because he knew it was mine. He was watching.”

She moves a piece of cloth out of the box, and it clatters to the floor. I pick it up and look inside.

We’ve found the jacket patch.

“Hannah, I need you to go to your parents’ house. Stay there until you hear from me again,” I say.

“What’s happening?” she asks.

“I know what’s going on. I’m going to get the other victims,” I say.

“I want to come with you,” she says.

“No. It’s too dangerous. You need to go to your parents’ house and stay there until you hear from me again. I will get in touch with you as soon as I can.”



CHAPTER THIRTY

After following Hannah to her parents' house and watching her go inside, I call the police station and tell them to meet me at the haunted attraction. I don't bother to wait for a response. Whether they take me seriously or not doesn't matter. I know that's where I need to go.

Rather than going to the spot where we've parked the other times we've come to the haunt, I find the staff parking area Hannah had described and park there. It's empty, but when I get out of the car, I see deep tracks in the rain-softened dirt that show someone else has been here recently.

Xavier and I run past the staff building and beyond the row of defunct games and food booths. I know exactly where I'm going. I should have thought of it before. The costume wasn't an accident. It wasn't random. He chose it because of the assignments from the night of Theo's death. It's the same costume Seth Hoffman wore when he took the place of an actor who was meant to be in the haunted hayride but called out that night.

The woods are thick and foreboding as we run toward what was once a wide path into them but is gradually being reclaimed by Mother Nature. Several yards into the woods we come across an old wagon. It looks like it was used for the

hayride that last night of the attraction and then abandoned right there when the police cleared the haunt.

We keep going, and soon pieces of the former displays start to appear. Props sit in piles of leaves, taken over by vines. Buildings not crafted to withstand weather sag under years of rain, snow, heat, and cold. The impact is tremendous after only four years. It wouldn't be long until these woods swallow all of this completely.

“Dean, look.”

I follow Xavier's point and see a small cabin set in front of us. Set up on the porch is a rocking chair. The scarecrow sitting in it shows no signs of age or weather. My stomach flips. I run to the cabin and step up onto the porch. The hands resting on the scarecrow's lap are covered in cuts and bruises. There's heavy red staining on one side. Fake blood. A sick joke. But it tells me what I need to know.

I move aside the hat and find Roman Soto's face.

“Shit,” I gasp. I press my fingertips to the side of his neck and feel nothing. “Shit. He's dead.” I head down the steps. “Keep going. There are still two people missing.”

I don't have the eerie, uncomfortable feeling I've had before exploring the haunt. This time it's determination and anger. We go by several more displays and search the props for any sign of the other two victims, but find nothing. Time is going by quickly, and the space between the trees is getting darker. The strobe lights arranged at occasional intervals throughout the woods aren't going to light up tonight. We're going to be left in blackness with only our phones' flashlights to guide us.

Though my main focus is looking for the two missing people, I keep my awareness sharp in case Asher is lurking nearby. The darkness is gathering quickly, and I take out my phone and switch on the flashlight to guide my way. Finally, we turn a corner and discover a pair of cages suspended from trees on either side of the path. Sharpened blades stick out of

the trees, their points just inside the perimeter of the cage so if it moves, it could slice the bodies curled up inside.

My heart sinks until I notice one of the cages shift just slightly. The blade comes close to the body inside which contracts. The person is alive.

“Robert Glenn,” I call up toward the cages. “Isaiah Baker.”

The other cage shifts, and I let out a breath. They are both alive.

“Help,” one of them says.

“My name is Dean. I’m here to help you. Are you hurt?”

“Yes,” one of them says. “But not badly.”

“Good. That’s good. Can you move?”

“No. The blades.”

“Don’t think about the blades. Can you move your body? Is anything broken? Do you have the space?”

“Yes.”

“Are there locks on the cages?”

“No.”

“Good. Okay. Hold on. Just hold on. We’re going to get you down,” I say.

I turn around and realize I can’t see Xavier. I call out for him, and he comes down the path with his arms full of props and pieces from the sets. His mind is already churning. He can see something in his head, and he’s going to build it. I talk to the two victims as we work, hoping to calm them as the darkness grows and the impending feeling of danger starts to grow. Xavier works quickly, but without tools or other equipment, he has to be even more creative than usual.

When the makeshift climbing structure is in place, I climb up onto it and look into the first cage. A younger face turns to look at me, and I know this is Robert.

“Robert?” I ask. He nods. “Hi. I’m Dean. Come on. I’m going to help you climb down.”

He shakes his head. “The blades. I don’t want to get stabbed.”

“You’re going to be fine,” I tell him. “You’re going to be fine. They aren’t real. They’re just props. Like everything else.” I carefully twist the cage so the opening faces the side and hold onto it as tightly as I can, leaning back against the frame of the structure Xavier built. It isn’t sturdy, but it’s enough. I just have to pray it holds up. “Come on. Just put your legs out and climb down.”

It takes a while, but Robert finally eases himself out of the cage and sits down on the ground, his head on his knees, shaking as he sobs with relief. I move over and do the same with Isaiah, reassuring him he can get out without being hurt because the blades aren’t real.

With both men out of the cages, I feel relief, but also a heavy sense of anticipation. This isn’t the end. This is not how this was designed to go.

“Asher is here. I know he is,” I say to Xavier. “I need to get them to a safe place.”

We are closer to the end of the hayride trail than the beginning, so we continue on. Eventually, we end up back out in the open space, and I have a choice to make: I could try to get them all the way to the staff building, or I could settle for a makeshift shelter that will keep them protected for now until the rescue squad can get here.

I decide on one of the food booths, a narrow station advertising cold drinks and snacks. I don’t want to open any of the booths that used to prepare food, knowing they haven’t been touched in four years and are likely infested with pests and rot. This one has the lowest chance of a severe infestation and may offer some relief to the men left hanging in those cages for two days.

We get the door to the booth open and look inside. It's surprisingly clean and dry inside. Whoever built this booth did it with the intention of using it for many years to come. There are cases of bottled water and drinks sitting on the floor along with cardboard boxes of assorted bags of snacks. They are four years old, but that doesn't stop both men from tearing into the containers. They each guzzle bottles of water before switching to sodas and digging into chips. It's reassuring to see them trembling and weak, but alive and in far better condition than I would have thought possible.

I call for emergency services again, handing the phone over to Isaiah to talk to the dispatcher so they know I am being serious. He hands the phone back to me.

"Where is he?" the dispatcher demands. "Where is the person who did this?"

"His name is Asher Dawson. Right now, I don't know where he is. I need to look for him."

Xavier opens the door to the booth and starts running.

"Shit. I have to go. Get them here. Now." I look at the two men. "Stay here. Keep the door closed."

I run after Xavier, chasing him in the direction of the corn maze. I don't want him going in by himself, but fortunately, Xavier is not much of a runner. I catch up with him, and we go the rest of the way to the maze together. I immediately notice the burning torches set up around the maze like they were when it was open.

We've only gone a few yards into the maze when Xavier draws himself up, filling his lungs with crisp, smoke-laced air.

"He's here."

He can sense Asher, feel him walking among the cornstalks. I get closer to Xavier, making sure I can take hold of him in an instant and he can do the same to me. We move deeper into the maze, and I hear movement in the stalks. I look in the direction of the rustling sound and see a dark mass walking slowly by, several rows deep.

“I know you’re there, Asher,” I call out. “It’s time to come out and face this.”

The rustling comes from the other side now. It seems like he somehow transported himself, but I realize we’ve followed a curve in the maze and it has oriented us facing a different direction. He keeps creeping through, occasionally getting closer, sometimes sinking back until he disappears and I don’t know where he’s going to show up next.

“He won’t,” Xavier says. “Not here. We have to get through the maze.”

He’s calm. Steady. I hear no fear or confusion in his voice. He has made the shift. This is his reality now. There is nothing else. Which means he doesn’t have to think of anything else. He can focus on just here. Right now.

The paths look familiar, and soon we’re moving through them more quickly, following the turns and switchbacks we did the first time we went through. The brightness of the torches gets stronger until we find ourselves in the rounded dead end where the hole still exists to mark where Theo Nakamura hung.

We stand in the center of the clearing, surrounded by the torches. It seems like having the torches on the paths would give away how to navigate through the maze, but in truth, when you’re on the paths, the dancing light is disorienting.

Everything stays quiet. Time stretches, creating a tension that gets tighter and sharper with each passing second.

“Asher, you might as well come out. I know you’re not going to kill us. Just like you didn’t at the store and just like you didn’t kill Robert or Isaiah. It’s not part of your story.”

The cornstalks part, and Asher steps through, the same dark figure in the same type of cloaked costume and gray mask. He stands in front of us and slowly lowers the hood on the cloak, then removes his mask.

“You’re wrong,” he says, drawing a new weapon from his pocket—a dagger he grips between his knuckles. “This is how

the story gets even better.”

The cut on my back is screaming from the effort of getting Robert and Isaiah out of their cages, and I’m aching from my last confrontation with Asher. But I will do what I have to do.

He lunges at me, and I duck the swing of the blade, avoiding the sharpened tip. While he’s recovering, I wrap myself around his waist and sling him to the side, taking him off his feet and slamming both of us to the ground.

“It all started here, didn’t it?” I ask him, holding the dagger down to the ground. “Right here in this corn maze. But you started thinking about it a long time before that.”

Asher thrashes, pushing me off him. He gets to his feet and tries again to strike with his dagger, but I move out of the way. Asher doesn’t seem interested in talking. His eyes are angry, his teeth gritted hard against each other as he seethes. It seems like just being back here has filled him with the same kind of rage he once felt.

He bounds toward me again, and the tip of the blade just punctures my sleeve, going slightly into my arm. He pulls it out, and I kick him in the stomach, grasping my hands together and smashing both forearms down over his neck and back. His blade catches my leg, and my knee buckles, but I don’t give in. I grab Asher around the neck and twist him around so his back arches, then draw my knee up into a sharp blow into his spine. He drops down to his knees for a second, only to pivot and punch me in the gut.

“He was your friend.”

The sound of Xavier’s voice stops Asher. He turns to face Xavier. “What did you say?”

“He was your friend. Seth Hoffman. You thought you shared something.”

“That’s right,” I say, pulling myself up. “You believed you had finally found someone like you.”

“No one is like me,” Asher says.

“You thought he was. You thought the two of you were going to create something incredible together.”

“He betrayed me,” Asher says, his eyes glinting in the torchlight. “I’ve spent my entire life admiring serial killers. Their vision. Their drives. Their creativity. The way they know exactly what needs to be done. And they do it, no matter what anyone says. For as long as I can remember, I wanted to be one of them. I’ve wanted to know what it’s like to have that kind of strength, that kind of power.”

“That isn’t power, Asher. It’s madness.”

But he’s almost lost to me now. He’s giving the speech he’s practiced in his head for years. “I’ve always known I could be so much more than any of them were. So many of the most famous ones aren’t even the best. And I could do so much more... if I just had the chance. And when I met Seth, that’s what I thought I had found. Someone who I could find a partner in—someone who would help my dreams come true.

“We fantasized about being famous, having our names known. We wondered what the media would call us—what we would go down in history known as. That was one of the most exciting moments to imagine... because it’s that moment, when you get a name, when everyone has begun to call you something, you know that you have made an impact. You have burrowed your way into their minds and their souls, and you’re never going to leave.

“And we were going to be an incredible pair. Seth wanted to make the most realistic horror movies ever made because they would be *real*. Specialized snuff films designed for the most discerning of audiences. I couldn’t wait to see what he came up with. I dreamed of what he would plan—what he would design—so that I could step into that role and fulfill it for him. We would produce films that people like us could savor.”

Asher had looked almost happy up until this point, excited by what he was saying. Now, his face drops, and the darkness returns to his eyes.

“But something changed. I felt like Seth was hiding something. So I followed him. I watched him put the bodies in the field. And then there was Hannah. She found her brother, and it was the most incredible moment. I had never been so impressed by a human being I knew in real life. I was so impressed by him, that I took the patch from Theo’s jacket as a souvenir.

“But I was also angry. This was supposed to be something we shared. We were supposed to do this together, and Seth went and killed not just one, but two people on his own. He completely left me out. I confronted him, and he acted like it wasn’t a big deal. Like he did nothing wrong. He didn’t do it for the enjoyment of killing! He did it for his research—so his character could be fully developed. It was all for his movies,” he says bitterly.

“That must have really burned you up,” I say.

“He reassured me I hadn’t missed anything, and that gave me hope. I felt like that meant we were still going to fulfill our dreams together. But then his screenplay came out. There was only one killer. I hated that. And yet, it was accurate. I wouldn’t want to be remembered for something I didn’t do. I want to be known for everything *I* have done. I planned for the next Halloween. I chose our victim. I waited for him. He never showed up. That was the year there was no kill.

Right then, I knew Seth had left me behind. But I wasn’t going to let him. He wasn’t going to take my dreams from me. I decided that the next year I was going to do it on my own. I was going to chase that dream and be everything I always knew I could be. There was just one piece left to put into place.”

“Hannah Nakamura,” Xavier says.

He nods. “She thinks we never knew each other. Of course, she would think that way. She is always surrounded by people who will love her... so many it has to be impossible to keep up. I can’t blame her. But I had to have her. She is everything. She’s the woman I craved from the time I was

young, and then she was at the center of a sensational murder case. I wanted to immerse myself in both. I found my way into a relationship with her. It gave me her, but it also gave me access to the core of the case.”

“Why Kenneth? Why all these others?”

“It was almost too much to have to wait until Halloween came up, but I did. I chose Kenneth because he deserved to be remembered. He never would have been if it was just him. You always hear about people who reach their peaks in high school, but it doesn’t mean anything until you’ve seen it. He was a good guy. A great baseball player. A strong swimmer. But he could never find the one thing that put him above everybody else—the thing he would be remembered for—so I gave it to him.

“Imagine what it felt like when I finally got that moment. I had finally taken my first life, and I was hungry for more. I knew I needed to take my time. I needed to breathe. I was so excited, but I couldn’t wait to see what the news was going to say. Imagine what it did to me when they attributed my work to Seth. They gave him a name. *My* name. The Hallows Eve Killer. *I* earned that name.”

He is distracted now, no longer filled with the rage that would cause him to attack me again. I move closer. As soon as I have the opportunity, I need to get the blade from him. But for now, it’s just a matter of keeping him calm. Hopefully the police will arrive soon and this will all be over.

“So the next year, Seth had to go,” I say.

Asher lets out a short burst of laughter and draws his bottom lip through his teeth.

“Exactly. If people thought he was the one responsible for the work *I* did, and he’d do nothing to prove they were wrong, then I was going to have to prove it for them. I’ve heard people describe his death as poetic justice. They don’t know how right they are. Just not for the same reasons.

“It was seeing him sitting in that chair, dressed as a scarecrow in honor of his first kill, when I really came awake. I realized what my path was. Like you said, the beginning of my story. Or at least, that chapter of it. I needed to eliminate everyone involved in the first case so the situation wouldn’t exist anymore. If they were all gone, then I would take my place as the true Hallows Eve Killer,” he says.

“I have to admit, you had me fooled, Asher,” I begin. “Your time in the theater department worked out well for you. The acting rubbed off on you. But it’s your makeup skill that truly impresses me. When I sat with you having coffee after I got out of the hospital, you pushed the sleeves of your sweater up. You didn’t do that just because you were hot. You did it to show your arms—to prove they weren’t burned. You knew anyone investigating Hannah’s attack would know she had burned him with a candle. If they could find the guy with the big burn on his arm, the investigation would be pretty simple from there. So, you needed me to see that your arms were clear and undamaged. That stage makeup must hurt like hell in that open skin. You’re going to be so lucky if it doesn’t get infected.”

“It was worth it. I got a little more time. I got Roman Soto. But you’re right, Dean. I didn’t intend on killing you. Not until the end—when you got too close. You didn’t fit my demographic at the beginning. I just wanted to lure you through the entire narrative to the very end. I wanted to give you a chance to experience it and appreciate it. You would be right there until the absolute end, when I had to make my final sacrifice and let go of Hannah. That wouldn’t be easy. But then I could go to prison and be as famous as I always wanted to be. I guess it’s funny to hear me say that. Most killers are clamoring to do anything and everything they possibly can to stay out of a prison cell. But that’s naive. Some killers are never caught. Some walk free. Others are enshrined.

“Going to prison would mean my story being told through every media outlet in existence. It would mean having my name said more times than anyone could count, my picture

showing up on every TV and every computer. I would have the very thing that Seth always wanted and saw so clearly for himself, but could never, ever have. I would be studied by students. Women would write me letters and become obsessed with me just like with Ted Bundy. And because I butted heads with *you*, I would get even more credit. I would be admired and revered. I would never, ever be forgotten.”

“That will never happen!” The scream shatters the silence that fell over the maze when Asher stopped talking. Hannah flies out of the corn, jumping onto Asher’s back. “I will see to it your name is blotted out of history, you son of a bitch!”

She screams, kicking him with her heels as she presses her arm hard against the front of his throat. Asher drops the dagger so he can grab onto her arms to try to pry her off.

“Hannah, stop!” Dean yells. “Get off him!”

“No! You betrayed me! You betrayed my brother!”

She’s on her feet now, but their difference in height means she has his head twisted and pulled back so he can’t breathe. Her knee in the center of his back gives her more strength and leverage.

“Hannah, you have to stop. Don’t do this,” I say. I don’t exactly run to get her off him though.

“Seth killed my brother, but he knew it was going to happen. And he spent four years knowing how it had happened and never said a word. All he wants is to be a famous killer, and I will not let that happen. I am going to end you, and then I am going to make sure everyone on this planet knows exactly why.”

“Say your brother’s name,” Xavier says.

His voice is only just loud enough to be heard, but not so loud that it can be easily understood. Another of his tactics. Never lift your voice to meet someone else’s. Set the tone low and controlled, and let them meet you. It demands attention and exerts perfect fingertip control.

“Hannah, say your brother’s name,” Xavier repeats.

Tears are streaming down Hannah’s face now. She tightens her hold on Asher. He’s choking now, struggling and trying to dislodge her, but she has determination and skill behind the stance.

“Theo,” she sobs. “Theodore Nakamura.”

Xavier nods. “Mirabel Renton. My sister. She was murdered too.”

“Then you know that I have to destroy him,” she says through gritted teeth. “I can’t just let him live.”

“Yes, you can. For Theo. I never had the opportunity to hear Mirabel’s name said in a courtroom, or have someone declared legally responsible for her death, or watch someone be sentenced. I never got to see anyone punished for what happened to my sister. But you can have that for your brother.”

She releases Asher, and he reaches for the dagger, but I dart forward and snatch it from the ground before he can touch it.

Asher takes off running through the corn, but I catch up with him and take him down. We walk out of the maze to the wash of red and blue lights. Hannah steps into them and closes her eyes, tilting her head back so they sweep across her face. She runs her hand across her chest over her heart and for the first time, I notice the patch from her brother’s jacket, pinned in place. The final piece of him, taken back.



EPILOGUE

Xavier backs his way into the house, closes the door, and takes another four-hundred-piece bag of candy from where he has them lined up in a row just out of sight. He opens it and dumps it all into the massive, black, ceramic spider-web bowl he's been greeting trick-or-treaters with all night.

“You know that Spider-Man with the silly string has been here four times, right?” I ask him.

“I know,” he says. “He adds a different accessory every time. I have to give recognition for his effort.”

As he's been doing at regular intervals throughout the night, Xavier runs out of the living room. It's a race against the clock to see if he can get back before the next wave of trick-or-treaters arrives at the door. He knows if he isn't, I'm going to have to pry my sore ass out of this chair and go to the door because I can't disappoint children on Halloween. But, according to him, I will still be a disappointment because I'm just wearing a black sweatsuit and a black headband with pumpkins bouncing around on springs. I'm pretty sure it belongs to Bebe.

This is as opposed to Xavier, who is now changing into his fourth costume of the night. The doorbell rings.

“Oh, well. Guess I’m going to have to hand out the candy,” I say.

“No!”

“I hope they like my headband.”

“Dean, no.”

“One preselected piece per child. I think I’ll do all licorice this time.”

Xavier runs into the room with a silver holographic cape rippling behind him, a matching body suit complete with platform boots, and massive goggles. He snatches the bowl out of my hands.

“No.”

I laugh as I go back to the seat, watching him take handfuls out of the bowl like he’s a claw machine and drop them into the children’s bags.

“What are you?” a little voice asks.

“The 1950s Americana perspective of a space traveler from the distant future that has now become the near past, a concept known as retro-futurism, which frequently produces imagery both ideal and adorable.”

Silence.

“He’s a spaceman,” I call.

“Yay!” the children cheer.

Xavier closes the door, puts down the bowl, and stomps over to me in his towering shoes.

“First, do not besmirch licorice. It is unique and true to itself as well as a beloved classic flavor that also has ties to herbalism and mysticism, both very Halloween-adjacent concepts, therefore making it the third most appropriate Halloween candy. Second. I am not a spaceman.”

The doorbell rings again, and he heads back. I watch the children outside show off their costumes and Xavier gush over

them. This is one of those times when I'm not sure if everything I'm seeing coming from him is fully authentic or if he is mimicking what he knows he should do based on a small amount of feeling. But I genuinely don't care. He's having an amazing time, and so is every person who comes to the door.

One of the neighbors waves in at me, and that wave combined with the theatrics of the night combined into a sudden thought. Brielle and her uncharacteristic behavior toward the teenagers. She wouldn't usually act that way. I wonder if she was showing off for her neighbors. They were nosy, and she knew they would be watching her. Maybe something was going on that made her think that the neighbors needed to see her disavowing the teenagers and telling them not to come back.

Maybe that was part of what she was hiding.



The November chill has settled in, and the last bits of Halloween are disappearing two weeks later when I finally discover the safety deposit box Brielle was keeping under her maiden name. The one with me as the only person named as being authorized to access it under any circumstances.

Even her death.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Dear Reader,

Thank you so much for choosing to read *No Escape*, the third book in the *Dean Steele Mystery Thriller series*! I wrote this story with Halloween in mind because that's my favorite time of the year. The air gets crisper, the leaves put on their fiery display, it signals the beginning of a long holiday season, and it's the perfect backdrop for mystery and intrigue to creep in. Plus, who can resist the allure of costumes, jack-o'-lanterns, and a hint of the uncanny?

Now that you've flipped through the last page, I sincerely hope you're left both satisfied and craving more. There's no better feeling than knowing you've enjoyed a tale and are curious to see what happens next.

As an indie author, your reviews and support are vital in keeping this series going. If you could please take a moment to leave a review for *No Escape*, I would be enormously grateful. I can't wait to hear your thoughts and for you to join Dean on his next adventure!

While you eagerly await the next Dean book, I invite you to catch up with Dean's cousin, FBI Agent Emma Griffin. In the latest book, titled [*The Girl on the Road*](#), Emma grapples with her fragile sanity as a series of chilling events unfold across the country. This thrilling journey will leave you questioning everything. There are brutal and mysterious murders, a bloodthirsty killer who seems to be sending a message, and pit stops along the way that will forever change how you see them!

Thank you for your support and for joining me on this journey, and I can't wait to see where our adventures take us next!

Yours,

A.J. Rivers

P.S. If for some reason you didn't like this book or found typos

or other errors, please let me know personally. I do my best to read and respond to every email at <mailto:aj@riversthillers.com>

P.P.S. If you would like to stay up-to-date with me and my latest releases I invite you to visit my Linktree page at www.linktr.ee/a.j.rivers to subscribe to my newsletter and receive a free copy of my book, Edge of the Woods. You can also follow me on my social media accounts for behind-the-scenes glimpses and sneak peeks of my upcoming projects, or even sign up for text notifications. I can't wait to connect with you!

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