

**QUEEN OF THE
MURDER SCENE**

ALSO BY STEVE MEDDAUGH

Dark Angel

QUEEN OF THE MURDER SCENE

A novel by Steve Meddaugh

Based on the original story by
Daniela, Paulina, and Alejandra Villarreal

Queen of the Murder Scene

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This novel is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. All characters are fictional, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead is entirely coincidental.

This interpretation of the lyrics for the concept album *Queen of the Murder Scene* is the author's alone and does not explicitly reflect the ideas, views, or story intentions of The Warning.

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For DPA & TWA

Foreword

Let's get this out of the way. I am a proud member of The Warning Army (The Warning's worldwide fan base). Like most of the other soldiers in TWA, I feel protective of the girls and their success, so I know what you are thinking. *Is the band profiting from this book?* The answer is no. And yes.

First, they are aware of this project, and I was given permission to do it. Do they profit directly from the sales? No, but I hope this book becomes a platform that introduces more people to The Warning and their music, thereby creating new fans. And that exposure *is* something they can profit from.

I know your next thought. *Aren't you profiting off their work, though? Not cool, dude.* This is a self-published novel that I have created at my own personal expense. I would have to sell a LOT of copies before I break even on my editing, design, marketing, and publishing costs. If, by some chance, the book does take off

and I start making any mentionable amount of money, I have offered full publishing rights to the band, which they have not yet taken me up on. But the offer always stands.

I want to be clear about my intentions here. This is not something I created to make money. I did this as a sort of love letter to the band. But even more than that, I did this for their fans. Not only does this story follow the *Queen of the Murder Scene* album chapter by chapter, song by song, lyric by lyric, but it is chock-full of easter eggs (subtle allusions to the band, their music, and their lives). I worked extremely hard to make this not only an entertaining story in its own right, but also something fun for the fans to enjoy. How many hidden references can you find?

If you've never heard of The Warning, they are a hard rock trio of sisters from Monterrey, Mexico. As of this writing, they have been a band for nearly 12 years, and they are still only in their early 20's. I think what makes them so special (aside from their music) is their uncanny ability to connect with their fans both on and off the stage. They are often labeled "the future of rock music" because they have brought back a style and energy that's been missing from modern music for decades. All three are extremely talented musicians and songwriters, but where they really shine is in their live performances. Seeing The Warning perform live isn't just a concert, it's an activity. A party. So, if you haven't yet, go check them out!

Queen of the Murder Scene is The Warning's second full album and was written and recorded when they were in their mid-teens, which makes it all the more impressive of an accomplishment. If you aren't familiar with the album, I highly suggest you give it a listen. It makes a great companion soundtrack for this

QUEEN OF THE MURDER SCENE

novel.

So please, enjoy the book and rest assured I am not out to take advantage of the band. If you like it, pass it on to someone who has never heard of The Warning and let's go beyond the music and start making new fans through fiction.

-Steve

“I’m not in danger, I’m the danger.”

—The Warning

I.

"Dust to Dust"

Prologue

Hey, come on in, walk this way. Look what I have prepared to show you. It is a story of desire that turns to obsession, then murder and madness. Let me show you how things can quickly unfold. The girl being buried here today died much too young. Her story is a tragic one, but you need to hear it.

There is a somber scene before us. This is not a typical Mexican funeral. There was no wake, and the gathering here is not to honor the deceased. It is simply to bury her. There will be no celebrating, no comfort, no smiles. Instead, the air is thick with sadness and loss. A loss of life and innocence. A loss of understanding. Of love.

Few were brave enough to come and be associated in any way with the departed. The family is hated for being allowed to bury the very person responsible for so many others who can never be buried themselves. The girl being laid to rest did some bad things,

it's true. She left an entire town lost, without answers. Yes, lives were destroyed. Some call her evil. Some say she was crazy. Others think she was a victim of circumstance. Maybe they are all right. Maybe they are all wrong.

What does any of that matter? In the end everything just turns back into dust, like her bones being buried today will, in time. Dust to dust our bones will rust and all that, right? I think it's more than that though.

The preacher says:

*“Hermano ¡la salvación es algo que se gana!
Suelta tu mano del rencor y despierta a una nueva
luz adentro de ti aunque tus hermanos intenten
sumirte en la oscuridad.”*

He talks of salvation and letting go of resentment to awaken a new light within. Is there redemption for her? Should there be? Or should her soul be plunged into darkness, lost forever? It's not for me to say.

Instead, I will share her story with you. Now, take it in and behold my words. I don't seek right or wrong. I seek the truth found in death, which goes hand in hand with remorse. Was death something she pursued to avoid the guilt she felt? Consider a life full of remorse, is it something that is worth losing? Or is it worth pursuing?

You may not want to hear this story, but hey! Where are you going to go? Life is what you make it, they say. But don't trust all that you hear. Sometimes an ill-fated destiny decides for you.

The things I am going to show you are not for the faint of heart. You may be tempted to run away, but aren't you sick of running? It's better to stay here with me and gain understanding before

STEVE MEDDAUGH

passing judgement on this young soul.

How do I know so much about this girl, and why do I care? Because I am that girl. A revenant sent to set things straight. To show you the truth.

My name is Reina Montanez, and this funeral is not the beginning of my story. It is the end. So, settle in...

and we shall start again.

CHAPTER I

II.

"Crimson Queen"

1

I swear to God my heart literally stops when he walks in the door. Everything around me fades away. It's just the two of us now. *There is something that you make me feel, Evan Chase, can't put my finger on it.* The feeling leaves me trembling. I watch him hold the door for an elderly couple that is leaving and think, *I don't know what it is that you do, but I can't get enough.* He probably gives off a pheromone or something that my body craves, like he was made for me. The attraction makes a spark but doesn't stop the conundrum in my heart. How can I feel so intensely for someone I barely know?

He likes to come in here sometimes to study but I never seem to be working the register when he does. Today I am, though, so he will finally have to acknowledge me. Oh God, what do I look like? I steal a peek at myself in the mirror on the back wall as I turn to fill a customer's black coffee. No zits today, so there's that.

QUEEN OF THE MURDER SCENE

I brush a loose strand of dark hair out of my face and tuck it behind my ear as I turn around and hand the customer his coffee. I look at the line, hoping Evan is in it waiting to order something and is not just here for the atmosphere. This place really has a great ambiance for studying and we get a lot of campers. There are lots of tables and everything is wood and iron. The space feels both rustic and industrial. Our lightning bolt logo is wood-burned into the center of every tabletop, which are all made from wood salvaged from wildfires, thus the name Wildfire Coffee. I would study here myself if I didn't work here, but I see enough of this place as it is. Plus, I know about the cockroaches.

I spot him in the line, but he doesn't notice me yet because his face is buried in his phone. As I continue taking customer orders my mind wanders until suddenly he's right there in front of me.

He says, "Don't I know you from school?"

I play it cool. "Oh, um yeah. I think so."

"Cool," he says. "We should study together sometime."

"Cool, yeah." I act half interested but I'm dying inside. Then I write my name and number on his cup, dotting the i with a heart, of course.

"Excuse me, did you get all that?" My daydream is interrupted by a frowning middle-aged woman with two young teenaged daughters.

"What?" I snap back to reality and realize Evan is still a few customers back in line.

"I said, did you get all that? You stopped typing things into your computer thingy." She waggles her fingers like she is typing.

"I'm so sorry, could you repeat that? I've been a little tired lately."

“Young lady, you don’t know what tired is. You are probably still a teenager yourself, wait until you have a couple of your own.” She nods her head toward her daughters.

Focus, Reina. Focus. I don’t know why I’m so nervous. I’m not like this around other guys. I just want him to like me so desperately, but he has never paid any attention to me. It’s not like I’m unattractive. Not like I’m particularly attractive, either, though. I’m just sort of plain, I guess, which is another word for invisible.

My hair is chocolate brown and it’s long and thick. Guys like that, right? I have a very good complexion and don’t need a lot of makeup to hide imperfections. I might be a bit on the heavy side, but only a tad. I’m just not like those skinny bitches I see him hanging around with on campus. He will realize I am prettier than any of them if I can just get him to really see me.

I get through the next few orders and then he’s here. For real this time, but still looking down at his phone, texting someone. I put on my best smile and say, “Welcome to Wildfire Coffee, what can I getcha?” *Getcha? Really, Reina, that’s how we talk now?*

Evan looks directly from his phone to the menu board on the wall behind me. “Oh, umm... I’ll take a large hazelnut latte with an extra shot.” Then he goes back to his phone to pull up the wallet app to pay.

He never even looks in my direction. This is not how this was supposed to go. “That will be \$5.75,” I say. *Look at me. Please, just look at me.*

But Evan only looks at the keypad, taps his phone to the barcode reader, and when it beeps, he mumbles, “Thanks,” as he walks toward the end of the counter to wait for his drink, already

back to texting.

I wonder if it's a girl he's texting. Probably. Definitely a girl. I unexpectedly feel things at the thought of that. I'm not sure what things, exactly. Anger? Jealousy? Why does the thought of him texting a girl make me so upset?

I am flustered and furious now and can't concentrate anymore. "Audrey, take over for me," I shout as I pull off my apron and head to the storeroom to sneak out the back door for some air.

"What the—?"

I don't hear the rest of what Audrey said because I'm already gone, and I don't care because right now, I need to calm the hell down.

I push through the door out into the cobblestone alley behind the store and take in a deep breath of cool afternoon air. Looking down the narrow street, lined on both sides by the backs of old brick buildings with dumpsters every fifty feet or so, I decide it looks like the kind of place where you get murdered in the movies. I wouldn't want to be out here at night.

My heart misses a beat when I hear a glass bottle clank on the ground, followed by something furry running past my legs. I no longer want to be out here in the daytime, either.

I discover the cause of my brief cardiac arrest when I see a mangy cat trotting away, its tail in the air. I laugh at myself. This was probably the distraction I needed. Like a slap to the face to shock me out of my spiraling.

What is wrong with me? Things went dark so fast in my mind back there. If feeling lovesick was a mental disease, then I would be committed for sure, because I am crazy in love with Evan Chase.

2

“Good God, Reina!” My manager, Kyle, comes storming outside to find me. “You can’t just go on a break whenever you want to. Did you not notice how busy we are right now? Nobody is going on break, it’s all feet on deck.”

Kyle is a self-important, grade-A douche. He’s no older than I am but he gets off on the power trip of being in charge, so I have to be careful around him. I need this job. If I lose it, I’ll have to drop out of school, and that can’t happen. I am going to be the first one in my family to get a college degree. I can’t mess this up. Kyle just takes a little finesse. Plus, he’s an idiot.

“I’m sorry, sir.” *Good one, Reina. Appeal to his ego, he loves that.* “It’s girl stuff, you know?”

“What, like you are being super emotional or something? That’s not an excuse to walk out on your job. Girls don’t get special treatment just because they can’t control their tears. This

is why you'll never make management, like me. Girls just can't maintain the professionalism required for this job."

Ok, maybe he's a little sexist, too. "No, Kyle. It's my time of the month. I'm cramping and just in so much pain." I wrap my arms around my lower abdomen and hunch over slightly for emphasis. Not entirely a lie. I am in pain, just not the physical kind.

Kyle's face flushes and he starts to stumble over his words in his sudden discomfort. "Oh, uh... I mean, I guess that's... well come back as soon as you can. Good God, it's crazy in there." He couldn't get his so-called professional ass back inside fast enough.

Kyle is right though. I am feeling super emotional and don't understand why. I'm not normally like this. I mean, sure I get passionate about things, but this overwhelming feeling of love and hate washing over me simultaneously is new.

I knew Evan in high school, he was a year ahead of me. And by knew, I mean I knew who he was. Everyone knew who he was: honor society president, captain of the football team, homecoming king. I had wished I was his queen, along with probably half the female student body, but he had no idea who I was. Nobody did. You don't get voted homecoming royalty when you just fade into the background like a shadow in a dark room. But seeing him in the halls had always given me butterflies. As hard as I was crushing on him, I'd never worked up the courage to talk to him.

Somehow, we ended up going to the same university. I consider it fate, or destiny, or whatever you call something that was meant to be. And it was total coincidence he happens to love coming to the same place I got a job. It's not like I am stalking him or anything. Like I said, meant to be. He still doesn't know

who I am, but somehow my feelings have intensified. It must be the universe showing me we are meant to be together. Maybe I will still get to be his queen.

Enough of this lovesick schoolgirl shit. I need to get back in there before Kyle fires me. I take one more deep breath and force myself through the door, preparing for whatever is waiting for me in there. When I get back to the front, I see that the rush seems to have passed and nobody is at the counter, but Audrey is standing at the register looking at me with a raised eyebrow.

“Everything okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

Audrey was having none of it. “Out with it. What’s going on?”

“It’s stupid.”

“I can see that it is not. If you are going to abandon me when we’re busy, you damn well are going to explain yourself.”

Her words are angry but her tone is more that of concern. And thank God, because I really, truly didn’t mean to piss off the one person here I actually consider a friend.

“Um, see that guy over there?” My stomach is already doing flips just looking at him.

“Yeah...” her eyes narrow. “What did he do to you?”

“Relax, you don’t need to go all mama bear. He didn’t do anything. I just sort of have a crush on him and when I took his order I just, I don’t know, got overwhelmed.”

Audrey studies me for a moment, then her face relaxes and a wide grin spreads across her face. “Dang, girl. You’ve got it bad for this guy.” She looks over at him and starts nodding her head.

“Yeah, I get it. Mmm...”

She keeps looking at him and nodding her head. Looking too

long, and I can feel heat rising to my cheeks. “Ahem.” I try to bring her attention back to me.

Audrey looks at Evan for one more beat, then back to me. “So, what is the deal between you two?”

“No deal. He doesn’t know I exist.”

“Didn’t you talk to him when he ordered?”

“Not really. He never even looked at me.”

Audrey presses her lips together and tilts her head to the side. “How is that possible?”

“That’s how invisible I am.”

She takes a step back and looks me up and down. I almost feel violated the way she inspects me with her eyes.

“Well, you need to make him see you, then. I mean, it’s not like you’ve got nothing to work with here.” She waves a hand back and forth in front of my chest.

I had forgotten to put my apron back on and suddenly feel weirdly exposed standing behind the counter in my scoop neck T-shirt.

“You just gotta give him something to see.” Audrey smiles at me like a kid about to sneak a cookie from the cookie jar. “Come on.” She grabs me by the arm and drags me to the rear of the store just as Kyle comes back out.

“What are you—?”

“Kyle!” Audrey interrupts him. “Watch the front for us.”

It is impressive how fearlessly she orders our boss around. I could take some assertiveness pointers from her. But at the same time, maybe she just doesn’t need this job the way I do.

When Kyle starts to object, Audrey whispers, “It’s girl time.”

Kyle turns red again. “Good God,” he exclaims before walking

to the register without further argument.

Audrey rolls her eyes. “Let’s go.”

First, we hit Kyle’s office, where Audrey rummages around in his desk until her hand shoots up holding a paper clip like it is some sort of trophy. “Bingo!”

“What’s that for?”

Audrey looks around. “Not here.” She grabs my hand and pulls me back out of the office.

“Where are we going?”

“Come on,” is all she says.

We move past the counter out to the front of the store. Kyle watches our every step with the stink eye until he realizes I am watching him, too, at which point he suddenly becomes very occupied with some imaginary task under the counter.

Audrey pulls me down the hall to the bathroom door and enters 01100101 on the keypad lock. “Why can’t we have the code 1234 like the rest of the free fricking world?” she says as the lock beeps and the keypad light turns green. She turns the handle and shoves me inside.

“Audrey, what are we doing? What’s happening right now?”

She follows me in, then closes the door and flips the lock. “We did say it was girl time, right?”

3

“You want me to do what?” My eyes must have been as wide as the shot glasses we pour our espresso into.

“Oh, don’t be a prude. Just take off your shirt and hand me your bra.”

I never really thought of myself as a prude, just insecure. The thought of getting undressed in front of someone, even another girl, is horrifying. I’ve never been one to work out. I tried a few times but just never got the bug to keep going. I’ve always been naturally strong. *Papá* calls it “farm strong.” So, I guess I never saw the point. Maybe the point was, someday you might find yourself in the bathroom at your place of employment being asked to strip in front of a coworker.

I don’t want Audrey judging my body, the way my muffin top belly spills out over the waist of my jeans, or seeing my outie belly button, or the moles on my abdomen, not to mention the cellulite.

No, the only person I want to see me naked is Evan. And he won't care about any of that because he will love me and I will be perfect in his eyes the way he is perfect in mine.

"Look, you can turn around if you have to be shy about it, just hand me that damn bra."

She isn't going to give up, so I let out a sigh, turn my back to her and just rip the band-aid off. Or in my case, the too-tight tee. I look around for a place to set it, but this is a coffee shop public bathroom, not a changing room. There is nowhere I feel comfortable setting my shirt down. I settle for draping it around my neck like a sports towel, which might have looked cooler if I had actually played a sport. Or gone to a gym.

"The bra, please," Audrey says with an amused impatience.

I reach behind my back and unhook my bra, then slip it off with one hand as I expertly cover my breasts with the other. "Here," I say as I dangle it behind me for Audrey to take. The second she has it, I use the bra hand to double cover my breasts, even though I am not even facing her.

"Where did you get this thing, your grandmother's dresser?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, if you are going to get yourself a boyfriend, you will need to start dressing sexier. At least there is no underwire through the bridge so we can work with this. Okay, now pay attention, I'm going to show you a little trick."

I try to look behind me to watch her without twisting too far so she doesn't see any of my belly or double covered breasts.

She holds my bra out in front of herself. "You just twist this around a couple times, like so." Audrey rotates one side 360 degrees, then does it again, twisting up the fabric between the two

cups. “Then put it back on.”

Audrey lets it unwind as she hands it back to me, which I gracefully retrieve and proceed to ungracefully try to twist back up while keeping my breasts covered.

“Okay, I’ll close my eyes, alright? I can’t watch this train wreck, anymore.”

I look back to make sure her eyes are actually closed, then finally uncover myself and twist my bra just like she showed me and put it back on. With the fabric twisted up, it pulls the two cups closer together, which pushes my boobs together. Holy cow, how had I never known this trick?

“Are you decent yet?”

“Close enough,” I say as I start to pull my shirt over my head.

“Wait, wait, wait. We’re not done yet.” Audrey steps up right behind me. I can feel her breath on the back of my neck. “Here’s the other part of the trick. You take this,” she holds up the paperclip, “and you hook it through the bra loops.” Then she pulls the straps together in the middle of my back and connects the circular loops on my straps with the paper clip. “That should give the girls a little lift.”

I finish pulling my shirt down and turn to look at myself in the mirror. “I can’t believe this. I actually look pretty amazing.” And I do. My body has taken on a shape I’ve never seen before. My newfound cleavage takes attention away from my less flattering midsection. I turn to face Audrey. “Why are you doing all this for me?”

Audrey shrugs. “I just love love, I guess.” She smiles and puts a hand on my shoulder. “Now go out there and talk to him. He’ll see you, I promise.”

STEVE MEDDAUGH

I am feeling a confidence I'd never felt before. I stand a little straighter. "Yeah, I will go talk to him." *He will fall in love with me, I know he will. He just needs to get to know me.* "Thank you, Audrey."

"Stick with me, kid. We're going to make this boy want to die for you."

4

Audrey and I return to the front counter. “Thanks, Kyle, you’re a dear,” she says. “I can take over the register again. Reina is going to tidy up the customer areas.” She gives me a knowing wink.

“Hey, I’m in charge here. I will say who does what.” Kyle shifts his attention to me and pauses. “You look different.”

Audrey puts a hand on her hip and stares him down, so I follow her lead and do the same.

Flustered, Kyle says, “Well? What are you waiting for, Reina? Put your apron back on and start cleaning up the empty tables. Let’s go, time is money in the bank!”

He starts to walk toward the baristas, then changes his mind and slouches back to his office.

Audrey laughs. “I love messing with that idiot.”

“You’re going to get yourself fired.” I look around the counter. “What did I do with my apron?”

“Forget the apron. At least until after you’ve talked to your boyfriend.”

Boyfriend. I like the sound of that. Someday soon, he will be my boyfriend. Mine. I straighten my shoulders again, nod at Audrey and march myself out to find where Evan is sitting.

I find him at a corner table, reading something on his laptop. The blue light coming off the screen illuminates his face with a glow that makes him look like an angel. He tugs at his sandy-blond, wavy curls at the front of his head where his hair is longer. His elbow is resting on the tabletop, so he has to tuck his chin and lower his head to reach his hair. This forces him to raise his eyes to see what is on the screen, giving him a puppy dog look. Freaking adorable.

“Can I take any garbage for you?” I ask.

He glances up at me then does a double take and grins. “Hi.”

Oh. My. God. I finally have his full attention on me. What the crap do I say? Why can’t I think? “Garbage?” I repeat. It is the best I can come up with, apparently.

“Oh, um... no, I’m good.” He looks deeper into my eyes. “Hey, do I know you?”

“Well, I took your coffee order,” I suggest.

“No, I don’t think so.” Evan rubs his chin.

“I actually did.” *You just didn’t bother to look at me.* “I just came off a break and forgot to put my apron back on. That’s probably why I look a little different.”

Evan laughs. It is a deep, warm laugh that calms my rapidly beating heart.

“No, I mean I don’t think that’s why you look familiar.”

“Well...we actually went to high school together.” *Could he*

possibly remember me? Was I not so invisible after all?

“No way!” He takes me in with his gaze, and I welcome the thrill of his visual examination. I drink it in with every breath, pulling his look deeper inside so he can see the real me. I definitely wasn’t invisible now.

“Nah, I think I would remember you if I knew you in high school. Are you sure we went to the same one? I didn’t go anywhere around here.”

“I’m sure. I watched all your football games. You were the quarterback. Number five.” *Dial it down, Reina, geez. Creeper much?* “Go Tigers?” I attempt to lighten up the obsessive-sounding word-vomit I was spewing.

“Oh cool. Wait, what was your name again?”

“It’s Reina. Reina Montanez.”

“Nope, doesn’t sound familiar, sorry.”

Ok, so maybe I am invisible, after all. “You might have seen me around campus?” I tried.

“Yeah, maybe. Or probably I just know you from coming in here. I come in here a lot to study.”

I know you do. You are the thing I look forward to every day, hoping I’ll see you walk in here. My heartbeat rises in anticipation every time I hear the chime of our front door opening.

“Oh, really?” I play it coy.

“Yeah, studying in college is not like high school. This shit is hard!”

Not really, it’s all about time management. “Right. College shit is hard.” I am the queen of coy.

“I’m Evan, by the way.”

“I know,” I say way too fast. “Go Tigers,” I offer with a fist in

the air.

“Oh, right. So, what classes are you taking?” he asks.

“Oh, just general requirements. You know, the usual stuff: English 101, Psych 101, Calculus—”

“You’re in calc?” He cuts me off. “You any good at it?”

“Yeah, it’s pretty easy. I already took it in high school, so it’s kind of a review.”

“Easy? Man, I could use some help. We have a test coming up and I don’t know what the hell I’m doing in that class. Hey, do you think we could study together sometime?”

I don’t think I’ve ever wanted anything more. “Sure. I mean, I guess. If you want.” Still nailing the coy thing. “Do you want to put my number in your phone?”

“My phone’s dead, and I forgot to pack my charging cable.” He reaches into his backpack and pulls out a pen. “But I’ve got this.”

I snatch the pen from him with my right hand and with my left, I take his hand and turn it palm up, then bend down to as carefully and clearly as possible write my digits on his hand. The feel of his skin on mine is electric. I can’t believe I’m actually touching him. My fingertips tingle as I manipulate his hand and the vibrations run up my arm, intensifying as they go until they reach my heart, causing it to beat way too fast. *God, Reina, don’t pass out now.*

As I am writing, I glance up to see him staring right at my cleavage. Not sneaking a peek, full-on gawking. I don’t mind, though. It is all for him and only him to enjoy. I want to be his fantasy, just as he is mine.

“Reina!” My thoughts are interrupted by a weak, douche-y voice. “You forgot your apron.”

I look back and see Kyle standing at the counter holding up my Wildfire apron. At least now I don't have to look for it. I raise my eyebrows and mouth "Okay" at him then take an extra few seconds before I look back at Evan. I turn slowly so he has time to adjust his direction of vision as I straighten up.

"Guess I'd better get back." I point to his hand. "Don't lose that."

"I won't," he says. "I'm kind of partial to my hand."

I let a giggle slip out, then give him a quick wave before spinning on my heels to return to the grind.

As I reach the counter, I turn back one more time and catch Evan sneaking a look at me. I don't know what it is, but the way his blue eyes glimmer, they transfix me. What is he thinking? Does he like me or is he just waiting to see if I'm about to get berated by my boss? Seriously. I haven't done an ounce of work in over an hour. At least he's looking at me now, the reason doesn't matter.

Nothing Kyle says can ruin this moment. I take my apron from his scrawny fingers, which aren't strong and perfect, like Evan's, and finish my shift so I can go home and wait for my love to call.

5

Tonight's the night. I'm going on a date with Evan. I never thought this would happen. Except I did, because he is my soulmate, and we were meant to be together. Granted, it's a study date, but it's still a date and I'll take it.

After five days, I'd thought for sure the ink on his hand must have smudged or rubbed off to the point he couldn't read my number. My stomach had been sick with disappointment and regret that I hadn't just written it down on a piece of paper. Why had I written it on his hand? I guess it seemed sexier, like something out of a movie. But then he didn't call, and I didn't see him at Wildfire the rest of the week. I wondered if I'd freaked him out somehow and he'd found a new place to study, just to avoid me.

But he did call, finally, last night. He wanted to do a calculus cram session. What the hell do you wear to a calculus date? I want to look beautiful for him, but a pretty dress seems like overdoing

it. I don't want to just show up in jeans and a T-shirt, either. This is a date, after all.

I have tried on pretty much everything I own and now my clothes are strewn all about my room like a small tornado struck down in my closet. I decide to go with black leggings and a short polka dot A-line dress. This way I look pretty but the leggings make it casual. Plus, they make my legs look great. They may not be skinny, but they are one of my better assets, especially when the spandex in the leggings tucks and holds everything in a perfect shape.

And, of course, I used the bra tricks Audrey taught me. But while I was putting it on, I remembered what she said about needing sexier underwear and made a mental note to go shopping at Victoria's Secret for some new undergarments.

I don't normally wear a lot of makeup because my skin doesn't need it, but I did go online for some eyeliner tips to try to do something extra to make my eyes pretty for him. I decide to go with a smokey cat eye. Meow.

I check myself out in the mirror and I think I nailed it. A perfect balance of casual and cute. Appropriate for a Saturday night date at the university library.

It may not be the most romantic first date, but that doesn't matter. What we do isn't important. Being with him is what matters. If he asked me to help him clean his bathroom, change his tires, or bury a body, it wouldn't make a difference to me.

I would do anything for him.

6

There must be a mistake. I get to the fourth floor of the library, intentionally a few minutes late so as not to appear to be trying too hard, and I'm at the study room Evan said he reserved. Room 404. Did I make an error? Looking in the window, I see a whole group of people and can't tell if Evan is one of them. I check my phone to make sure I have the right room number. His text says 404, so I open the door and poke my head in.

"You made it!" Evan was right there, behind the door. "Man, I was getting worried you wouldn't show. Come in and meet everybody."

I can't seem to wipe the scowl off my face. I am fuming at his deception. Why did he tell me he wanted a study date but then invite all these other people? Mostly girls, I notice. Sluts, every one of them.

This is not an attractive way to present myself. I realize this,

hopefully, in time to make a correction. I paint a wide smile on my face, even though inside I'm all frowns. I can't let them see the distaste and resentment I'm feeling. *Push it down, Reina. Push it way down deep, where you keep your darkest thoughts and secrets buried, never to be found.* I refuse to let my severe disappointment reveal itself through my eyes, so I brighten even more.

"Hi everybody," I say like a cheerleader who's here to root them all on their way to an A rather than teach them actual math.

Evan points at the individuals one at a time. "This is Craig, and Tiffani—"

"Tiffani with an I," the first bitch clarifies.

"And that's Cami," he continues.

"Cami with an I," the second bitch declares.

"And Vicki," he finishes.

"Vicki with an I?" I beat that third bitch to the punch. She just rolls her eyes at me, so I'll never know for sure.

"Here." Evan pulls out a chair for me next to him.

At least I can sit close to him where I can smell his man scent and minty breath. Maybe catch the occasional brushing of our arms as we lean over the material together.

Cami with an I is saying something in Tiffani with an I's ear while looking straight at me. Jealous, I'm sure, now that a girl worthy of Evan's attention has finally shown up.

I still feel a little burned by the calculus date switcheroo, but now that I've calmed down, I have to admit maybe he never used the word "date." I might have, possibly, sort of, almost certainly, inserted that into the plans myself. He has such a power over me, I don't understand half of what I feel when I'm near him or when I think about him. I love him for how I feel when he is around me

but I also hate him for how I feel when he is around me. He confuses my very soul.

We get down to studying and it doesn't entirely suck. They all have a different professor than me and are learning stuff we have already gone over in my class. Evan picks up on the material faster than the rest. My brilliant man, he is getting it. Not sure the lights are all on in the other dumb-asses heads, but I couldn't care less how they do on their tests. As long as my guy is happy, I'm happy.

Except when it comes to these hoe-bags. He thinks he's happy being around them, but they have nothing to offer. Not like I do. Are they pretty? Sure, but looks will fade and they are mean girls, every one of them, and he deserves better than that. Their inner ugliness will eventually overshadow their outer attractiveness, but when he sees my inner beauty, he will love me for life.

We stay at it for a couple hours then reach a point where Evan seems ready and the rest of their little brains just seem full. With nothing more that could be accomplished tonight, we call it.

Vicki (maybe with an I, maybe not) whispers something to the others.

Craig replies with a, "Heck ya!"

I'm sure they are making plans to continue their evening without me. It is the weekend, after all. Evan is acting like he doesn't notice what is happening. I look at him and bat my eyes and wiggle my shoulders a little, hoping he might invite me to join them. Or better yet, just join him. We can still have that date tonight. All he has to do is ask.

Instead, he says, "Thank you so much, Reina, for helping us. This was huge."

"Yeah, thanks," Craig says in what sounds like an afterthought.

QUEEN OF THE MURDER SCENE

Like he just now noticed I was in the room.

The three girls are already heading out the door, chatting each other up. It's like they can't wait to get out of here and get on with their night for real. Craig is right behind them.

But that leaves me alone with Evan. This is his chance to make a move. I will forgive all his other mistakes tonight if he will just take me in his arms right now.

He looks into my eyes and holds me in his unwavering, hypnotic gaze, then shrugs his shoulders and says, "Well, have a good one. Thanks, again." Then he trots after the others. "Hey, yo, wait up!"

And then I am alone.

7

I could kick myself. Why did I let myself dream this could be real? He may have talked to me, but he still hasn't noticed me. Not really. I storm back to my car, a beat-up pale-gold Honda Civic, and literally throw my backpack across to the passenger side, where it bounces off the window, then off the seat onto the floor. *Shit, my laptop is in there.* I get in and just start driving around to clear my head.

I don't know where I'm headed, I'm just going where the road takes me, which seems to be toward downtown. As I drive, I think about Evan and how he smiled at me during the study session. I don't know the meaning of that glance he threw in my direction, the way that it seems to dance between his lips and his eyes. That look always leaves me in a trance and I was so sure it was for me, but when I replay it in my mind, maybe it was for stupid Tiffani with an I.

What's the reason for that smile you wear, Evan? I need to know. No matter how much I might be wishing that it was for me, I must admit to myself it probably was not. It only landed on me as he shifted his focus from her, like shrapnel from someone else's flirtation. My desires never made me feel so weak; it's driving me mad. And not in a good way. I know love shows in mysterious ways, but this is too much.

My frustration hits the tipping point, and I scream at the universe. Fortunately, the people walking around outside don't seem to hear me. With the windows rolled up, my screaming makes no sound. It's just silence at the roundabout as I drive past them, unnoticed. Just like I'm unnoticed by Evan. I need to find a way to change that. Why is love so hard?

My *abuela*, my dear grandmother, used to tell me, "There is no rose without its thorns. Prickled fingers are just part of the ways in to the heart."

I get what she was talking about, now. But these are some big-ass thorns, and I can't tell if it's love or venom that is seeping into my heart right now. Sometimes it seems like the way I feel isn't normal and healthy. It's too intense, and brings out other feelings just as fiercely. Love, hate, desire, anger, want, jealousy. It's all a mix of emotions which, like the ingredients in my *abuela's Asado de Puerco*, lose their individuality and become something altogether new and different. And spicy.

Maybe I should text Evan all these thoughts I am cooking up and just get them out there. Out of the frying pan and into the fire, as they say. I pull over and park, then dig my phone out of my purse. Emotion bleeds from my fingertips as I type:

I need to tell u something
and I have to do it this way
while I'm brave enough to
say it. I need you to see me
and when you don't it cuts
me in a way only you can
heal but I can't always be
there with you to stop all the
bleeding. Your words are
misleading there's more to it
than just wishing to be found
cause you are my fantasy
I don't know what that means
but I know that you bemuse
my soul

Bemuse? Why am I being so literary? Nobody talks like that. I read back over my text and decide my attempt at sounding romantic makes me seem a little too needy. Maybe even a little crazy. I immediately delete everything and drop the phone on the passenger seat. I lay my head back and sigh.

I try to clear my head and think about something else. Looking out my window, I take in the surroundings and notice a lot of teenagers dressed to the nines. The boys are all in rented tuxedos and the girls in beautiful, colorful dresses with hemlines that vary from covering their feet to nonexistent. I realize tonight must be homecoming and everyone is going out to dinner with their high school crushes.

QUEEN OF THE MURDER SCENE

No one ever invited me to any of the homecoming dances. There was only ever one person I wanted to be invited by, anyway, and he didn't know I existed. Still doesn't, really. Not the way I want him to.

Across the street I see a young couple through a restaurant window seated across from each other. They have champagne glasses sitting in front of themselves, no doubt filled with sparkling cider. I imagine it is Evan and me sitting there. I would make a toast and say, "So here's to loving you. Raise the glass in front of you and drink for me. For me."

Then, as if I willed it to happen, the couple picks up their champagne glasses and clinks them together. I turn my attention to a group of teens approaching the restaurant to go inside.

One girl in particular catches my eye. Her blonde hair is in a gorgeous braided updo with a glittering tiara resting on top. She's in black strappy heels and a red dress that hits just above her knees. She looks damn good. Hell, I'd almost switch teams for a girl that looks like that.

I wonder if I could get that kind of reaction from Evan if I were in a red dress, too. Actually, it's more crimson, if I'm being specific. I wonder what color turns him on. If I looked like that, there's no way I wouldn't have been his homecoming queen. His queen in a crimson dress. *Someday, Evan, I can still be that for you.*

I'll be your crimson queen.

III.

"Ugh"

8

The alarm breaks through my slumber like a jackhammer to the brain. I swear I just fell asleep. I check the time on my phone. 7:00 a.m. It's time to get up for my 8:00 calculus class.

To be honest, I don't remember going to bed. What did I do yesterday? I was driving around Saturday night, cooling off, and that's the last thing I recall. Where did I go? Ugh, why does my head hurt? I feel hungover, but I didn't even drink. Or did I? Yesterday seems to be a dark hole in my memory.

I pull on some sweats and make a piece of toast. Maybe some caffeine will stop my headache. I've never been much of a coffee drinker, I don't even own a coffee pot (yes, I see the irony of working in a coffee shop) but this morning it feels like I won't be able to function without it. I'll have to start using my employee perks and take advantage of the one free coffee drink per day benefit. I still have time to swing by Wildfire on the way to

campus.

I get to class, large coffee in hand, and slump down in the back row where I can maybe catch a nap without anyone noticing. I have zero faith the coffee is going to work.

The professor is lecturing on various derivative notations and my mind strays to the study session Saturday night. That part of my memory is still intact. I wonder if I made a huge mistake. Did I inadvertently put myself in the friend zone? I have to be careful to correct this course, because I don't want Evan to just see me. No, he needs to want me as badly as I want him.

I'm smart. I'm pretty. Ish. What am I missing that other girls have that make him want them? What does he desire? I need to discover what turns him on and become that. Maybe I could lose a little weight. I suppose I could give working out a chance. If I try jogging, I'll have an excuse to be outside and see what Evan is up to. I could arrange my routes to coincide with his daily activities and give myself more chances to randomly-on-purpose run into him.

If I didn't have work this afternoon, I would start running today and find myself stretching by the math building right around the time Evan gets out from his calc exam. Then I could ask him how it went. If he did well, he will be more likely to want more study sessions. Not in the cards today. Gotta pay the rent.

Why did he have to take a late-afternoon class? I guess some kids don't have to worry about paying for college and can party all night, sleep all morning, and take their classes in the afternoon. Not me. Even though I'm here on scholarship, it only covers my tuition. I must work to pay for food and my crappy apartment. Gotta fit studying in there, too, because if my grades drop, no more

scholarship and no more college degree. So, I have to be up early and get through classes in the a.m.

The class drags on. I'm not even paying attention and now I feel like I'm wasting my time even being here. At least it's Monday and I only have one more class after this. Then I'll go home, shower, and get dressed for work. I'll still have a couple hours to do some online shopping before I start my shift at Wildfire. If I'm going to start jogging, I'll need to look cute, so I better find myself some fashionable clothes. Definitely need some actual running shoes, some running tights, maybe a lightweight long sleeve shirt, because fall is in the air. Maybe one of those breathable running hats so I really look the part if Evan spots me.

Now I am starting to sound like a stalker. What am I doing? Nothing devious, just trying to get to know him better.

If he's going to make a move, I need to create opportunities for him. I'm really doing this to be the best I can for him. To be what he needs me to be.

Nothing wrong with that, right?

9

I just texted Evan asking how his math test went today, hoping it will spark some conversation. We'll have witty banter then he'll thank me for all my help and realize how brilliant I am. I held off all day reaching out to him because I don't want to seem too desperate but now that his test is over, it was time to make a move. I'm home from work and I've looked forward to this all day. I get a response right away, but it isn't what I was hoping for. He just gave my text message a like. A goddamned thumbs up is all I get?

How hard would it be to give me two minutes of his attention and say thank you? To say, "You're so smart, Reina." Or, "Let's hang out and study, I don't know what I would do without you, I need you. I love you."

Maybe I did friend-zone myself by agreeing to a study date instead of an actual one. It had seemed like studying was a perfect way to spend time together and get to know each other, but now it

feels like I destroyed my chances with him. Realization smacks me in the face. The sadness tastes like yesterday and time won't take the pain away, so I can't leave it like this. There's got to be a way to fix this. I will not let it be over.

I had put up walls to spare myself the heartache of rejection, but guess what? I feel it, anyway. It's not smart to become obsessed with what's destroyed, though. I need to build something new. I need to open up fully to him and break all the walls to fill the void I feel in my heart.

He has no idea how bad his response hurts me. Evan can say so much without saying anything at all. He is telling me this is just casual, that I am just his math tutor. How can I make him see there's so much more to this than that?

My infatuation is on a rampage now. *Suppress the feelings, Reina. Bite them back.* I don't really know why he responded the way he did. There are too many reasons caving in on me, burying me with despair. I want to shout at him, "I'm choking on words that you won't give!" I can't lash out at him, though. That's not the right move. Stick with the plan.

I'll try the jogging thing so I can literally run into him at random moments until I catch the right one. I order my running gear: a pair of high-waisted capri running leggings in diamond dye blue and matching sports bra, a half-zip tech pullover, and a running cap. I also order pepper spray that comes with a quick release keychain. You can't be too careful, there are some sick people out there. Now I just need to pick up some affordable running shoes in town.

While shopping online, I pick out some pretty undergarments, too. Lacey things, in both black and red. Audrey would be proud

of me, but it's an expensive purchase. I may have to eat nothing but ramen for the next month. Maybe the next two months. Dating Evan is going to be expensive.

I should probably think about getting a roommate. There is an extra room in my apartment, though I do like my privacy. And I don't need someone interfering with my dating life, but I am barely getting by as it is.

The place I found to live in is a godsend. It's an old carriage house next to the Eternal Love crematorium located at the edge of town. The lower level is a garage that houses the hearse and extra supplies for the crematorium, but it's also where I park my car. Above it is a converted two-bedroom apartment, which is accessible by a questionable wooden staircase on the side of the building that leads to an equally questionable small landing on the second level where the apartment door is.

During the pandemic, they had to hire a couple people to live here full time to transport the bodies and run the cremator. The incinerator was running almost 24 hours a day for a while, and it took two people to keep everything moving. They set the place up almost like a dormitory suite. It is minimally furnished; each bedroom has a full-size bed, small dresser, and a desk. There is a café dining table with 2 chairs in the kitchen area, and the living room has an entertainment console where my TV sits, a matching coffee table, and a dark grey couch with an even darker stain on the middle cushion that I try not to think about. The couch looks soft but might actually be made of concrete. I swear to God I bruised my ass the first time I plopped myself down on it. The bedrooms each have a lock on the door for privacy. The bathroom and the rest of the common area are shared. They would have

hardly been there other than to sleep between shifts, which were offset, anyway.

Now that deaths have slowed back down to normal rates, the crematorium is not busy enough to need full-time people living on site. Ryan, the cremation technician, mostly does the transporting these days. They still have a need for the occasional on-call transport, though, and posted an ad for cheap housing for anyone willing to transport dead bodies on an as-needed basis between the hours of 5:00 p.m. and 7:00 a.m. Most people find that completely creepy, but it doesn't bother me at all.

My cultural view of death is different than most everyone around me. I was raised in the family tradition of believing in three deaths. The first death is when the body fails, and the last breath is drawn. The second death happens when the body is buried, returned to the earth, so we believe that even if you are cremated, you must still bury the ashes for the second death to occur. Dust to dust our bones will rust. The third death is the absolute final one and that happens when there is no one left alive to remember you. This is why we celebrate *Los Dias de los Muertos*. The Days of the Dead. We honor and remember those who have passed away to keep them from suffering their third death. The bodies here haven't even gone through their second death yet.

So yeah, living next to a crematorium is no big deal and I jumped at the opportunity. They only call on me to do a transport about once or twice a month. Plus, sometimes when they are super busy, Ryan lets me help with the cremations for some extra cash.

The smell can be bad sometimes, so that is definitely a downside of living there. And it's not a very nice place. I think they just needed to quickly create a living space for someone to be here, so

they did the bare minimum with a century old structure.

Not the ideal place to bring a boyfriend now that I think about it. So maybe finding a roommate wouldn't be such a bad idea. But who am I going to find that would want to live with me and all the dead bodies?

10

I think I might be dying. I can't breathe. How do people run marathons? It all started off well enough. I had laced up my shiny new Asics, put my earbuds in, fired up Spotify and queued up my new running playlist, which started off with "XXI Century Blood", by The Warning. The pounding beat got my heart rate going and set a nice comfortable pace. I ran the first block and was feeling great. With the fresh air rushing through my lungs, I felt alive. It seemed like I could go for hours. Then block two sucked the fucking wind out of me.

My side is hurting, it's hard to breathe, and I'm hunched over trying not to throw up. *How did this go to hell so fast?* I might have overestimated my pace a bit. Maybe a nice brisk walk would have been a better option for my first time out.

I walk four more blocks before I reach campus and try out a slow jog, then abandon that immediately and walk the rest of the

way to the math building. I get there a little later than I planned, because of the walking, and start stretching behind a tree where I can see students leaving the building. I wait to see Evan come out from his calculus class, but he doesn't appear. I see Craig and Cami with an I come out. Dammit, I might have missed him already. I try to stretch my calves out, but they start cramping up. Isn't stretching supposed to prevent cramping? My body really hates this.

I keep watching and eventually I see him. Evan comes out and my heart flutters. He's laughing, but then I see why, and my heart seizes. Tiffani with an I is right behind him, her perfect little bitch smile painted on her face. They stand outside the door talking and laughing for a few minutes and I just carefully watch from behind my tree, so they don't see me.

Finally, thank God, they head off in opposite directions. Hopefully Evan is headed home so I can see where he lives. What better way to get to know him and how he lives his life, right? I wait until he is about a hundred yards away then I start slowly jogging after him.

I almost lose him a couple times when I let him get too far ahead and he goes behind a building. But then I find him again and try to stick a little closer, always keeping my head low in case he looks back. He doesn't seem to be heading away from campus though, he's going deeper in and eventually we reach Joffroy Hall where all the business classes are. Another late afternoon class? Does he have nothing in the morning? Must be nice to sleep half the day.

At the thought of him sleeping, I imagine myself curled up next to him. I could sleep all morning, too, if I were wrapped up in his

arms, his skin next to mine. I'm smiling to myself, lost in my thoughts when I realize he's gone inside the building. This outing was a bust. I didn't learn much other than he appears to have a lot of afternoon classes.

After two weeks of tracking Evan's patterns, I mean jogging, I acquired a few things. First off, I gained some stamina in the running department. As bad as that first outing went, my body quickly adjusted and I'm doing three miles a day now. The other thing I gained is some good intel on Evan. It was a lot of effort and now I'm behind in all my classes, not to mention I was late to work more than once, but it was worth it.

Here's what I know now. Evan lives in unit number 23 at the Z apartment building, with at least one other guy. When he goes out to eat, he mostly goes to the taco truck or Rudy's Burgers drive-in, which is a walk up and order kind of place. I also know his class schedule (which doesn't start before 11:00 a.m.) and when he's between classes, he goes to the library to study. I haven't found a pattern for when he goes to Wildfire to study, but I have seen him there and he always smiles at me now. No asking for calculus help or conversation of any sort, but he does notice and acknowledge me. And now I'm able to create more opportunities for our encounters. More opportunities for him to notice me. To smile at me. And eventually, to love me.

Bonus news, I have lost six pounds! I am toning up quickly and have not looked this good, ever. I'll never be skinny, but that doesn't mean I can't look fit. My clothes are starting to hang more

loosely on my body, to the point where I will probably need to shop for more outfits soon if I keep this up. Which means I need to spend more money I don't have. I need to pick up more hours at the coffee shop and maybe hit Ryan up to see if he needs extra help at the crematorium. But I don't want to work more, I want to work less so I can focus my attention on Evan and learning all about him.

This struggle of managing Evan with school and work is overwhelming me. It's like I've gone from juggling scarves to juggling bowling balls. I feel like I know how to do it and want to do it, but I can't physically manage it. Yet I can't stop, can't let anything drop. That feeling that I'm going to lose something is growing: my job, my scholarship, Evan, my future. And I don't see a way out of it.

11

It happened again. Another one of those blackout nights. I feel like pure hell this morning, like I partied all night. But I didn't. Or maybe I did, because I can't remember anything after coming home from work.

I have found the endorphin rush I get from running helps with my headaches, my energy, and my mental wellbeing, so I decide to skip calc this morning and go for a run instead to reset my brain. Then I'll grab a coffee. I never thought I'd be a coffee drinker, but it's either that or I get more sleep and I have no time for sleep. And besides, on days like today, even when I've slept, I feel like I haven't. So... I guess I should buy myself a coffee pot because apparently, I'm a coffee drinker now.

Evan will still be asleep so instead of doing one of my recon runs, I will just run downtown where I can end at Wildfire for my freebie. I think I'll go with a latte today, whole milk; it will be my

reward. Audrey should be working; she'll give me an extra shot. Maybe I'll add the hazelnut syrup, because that's what Evan likes.

It's frosty this morning, so I grab a knit cap to keep my head warm and I layer up and head out. I'll eat later, right now I just need to feel human again.

As I jog through downtown, "The Pretender" by the Foo Fighters blasting in my ears, I can't seem to clear my head of the million thoughts floating through it like dust particles in the air. In fact, the opposite is happening. It's as if the sun is shining a bright light on all these things that would normally be unseen. I run harder, pumping my legs faster, hoping to outrun my own craziness. Yes, I admit it. It feels like I'm going a little crazy.

When my body finally gives out, I stop to catch my breath. I may have pushed too hard and good job to me for running in one direction. I still have to make it all the way back to my car now. I look across the street where a catholic church sits, beckoning me in with its stone exterior and colorful stained-glass windows. Maybe if I just sit and rest for a bit, I'll be able to finish my run. I haven't been inside a church since I don't know when. I'm exhausted, not just physically, but mentally, too, and I don't know where else to turn. Maybe falling back on my roots will bring me some peace.

I cross the street, and every step feels like a hammer on my thighs. I definitely pushed too hard. As I enter the narthex, I dip my fingers in the holy water font then make the sign of the cross the way I was taught practically from birth. I form a cross with my thumb and forefinger then do the movements, forehead to sternum to left shoulder to right. Then I kiss my finger cross and say, "Amen."

I walk into the sanctuary and plop myself down on a pew bench in the back. The early morning mass was over a long time ago according to the reader board out front, so no one else is in here and I can be alone with my thoughts for a while. Dangerous, I know, but I feel safe here. Calm.

It's a delicate balancing act with my emotions. They seem to be driving me lately. Controlling me. Steering me in one direction with no way out. Now I am trapped within myself, slowly sinking in. It feels like these waves of never-ending terror will stay forever and I am afraid to see what's become of me. Who am I now?

The only way to sort this out is to travel through the hell I've created and the way across is a tightrope of my fears, desires, passions, fantasies and realities all woven together. The rope I'm walking on gets tighter as I cross the fire, bringing all these things together until the separate strands become indistinguishable. Falling off is not an option, I can only follow this to the end, wherever it's leading me.

After dwelling on this for too long, I get up and approach the votive candle station, select an unlit candle, then light it as I say a quick silent prayer:

*Oh lord, save me 'cause I'm falling down and
oh lord, we are so far from the ground.
Lift me up and keep me safe, eternal God
from the deep abyss that is my mind.*

This is all overwhelming me and I know I'll never be able to understand these feelings for Evan. I don't want to understand. I only want to go to him and say, "I just want to hold your hand." Then have him take my hand in his and tell me it will be alright. I don't want to think about it or work at it or obsess over him. I want

QUEEN OF THE MURDER SCENE

it to be simple. But I fear simple is not where this is all going.

As I leave the church, what little sense of peace I felt inside is gone, making me wonder if this tightrope I'm walking on is leading me to Evan, or to madness.

Maybe this is not real and what I feel is only making me reveal what it will take to make me break once and for all.

IV.

"The One"

12

This is not working out how it was supposed to. I learned Evan's schedule so I would have more opportunities to talk to him. But every time I "run into him" he blows me off. Not in a mean way. He could never be mean.

When I find Evan on the way to a class, he says, "Sorry, Reina, I can't be late to class."

When I find him in the library, he says, "Sorry, Reina, I need to get ready for my next class."

When I find him at Wildfire, he says, "Sorry, Reina, I really need to study so I can meet my friends in an hour." Then Kyle says, "Good God, Reina, get back to work!"

When I find him at the grocery store, he says, "Sorry, Reina, my roommates are waiting for me to get back with this stuff."

Sorry, Reina. Sorry, Reina. Sorry, Reina. That's all I fucking hear, and I don't want him to be sorry. I want him to genuinely

make me a priority. Even though his words are kind, his lack of effort is hurting me. He needs to know this. Since I can't seem to find an opportunity to actually have a conversation with him, I grab my phone and start texting him:

I need to tell you something
hear me out cause it is
something that I have
decided even if my intent is
misguided

What's up?

Don't want to be...

I stop typing. I can't do it like this, what am I thinking? It's already not coming out right. I delete that last part and type instead:

Never mind me

lol, k

Great, now he really thinks I'm a joke. I need to be able to form my words carefully and I need him to take them all in, so I decide to write him a letter. That way he can read it when he is focused. Once he does, he'll see what he's doing to me, and he'll feel bad, because he would never want to intentionally hurt me. I know he'll make it up to me once he understands.

STEVE MEDDAUGH

I sit down at my kitchen table with a pile of stationery and a pen. Old school, I know. But this is too important, too special, to just be an email or a long text. I think a handwritten note will mean more to him, too. Something he can keep under his pillow to feel closer to me. It will be scented with my perfume, of course.

So here goes, let's pour our heart out, Reina.

Evan,

Can you explain to me what's this feeling between us? Love it or hate it, it's never leaving, and I want to believe, that you feel it too.

There is no reason to even doubt it, please understand that I am not lying. My heart is true, it beats for you.

I'm always staring from afar, fantasizing that something might happen, always wishing that I was the one.

Say that you will really never hurt or leave me. Say it and it will come true. Hold me like you really love me. Tell me that you do.

Give me something I can feel. I'm too afraid to ask, what is it I need to change for you to love me back? Is it all in my head? Was it something you said that left my heart exposed? And I know that I'm not the one on your mind, but still...

Let me be the one.

Wow. That definitely won't scare him off and doesn't sound at all psychotic. Still, it came out kind of poetic. And I have to admit, it feels good to get it off my chest and actually say it. He can never read this though. Nobody can.

QUEEN OF THE MURDER SCENE

I grab the sheet of paper, scrunching it in my hand as I lift it off the table. I take it over to the kitchen sink, grab a butane lighter from my utility drawer, and light it on fire. As the flames grow and climb closer to my fingertips, I watch my words burn like an offering to the gods. Maybe putting this out into the universe will help bring him to me. At this point I'll do anything to make it happen. I need to know how he really feels.

Tell me your secrets, what are you hiding?

Once I feel the heat begin to singe my skin, I hold on for one second longer, then drop it in the stainless-steel sink and watch my submission to the universe reduce to ashes. I throw a little prayer up with it for Evan to remember me as I was before we were study buddies. Let me be something different.

Let me be the one.

13

I've had an epiphany. The more I thought about the girls I see Evan hanging out with, trying to figure out what attracts him, I saw three common denominators. The first is that they are all bitches who don't deserve him, but that's not what he's attracted to. He just doesn't know any better. Yet.

The second thing is they are all skinny. I can only do so much about that, but I'm working on it, and I've lost another three pounds! I can't change my body type, but what I can change is the third thing I noticed these girls have in common. They all have blonde hair. He must prefer blondes, and I would do anything for him, so I decided to make the change.

Now I sit here in the salon chair, nervous as hell but confident in my decision.

"What's your name, hon?" the hairdresser asks. I tell her and she responds, "Nice to meet you, Reina. My name is Krystal." She

says it like kris-TALL. “What are we doing today?” She starts fluffing my hair.

“I want to go blonde.” I say it like a question.

Krystal pauses her fondling of my hair and raises an eyebrow. “You aren’t sure? That’s a big change, you better be sure, my dear.”

“No, I’m sure. It’s just, can I? Go from dark to blonde, I mean?”

“Well what color blonde are you thinking?” She starts playing with my hair again.

“I don’t know, I just need to be blonde!” Whoops, I didn’t mean to say it like that.

Krystal stops her primping again and makes eye contact with me in the mirror. After a beat, she laughs. “Ah, so this is for a boy. I got you, girl.” She pulls my hair straight, examining the length. “You have some nice body to your hair, what are you, a 2B, 2C?”

I have no idea what that means. She’s asking a lot of questions I wasn’t prepared for. Am I being too spontaneous? No, I decide, this is what I want. I’m pretty sure she’s talking to herself, anyway.

“Yes, we can definitely make you a blonde. With your virgin hair, we should be able to do it in one session without causing too much damage.”

“How do you know I’m a... I mean I’m not... well technically...” I am so flustered I can’t even get a complete sentence out. “You can tell that from my hair?”

Krystal let out a cackle. It was dry and gravelly, most likely from a lifetime of smoking. “Oh hon, virgin hair just means it has never been dyed, bleached, or permed. And I can tell by how healthy it is that you have never done any of those things, yes?”

“God, I’m so embarrassed.”

“Nothing to be embarrassed about.” She pats me on the shoulder. “Good for you, girlfriend.” Krystal spins me around in the chair so we are face to face and looks from my shoulders to the top of my head, then back to my shoulders, then settles on my face. “With your complexion, I think we should do something like a honey blonde.”

She grabs a book from the front that shows pictures of different blonde colors. We look through it together and settle on the shade we agree would be most flattering. I sit for hours while she works, saying silent prayers this doesn’t end up a huge mistake.

After she removes the last of the foils and rinses my hair out, she walks me back to the chair with a towel over my head and sits me down, facing away from the mirror. She blow dries and brushes everything out until she is satisfied.

“Are you ready?” Krystal spins my chair around so I can see the finished product, but my eyes are scrunched so tightly closed they hurt.

I take a deep breath and let it out, then open my eyes.

14

I walk out of the salon \$300 poorer, but it is worth every penny. I look like a freakin' fairy tale princess. No, make that fairy tale queen. Krystal is a miracle worker. Evan won't be able to keep his hands off me, now.

Is it enough, though? It's not like I'm going to be the only blonde in his life. Those other girls are still a threat. I glance down the alley I'm walking past and see someone tossing a couple large black trash bags into a filthy green dumpster. I imagine those bags filled with the body parts of the girls Evan hangs out with.

Jesus, Reina, that got dark fast. I shrug it off, though. It doesn't seem so wrong to be willing to do anything for love. Whatever it takes, I would do it for Evan.

I check the time on my phone. No time to go home first, I need to head straight to work. I need to ask Kyle for more hours to pay for my new hairstyle and that won't go over well if I'm late. Again.

I'm standing at the register, watching the front door, hoping Evan comes in today so he can see what I've done just for him. This could be a turning point.

Audrey absolutely loves my new look. "He's totally gonna want to bone you," I think were her exact words.

That's the plan, Audrey. That's the plan.

"Um, excuse me." Kyle's nasal voice behind me makes me cringe. "Who exactly are—?" He stops abruptly when I turn around. His arms are crossed and he's squinting at me. Then his eyes go wide as he draws his head back. "Good God, Reina! I didn't recognize you. What did you do to your hair?"

Well, that was a little hurtful. But he's a pathetic little man, so I let the comment roll off my back and don't dignify it with a response.

When he realizes I'm not going to answer, Kyle drops his arms and waves his left arm in a shooing motion. "Carry on." Then he taps an invisible watch on his wrist and says, "Time is not made of money."

I try not to let him see my eyes roll as I turn back around. I need to be on his good side, so he will give me more shifts. Now is not the time to ask him, maybe at the end of the day. My thoughts are interrupted when Evan finally walks in. He is here, and it looks like he's alone.

He walks right up to me and I'm just grinning like an idiot, waiting for the recognition to reach his eyes.

"Wow," he says. "Reina? Your hair looks... wow!"

"Hi, Evan, do you like it?" My heart is thumping so hard in my

chest right now, I'm worried he might actually be able to see it beating.

"Yeah, it really suits you." He just stands there looking at me.

I finally break the awkward silence. No, not awkward. More like glorious, because we are connecting on a spiritual level. "Did you want to order some coffee?"

"Oh, um, yeah." Evan gives a short laugh. "Sorry. I just can't get over how different you look."

"You here to study?"

"Yeah, um, I'm meeting some friends here. We have a business accounting test on Monday. I don't suppose you are taking that, too?"

"No, I'm not taking any business classes." Based on his class schedule, I think Evan is planning to major in business. He makes me want to major in business, too. We could take all our classes together, study together; we would be practically attached at the hip.

"Oh. Uh, too bad. You could have joined us. You were so helpful with calculus. I really owe you for that, by the way."

What is happening right now? Was the blonde hair really all it took to make him pay attention to me? "Well, I couldn't have joined you anyway." I drew my hand under the lightning bolt logo on my apron.

"Right. You're working. Cool."

Is he blushing? Oh my God, I'm making Evan Chase blush right now. I feel like a goddess: powerful, beautiful, desirable.

"I'll take a—"

"Hazelnut latte," we say together. *Easy there, Reina. Don't freak him out.*

“Am I that predictable?” He just laughs it off, thankfully.

“No.” *Yes, you are predictable. And perfect in every way.* “I just remembered that’s what you ordered last time. Anyway, it’s on the house.” Maybe free coffee will get him to come in more often when I’m working.

“Really? Thanks!”

“Yeah, good luck with the studying.”

The second he walks away, Kyle is right there speaking in hushed angry tones in my ear. It makes me jump.

“Did you just give that customer free coffee?”

“Jesus, Kyle. Lurk much?”

“Money doesn’t grow in the bush, you know.”

“Relax, I’ll pay for it out of my own pocket.”

“Darn straight, you will.” Then he was gone as quickly as he had appeared.

As soon as Evan sits down at a table and unpacks his backpack, three girls about my age walk in like the start of a bad joke. A blonde, a redhead, and a brunette walk into a coffee shop... But they are no joke. They are slender, stylish, and gorgeous, and I hate their guts. I pray they are not Evan’s study partners, because if they are, it’s all over for me. I can’t compete with this.

The redhead is talking super-fast and they are all laughing and being a little loud. They are so ruining my vibe right now. I want to spit in their drinks. Lucky for them I won’t be making their orders, I’m just the one taking them.

Using every ounce of self-control I possess to force a smile, I say, “Welcome to Wildfire Coffee,” as they approach the counter. They immediately stop their yammering and say, “Hi,” in perfect unison. It’s a little freaky.

The blonde looks me straight in the eye and points at the redhead. “Make sure she gets decaf,” she deadpans.

“Hey!” the redhead says, and they all start giggling again. “You guys, focus.” Redhead quickly takes control of the situation. “This girl is busy, stop wasting her time and figure out what you want to order.”

Thankfully, they get down to business and order their drinks, including one for their dad. Sisters. I see it now. That means they are not Evan’s study buddies, and it also means they are not staying, and I for one can’t wait for them to be gone.

As the brunette is paying, the blonde looks directly at me with an intensity and confidence that should probably make me feel uncomfortable, but her demeanor is actually very calming. “I like your hair,” she says.

“Oh, yes. It’s beautiful,” the redhead says with an enthusiasm that makes me believe her. Now it’s my turn to blush.

The brunette makes a heart with her hands and gives me a sweet, closed-lip smile, then they all walk down to the end of the counter to wait for their drinks.

I look down at the screen and see they gave me a 25 percent tip. It is rare to get tips here and when we do, it’s usually just enough change to round the total up to an even dollar amount. This kind of generosity is unheard of. Who are these girls? I immediately feel terrible for misjudging them and hating them for their looks. Am I that kind of person now? Why am I like this?

Not knowing what else to do to atone for my hateful thoughts, I lean over the counter and holler, “Thank you,” to the girls. When they have their drinks and are heading out the door, I wave at them and say, “Thank you again!”

“Have a nice day,” the blonde says.

“Thank you,” the redhead says.

The brunette mouths, “Bye,” but I’m not sure any sound actually comes out of her mouth. I think I love them.

Speaking of love, I look over to where Evan is sitting and see that his friends have just shown up. I watch as four girls and two more boys sit down with him. I don’t like that ratio. I catch Evan’s eye, and he waves at me. I am about to wave back and realize I still have my hand in the air, like a moron, from waving goodbye to the sisters. I don’t even know what I’m doing anymore.

Their study materials unpacked, Evan’s classmates come up to get drinks. I take all their orders and get a closer look at the competition. Three of the girls are fairly ugly. I probably don’t have to worry about them. The one with raven hair is pretty hot, though. At the end of the day, it doesn’t matter what their hair color is or how pretty they are. They are girls, boys will be boys, and all of them are a threat.

Evan and I had a moment earlier, a real connection. I know I need to protect that at all costs. I see the way these girls look at him. How can I expect him to fully love me while there is so much out there for him? Everywhere he looks, there is someone to love. He could have his choice of girls.

Oh Evan, I want all your love, and I want to kill all the love that’s for you so only mine remains, then there’s nothing to choose. You’ll look at me, and only me. There’s no guarantee that I’ll be forgiven but it’s just something that I am willing to do for you, so there’s nothing left to prove.

Audrey walks behind me and whispers, “You’re staring,” as she continues her path to the stock room.

QUEEN OF THE MURDER SCENE

I wasn't just staring, I realize. My hands are balled into fists, and I am squeezing so hard my nails cut into my skin. I never felt a thing but when I look down at them, I see blood on my palms. As soon as Audrey comes back out, I'll have to ask her to watch the register so I can go wash up.

I need to be more careful. I just get so lost in my head sometimes. But I have come to one conclusion. No more wishing that I was the one for Evan. It's time for action.

I will be the one.

CHAPTER 2

V.

"Stalker"

15

It's now or never. I can't waste that connection I made with Evan at the counter earlier today. Can't let the electricity I felt fizzle out for either of us. It's time to tell him how I really feel. No letters, no phone calls or texts, no casual conversations at work. It has to be a face-to-face private conversation. Personal. Romantic.

Maybe I'll make him dinner; we could drink some wine if I can get my hands on a bottle. That might be a good idea to take the edge off and calm my nerves. I'm feeling butterflies just thinking about it.

Everything must be perfect, though. I look around my dirty apartment. This place needs to be cleaned up, I need to figure out what to make, go grocery shopping, and of course, pick out something sexy to wear. First order of business though, is think of an excuse to invite him over.

It needs to be a little more subtle than, "Hey can you come over

so I can tell you how much I love you and think about you every second of every day?" Just inviting him to dinner might be too forward. I don't want to scare him off before I even get him in the door. Maybe I can ask for help rearranging my furniture and tell him I need his strong muscles.

As much as I wish it could be tonight while my confidence is at an all-time high, it's probably going to have to be this weekend. I need time to make sure everything is prepared just right, not to mention actual studying I need to get done. And there's work this week. Can't skip out on that because I have to pay for all this somehow. Hopefully he doesn't already have plans.

Now, how should I ask him? I could wait for him to show up at Wildfire again but that might not happen soon enough, and I need to lock him down. Maybe a text, keep it casual. But that is not personal enough. I need to look into his eyes. He needs to feel our energy and be reminded why he should say yes to this date. No, I shouldn't call it a date, I'll just ask him over to move some heavy things and tell him I'll feed him. Nothing finds its way to a boy's heart faster than food.

But what if he brings some of his friends? I don't need any of those idiot guys he hangs out with over here and I definitely don't want any of those bitches stepping one slutty toe in my space. Evan and I have things to talk about, just the two of us. I bury my face in the palms of my hands and let out a scream. How hard can it be to ask a guy on a date-not-a-date?

I will figure that out tomorrow. I'll plan to run into him on campus between classes. I'll catch him on his way to the library so he's not as rushed. He will say yes, I know he will.

Right now, I'd better start cleaning. There's a lot to do and I

STEVE MEDDAUGH

don't have a minute to waste on daydreaming. It's time to focus. *You've got this, Reina. You will make this happen and nothing will get in the way of that.*

I feel my phone buzz so I pull it out of my back pocket and glance at the screen. The cleaning will have to wait.

I have to go pick up a dead body.

16

I can't believe I pulled it off. It was an insane week, but everything came together in the end. Ryan needed some help a couple of the evenings because he got backed up with the cremations. He's a single dad because he lost his wife to cancer a few years ago and has a hard stop at 5:00 p.m. to get home to his young kids. He let me finish up for him on those nights. I didn't really have time for that this week, but he's been really good to me, and I wanted to help him out. Plus, I need the cold hard cash, so to speak. Besides, the cremation process is so fascinating, and I truly have no problem working with the dead so it's a good opportunity for me. Maybe I should consider a degree in mortuary science. Who knows, maybe that is my calling.

Between the extra work, preparing for a philosophy exam, cleaning, and shopping, I managed to lock Evan down for a study session here at my place. Reinforcing the study friend relationship

was the exact opposite of what I wanted but he actually texted me first, asking for more calculus help. The universe clearly wants us to be together, so who am I to pass on the opportunity? Once I have him all to myself, I can show him how I feel.

I suggested one-on-one tutoring Friday at my apartment and told him I wanted to talk to him about something anyway. When he asked me about what, I said we could talk about it when he got here. Guys love a little mystery, I think, because he dropped it.

Now it's finally Friday night. He couldn't come until later, so dinner was out but I told him I would have snacks. I cube up some cheddar cheese and put it on a plate with some Ritz crackers, red seedless grapes, and roasted almonds. A poor-man's charcuterie board. Audrey picked me up a bottle of wine, a Bordeaux red blend called Amour. I don't know anything about wine, but it's French and seems romantic. I had to buy a cheap pair of wine glasses, too. And a wine opener. I figured out how to get the cork out and the open bottle is sitting on the coffee table with the wine glasses, so it can breathe. Whatever that means.

It's almost 8:00 p.m. and Evan should be here any minute. I look around the apartment. Everything is clean and tidy, and my bed is made in case we make it in there tonight. I have candles lit to set the mood, but also to help mask the smell from next door.

I am wearing a blue argyle knitted sweater-vest dress, sheer black thigh-high stockings, and black combat boots. I am the perfect blend of cute college co-ed, sexy girlfriend, and casual study-buddy all wrapped up in one. I am nailing this.

There's a knock on my door. My God, my heart is racing. I think I might pass out. I take a couple deep calming breaths, tug the hem of my dress down and smooth it out. I check my hair one

QUEEN OF THE MURDER SCENE

last time. Looks the same as it did the last fifteen times I checked it. I open the door.

But the person standing outside isn't Evan.

17

“What are you doing here?”

Ryan is standing at my door with a steel urn tucked under one arm. “I need a huge favor.”

Oh God, not now. Evan is going to show up any second.

“Ryan, you know I have plans tonight. This really isn’t a good time.”

“I know, I know, and I’m sorry. I wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t an emergency. I had a sitter for the kids tonight because I knew you were busy and I thought I could get everything done, but there was a mix-up with the paperwork and it took hours to sort out. It totally fu—, I mean screwed up my schedule. I have one last body to do, but I can’t stay any later. I have to relieve the babysitter and the deceased’s family is expecting to pick up the remains first thing on Monday.”

“Can’t you just come back tomorrow and finish?”

“I wish I could, but I am catching an early flight with the kids to go see their grandparents.” Ryan looks away, but I caught the sadness in his eyes. “Maggie’s parents.”

“Are you asking me what I think you are asking me?”

“The body is in the refrigeration unit, it’s all prepped to go, paperwork is finished. There’s no medical devices or prosthetic devices on this one. It’s a textbook burn and grind. You’ve done this with me enough times, you know the whole process now. You can do it.”

“Really?”

“I have no doubt.”

Wow, doing a cremation by myself feels daunting. But I have got to get rid of Ryan as fast as I can. I’ll say yes to anything at this point just to get him out of here.

“Okay, I’ll do it. Can you just leave now?”

“Thank you, Reina. I owe you big time!” He hands me the urn he brought. “This is what the family provided me for his remains.”

“Got it, I’ll take care of it.” *God, this thing is heavy.* “Wait, why do you have this with you? Why didn’t you just leave it inside with the paperwork?”

Ryan’s cheeks flush and his eyes drop to stare at his shoes. Without looking up, he says, “I just thought if you had a physical reminder, you wouldn’t forget to do it.”

“Well, that’s a little insulting.”

He finally looks me in the eye again. “I know, I’m sorry. It’s just really important this gets done. Any time this weekend is fine. Just make sure it’s done before Monday. I’ll be back to hand everything over then.” He starts to walk away, then stops and turns back to face me. “Reina, my job is on the line, here. Please don’t

STEVE MEDDAUGH

screw it up. If you have any questions, anything at all, just call me and I can walk you through it. I trust you to do this, but nobody can know you did. Do you understand?”

“I got it, Ryan.”

He looks at me for a beat, then says, “Thanks again. Sorry for interrupting your evening.”

With Ryan finally heading down the stairs, I shut the door and set the urn down on the hallway table next to my key bowl. Now my mind is distracted, thinking about the cremation process, and trying to remember all my training. I’m both nervous and excited to do one by myself, but this isn’t the time to think about all that. I have a whole speech planned for Evan and I need to concentrate on it. I try to shift my mental state away from death and back to romance.

There’s another knock at my door. *Jesus Ryan, just leave already.* I yank the door open. “I don’t have time for this, Ryan!”

“Who’s Ryan?” Evan asks. “And what’s that smell?”

18

My heart nearly stops. Evan standing at my door, even though I am expecting him, causes unexpected feelings. I hadn't meant to, but I'd gone at him hot, full Latina, thinking he was Ryan. In my mind, I had envisioned a much sultrier welcome to my home.

He is looking at me, waiting for a response to his questions, or maybe just an invitation to come inside. The intensity is overwhelming, and I have to look away. But I quickly recover and give him my best smile.

"Come in," I say and make sure to give my hair a good flip as I turn around and lead him inside.

Evan closes the door behind him. "So, who was that guy out there? He your landlord or something?"

"No, that was Ryan. I work with him next door sometimes."

"You work at the crematorium? That's a little disturbing." He pauses, as if considering something. "Oh God, is that what that

smell was?”

“You get used to it, I guess. It smells okay in here though, right?”

“I mean, I guess. I feel like the smell is just stuck in my nose now, though.”

“Snacks?” I offer, pointing both hands at the plate of cheese, crackers, fruit, and nuts sitting on my coffee table, hoping to distract him from the smell of death with food. “Maybe a glass of wine?”

Evan looks where I am pointing and takes in the wine bottle and glasses, then notices the candles. He takes a more deliberate look at my outfit. *That’s it, Evan. Drink me in from head to toe.*

“I thought this was a study session.”

“It is, I just thought, you know, it’s Friday night, so...”

“Yeah, I know. I never would have agreed to studying calculus on a Friday night, but I really need your help, and this seemed like the only time I was going to get it.” He unzips his hoodie. “Let’s just get this over with. I have somewhere else to get to tonight.”

Well, that was rude. I just stare at him as he sloughs off his backpack. He must have seen the disappointment on my face.

“Sorry,” he says. “I didn’t mean for it to come out like that. I’m just really stressed.”

He removes his hoodie and I see he is wearing a Wildfire Coffee T-shirt with the lightning bolt prominently on the front. He looks like a superhero. And weirdly it makes me feel closer to him that he is wearing merchandise from where I work. *I bet he wore that just for me. Okay, all is forgiven.*

I motion toward the couch. “So, what do you need help with?”

Evan plops down and tosses a cheese cube into his mouth then

digs his laptop and notes out. I sit next to him and play with my hair while I watch him talk about curve sketching without really listening.

“So, that’s what I don’t get,” he finishes.

All I can think about is him sketching my curves. Screw the calculus. I invited him over for a reason. I’ve basically stalked him for weeks so that I would have an opportunity to tell him everything I’m feeling. This opportunity.

I reach for the bottle of wine and pour some into each of our glasses, then pick mine up and guzzle the whole thing down.

“I don’t think you’re supposed to drink it like that,” Evan says. Then the look on his face shifts from amused to concerned. “Wait, do I make you nervous?”

“Remember, when I said I wanted to talk to you about something?”

“Oh, yeah. What is this all about?”

I stand and start pacing. “I need to let you know something. Something I’ve been feeling for a long time. Since high school, even. I just...” *You got this, Reina. Just spit it out.* “I want you to love me.” I look him right in the eye. “Touch me. Let me in your heart,” I say as I tap my own heart.

“What?” Evan is clearly uncomfortable and can’t maintain eye contact.

“I want you to want me. Hunt me, like I’ve done from the start.” Okay, maybe I’m being a little too honest a little too quick.

“Wait, what are you talking about? We barely know each other. This is crazy.”

“No, I’ll tell you what’s crazy.” I am on a roll now and couldn’t stop myself if I tried. “It’s crazy how much I love you. It’s crazy

how much I want you. You think it's crazy? Oh, you don't even know! It's crazy how much I think about you. It's crazy how I can't live without you. It's crazy how my love seems to grow even though you don't notice me."

"Fuck this," Evan says. "The only thing crazy is you."

He slams his things into his backpack, stands and grabs his hoodie and rushes toward the door. I hurry after him and grab his arm.

"Please!"

He twists and shoves me back with his elbow. "Get off me, you wacko!"

He's right, I am crazy. How can I not be? He is like a psychotic drug that is making me this way. It's crazy how I need to have it. It's crazy and it's an ugly habit. That's par for the course with any potent drug. Dependency overwhelms all reason. It changes you. It makes you do things you would normally never do. Desperate things.

I would die for you. Would you die for me? Yes or no, whichever, I'll have you someday. I'll have you forever.

"Say I'm yours, my dear. Just... say I'm yours," I plead.

He is reaching for the door handle. He's going to leave, and I can't let this happen. I'll lock the door and keep him here, somehow, until he says the words. I'm seeing red now and am no longer in control. I have only one thought, one objective, one need.

Before you go, say I'm yours. Say it again and again.

But he is already pulling the door open and is about to walk out. If he leaves like this, I know he'll never come back.

I don't remember picking it up off the hallway table, but I find myself holding the empty urn Ryan had dropped off earlier. I have

QUEEN OF THE MURDER SCENE

no choice, I must stop Evan from leaving, so I smash it into the back of his head. His head ricochets forward into the edge of the door, which slams it back closed. Evan's body drops with a heavy thump. Unmoving. Lifeless.

“No! No no no no no no...”

19

What have I done? I kneel down and check the back of his head for blood. Nothing, so I flip Evan's body over onto his back. His eyes are closed, so I shake him by the shoulders.

"Wake up!" I shout. "Evan, wake up!"

No response. I don't know what else to do, so I sit on the floor and hook my arms under his armpits, then lift his torso and pull his head onto my lap. *How did we get here?*

"I know, I'm a maniac when it comes to you," I say as I stroke his hair. "I'm just... I'm obsessed with what we both could be."

Or should I say could have been? I can't stop the tears now as they stream down my cheeks. Have I just ruined all the possibilities? Did my obsession get the better of me? As I wipe my eyes with my palms, all I can think is, how did this all go so wrong? This can't be the end. *Think, Reina. Do something.*

I check his neck for a pulse. I think I feel something, maybe a

QUEEN OF THE MURDER SCENE

faint pulse, but I'm not sure. I lower my head so my ear is next to his mouth. I feel his warm breath and a wave of relief flows over me like hot lava from an erupting volcano, its comfort covering me with a burning reality. He's going to wake up.

What am I going to do then?

20

This ought to hold nicely, I think as I find some nylon rope and duct tape among the supplies in the garage. He's going to take some persuading still, but I know he'll come around and see what we have between us is special. However, I can't have him running away again until he sees the truth.

Back upstairs, I drag his unconscious body to the kitchen. I start to lift his body onto one of the chairs, but he's heavy and slips back down, scooting the chair back. I kneel and wrap my arms around him from behind.

"I'll hold you, my dear," I say gently in his ear. With another heave, I manage to get him onto the chair. "I'll tie the rope, and I'll hold you, my dear. Just until you understand we are meant to be together. 'Cause I am yours and you are mine."

With the rope, I bind his ankles to the chair legs and tie his arms together at the wrists behind his back. I put a strip of duct

tape over his mouth, so he doesn't start screaming for help and making unwanted noise. We don't want to attract any outside attention. I will remove that as soon as he calms down and is ready to have an adult conversation.

Looking at my handiwork, he appears more like my hostage than my lover, but it's not like that. It really isn't. We will figure this out. He needs me like I need him. But when he wakes up, will I be able to convince him of that?

I hold his face in my hands. "Why don't you know that you are mine?"

Words alone may not be enough to convince him, so I decide more enticement is in order. I need to let him see I am completely his. All of me. I ditch the combat boots and replace the sweater dress with a crimson satin robe and now I'm sitting across from Evan, waiting for him to wake up. He stirred a couple times while I was binding his hands, so I know I won't have to wait much longer.

When he finally opens his eyes, he seems disoriented. It takes him a moment to figure out why he can't move. He looks down and sees he is tied up. Recognition burns in his eyes as he stares at me with hate and defiance, but when I stand, his demeanor switches to panic and he frantically looks left and right, trying to glimpse what is behind him. As if there might be someone standing there who could get him out of his predicament. The only person who can get him out of his predicament, though, is himself. This is his chance to get on board.

I smile to put him at ease. "Hello, my dear," I say. "We seem to have gotten off on the wrong foot." I start to slowly pull at the tie on the front of my robe. "I didn't mean to hurt you, I really

didn't." I take a slow step toward him. "I just wasn't ready for you to leave. You didn't let me finish." Another step and I pull the tie loose, allowing the robe to part slightly in the middle.

Evan starts to twist and hop, trying to break loose from his restraints, but it is useless.

"Now, now, love." I try to calm him. "I don't want to hurt you, I just want to talk."

He redoubles his efforts to get free. It's like he still doesn't see me.

"Stop!" I scream. That gets his attention. He is still fighting the ropes but at least now he is looking at me. I watch his eyes as he finally notices my robe is partially open. *That's more like it.*

"I love you, Evan. And I want you to want me. I am yours."

I pull the robe fully open, exposing my breasts, and lift it off my shoulders, to let it fall. It brushes my back with its silky softness as it drops to the floor behind me. Evan is frozen as I stand before him in nothing but my thigh-high stockings and black lace panties from Victoria's Secret, with the classic tiny pink lingerie bow.

I would normally have felt insecure, being so exposed. But not with Evan. With him I feel bold, empowered, and sexy. I am fearless. I am drunk with love. Maybe a little from downing an entire glass of wine, too, but I have lost all inhibition now.

I straddle Evan and squat down on his lap. Then I rest my arms on his shoulders as I begin to grind at his groin. I can feel him respond underneath me. I whisper in his ear, "Tell me I am yours."

Evan mumbles something underneath the duct tape.

"I'm going to take the tape off now, do you promise not to scream?"

He nods his head vigorously, so I tear it off his face as quickly as I can to minimize the pain. He stretches out his jaw and says, “Thank you, Reina.”

I study his eyes, trying to gauge where he is mentally right now. He seems like he might actually be ready to talk. Maybe more than talk judging by the bulge I feel pressing against my lady parts.

“I’m sorry I tried to leave, Reina. I just got scared. I do want you. I was afraid I would screw it up, you know? You’re different than all the other girls, and I didn’t know how to handle it.”

“Are you being real, right now? Don’t lie to me, I don’t think I could handle it.”

“No! I would never lie to you, Reina, I promise. I want to be with you. Do you feel that?” Evan thrusts his pelvis a couple times to emphasize his point. “See? I want you so bad, Reina.”

His words are like a drug, throwing me into ecstasy. I am ready for him, too.

“Let’s get you out of these ropes, then,” I say.

I climb off Evan and start to untie his legs, but the ropes won’t budge. The knots are too tight, probably from all his struggling and pulling. I can’t get either foot loose.

“It’s okay,” he says. “Try my hands.”

I move behind him and try to free his hands but have the same problem. Everything is too tight to get a loose end started.

“Hang on, don’t go anywhere,” I say with a wink.

I sift through my utility drawer looking for scissors, but they aren’t in there. Where the hell had I put my scissors? I look around for something to cut him free with and spot the knife block on my kitchen counter. I grab a chef’s knife out of the block. This will have to do.

Evan's eyes get wide when I return to him with the knife. "Whoa whoa whoa. Please be careful with that."

"Don't worry, I want all of you," I say.

I very carefully saw away at the rope until it loosens up enough for Evan to pull his hands free. He rolls his shoulders forward, stretching them out as he rubs his wrists. I come back around to the front of his chair and kneel to work on cutting free his left foot.

Suddenly, he has me in a headlock that flips me around so my butt is on the floor with my back to him.

"You goddamned bitch. I'm going to fucking kill you," he says in my ear.

Kicking my feet, I struggle to wriggle free, but all I manage to do is scoot myself closer to him so he can tighten his grip. I instinctively try to grab at his arm with both hands to relieve the pressure crushing my windpipe, but my right hand is still holding the eight-inch blade. As the knife comes up, he leans forward to apply more pressure to choke me. I feel the tip hit something soft and Evan releases his grip immediately.

"My eye!" he screams. "You stabbed my fucking eye."

I scramble forward on all fours, coughing and spitting, trying to catch my breath again. I turn to see him holding both hands over his right eye, blood trickling between his fingers. I stand and stomp back to him. Even though his legs are still tied to the chair, he tries to rise when he sees me coming for him.

"You are mine forever, Evan. You can never leave me." With two fingers of my left hand, I easily push him back down. "Look at me, my dear."

"I can't see. You took my fucking eye out!" Evan is crying now.

I lift his chin with the same two fingers. “Shh shh shh. Look at me, my dear.” I suddenly feel disturbingly calm.

Evan glares at me through the tears of his one good eye. “Please, I’m sorry.”

“Do you know why I love you so?”

Evan whimpers. “No, please...”

I lean in and ram the knife right into Evan’s heart. The blood quickly soaks through his T-shirt, staining the lightning bolt logo red, giving it a splattered look.

“Cause I am yours.”

Evan never takes his eye off me. I watch him as his breathing slows, peering into his very soul, drinking it in as it leaves his body. I hold his gaze until I see the light go out in his eye and he is gone.

“And you are mine.”

VI.

"Red Hands
Never Fade"

21

I know that it was just a mistake. An error of passion. But I don't know if I can forgive myself. *And I need you, Evan, to forgive me for what I've done. But you don't forgive, and you don't forget. You can't. Because you're fucking dead.*

Now that I have finished cutting Evan loose, I lowered him off the chair and am spooning him on the floor. I stroke his hair as I talk to him.

“Tell me what I must do to atone for what I did to your soul. Tell me to step over fire if that's what I need to do. What is your desire? ‘Cause it is done! One word and it'll be done.”

I hold on to him tighter and take in his scent. I already feel the heat leaving his body as he grows colder.

“Did I ever stand a chance, Evan? It seems I was playing the game you already won.”

I feel the stickiness of his blood all over us. I see it on the floor

and on his clothes. But there is more. There is the blood that is invisible. I am bleeding in my soul. My heart has been ripped apart the way my knife tore through his. There wasn't enough time, and I still have so much to say.

I'm pleading, "Listen to me."

But he can't hear me now. I shouldn't have done it. It was wrong to take him for myself. I know it was wrong. Lying here in my sorrow, my sadness starts to seethe and after a while, turns to anger. This is all his fault, I realize. If he'd just listened to me, it wouldn't have ended like this. I sit up and punch his lifeless body as I cry out to him.

"Why did you make this happen? Tell me, when did you get to decide? Why couldn't you just give me your attention? Your affection? Was it a matter of pride?"

My fists make contact with every word until I collapse on top of him, completely spent. He is the one who was wrong, so why am I the one suffering? What is this going to do to me? I've just killed the love of my life and what I feel now is indescribable. If it's the price of betraying him I accept it, but what is it I'm paying? Did it cost me my soul? My humanity? My mind?

I worry I will go insane without answers. I sit up again and roll Evan onto his back. Rigor mortis has begun to set in and he is becoming less maneuverable. I want to look him in the eye and maybe his spirit will speak to me.

"Your reason is overdue, Evan. C'mon I just want the truth. Do I resemble the rage and the chains that tied you down in some past relationship? Is that why you couldn't give in to me? Who hurt you so badly that you avoided the chance at love beyond imagination?"

I lean over and kiss him on his cold lips. I'm filled with sorrow and remorse. But I'm also filled with something else. A new feeling I can't describe, like something has been awakened in me. I feel alive. Unlike poor Evan. But he lives in me now. His body is just a shell. A shell, it suddenly occurs to me, that needs to be hidden away. Forever.

Now I'm panicking. What am I going to do with him? What do they do on TV? I try to think of places to bury him, but I don't think I'd be able to drag him out deep into the woods or dig a big enough grave. Besides, those bodies always get found on the TV shows. Acid in the bathtub? Out with the trash? Chopped up and dropped in a lake?

I didn't think this thing through. I have no idea how I'm going to get away with it because I don't know what I'm doing. I'll get caught for sure. And speaking of dead bodies, on top of having to figure out what to do with Evan's body, I promised Ryan I would take care of his—

Oh, wait...

22

I don't want to spread a trail of blood moving the body. Maybe a sheet or a blanket to roll him up in would work, but I don't think I have anything big enough. My bedding maybe, but I need that. Evan's not going anywhere, so I throw on some sweatpants and a sweatshirt and head down to the garage to find something to wrap him up in. That's when I notice his car outside. Shit, I have to get rid of that, too.

In the garage, I find a roll of plastic sheeting. Perfect. I haul that back upstairs and lay some out on the floor in front of Evan, then roll him onto the plastic. I grab his hoodie and toss it on top of him. I've seen CSI, I know his hoodie can pick up my DNA from a strand of hair or something just from being in my apartment. Better to get rid of it, too. Then I roll him in the sheeting three times for good measure and apply strips of duct tape to hold it closed.

Grabbing the keys to the hearse out of my key bowl on the hallway table, I start to walk out the door when I realize I also need Evan's keys. He didn't set them down anywhere that I saw. They are probably in his backpack. I'm about to open it up to look when I remember about fingerprints. I grab a pair of yellow latex cleaning gloves from under the kitchen sink and put them on before continuing my hunt. I can't find his car keys anywhere in the backpack, which means they are probably on him. Dammit.

I rip off the duct tape and unroll Evan. *Is he getting heavier?* I dig around in his front pockets and find the keys, then wrap him back up and re-secure with the duct tape. Snagging his backpack, I head back outside.

First, I pull the hearse, which is really just a silver minivan that has been retrofitted to transport bodies, out of the garage and back it around the side so it's next to the stairs that lead to my door. Next, I throw Evan's backpack in his car and pull it into the garage. It's a large space and there's plenty of room for multiple vehicles so I pull it in as far as I can. Leaving the keys in the ignition, I cover the car with some canvas drop cloths and figure that should be good enough until I can figure out what to do with it.

After turning off the external garage lights, because I don't need a spotlight on tonight's activities, I go back upstairs and drag Evan to the door and out onto the landing. Moving a lifeless body is no easy task. It's like the weight wants to be everywhere but the part you are lifting. Squatting low for leverage, I manage to heave his body upright against the railing. Lifting from his feet, using the rail as a fulcrum, I'm able to flip him over the edge. It takes what feels like minutes but would have been only seconds before I hear

the dull thud of his body landing on the ground below. There was some cracking of bones, too. *Sorry, Evan, but it won't matter what shape your body is in where it's going.*

Another trip down the stairs and I'm officially hating not living in a ground floor apartment. I go behind the vehicle where Evan's body landed and, under the shadow of night, cover his body with a clean linen sheet and load him into the back using the mortuary cot that is kept stored inside. Thankfully the stretcher is collapsable and designed so one person can load a body by themselves. As I'm closing the back of the van, my stomach knots as I sense a presence. I freeze and search the darkness, listening for signs of movement. It feels like someone is watching me, but I can't see or hear anything that confirms my paranoia. That's probably all it is. The danger of what I'm doing and my vulnerability is settling in and so I must be manifesting my fear.

I call out, "Hello?" No response. I am a statue for a full five minutes before I dare make another sound or movement. After I convince myself no one is actually out here with me, I pull the van back in behind Evan's car and close the garage door. I'll deal with the disposal tomorrow.

I grab a bucket and some industrial cleaning supplies used in the crematorium and trudge my way back upstairs. Since I already have cleaning gloves on, I may as well start taking care of the mess. I scrub the few drops of blood I can find on the cheap linoleum floor. Luckily, I didn't hit any arteries or anything that would send Evan's blood gushing everywhere. His bleeding stayed mostly internal, but there was some. I should probably get a black light and go over everything with that. I had put the knife in the sink, so I scrub it and clean the sink, too.

STEVE MEDDAUGH

When I am done, I look around and find no trace Evan was ever here. Satisfied, I pull off my kitchen gloves and then get hit with a wave of nausea from what I see.

My hands. They are covered in blood.

23

That's what you get when you kill a guy. Red, bloody hands. I probably shouldn't have touched Evan's body so much, but I needed to be close to him. I needed a moment. I don't think I touched anything before I put the gloves on that I didn't clean. Just the clothes I'm wearing. And the handles on my front door and the garage side entrance door. I wipe the handle on my entry door with a disinfecting wipe, but I am not making one more trip down those goddamned stairs. Not tonight, so I make a mental note to wipe down the garage door handle in the morning.

I grab a plastic grocery bag from under the sink and head to the bathroom to shower. I take off my clothes and throw everything in the bag. Too bad, I love those sweats, and the lingerie was expensive. Better safe than sorry, though. I'll burn the clothing with the body.

Is that what he's become to me now? Evan was the love of my

life. My everything. Now he's just "the body". My mind is trying to distance itself from him for emotional protection, but I can't let that happen. He means too much to me and I've made his soul forever a part of mine. I suppose that's the point. The essence of him will always be with me now and what's left behind truly is just a body.

The old pipes groan as I turn the shower on. While the water is warming up, I look in the mirror and don't recognize the girl I see. There's blood on my face and in my hair but also something different behind the eyes. Sadness, for sure. But there's also the look of experience. The look of having seen things you should never have seen. I look older, rundown. Exhausted. I look like I just murdered somebody.

I step into the shower and let the steaming hot stream beat down on me as I watch pink-colored water run over my toes on its way to the drain. Scrubbing the blood off takes the stain away but doesn't make me feel clean, so I wash my hair and body again. And again.

Weary, I sit on the tub floor and wrap my arms around my legs, tucking my knees to my chin. Then the tears start to flow as heavily as the water beating down on my back. *Oh God, what have I done?*

I sit here in my misery until I feel the water start to get cold, then I shut it off and grab my towel. After I dry myself, I wrap the towel around my chest, tucking it in at my armpit, and grab another one to dry my hair with. Once towel dried, I start brushing it out and notice there are still bits of caked-on blood in it. I didn't get it washed out completely. I guess one of the downsides of being a blonde is that you can't hide your murderous activities easily. It

shows everything.

A pair of scissors sitting on the bathroom counter catches my eye. So that's where I left those damn things. I wonder how differently things would have turned out tonight if I had put them away after trimming my ends. I might have been the one who was dead.

Using the towel I dried my hair with, I wipe the steam off the mirror so I can see myself, then I grab the scissors and start cutting off chunks so that my hair falls just below shoulder length. I do this to get rid of the bloody evidence but also as a sort of ritual to release the negative energy and emotions of Evan's death. The more I cut, the more aggressively I go at it because with each snip, I feel cleansed, both physically and spiritually. It's not entirely even, but as I look at my reflection, it is perfect. I am reborn. I'll have Krystal clean it up later.

Finished with the impromptu cut, I sweep the hair up and dump it in the bag with the clothes to be burned. I am just starting to feel better. Human. But as I tie the handles of the grocery bag to keep the contents securely inside, I look at my hands and depression sets in again. Even though I've washed them clean, all I see is red. They are forever stained in my mind with the blood of what I've done.

Looking at myself in the mirror I think about what I'm about to do. I just killed a boy and tomorrow I will destroy his body forever. There is no coming back from this. There is no undo.

I say to my reflection, "This is when we take another step closer to our demise. I want to tell you to tell me, to tell you that it's alright. But we know it ain't." I am so fried, I don't even know what I'm saying anymore.

STEVE MEDDAUGH

The sorrow may fade with time. Regret may fade. But I killed Evan with these hands and his blood is all I'll ever see when I look at them.

'Cause red hands never fade.

VII.

"The Sacrifice"

24

I sleep like the dead. Like Evan in the hearse below my bedroom. A dreamless, motionless, slumber where life halts and the heart doesn't hurt, and the mind doesn't spin aimlessly in circles trying to figure out where right ends and wrong begins. But unlike Evan, I get to wake up.

Maybe it would be better if I didn't have to wake, because the morning only brings back the ache in my chest and the regret for what I've done. But no sense wasting the day worrying about all that. If I don't take care of the body in my garage, I'm going to have a whole lot more to worry about. So, I'll put on a fake smile and get done what needs to be done.

I drag myself out of bed and when I enter the bathroom, my reflection in the mirror shocks me a little. I'm still getting used to being blonde but now with the shorter cut I struggle to reconcile what I see with who I am. Who I was, I suppose. It's like I'm

looking at a stranger.

I freshen up and put on some black leggings and a Def Leppard T-shirt because it's going to be a long day, and I need to be comfortable. I'm going to require some fuel to get through today, so I make myself some coffee in my brand-new coffee maker, and some toast with peanut butter, then grab a yogurt from the fridge and sit down at my kitchen table to make a plan while I eat, because today needs to go just right. There's no room for mistakes.

After breakfast, I toss my dishes in the sink then grab my PPE, my personal protective equipment, which consists of a surgical gown, heat-resistant gloves, disposable shoe covers, and a face shield. On my way out the door, I also snag the urn and head down to the hearse. Normally, the PPE wouldn't be necessary in a scenario like this, but I want to make sure I look official, in case I'm spotted. More importantly, I need to make sure none of Evan's DNA gets on me while I'm working with his body.

As I enter the garage, I remember about sanitizing the handle, so I dump my gear in the van, grab some disinfecting wipes and clean the handles on both sides of the door. I toss the wipes in the garbage and hit the garage door opener as I climb into the hearse.

Part one of the plan is to not look suspicious. Like being seen delivering a body from my residence to the crematory building. So, in order to make it look like I'm doing a pickup, I go for a drive.

The hearse needs filling up, so I stop at a gas station. While I'm there, I pay for a car wash then run it through. The landau panels on the back hide the fact there's actually a body inside so no one will ever know. It's part of my job to keep the van clean and full of gas, so I may as well do all that now.

After driving around a little longer, I return to the crematorium and back up to the entrance for unloading. Getting out, I grab my PPE and head to the door where I enter access code 2013 and let myself in. I flip on the lights, then put on my garb, face shield and all, and go back out to the hearse. I unload the cot, letting the legs drop to the ground. Before moving it, I walk to the head of the cot and put my foot in front of the wheels and push on it to make sure the leg has locked in place. This cot has been known to not lock all the way and if you're not careful, the whole thing can drop. The sheet covering Evan's body is simply draped over him and not secured in any way. Even though his body is wrapped in plastic and strapped to the cot, an unexpected fall to the ground could dislodge things or shift the cover, and the last thing I need is for any part of him to be visible to anyone.

Satisfied the cot is good to go, I roll it inside. I plan to work on Evan's body first so the evidence can be disposed of before anyone happens to see what I'm doing. I don't expect anyone to be working today and I should be alone all day, but you never know, and this isn't the kind of thing you want to take your chances on. I'll finish up with the body Ryan left for me after.

The first thing I must do is make sure there's no metal on Evan's body. I cut open the plastic he's encased in so I can search his pockets and then the rest of him to check for a belt buckle, watch, bracelets, or rings, but don't find anything. It seems unlikely he has a pacemaker at his age, so I should be okay to put him in the incinerator as is.

Next, I need to get Evan into a cardboard casket, which is just a large, heavy cardboard box used as combustible material to start the cremation process. We have a stock of them, so I get one and

QUEEN OF THE MURDER SCENE

place it on the conveyer belt in front of the retort. It has one side folded down, so I'm able to simply push the cot right next to it and roll the body inside. With everything ready to go, I fire up the cremator.

The preheating process should not take long since the incinerator is still warm from being run all week. It normally takes the entire weekend to completely cool down, so I have a head start today. While that is coming up to temperature, I decide to go check out what Ryan has left for me this weekend.

I walk over to the refrigeration unit and open the door, giving the automatic lights a second to kick on. When they do, I step fully inside but when I see what is lying on the shelf, I stop short.

Ryan, you son of a bitch.

25

Things go from bad to worse once I inspect the paperwork attached to the casket. It's bad enough that this body is in a wood casket, which means an extra hour of cremation time to fully incinerate everything so the remains aren't left with a sooty color. Now, I see the person inside is nearly 400 pounds. That's almost at capacity for our machine and will take an additional hour or two, depending on whether I need to do any repositioning of the body.

Working with obese bodies can be dangerous and must be watched closely. Fat is fat and can cause what is essentially a grease fire in the chamber if not monitored with heat levels kept under control. I can see now why Ryan didn't have time last night to do this one. He could have warned me, though.

As if things aren't bad enough, with these heavier bodies, for safety reasons, they should be done first, while the cremator is

cold. Why the hell wasn't this the first one he did yesterday? Maybe it was brought in late in the day. Or maybe he never intended to do it yesterday. Did he plan to leave this for me all along? That thought pisses me off. I could kill him.

I feel a darkness wrap around my soul as I let the thought of actually killing Ryan wash over me. It's not just a thought, I could literally kill him and the idea ignites an excitement in me. I feel almost outside myself right now. Who am I? What am I, that I would feel tingly all over, the way the thought of kissing Evan used to make me feel? Only now my thoughts are of dragging a blade across Ryan's neck. Slowly.

My cheeks flush with heat and my chest tightens as I imagine his blood covering me. I am bathing in it as I hold his dying body in my arms and watch the life drain from his eyes. Suddenly, it's not Ryan's face I'm picturing. It's Evan's. My heart instantly cracks, my pleasure replaced by sorrow. All my regrets come rushing to the forefront. Why would I fantasize about murdering someone? Especially a friend.

My body shudders as I simultaneously feel the excitement of taking a life and the angst of living with what I've done. Everything starts to collide, and I fear I'm losing my mind. *Get it together, Reina! You have work to do.*

I force myself to push the noise that fills my head deep down where it can't reach me and I get busy. Evan's body needs to be moved to the refrigerator while fatso's casket is put in the incinerator. I have cleanup to do, and a fire to keep under control. If only I could control the fire in my soul.

When Evan's cremation is finally done and I have swept and vacuumed out the chamber, I sift through his remains with a magnet to catch any metal parts left behind. I only find one bit that is probably a filling. The rest goes into the cremulator, which sounds like a ridiculous late-night TV invention you would buy for four easy payments of \$24.99 but is actually just a grinder that pulverizes the bone fragments into the dust everyone refers to as ashes.

One part of the plan I have not yet worked out is what I am going to do with his ashes. Do I keep them and just tell people it was my childhood cat? There are no traces of DNA left in the ashes, there's no way anyone could ever prove this was Evan, but it's probably best if I don't have anything around that I might have to answer questions about. *Well, maybe I can keep just a tiny bit for myself.*

I scoop about a teaspoon or two of Evan's ashes into a plastic baggie and tie it off before stuffing it in my bra. Looking at the urn into which I'd put the ashes for Ryan, I have an idea. There is a metal ID tag and label that goes with each urn, as well as a cremation certificate, but Evan doesn't have any of that. He is just ashes. Ashes that are otherwise indistinguishable from others. I go to the safe where we keep any containerized remains that have not yet been picked up and find that there are a few more in there. I bring them all out and distribute the rest of Evan's ashes amongst them and return them all to the safe. Because, why not?

I'm already going to hell.

26

My gut is doing somersaults. Only this time it's not fear or nerves causing the cramping. It's hunger. I have been working all day and haven't eaten a thing since breakfast. I don't have the energy to cook myself dinner, so I'll just go out and grab something. There's a taco truck close to campus that makes authentic Mexican food, it was one of Evan's favorite food stops. Their tacos are not as good as my *abuela* makes them, but they'll do in a pinch. And this definitely qualifies as a pinch.

After shutting everything down and cleaning up, I dispose of my gown and shoe covers, then clean and sterilize the face mask and gloves. After locking everything up, I get in the van and drive across the parking lot to my garage and park the hearse.

As I get out, a sound behind me makes me spin around so fast I lose my balance and catch myself on the doorframe of the van. When I look up, a woman dressed all in black steps around the

corner into the bay. My heart skips a beat, not only because of the unexpected visitor standing in my garage, but because she might be the coolest, most beautiful woman I've ever seen. Her jet-black hair is pulled back in a ponytail so tight, it looks like it's part of her scalp. Her eyes are done up in a panda smudge, her lips, painted and parted, are a bright red that contrasts with the black eyeliner in a way that makes her look dressed up for slaughter. A sexy man-eating shark. Her skintight clothes accentuate her perfect body. She's wearing black combat boots that look just like mine. She clearly has great taste. I'm so mesmerized I forget for a second there is a total stranger in front of me and I look like a deer caught in headlights. Or like a girl who doesn't want to get caught murdering her boyfriend.

I need to say something instead of just standing here looking guilty. "Um... can I help you?"

"I'm Scarlet."

Scarlet. Like her lips. *What the hell is she doing here? What does she want? Am I supposed to know this person?* I am starving and don't want to interact with anyone. I need to get out of here and eat something before I faint.

"What do you want, Scarlet?" That came out a little bitchier than I intended.

Scarlet takes a couple steps toward me and her boots clacking on the concrete floor echo ominously. I instinctively try to back up but am blocked by the open car door behind me. I feel a bit like a caged animal. Hungry, confused, scared, and out of my natural element, even though I'm in my own home.

She stares at me for seconds that feel like days, like she is deciding whether she will actually tell me why she is here or not.

QUEEN OF THE MURDER SCENE

“I know what you did.” The words float from the corners of her upturned lips into my soul.

There went my appetite.

27

Is it possible? Could this person have witnessed what I did? I thought I'd felt a presence last night when moving Evan's body, so maybe she did see everything. Or at least enough to send my guilty ass to prison for life. I decide to try playing it off until I know for sure what she knows.

"Actually, I work here. I'm only doing my job." I decide to show some authority and add, "But you are trespassing."

Scarlet doesn't respond. Doesn't even attempt to move. She simply continues to look at me, or into me, with a smile that is not the friendly kind.

Well, that got me nowhere. Maybe the direct approach will work.

"What is it you know I did?" I try.

"Relax babe, it's all good. I don't judge," she finally says.

Somehow her words and her tone relax me just a teensy tiny

bit, but I still don't know what she knows or what her motivation is. Danger alarms are going off in my head like a missile strike is headed right for me.

"I can help," she says.

"No. You can't. First of all," I tick the points off on my fingers, "I'm done with my work for the weekend. And second, you don't work here."

Scarlet folds her arms across her chest and points her chin at Evan's canvas-covered car. "You're not done yet."

Shit. She does know! How in the world...? I'm sure my face has already betrayed me. I need to pull myself together and be very careful with my words now.

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"You can't keep that here," she says pointing at the car with an upturned palm, as if she was offering it up for my consideration. "They will be looking for him. You don't want anyone to find his car in your garage."

"Looking for who? What are you talking about?" I am not nailing this.

"Your lover. People are probably already wondering where he is. Won't be long before they are actively searching for him."

"He wasn't my lover!" I overreact to this statement because of the rawness of it all. Even though we are lovers in the spiritual sense, souls who are forever intertwined, we never got the chance to be physical lovers. What I shared with Evan transcends physical love, it goes deeper than what this Scarlet person could possibly understand. But still, the label is a painful reminder of what I didn't get to share with him.

"Wasn't?" she responds with arched eyebrows.

“Isn’t! Aw, hell...” I drop my head in defeat. I take a breath and raise my eyes to meet hers. “What do you want?”

“I just want to help.”

“But why?” I can’t figure out what her game is here. “What do you really want?”

Scarlet closes the distance between us and rests a hand on my shoulder. “Listen, I’ve done some things, too. Things nobody needs to know about. We’re the same, you and me.”

I break eye contact and turn my head to the side, so I don’t have to look at her face.

“Please don’t hide from me,” she says as she gently turns my chin, forcing me to look her in the eye. “I see through the fake smile that you’ve been wearing around.”

“What fake smile? Who are you to—?”

“I’ve been watching you.” She waves me off. “You’ve been acting like you are living a normal life but there is pain and darkness under it all. Something has been stirring that no one sees.”

“Why the hell have you been watching me?” *Who does this psycho think she is?* “I haven’t done anything wrong!”

“Don’t lie to me. I see through the façade that you’re portraying as everything starts to collide around you.”

She’s right. God, she’s so right. It does feel like my world is colliding right now and I thought I could act normal, but clearly, I’m terrible at that.

“The pain of rejection you’ve felt all your life, it festers in you. All the hurt people have caused, you can’t forget, though you have tried. I know what you see when you look in the mirror. I see it too. But don’t reject the darkness in your eyes. Embrace it.”

I don't know what to say to this. How can I embrace it? It's not right what I did, I know that. But I can be better. I have to be better.

"You need help," she says. "So please let me get close. Let me in. You can't do it alone, you need a hand to hold through all this and what's to come. Please let me help."

"What's in it for you?" As much as she may be right, I am highly suspicious of her motives.

"Like I said, I've done some things. I need to lay low for a while and I'm looking for a place to crash until it's safe to resurface. I know you have an extra room here."

"Maybe I have a roommate already." Maybe? *Way to sell it, Reina.* I am the worst liar. Not a great quality for a murderer.

"I know that you don't, Reina."

"Wait, how do you know my name? I never told you what it was."

"Didn't you?" Scarlet gave me a playful smile.

Did I? I'm sure I did not. I'm getting so lost in all this. How is she doing this to me?

"Tell me, aren't you sick of only having this guilt that eats you up inside? That's no way to live. You need more than that to survive. More than just this emptiness, this loss of life you bear. You can't just sit here and dwell in it. When people start looking for him," she points at Evan's car, "things are going to get real, babe. You know that you're running out of time."

I do know it. She's right, I can't just sit here and pretend nothing happened. I need to erase what transpired. Make it so Evan was never here. So many questions begin to swirl around in my head, a hurricane of details that will destroy my world, sweep me up and toss me right into prison. Who knows I liked him? Who

knows he came to see me? Who knows where I live? Does anyone track his phone? *His phone! Shit. Where is it? How could I miss such an obvious detail? I am the queen of idiots.*

I have so much to do, I need to get rid of this chick. She looks like she could kick my ass if she wanted to, so maybe pacification is the right call here. “I have a lot to do right now. Can I think about it? The roommate thing?”

“What would it take to show you I’m on your side? That I’m exactly the thing you need in your life. And honestly, you might be just the thing I need right now, too. You are clearly struggling, it’s all over your face and in the way your body is trembling. You don’t know what’s coming next, but I promise you, I can help. Let me stay, it will be worth it. Whatever you need I will do it, let me prove it.”

“Right now, I just need you to leave.”

Scarlet gives me another one of her not-friendly smiles, waggles her fingers at me and saunters away without another word.

All I can do is gawk as I watch her slip around the corner of my building. Suddenly realizing I should probably find out how she got here, I have to will my body to move again. I don’t think I’ve moved an inch since she backed me into my car door. Maybe I can catch her getting into a vehicle that has a license plate I can snap a picture of. That might be good information to have, you know, just in case. Cell phone in hand, camera turned on, I finally manage to make my legs work and jog outside the garage and around the side, but she is nowhere to be seen. No cars, no beautiful scary woman walking down the street.

I am alone.

28

Scarlet seems to have vanished. *Is she hiding?* I stand here for a minute, waiting to see her reemerge from the shadows somewhere, but she is just gone. I look down at my phone to turn the camera off, and then I remember. Evan's phone is still missing. I can't worry about Scarlet right now; it is more critical that I find the cell phone.

I return to the garage and close the door for privacy before I uncover Evan's car. I dig through every inch, checking his backpack, the glove box, center console, car door pockets, and under the seats. I even look in the trunk. I have no idea why his phone would be in there, but I can't afford to not check every possibility until I find it. Giving up on the car, I pull at my hair. *Think, Reina. Use that big brain of yours.*

I start to replay the night in my head and picture Evan in my apartment. We unfortunately never made it to my bedroom. Did

he use the bathroom? I don't think so, but if he had left his phone in there, I would have seen it. It's not in his car, and it wasn't on his body. Is it possible he didn't bring it with him? There's no way he would have come without it. How would he even have found this place? I give up. I'm exhausted and can't think straight anymore. I feel dirty and desperately need a shower.

I trudge upstairs and hope that some revelation will hit me while I clean up. All the best thinking happens in the bathroom, right? I start to undress in my bedroom and when I take my shirt off, I see the little baggy of Evan's ashes poking out of my bra. I completely forgot I'd put it there. It's this kind of forgetfulness of details that is going to get me caught. Maybe I do need Scarlet. How can I possibly trust her, though? I don't know anything about her.

On the other hand, I have been considering a roommate, so maybe it makes sense. I just need to figure out how to vet her out. The problem is, she seems to know everything I did so, what happens if I say no? Will she turn me in? Am I being blackmailed? I've never felt so powerless.

I snatch the bag of ashes from between my boobs and drop it on my nightstand. I look at it for a second, then reconsider and put it in my underwear drawer instead, tucked underneath a pile of unmentionables.

After a hot shower, I slip into some old sweats and a raglan shirt, no bra. Comfort above all else. The twinges of hunger start to return. I really need to eat something, so I grab my wallet and keys and head down to my car.

As I open my car door, something occurs to me. I don't know what triggered the thought, but I think I finally got that epiphany

I was waiting for.

I race out of the garage and take the steps two at a time up to my front door, which I leave open with the keys dangling from the lock as I run to the couch. Relief washes over me so fiercely that my body relaxes to the point I actually pee myself a little.

It's there. "Thank God!" I pump my fists victoriously in the air. I found the phone. It must have slipped out of Evan's pocket when he sat down. Now the question is, what do I do with it?

I pull it out from where it was partially lodged between the cushions and inspect it. The battery is dead. Of course it is. Keeping his phone charged did not seem to be one of Evan's better qualities. This is not necessarily a good thing. A phone can still be tracked to the last location it was at before it ran out of juice. I do not want my apartment to be the last place his phone was known to be. I don't want his phone to be known to have been here at all, but there's nothing I can do about that. Maybe I can do something about the last known location, though.

I walk the phone over to the kitchen where I have my charging cable plugged into the wall. I check the plug type on his phone and fortunately it fits. I plug it in to let it charge up a little bit. It just needs enough power for me to take it somewhere else before the power dies out again.

While I'm waiting, I think about all the things I could have done differently if I had only thought about his cell phone earlier. I could have opened it up with his face while I still had his body here. Then I could have gone through it and found if he was sharing his location with anyone, and read through his texts to see who he told about coming to my place. There is so much information I could have gained that would make me feel more in

STEVE MEDDAUGH

control of my situation. But the not knowing what I don't know is stressing me out.

A half hour of charging should be enough before I move it and let it die somewhere far, far from here. With nothing else to do in the meantime, I sit at my kitchen table and rest my head on my folded arms. I close my eyes, just for a few moments.

But it wasn't just a few moments, because something, a sound maybe, makes me jerk my head up. I can tell from the brightness stabbing through my window blinds that it is morning. I must have fallen asleep.

Crap, I have so much to do. I was going to dispose of the phone during the night, when I would have been less likely to be seen, but now, I have to do it in broad daylight. I stand to unplug the charger and feel my heart drop into the pit of my stomach. My knees buckle as bile rises in my throat.

Evan's phone is gone.

29

There is a scratching at my door. It sounds like someone trying different keys in my lock. Not only is Evan's phone missing, but someone is also trying to break into my apartment. My panic grows and I just stand here paralyzed by fear.

The door swings open and there is Scarlet, her body an s-shape, with one hand on her hip and the other raised, palm up and dangling my keys from her fingers. Lord, she is sexy. I hate her for so many reasons.

"Hi, babe!" she says cheerfully and closes the door behind her with a boot heel. She drops my keys into the key bowl, just like I do, and walks right in like she already lives here. "Let's talk."

"What are you doing here?" My legs want to give out on me, so I drop back into my chair. I feel way too exhausted for having slept through the night. I guess that's what you get for sleeping at your kitchen table.

“How did you get my keys?”

“You left them in your door, which you left wide open while you took your little snooze.”

That can't be right, can it? Last night was a whirlwind, so I suppose anything's possible. The more I think about it, the more I believe she's actually telling the truth. I don't have the energy to fight what's happening, so I wave her over.

Scarlet joins me at the table and says, “So, who was he?”

I'm not sure I should say anything. She clearly knows a lot, if not everything. But how do I know she's not an undercover cop or something tricking me into a confession? Can cops operate like that?

“I didn't mean to,” is all I offer up.

Scarlet bobs her head in understanding. “Shit happens.”

We stare at each other for nearly a full minute before I finally ask, “Did you take the phone?”

“Sure did. I took care of it, along with Evan's car.”

This chick has way too much information. “So, if you already know who he was, why did you ask?”

“I meant, who was he to you?”

I ignore this more specific question. “How do you even know his name?”

“I looked at his registration when I disposed of the car.”

“What do you mean disposed of...”

I jump up, knocking my chair over, and bolt outside and down the stairs. The adrenaline pumping through me gives me the energy I need to move. When I reach the garage side door, it is locked, as it should be. I look up the stairs, my hand still on the doorknob. Scarlet steps slowly out from the doorway and dangles

my set of keys between her thumb and forefinger, shaking them at me. I raise an outstretched palm, and she tosses them down to me.

Of course, I don't catch them and must bend down to pick them up. My body retaliates with pain and stiffness. Sleeping in a cheap kitchen chair is not kind to the muscles. When I finally get the door unlocked and can see inside the garage, I am both surprised and not surprised to see Evan's car is actually gone. Disappeared like a magician's trick, leaving nothing in its place but the pile of canvas sheets I had covered it with. I have questions.

I step back out and see her spin on her heels and walk back into the apartment without even a glance in my direction.

"Hey!" I shout as I rush back up the stairs. When I get to the entry, I see her sitting at the table again, her back to me. She obviously doesn't fear me in the slightest. "Hey," I say again but she doesn't turn around. With a sigh, I trudge back to the table and sit across from her.

"Look, I'm too tired for games. Just tell me what you did."

"You're tired? Don't talk to me about being tired," she says. "I came back last night and found your front door open with the keys still in the lock, so I brought them in. That's when I found you asleep and spotted the phone charging, so I grabbed it to take with me."

"How did you know that wasn't my phone?"

"I saw you with your phone out yesterday. Yours has a pink heart on the case. Were you trying to take my picture?"

I feel my cheeks flush. Busted. I look down at the table, but I'm not sure why I should feel embarrassed. There's nothing wrong with that. Of course I would try to get a picture of her.

"I'll take that as a yes. Listen, I have a few rules. One of them

is absolutely no pictures. Understand?”

Oh, she has rules now? Instead of protesting, I simply nod my head.

Scarlet searches my face for a few seconds, then says, “Good. So, I took the phone with me and drove his car out to a dive bar just outside of town and parked it in a far back corner where it might not be noticed for a while. It’s not unusual for cars to be left there overnight anyway. It’s the kind of place where people usually end up leaving in either an Uber or a police car. Finding his car at a place like this will definitely throw some confusion in the mix.”

“How did you get home?”

“I walked back. It was probably six or seven miles. So, I don’t need to hear about how tired you are.”

“Jesus.”

I am processing everything she is telling me, then feel the fear hit me again like a punch to the face. I recoil as if I had been physically hit. I was literally all over Evan’s car with my bare hands looking for his phone, which is also covered with my prints.

“I know what you’re thinking, but don’t worry,” Scarlet says. “Before I left, I grabbed some disinfectant wipes and a pair of gloves I found in your garage and wiped down his phone and the entire car. They will find it clean of prints. Too clean, but when they can’t find a body, they will know something shady happened anyway. I told you I would prove it to you that I can be useful.”

I hate to admit how safe she is making me feel right now. Even though five seconds ago, she was freaking me out with her no picture rule. What is that about? What did she do?

“So did I?” she asked.

“Did you what?”

“Prove it to you.”

She kinda did. Whatever she may or may not know, she’s officially an accomplice now. Supposedly.

“How do I know you’re not a cop and just took the car to the impound while you trick me into a confession?”

Scarlet throws her head back and laughs. The hearty kind of laugh that comes from your gut. True laughter. She reaches into her front pocket. “If I were a cop, would I have saved you this?” She pulls out a Leatherman multi-tool and hands it to me. “I found this in his car. Thought you might want a little souvenir to remember him by.”

At the word souvenir, my mind flashes to the bag of Evan’s ashes hiding in my dresser drawer.

My face must have given me away, because she says, “You naughty girl. You already kept a little something for yourself! What is it? A lock of his hair? Piece of his clothing? A finger? You must tell me!”

I will never tell her. I will never tell anyone. I just silently turn the keepsake over in my hands. It’s one of those pocket survival tools that has a blade, screwdriver, can-opener, pliers, and a whole host of other items that seem useful, but nobody ever uses in real life. I open and unfold each part and inspect them. The knife is dull and tarnished. He’s probably had this since he was in cub scouts. I do happen to know he was in scouts as a kid. He was an upstanding young citizen. I suddenly feel a pang of guilt for denying the world his greatness. He would have been a good member of society, unlike me, and done amazing things. What have I done? I feel the tears begin to collect at the corners of my

eyes, threatening to flood my cheeks.

“Do you like it?” Scarlet’s voice snaps me out of my spiral. I forgot she was even sitting there for a second.

“This is so him,” I say. “It’s perfect.”

“I thought it was. It’s a common item so you wouldn’t even have to hide it. It’s not engraved or marked in any way that would tie it to him. And yes, I wiped it down so it wouldn’t have his prints.”

I stand and walk over to my utility drawer. I can feel her eyes on me. I open the drawer and drop the Leatherman in among the batteries (which may or may not be dead), pens, screwdriver, the keys to the bedroom doors, the scissors I put back in their place, and other random items I have collected that don’t have a better place to belong. There’s even a big, fat, pink eraser in there like I am in first grade still. I close the drawer and use this moment while my back is to Scarlet to wipe the wetness from my eyes, but this seems to just break the seal and the tears start running. I can’t hold back anymore and put my palms on the counter and sob, my shoulders heaving. I’m not exactly hiding the fact that I’m bawling my face off, but I don’t need her to see it. This is all too much. It is going to drive me to crazy town for sure.

I take a moment to get my emotions under control, wipe my eyes with my sleeve one more time before turning around. Scarlet is staring at me thoughtfully. “What?” I raise my hands in the air then let them fall, slapping my thighs. “Haven’t you seen a girl cry before?”

“Let me ask you one more simple question,” Scarlet says. “You don’t have to answer, no one answers, just think about it. For people like us, who love so fiercely, we would sacrifice everything

to hold onto that love. No one mentions the emotion, the commotion that can go on in our heads nearly driving us insane. They don't understand it. None of them. But I do. It's the surrendering to these intense thoughts that fills your every need. Right? It's the thing that fuels your fantasies."

It's like she's in my head. All these emotions and desires I hang on to, letting them rule me. It's taking me down a destructive path but that's the sacrifice I make to experience true love. To keep Evan with me, forever. I would do anything to hold on to that. But I don't know if I can.

"What's the question?"

"The question is this. What if you could just let go?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean what if you could keep all the love you desperately cling to, but get rid of all the other shit? I can guide you through this. I will lead, you just follow."

"What do you mean, get rid of all the other shit?"

"The stuff you worry about. The unknown. All your thoughts of tomorrow, I'll make them disappear. You just... hand it over, all the pain will be mine to keep."

"How the crap does that work?" She might be crazier than me. But if I'm being honest, it would be nice to rid myself of the guilt that eats at me like a scavenger on carrion. I want so desperately for that to be possible, so I let her continue.

"Let me put it this way. You did what you did because Evan didn't return your devotion. He wasn't dedicated to the love you shared the same way you were. So, you had to take charge. Am I wrong?"

I shake my head, no.

“And now you are stuck with more than you can handle. You need someone who is faithful to you, who is as dedicated in their loyalty as you are. Someone who is committed to love at any price. I’ll show you what it means to be so devoted, to live for it, this pursuit of intimacy. Passion. Real love. You need it to survive.” She closes her eyes and takes in a big breath through her nose. “It’s in the air that you breathe.” Her eyes pop open, boring into mine like a drill, and her voice drops an octave. “And you would die without it.”

She is really scaring me now. I kind of want her to leave, but I kind of don’t. Scarlet truly does understand me, and it feels like I’ve known her all my life, yet I still don’t know if I can trust her. She’s beautiful and frightening, comforting and threatening, helpful and unpredictable. Definitely dangerous. But dangerous to whom? That is the real question.

“I don’t know, Scarlet...”

“We’re in this together now, bitch.”

She said “bitch” in a friendly, sisterly way. I think.

“You know, if you let this go much further, there’ll be no turning back from me. So, you may as well just let me all the way in now.”

I think there’s already no turning back from her. She’s become an accessory in Evan’s murder. She doesn’t know everything, but she acts like she does. She definitely knows too much. We really are in this together now. “Okay, you can stay.”

Scarlet’s face lights up as her open smile widens, showing perfect teeth. I hate her so much.

“Yay,” she says clapping her fingers with her palms together. “Let’s see my new digs!”

30

I guess I better start locking my bedroom door. I fish the bedroom keys out of the utility drawer and walk her to the extra room. “This one’s yours. Mine’s that one.” I point to the room across the hall.

Scarlet walks to the middle of the room, places her hands on her hips and looks it over, top to bottom. “This will be perfect.”

While she inspects the desk and dresser drawers, I fiddle with the lock to figure out which key is for her room.

She looks up at what I am doing. “That’s not necessary, is it?”
“I don’t really know you.”

Scarlet considers this for a moment, then says, “You’re right. Privacy is good.” Her smile and the way her eyes crinkle tell me she is amused by all this. She walks back to me and holds out her hand.

I drop the correct key into her outstretched palm. “Do you have

any stuff to move in?”

“Nothing right now. I’ll grab some stuff later. I don’t need a whole lot.”

“Should we talk about rent and utilities?”

“Yeah, we do need to talk about that.”

By the tone, I don’t like where this is going already.

“The thing is, I don’t have my own cash flow right now. I’ve got some things in the works, and I’ll pitch in when I can, but I was kind of hoping I could crash here basically for free and that my services and silence would be payment enough?” She made air quotes when she said services.

The look on her face says, “Go ahead. Challenge me, I dare you.” I really, really hate her.

I am defeated. There’s no use fighting any of this. Like she said, there’s no turning back now. She has been very helpful disposing of the car and the cell phone. And I do think I need her. I don’t know who I am anymore, but she seems to understand me and can maybe help me figure it all out.

This is what it will take for me to be truly alive and love unconditionally, completely, eternally. I must give everything to have this. Most people aren’t willing to do what it takes to know love the way I know it. For someone like me, it’s not a choice. It’s just the cost of living.

It’s the sacrifice of life to sacrifice it all.

CHAPTER 3

VIII.

"Sinister Smiles"

31

This was a mistake. For the last two weeks Scarlet has been my shadow, always lurking right behind me. She probably thinks I don't see her, but I do. I see her on campus when I'm walking between classes. I see her outside Wildfire on the sidewalk, though she never comes in. She's definitely spying on me, but why?

I'm trying to move on with my life and forget about what I did to Evan. I don't mean forget about him, of course. I hold him in my heart where I can feel his love with every beat. What I did to him was a bad thing, though, and not what I wanted. Although, the more time that passes, the more I think maybe it is what I wanted all along but didn't understand it. Either way, there are consequences to what happened. Life changing consequences. Maybe life ending.

It made the evening news three days after the incident. They posted his high school senior picture on the screen behind the news

desk. His handsome face made my heart swell so much my chest felt like an inflated balloon. I still hear the reporter's somber voice clearly in my head:

“Twenty-year-old college student Evan Chase has gone missing. He was last seen Friday night by roommates who stated he left alone to study before a party he never arrived at. His car was recovered at a local bar, but no witnesses inside claim to have seen him. It seems he has vanished without a trace, leaving his cell phone behind. Is he running from something and doesn't want to be found? Was he abducted? The investigators we spoke with suspect he may have been caught up in some criminal enterprise and found himself in over his head. Suddenly breaking contact with everyone he knows and disappearing for days is atypical behavior, and his friends and family are calling foul play. If you have seen this man or have any information on his whereabouts, the police request you call their non-emergency number posted on your screen. More on this as the investigation unfolds.”

But nothing more unfolded. I watched the news religiously for a week, waiting to see what they had figured out. Am I safe or am I in danger of getting caught? The suspense was thrilling. Did the police have any leads? Had any witnesses stepped forward? They certainly didn't find his body, so what was happening? I may never know, because all the news covered after that was important stories, like the one about a family of ducks who took up residence

on the ninth hole of a local golf course and the battle that ensued between environmentalists and country club assholes.

Evan deserves better than that. I guess I should be glad I covered my tracks well enough that I didn't become the next breaking news story, though I can't take all the credit for evading the police. Scarlet played a big part in it. Maybe that's why she is watching my every move.

Does she think she needs to make sure I don't do anything stupid? I guess now that she's my accomplice, she does have something to lose. But I still don't understand why she helped me. And I don't like how she knows what I did, yet I don't know what she has done. That gives her too much power in this relationship. She is obviously hiding from something and refuses to talk about it.

I look up from the study notes spread about my kitchen table and see Scarlet just sitting on the couch watching some anime show on TV. I laugh to myself. She'd get along great with Kyle from work. He's a huge anime nerd. Actually, she'd probably murder him, if I'm being real. I picture her firing three rounds into his chest in the alley behind the coffee shop, his body dropping into a limp pile next to the dumpster. My body tingles at the image. Then I envision her drawing a sharp blade slowly across his neck, the blood gushing out in a warm, sticky glaze that makes me thirsty. What am I, a vampire now? Why the hell am I fantasizing like this? I am no fan of Kyle, but it is not okay to kill someone just because they annoy you. Is it?

I snap out of my twisted fantasy and realize Scarlet is staring at me.

"Hey, little girl," she says with a wicked smile.

“Why are you looking at me like that?”

“There’s something you don’t know.”

“What’s that?”

Clicking off the TV, she pops up and saunters over, taking my question as an invitation to join me at the table.

“I saw that look on your face.” She made circular motions with her index finger around my head. “I know what’s going on in there.”

I just stare at her.

“Exactly,” she continues. “Nothing. Everything. Confusion. Clarity. Anguish. Ecstasy. You’re feeling all the feels and it’s shutting you down.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about the thing you’ve awakened inside yourself. The thing that has always been there, unknown, unseen until now. The thing that’s always been missing, unneeded before and now that you found it, can’t live without. You’re like an 11-year-old boy who got his first boner. It’s scary but exciting and all-consuming.”

“Eww.”

“You are a slave to your thoughts now and you have nothing left,” she holds both hands out toward me, “but this body you control. You’re just a shell.”

She’s lucky I’m still in control of my body. I want to slap her. I’d walk away, but before I could start, she’d just stop me and feed me more of her bullshit. I’ve given up fighting these conversations. Whenever I try to argue, her sinister smiles shut me up. I see them in my dreams. Her villainous lips, too many to count, floating all around me and they open up their mouths to say,

“break, break, just break apart.” I don’t know what it means but I’m sure my psychology professor would have a heyday with it, if I could talk about it. But I can’t. Not ever. I’ve started having that dream every night, but I can’t reconcile what my subconscious is telling me, so I say nothing when I see that evil smile. I’m too afraid to know the meaning behind it.

“Hey,” Scarlet is snapping her fingers in front of my face, “little girl.”

“Stop calling me that.”

“Do you feel satisfied?”

“No, I feel the opposite of satisfied.”

“Have you quenched the hunger that was still dormant inside before all this started?”

I feel like I just answered that question.

Scarlet raises her hands and nods like she just read my thoughts. “Hear me out.” She takes a moment to consider what she says next. “Okay, you know how people who don’t crack their knuckles don’t ever feel the need to crack them, but once you start, they always seem to need the relief that only a good cracking will bring?”

“I would have no idea.” But I do have an idea where she is going with this.

“Or when you start seeing a chiropractor and how once they crack your back, you have to keep seeing them to get your back cracked? That’s what you need.”

“I need something cracked?”

“In a manner of speaking. You need the release, but the only way you will get it is to take another.”

“Another?” I am afraid to ask but I want to hear her say it.

“You must take someone else’s life, to feel their life force drain and consume their soul. It’s the only way.”

“Absolutely not! I am not a killer.” I heard it as soon as it came out of my mouth. “Okay, I’m technically a killer, but I’m not a *killer, killer.*”

Scarlet just shakes her head. “You are. The sooner you admit that to yourself, the sooner you can move forward.”

“No. No! That’s not who I am. Not who I will be.” My parents would be so ashamed of me. What has happened to their little girl? Little girl. It’s so weird that Scarlet keeps calling me that. How did she know that’s how I would be feeling right now? Or had she put that into my head? *Argh, get out of my head!*

“You have to do it,” she says. “I’m here with you every step of the way to help you through it and protect you. We will be inseparable, so trust when I say I won’t let you get hurt.”

The words from my dreams ricochet through my head, *break, break, just break apart.* I have to get away from her. That’s it! That is what my brain has been trying to tell me.

“I won’t do it,” I say with renewed confidence. “If you even try to get me involved in something I will rat you out so fast your head will spin.”

“Rat me out?” She laughs at that. “Oh, okay,” she mocks in a doofy voice. “First, let’s watch our cliches. Second, you can give me up, but if I am to burn, then you will never get to walk away from all the horrors and the pain that moves us forward, because I will turn you in just as fast. And make no mistake, it is horror and pain that moves us forward. It’s the only way.”

Great job, Reina. You can’t threaten the one person who knows what you’ve done. She’s right, I would never get to walk away

from the things I had to do, and apparently still have to do, without her.

“So, what?” I ask. “I’m supposed to live a double life as a college student slash serial killer?”

“This is what I’m trying to get you to understand, Reina. You haven’t really been living. You haven’t been your true self until now. You were incomplete, and now you are fighting who you are, insisting on still being the person you were pretending to be all your life.”

Could she be right? Have I been pretending all my life? Do I need to accept that I am not the good girl I thought I was? I feel dizzy. *Who am I?*

“Congratulations,” she says. “You have just found out what it is like to live a lie.”

32

A motion on my bed wakes me up. I open my eyes to see Scarlet hovering over me on all fours.

“Hey, what the fu—”

“Shhh.” Scarlet puts a finger to my lips.

How in the hell did she get in here? Did I forget to lock my door? I was so tired when I’d gotten home, I’d barely had the energy to strip and fall into bed. I probably had forgotten. This is messed up, though.

“I have a surprise for you,” she says. “I couldn’t wait any longer. It’s time.”

What in the world is she talking about? Actually, I don’t want to know. I’d had a long day of school, a shift at the coffee shop, and another shift at the crematorium helping Ryan. Somebody has to pay the bills around here, and so far Scarlet has contributed nothing but acid reflux.

Ryan was so impressed with how well I'd done covering for him a couple weeks ago, he'd started pulling me in more and more to help him out and get some extra cash. Tonight had been one of those nights where he'd given me extra hours finishing up a backlog so he could get home to relieve his sitter. So yeah, it had been a long freaking day and all I want to do now is go back to freaking sleep.

"Get out," I moan.

"Up," Scarlet insists, tugging on my arms to get me into a seated position. The covers drop to reveal my bare breasts. She doesn't seem to notice or care. "You're gonna love this, I promise."

I look over at my alarm clock. It reads 2:00 am. I let myself drop back onto my pillow and pull the covers up, hiding my nakedness. "Whatever it is, I will love it in the morning. Go away."

"Oh no, you don't. Let's go, babe" She pulls me back to sitting, then hops off the bed and from the doorway waves in a come-hither motion before trotting out toward the living area.

Is she fully dressed? Why is she in such a good mood? I don't like this at all.

"Are you coming?" she calls from the outer room.

Jesus. "Fine, I'm coming!" I throw the sheets aside. I'll just go see what Scarlet wants to show me so she'll leave me alone and I can go back to bed. I don't even bother to find any clothes to put on. When I step out into the hallway and see her standing in the kitchen, I know.

I will not be going back to bed.

33

I quickly cover my breasts and instinctively cross my legs, even though I'm wearing panties. Scarlet is standing in the kitchen and seated in front of her, tied to one of my chairs, is a man I've never seen before. He is wearing nothing but a pair of boxers himself, with his mouth duct-taped shut and his eyes bulging with fear.

As soon as I step into the room, he starts rocking side to side trying to get loose, but it's all in vain. His legs are duct-taped at the ankles to the chair legs and his hands are bound, also with tape, behind his back. He is completely immobile. How did Scarlet get this guy up here?

"Who the hell is this?"

The man looks suddenly confused. As I step closer, I realize he looks a lot like Evan. Same build, same hair, same age. The eyes are different, but at a glance this could have been him.

“What do you think?” Scarlet is awfully proud of herself. “This one will do, right?”

Do for what, I wonder. But it’s pretty obvious, given that the floor underneath his chair is covered in plastic sheeting. It becomes even more obvious when Scarlet pulls a knife from the block, the same knife I’d used on Evan, slowly unsheathing it so the metal sings to me. The stranger seems to ignore her, his eyes fixed on me.

“You can drop the modesty, he’s here for a date,” she says with a flirty grin as she tests the sharpness of the blade with the edge of her thumb.

Inhibition does seem pointless at this point, so I let my arms drop and I stand straighter, opening my chest to him. I’m surprised how freeing it feels to stand bared and vulnerable in front of a total stranger. I feel powerful. Confident. I walk closer until I’m standing right in front of him, my knees brushing his. I start to breathe heavier.

I want this. I didn’t think I did, but I feel a pull, like a black hole in my soul pulling at everything around me to fill the void. Then my conscience kicks in and I take a step back. I can’t seriously be considering this. I don’t care what Scarlet says, I am not a killer. That can’t be who I am.

“See?” Scarlet says, lowering her eyes to the man’s crotch. “I told you he was here for a date.”

I follow her gaze and see the erection under his boxers. Boys are such simple creatures, aren’t they? Even when in danger, their bodies will betray them and be ready for sex at any opportunity.

I instinctively take another couple steps forward so now I am straddling him. My breasts brush his face as I squat down onto his

lap. I rest my forearms on his shoulders, just like I had with Evan. His face relaxes. He probably thinks we're doing some sort of S&M act here, and it clearly excites him.

Wait, this is too weird. I'm sitting almost entirely nude on a total stranger's lap, who is also almost entirely nude, and in front of Scarlet, who is still basically a stranger. Maybe this weird threesome is part of the sexual arousal I'm feeling but I don't really think it's sex I crave. I desire something deeper. A spiritual connection that can only be found in death.

"No. I'm not doing this." I climb off his lap. The man's eyes speak to me, but I can't tell if it's relief or disappointment. "Do we even know this guy's name?"

"I don't know," Scarlet says. "Jay, Josh, something like that. Does it matter?"

"He's a human being, of course it matters. We need to get him out of here."

The man starts desperately trying to look behind him, as if he had forgotten Scarlet was even there. Panic returns to his eyes as he tries to figure out his situation. He seems completely disoriented.

"Oh sure, we'll just let him walk right out of here." Scarlet rolls her eyes. "Walk right out of here and straight to the police station."

"Shit! Shit, shit, shit." He's seen my face and knows where I live. I close my eyes. I need to think of a way out of this.

"No, babe, the only way he's getting out of here is rolled up in the plastic under our feet."

I open my eyes and look straight into hers and know she's right. The man is absolutely hysterical now, screaming behind the tape and hopping up and down, clearing some serious air with his chair.

Good thing no one lives below me.

Scarlet beckons me to join her behind the chair. “Come on, you can do this. We’ll do it together.”

I don’t want to go to her, but for some reason, I do. I walk calmly around the struggling Evan wannabe. I shouldn’t be so calm right now. Ice must flow through my veins, or maybe nothing at all because I’m cool as a cadaver right now. This whole thing feels so surreal. Maybe it’s just another of my crazy dreams because they have been doozies lately. *Please lord, let this be a dream.*

Scarlet has taken a step back, so I can stand between her and the chair. She hands me the knife and turns me around by my shoulders so that she’s now behind me, and I’m looking down on this guy’s head.

Her hands still on my shoulders, she leans in and whispers in my ear. “It’s Evan. Look.”

I bend down to do as she says. He turns his head as far back as he can, trying to see me. I’m so shocked to see Evan’s face, I almost drop the knife. The man in the chair is Evan. I mean, I know it’s not really him, but he has become a sort of proxy. A vessel that can embody the spirit of Evan I’ve held inside since our last night together. I’ve been given a chance to experience ecstasy with him all over again.

I had no idea this was possible, that I could keep having these special moments with Evan. All I have to do is find a body for his soul to inhabit while we share those seconds when the lights go out. When he gets to die so he can live forever in me.

“Do it,” I hear Evan say. “Take me now, darling.”

But he doesn’t say it, because his mouth is taped shut. That’s

just the special connection we have. Our words don't have bounds, our speech is internal, like the voice of God.

I run my left hand through his thick hair, feeling the soft curls sweep between my fingers until I grab hold and yank his head back. Scarlet reaches her arm around my waist, resting her left hand gently on my abdomen as she presses against me. She places her right hand on mine and guides the knife around the front of his neck and together we slowly slice across his throat, cutting deep to fully sever his artery.

The blood spurts immediately. His heart is still beating strong and forcing the blood in bright red streams that shoot as high as his head to land on the plastic covered floor about a foot in front of him.

“Take him in,” Scarlet says as she lets go of me and takes a step back.

I push his head forward so the blood doesn't shoot so high as I swing around him and settle myself on his lap. I lift his head so I can look into his dying eyes, allowing the blood to pour over my bare chest. It is hot and sticky and makes my nipples stand erect as it covers me and runs down over my legs, dripping into a crimson pool beneath my feet. I let it squish between my toes as the body beneath me convulses. When the movement slows, I try to hold him tighter, but everything is slippery now.

“I love you,” I say to Evan as I see that last flicker of life behind his eyes. I drop my head as my body trembles in rapture. The blood stops pumping and I raise my head and stare into the eyes of a stranger.

I may still be a virgin, but I know in my core what I just experienced is better than sex. More intoxicating. More profound.

STEVE MEDDAUGH

What could be more intimate than sharing a soul?

“Feel better?” Scarlet asks.

I’d forgotten she was even here. I really went somewhere else for a while and now I find myself naked, covered in the blood of a stranger, sitting on the lap of said stranger, in the kitchen with my roommate. *Welcome back to reality, Reina.*

I don’t even know how to respond right now. It’s all so absurd, I just chuckle to myself. Scarlet looks at me like I am a lunatic, which makes me chuckle again. This made her smile. Then the chuckle turns to laughter. Eventually, Scarlet can’t help it and joins in. Next thing I know, we are both laughing our faces off and I don’t even know why. I can’t stop. I don’t want to.

Because as soon as I stop, I have a dead body to deal with.

34

“How the hell did you gain access to get in there?” I ask when she tells me she already fired up the incinerator. “Never mind, I don’t even want to know. And dare I ask how you even knew how to start the cremator?”

The truth is, I am just thankful it is running and warmed up so we can get rid of this body tonight and be out of there before anyone arrives for work in the morning. I don’t press her when she doesn’t answer my questions.

Scarlet helps me wrap everything up in the plastic she was kind enough to lay down ahead of time. The cleanup goes much faster this time, thanks to her foresight. I don’t want to ask why she’s so good at all this. She frightens me.

I throw my blood-soaked underwear in with the body to be incinerated and take a shower to wash the rest from my skin. I scrub until my flesh is raw, then shut off the water and get out to

towel off. When I wipe the steam off the mirror, I can see there is just a little blood staining the very ends of my hair. I really need to start pulling it up into a pony like Scarlet does. I'll trim that off later, because right now we have a body to dispose of.

Scarlet helps me get our victim down the stairs, but it is a clumsy disaster, and we basically bounce him all the way to the waiting hearse at the bottom. We could carry him across the parking lot, but just in case anyone were to see us bringing a body in, it needed to look professional. So, I load him in the back of the vehicle, drive it around the block, then unload it to get him inside.

My heart palpitates when I glance up and see the video camera installed over the door. How could I have forgotten about that? Then I remember it is inactive. It hasn't worked in years, but the owners had left it there as a deterrent. That would have been just what I needed, to figure out how to erase security footage. I'm not tech savvy enough for that kind of thing. I'll bet Scarlet is, though. She seems to know how to do everything.

Going through his clothing to check for metal before adding it to the cardboard coffin, we find his wallet. I pull out his driver's license and read it. His name was Jason Ash, an appropriate name, as that's what he's about to be.

"Jason, that's right!" Scarlet snaps her fingers. "I knew it started with a J. I wasn't really paying attention because, seriously, what did it matter what his name was?"

"It matters," I say, daring her to challenge me.

"Fine, fine, it matters." She holds her hands up in surrender.

Everything but the bloody plastic sheeting seems fine to be burned, so I toss it all in the box with Jason's body. "Let's just get this going."

While the body is in the incinerator, we rinse off the plastic and scrub away as much blood as we can. Then I stuff it all in a garbage bag and toss it in the dumpster out back. There's not much else to do while we wait for the body to finish, so I decide to drill Scarlet on a few things. I have so many questions.

"Where did you get this guy?" I nod toward the cremator.

"Picked him up at a bar," Scarlet says matter-of-factly.

"Where's his car?"

"Still at the bar."

"Well, then, how did you get him to the apartment?"

"Your car."

"You took my car?" I don't think I've ever met anyone so entitled. She eats my food, though granted very little, stays in my apartment for free, and now apparently uses my car while I'm asleep. Clearly, I need to establish some ground rules. I thought there was a basic social construct for how roommates behave that everybody understood. Some commonsense boundaries, a concept she obviously doesn't grasp.

"Don't worry, I had plastic sheeting on the passenger seat so he wouldn't leave any DNA in your car."

The more questions she answers, the more I have. "How did you get him into a car with plastic sheeting on the seat? And how did you manage to get him tied up?"

"Oh, he was very cooperative." Scarlet winks.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Rohypnol."

"You roofied him? Where did you even get something like that?"

She looks at me for a moment like I am a child. Then says,

“You live right next to a university campus. It wasn’t that hard.”

Scarlet continues to fill me in on the details of her hunt for a victim until I am satisfied we aren’t going to get caught. The biggest exposure is that someone might have seen this guy get into my car with her, but she assures me nobody was around, and anyone who might have seen it were in no state to notice, let alone remember. He had been there alone, so there were no friends to know he was going home with a girl.

“What about a cell phone?” I ask. “I didn’t see one in with his clothing. It had better not be sitting in my car somewhere.”

“After we left, he pretty much passed out and I slipped on some gloves, fished it out of his pocket, and tossed it out the window. We weren’t even heading toward your apartment,” she adds. “I took a roundabout route back, just in case.”

I feel a little better, but still out of control of the situation. I decide what’s done is done and what will happen will happen. All I can do now is make sure they never find a body.

When the cremation is completed, we shut the cremator off so it can cool at least a little bit before they fire it up again later this morning. They might question how warm it is if they really pay attention, but they probably won’t. It takes days to fully cool, so it won’t be unusual if it’s a bit toasty still.

We sweep the ashes out of the chamber and run them through the cremulator to grind everything to fine dust. Fortunately, it’s the middle of the week and there are plenty of urns still here waiting to be picked up that I can spread the remains between, saving a little bit for myself, of course.

Satisfied that everything is cleaned up and just the way we found it when we came in, I lock up the building and pull the

hearse back into my garage.

As we walk down the hallway to our respective bedrooms, Scarlet and I make eye contact but don't say a word. There is so much to say, too much, but not tonight. We enter our rooms silently and close the doors in unison.

I drop my baggie with Jason Ash's ashes on my dresser and eye it. Did I just become a serial killer? I can't remember how many kills before it's considered serial. I don't think I'm there yet. Yet? Listen to myself, already talking like I have goals for murder counts. This needs to stop now. It's sick and twisted. And satisfying.

I don't have the energy to think about this right now, I just need to sleep. I open my underwear drawer and scoop Jason into it with a sweep of my arm. I need to find a better way to keep my treasures than little baggies in my drawers, pun intended.

Without even bothering to take my clothes off, I drop onto my bed. Ah sweet, heavenly relief. I could sleep for like two days. I roll my head to check the clock.

It's time to get up for calculus.

35

I never make it to class. The last thing I remember is seeing 7:00 a.m. on my clock, and now it reads 12:55 p.m. I'm still fully dressed, shoes and all, lying on top of my bed. My shift at Wildfire starts in five minutes. That's not happening.

When I sit up, the migraine hits me like a fierce hangover. Lightning behind my eyes, vice-like pressure on my temples. I didn't have a drop to drink last night, this is a different kind of hangover. This is the kind brought on by a lack of sleep, stress, dehydration, and bloodlust. I hold my head in my hands and wait for the pain to pass, or at least lessen to the point I can see again.

When I can finally open my eyes and focus, I call in sick to work. With my schedule cleared for the rest of the day, I pad to the bathroom to pee. Sitting on the toilet, I start to think about last night and feel the sudden urge to puke. I barely grab my bathroom trash can in time to catch it. It feels like my head is going to

explode as everything comes up. Is this my life now? If it is, I don't want it. Look at me, sitting here on the toilet with my pants around my ankles, hugging a trash can full of vomit. What is a monster like me to do but cry?

I eventually stop my pity party only because the sharp stench of urine mixed with vomit filling my nostrils has become unbearable. I wipe, then dump the contents of my waste can into the toilet and flush. I give the can a quick rinse in the tub and leave it there to dry out. After washing my hands, I pop a couple Excedrin. I start to leave, then have a change of heart and go back to take two more Excedrin.

I need food, even though my stomach warns me against it. As I pass Scarlet's room, I pause and listen. I can't hear any motion happening inside. Is she still asleep? Is she even home? That bitch better not have taken my car again. I raise a knuckle to knock on her door, then think better of it. If she is in there, I really don't want to interface with her right now.

I go to the kitchen and make myself a piece of dry toast. I'll start with that. While I wait for the toaster oven to do its job, I pour a tall glass of cold water and leave the spout running while I down it, then fill another glass before shutting it off. The toaster dings, I grab the maybe too dark bread with a paper towel and sit down at the table.

I realize almost immediately that I just sat in the same chair Jason was tied to last night. A tingling sensation travels from my core through my entire body, like an aftershock that resonates the euphoria of last night. I feel nauseated again. I take a tiny bite of the toast and choke it down to see what happens. It seems content to stay down, so I take another small bite.

Why can't I come to grips with my own desires? My desire to be a good girl, to do what's right, to feel love, to feel whole. My desire for blood. Because these things are contradictory, that's why. They can't be reconciled. The push and pull going on in my head blurs the lines between right and wrong. Between reality and fantasy. When exactly did I start to lose my mind?

The day Scarlet showed up, that's when things really started to go downhill. The same words keep echoing in my head:

Break, break, just break apart. Just break.

I need to break away from Scarlet, but I don't know how. How do you get rid of someone who knows all your dirty little secrets, who holds your life in their hands? Someone who has shared such intimate moments with you that as much as you hate them, they are like a part of you. How do you break from that?

I can think of only one way. A nice warm bath will be in order for what I need to do. I hate that it has come to this, but I'm in a lose-lose situation now and I just want the pain to stop. The pain in my head. The pain in my heart. I must wash my sins away with another sin. The gravest of sins. I decide to do it and stand, leaving most of the toast uneaten on the table.

I grab the chef's knife still lying on the drying mat from being cleaned last night and head to the bathroom.

36

I can't even kill myself in private. Just as I am working up the courage to do it, Scarlet bursts into the bathroom. I'm certain I would have locked the door at a time like this. How is she always getting into my private spaces?

I'm more embarrassed by getting caught with a sharp knife in the bathtub than I am by my nakedness. I am so over worrying about Scarlet seeing me nude.

"What the hell are you doing?" She seems pissed.

"I am ending this." I could swear I see a hint of fear flash behind her eyes. She probably needs me at this point more than I need her.

"No," she says with full resolve. "You are not the one in control here. You don't get to decide to do this."

"Of course, I'm the one in control. It's my life." I say the words, but I don't believe them. I haven't felt in control for a long

time.

Scarlet sighs and squats down next to me. “I know you’ll never admit you were born to be a pawn, but that’s what you are. Don’t you see how special you are? You were created for a purpose that is greater than you can understand. A purpose that goes beyond morality and justice. A purpose that absolves you of any sort of wrongdoing. You are an innocent sinner, a guilty saint, above all.”

“That is some grade-A bullshit. I’m not a fool, Scarlet. There’s nothing left for me.”

“But there is. There is so much for you to experience, you can’t even imagine. You are miserable because you are fighting it. The more you resist, the worse it’s going to go for you.”

“I’m supposed to believe I’m really just a pawn in this life and there is some higher power forcing my destiny? And it’s what, do what they say or else there will be hell to pay?”

“You know what? Fine. Go ahead, pay the price and grab the dagger. Cut through skin and stain the water with your blood.” Scarlet stood. “And for what it’s worth, you’ll never live until you die, so you may as well do it.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“You know what it means. You’ve seen it in the eyes of those you’ve taken. That moment when they die and become truly free. It’s supposed to be your job to usher them into that freedom, to usher their souls where they are meant to go. But you know what? I see this is too much for you, so maybe you should join them all.” She squats back down and takes the knife from me. “Here, I’ll help you.”

She called my bluff. I don’t want to die. I want to live. But according to her I can’t really live in this life. I won’t be in control

of my purpose. This crazy in my head will never go away. Alive means to be dead. If I want to live and truly be free, I must die. She is so deep in my head, I'm frozen. It's like I have both hands tied up, held hostage by the whispers that destroy my mind. Whispers that come from her.

"Are you ready? Together." Scarlet holds the knife to my wrist. "It will be my hands, your blood. Let's do this."

I try to pull away. "No, please..."

Scarlet arches an eyebrow and raises the knife off my skin.

I notice a trickle of blood in the water. I didn't even feel it at first, but the knife must have cut me when I tried to move away from her. Just a slice on the skin, but it stings now as I lower it into the bathwater.

Break, break, just break apart.

"Get out! I want you gone. Gone from this apartment. Gone from my life!"

Break, break, just break apart.

"There she is," Scarlet says.

I have done no wrong.

"Go!" I am screaming at her with everything I have.

Break, break, just break apart.

"Fine." Scarlet drops the knife and stands again. "I know you want to push me away, and I'll go. For now. Let me be clear though, I won't let you win, but darling, you can barely take much more. You need me. So, you'd better get on board."

She walks out of the bathroom, then turns around and sticks her head back in. "By the way, you still have blood in your hair. You're welcome," she says, then slams the door behind her.

"I don't need you," I say to no one. But maybe I do. I would

STEVE MEDDAUGH

have totally gone to school and work today, forgetting about the blood I still needed to trim out of my hair. Actually, no. I don't need her. The blood isn't even that noticeable. You'd have to look closely, and nobody pays that kind of attention to me. I can do this on my own.

I hope she disappears forever. I've never felt such animosity toward anyone before. It's time to end this sick relationship.

I try to will her away, to make her disappear forever with my mind as I close my eyes and let my body slide down, my knees rising out of the water, until my head is completely submerged.

Break, break, just break apart.

IX.

"Dull Knives
(Cut Better)"

37

I don't understand why I'm so lonely. Ever since Scarlet left, I've been feeling like a part of me is missing. It makes no sense, because I hate her and want nothing to do with her. But I need her, and maybe even miss her.

I've started to catch up on sleep again, got caught up with school, and can balance working two jobs with everything else a lot easier without her. But the emptiness, it's almost eating me up from the inside and I think that void in my life is her.

Or it's the other thing.

Maybe Scarlet was right all along. I've aroused something hibernating all my life in the darkest part of my soul. Now I've become something new and there's no going back. It's a hunger that must be fed, a pressure that must be released. The rush that's in my veins, I can't control it. I need her to tell me why.

The whispers I thought were Scarlet are still there, and they are

getting louder. This voice that's in my head is getting stronger. I need her to tell me how this is happening. How can I make it stop?

The aching in my bones is taking over. I can't stand it anymore. I refuse to take anyone else's blood. Maybe if I take my own, instead. Not like, kill myself, but just enough to satisfy the feeling. Or to feel satisfied. If I can't have that, then I'm feeling for nothing at all.

I grab the knife, the devious object that started all this, and I rest the blade on my forearm. In a moment of clarity, it occurs to me I don't want to have to explain any cuts or scars on my arm. I set the knife down on the kitchen table, undo my pants and pull them down before sitting in the chair. I pick up the knife again and before I think myself out of it, quickly slash at my thigh, high enough that any potential scar would still be covered by shorts.

I feel nothing. I don't see anything, either. I know I didn't miss but my blood ain't spilling red, I'm freaking out! Am I still alive? It feels like everything human inside me is gone.

Then slowly, a line of pale red starts to form, thin as a strand of hair. That line grows, quickly now, getting darker as it gets thicker. Shit! I didn't prepare very well for the outcome of this. Or at all. I'm about to get blood everywhere. I try to put my hand over it and press but that does nothing to stop it.

Holding my hand in place to at least try to contain the blood from dripping onto the floor, I shuffle with my pants still around my ankles over to the counter and grab some paper towels. I use them to apply pressure and watch the white quilted pattern turn red as it soaks in my vital fluid, my essence of life.

After a minute of holding the wound with the paper towels, the bleeding seems to have stopped. The paper tears a little as I pull it

off, sticking where the blood already started to dry. I check the floor and see no drips. I guess I managed to keep the mess contained to my hands and leg. So, that's a bonus. Even the knife looks spanking clean.

But what I didn't accomplish was to feel anything. Very disappointing. That sharp blade cut through me like butter, slicing with such ease, it's as if it did damage without doing damage. But the blood on my hands confirms it did indeed do some. I need to clean it out so it doesn't get infected.

I move to the bathroom after pulling one foot free from my pant leg, dragging the rest of the pair of jeans by the other like a weird blue denim tail. Once there, I grab a washcloth and add some hand soap and cool water, then I put my foot up on the toilet seat, and gently wash my leg until it looks clean. From under the sink, I pull out a bottle of hydrogen peroxide and some cotton balls. I wince as I apply a soaked cotton ball to the cut. Well, that part stings. At least I know now I am capable of feeling some kind of pain, but that's not at all the result I was going for.

That quenched nothing in me. I can't just go around murdering people, there must be a way to manage this. I'm going to have to do better. But I don't think I can.

I need Scarlet back.

38

So, I found out dull knives cut better. I was feeling particularly frustrated the other day. Everyone I looked at as I walked through campus had Evan's face. Even the girls. Every customer at Wildfire had his face. It's all I could see. Is this what guilt does to a person? It is slowly spinning me into absolute lunacy.

When I got home, I tried to distract myself with dinner. I turned on the news for background noise while I dug around the refrigerator for something to eat. I pulled out a head of lettuce, a couple tomatoes, a cucumber, a package of deli turkey breast, and a bag of peeled hard-cooked eggs. Chef salad, it is.

I was cutting the turkey into strips when the news I'd been waiting for came on.

“Another student has gone missing this week. Twenty-one-year-old Jason Ash was last seen at the Copper Bullets tavern on Wednesday night,

the same bar where Evan Chase's car was found a few weeks ago. Jason's car was left in the parking lot, but his cell phone was recovered five miles down the road. There is speculation he stumbled out, too inebriated to drive, and attempted to walk home. But he never made it there. Witnesses inside say they saw Jason talking to a woman with long dark hair. Her identity is still unknown."

A lump formed in my throat. Scarlet was seen. There were witnesses! This was not good news. I'd told her the way she'd gone about it was sloppy. Messy. It didn't seem like anyone had seen him leave with her, so there was that. The reporter continued:

"Police believe the two disappearances may be related. If you have seen either of these young men, or have any information pertaining to their disappearance, you are urged to call the number below."

Seeing their photographs side by side was both exhilarating and depressing. I was saddened by the reminder of what I'd done, but also excited by the fact I'd gotten away with it, and they appeared to have no real leads.

I went back to cutting vegetables. As I started slicing into one of the tomatoes, the red fleshy tissue tearing, pulp oozing out, I pictured the knife entering human flesh. It was happening again, that uncontrollable urge. I looked at the knife, then remembered how unsatisfying the experience had been last time. I needed to really feel it this time.

I opened my utility drawer thinking maybe scissors might work

QUEEN OF THE MURDER SCENE

and that's when I saw Evan's Leatherman multi-tool. I pulled it out and opened up the three-inch stainless-steel blade. I wasn't sure it was even up to the task of cutting my skin, but I suppose that was the point. That I'd have to work at it, so I actually felt something. And I did.

But not for long.

39

The pain of cutting myself quiets the noise for a little while, distracts me from the vile conversations in my mind. But every day brings new nefarious thoughts, new temptations, a new craving. Today is no exception.

Now that I'm home from a long day of school and work, my body begins to quiver, my flesh becomes clammy. I feel like a drug addict going through withdrawal. I suppose I am an addict of sorts, except my drug is the spilling of blood. This kind of addiction grabs hold of you from the first taste and never lets you go. Once you've had it, you can't live without it. Where were the ad campaigns in middle school that read, "Just say NO to murder?"

The first time had been an act of love. The second, one of need. I was surprised by how much I liked it when I was in it. You know, for the murder of it all. Sure, Jason was a substitute for Evan,

allowing me to relive a moment, but if I'm being honest, I got a huge thrill from the power and control I had over a total and complete stranger. No emotional ties, just him, me, and my blade. I wonder if I would get the same thrill from a female victim.

That's when it hits me. I really am a monster. Just thinking about all this is spinning me up. I am losing my mind. I have to be. When did this kind of thinking become okay? Is any of this real? Did I actually do these things? Did Scarlet ever exist? The truth sinks deeper, slipping through my fingers. I wish someone, anyone, would tell me why I'm losing my grip on reality.

I pull the Leatherman from the kitchen drawer. It's the only thing that will stop the anguish. I have learned to go into the bathroom first before starting this process. I do learn from my experiences. It's a daily ritual now. Pants all the way off, sitting on the edge of the tub with my feet inside, gauze pads and washcloth next to me on the tub ledge, I start cutting into my inner thigh with the dull blade.

Pain's ripping up my skin, but I can't take it back now. Don't want to, because I'm here for it. This is what I need, but it's not enough. I wish someone would tell me, how am I supposed to understand, why I am like this?

I press a piece of gauze to my new wound and with all other options exhausted, I can think of nothing else to try. So, I fall back on tradition and family upbringing, and I pray outloud.

"Oh, help me, Lord. Tell me why, why did you make me like this? I hate to live like this, but I fear even you can't save me now!"

Nice one, Reina. Let's challenge God's omnipotence. My abuela would tell me I'm being blasphemous right now. I may as well triple dog dare Him to save me while I'm at it.

As if on cue, Scarlet, sexy as ever, darkens my doorway. I jump at her sudden appearance, knocking the multi-tool into the tub where it clatters and slides until it hits the drain, its tip caked in blood. No hiding what I've been doing now.

"Hey, babe," she says. "Am I interrupting something?"

"How the fuck do you keep getting in here?" I scream.

"I knocked, but I guess you were too deep in your little prayer," she says innocently.

Once I get over the shock of her return, my surprise turns to relief. She has to be the answer to my prayer. Then my relief turns to anger. Anger at her for leaving me, even though I'd wanted her to. Anger for the way she has walked me down this dark path I'm on. Anger that I'm relieved to see her. But I am. I think. Honestly, I don't know what I'm feeling anymore.

"I'll let you have a moment," she says and walks to her room, acting like she never left.

I pick up the Leatherman and start wiping off the blade. I consider what it means now that she's back. Since she left, it's been like needles piercing through my brain. Things should have gotten better as the days went on, but the passage of time was slowly increasing the pain instead.

I don't know why she is in my life. Is she a gift from God? Or a gift from the Devil? I am trying to extract greatness from this life, to live to my full potential. I do everything right, then it all goes so wrong. I grasp for everything that's beautiful, but am left holding onto things that cut me like this dull knife. Things like Scarlet.

I'm plucking roses but keeping the thorns.

X.

"Queen of the
Murder Scene"

40

“You don’t really wanna be like me,” Scarlet says without looking up.

She is sitting cross-legged on her bare mattress, scribbling something in a journal. Didn’t think she was the journaling type, which makes me all the more curious what she is writing. I look around her bedroom from where I’m standing in the doorway. I don’t think I have ever looked in this room since she started crashing here. To say she moved in would be an overstatement.

There is a black duffle bag on the floor next to the desk and a throw blanket folded on the end of the bed. No sheets, no pillow. No possessions but the mysterious journal and the clothes on her back. And whatever is in the duffle. *Wait, isn’t that my blanket from the couch?* Whatever, that’s not the battle I want to fight right now.

Scarlet slams her journal shut, snapping my attention back to

her. “Don’t come to me with a false pretension of being complete, because you are not. You are a shell, a puppet to your emotions. You don’t really wanna understand what it’s like to have blood on your hands.”

“I know what it’s like, Scar. I have a lot of blood on my hands. So much blood, you know this.”

“Technically, but what I’m saying is you want to remain your innocent self and act like what you do is not real. You try to hide from it rather than embrace it as a part of you.”

This conversation is not going how I planned it. I just wanted to know how she is always so confident, how she can own her actions and who she is so fiercely. I want to be like that, too, but she doesn’t believe I am capable. I need to show her I can handle this. I need to prove it.

Infuriated, I charge into the bathroom, where there are no windows, and slam the door shut. Leaving the lights off, I lean back against the door and let my body slide to the floor and sit there in complete darkness.

I’ve resolved myself to the fact I might have to move beyond the cutting. Killing might just be the only release for the demons that inhabit me. And so, I let those demons rise and let it all out with screams that are blood curdling. I keep screaming, letting the sound reverberate in the darkness until my screams turn to laughter. The kind of laughter that makes people uncomfortable, like they should be worried for my sanity. They probably ought to be. I am a bit worried, too.

But the thing that really unnerves me is when I finally stop, I can still hear that disconcerting laughter. At first, I think it’s in my head. Then I realize it’s not me.

STEVE MEDDAUGH

It's coming from Scarlet.

41

Thinking about how I might find a victim on my own, to show Scarlet I am in control, the answer hits me. Literally.

Leaving the math building, I pass a group of girls caught up in conversation and not paying attention. They don't see me and I have nowhere to move out of the way, so one of them slams right into me.

Tiffani with an I.

“Watch out!” She looks up at me then recognition registers on her face and the snarl of distaste is replaced with a frown of sadness. “Oh, hey, Ronda, right?”

“Reina.” I remember how her name is spelled, and she can't even remember what mine is.

“I'll catch up with you guys,” she says to her friends, who give me sideways glances like I might be stranger danger, then continue into the building.

They would be right about the danger part. Tiffani with an I may have just sealed her fate as the next in line after bumping into me.

“So, you heard about Evan, I assume?” she asks.

“Did they find him?” I pretend to not have a clue.

“No, I was hoping maybe you, like, knew something. Or whatever.”

“Why would I know anything?” I need for her to not associate me with him.

“Well, you study calc with him sometimes, right?”

“No, just that one time, with all of you.” Her face says she doesn’t believe me, so I throw her a bone. “I mean, I saw him sometimes in the coffee shop where I work, and would maybe give him a little help on a problem here or there, but I haven’t seen him come in for a while.”

Because he’s dead.

This seems to satisfy her. “Okay, I was just hoping...” Her voice trails off. “I really hope they find him,” she adds.

They won’t.

“Because that other guy is missing too, you know?” she continues. “I’m just scared.”

You should be.

“I mean, aren’t you?” she asks when I don’t respond.

“I don’t think you have to worry,” I say. “I heard he might have been caught up with drug dealers or something. Maybe he owed money he couldn’t pay.” I am trying my best to misdirect. “Maybe they—”

“You think he might be dead?” She puts her hand to her mouth.

“No, that’s not what I’m... I’m sure he’ll turn up.”

QUEEN OF THE MURDER SCENE

I must not have shown enough emotion or concern, because she says, “I don’t know how you can be so calm about this. I think something bad is happening. I try not to go anywhere alone anymore.” She tugs at her backpack straps. “I gotta get to class, but watch your back.” With that, she was off to her class.

I don’t need to watch my back, but she should watch hers. Something bad is definitely happening. I don’t need to be scared though, because I know I’m not in danger.

I’m the danger, now.

42

It takes a few days of jogging around, modifying my daily run times and routes, but I finally figure out a path where I can follow her and find out where she lives, and what car she drives.

“I got you, Tiffani with an I,” I say to myself as I see her get out of her car and enter her apartment unit. Turns out she lives at the Z apartments, just like Evan does. Did.

Feelings of jealousy and rage fill my heart, thinking about how much time they probably spent together. Had they hung out in each other’s apartments? In each other’s bedrooms? I jog away and start to formulate a plan.

As I put some distance in, I begin to calm down. The anger subsides as my plot grows. The scheme alone brings me peace as I feel the anticipation swell within me. But also, I know whatever relationship those two may or may not have had, I am the one who loved him in the end. I am the one who got to share something

QUEEN OF THE MURDER SCENE

more intimate than anyone else could have dreamed. I'm the one who gets to love him forever.

When I told Scarlet my idea that night, she was on board. Excited even. Her approval made me feel even more confident, but there are still a few risks, especially given Tiffani's "I try not to go anywhere alone anymore" comment. We talked through everything and now here I am at 7:30 a.m., parked a couple blocks away from the Z apartments, but sitting where I can see Tiffani's car.

I am alone for this part since the plan starts with me in the hearse and I only have room for Tiffani. Before I left, I took off the removable landau panels over the tinted back windows so the vehicle would be less noticeable. This will be the most critical phase to not draw any attention. From the outside, it just looks like your run-of-the-mill soccer-mom minivan. Cadaver transport is a discreet business, so it's not like we have the "Eternal Love Crematorium" name painted on the side or anything like that. There are no distinguishing elements on the exterior. The interior is another story as it only has the two front seats and the entire back is a flat tray with rollers for a casket, or the mortuary cot, but for anyone outside, I'll be invisible.

Earlier this morning, around 5:00 a.m. when I was not likely to see anyone out and about, I went for my morning run and used a route that took me by her apartment. As I was jogging to where Tiffani's car is parked, I scanned for people the entire time. "Kickstart My Heart" by Mötley Crüe was driving my pace. I saw

no one, so when I reached the car, I stopped and squatted down, pretending to tie my shoe. After removing my earbuds, so I could hear everything happening around me, I slipped the Leatherman tool out of my running jacket pocket and extended the blade that has been my close companion for the last couple weeks, though I haven't needed it since I ran into Tiffani.

Quickly, I jabbed the small knife into her front tire. It only went about a quarter inch in, and nothing happened. This was harder than I thought it would be. The blade was too small for me to make a big slice, but I was hoping a puncture would do. I figured I probably just needed to go deeper, so I pulled the knife out and stabbed again, this time with a full arm swing. It penetrated fully and I heard the hiss of escaping air.

In case she had a spare tire, I scooted back to the rear tire and gave it a quick jab, as well. Her car needed to be completely disabled for my plan to work. With two tires deflated, the stage was set, so I pocketed the knife and continued on my jog to return home, shower, and change.

Now, I just wait for her to emerge from her apartment. I've been sitting here for over half an hour because my recon taught me she has an 8:00 a.m. class and I thought she'd have left by now. Assuming she is going today, she should be coming out any time. The fact she is leaving late actually works in my favor because she won't have time to deal with a disabled car and will be more desperate for the ride I will conveniently provide.

This is the biggest unknown part of the plan that could ruin everything. If she is riding with someone else, she may not even see her car. Plus, she wouldn't need a ride from me, anyway. I half wonder if she already left with a friend and I just didn't see her get

into another car.

The other possibility is that she is planning on giving someone else a ride. I need this to be a rare window where she is alone, otherwise I have to call it off. I won't get away with the tire trick again, so it's this or come up with a plan B for another day.

I am about to give up hope that this is going to work when I see her, all by her glorious self, walking toward her car. I start the engine but give her a minute to notice the tires and react before pulling out and driving toward her.

"You have got to be kidding me!" she is screaming at her car when I pull up alongside it.

I stop and roll down the front passenger window. "Hi, Tiffani with an I." She is so pissed about her car, she doesn't notice my little jab.

It takes her a second to recognize me. Nobody expects a fellow student to pull up in a minivan. "Can you believe someone for real slashed my tires? Who does that?"

"Oh, man, that's awful." I pretend to be enraged, too. "Do you want a ride to school?"

"I don't know, I should probably skip class and deal with this."

"Your car's not going anywhere. Literally." That got a smile and a chuckle out of her. "Besides, nobody is going to be open yet that you can call. You may as well go to class and take care of this later."

She is considering it but I don't want to draw any attention. I need to get her in the car quickly.

"I have an 8:00, too. I can bring you back here after class if you want, but I need to go, or I'll be late."

She walks up to the open window and asks, "Why are you

driving a minivan?”

“It’s a hearse. I have an on-call job picking up bodies for Eternal Love.”

She wrinkles her nose. “Gross.” Then her eyes widen. “Is there a body in there right now?” she asks as she tries to look through the open window at the back.

It’s empty, of course. For now.

“Nope, just returning from getting it cleaned and gassed from last night’s job,” I say, hoping it will fly as an excuse. “Come on, jump in.”

Thankfully, she gets in and I pull away, releasing the biggest internal sigh of my life. Now that she is my captive, I say, “We just have to make a quick stop to swap vehicles.”

“We’re not going straight to campus? Do we have time?”

“It will be tight, but I don’t have a choice. I’m not allowed to use this for personal use. Just need to drop it off and grab my car from the crematorium. It’s barely out of the way.”

“Fine,” she says then pulls out her phone and immediately starts texting.

Crap. What if she is texting someone about what happened and that I picked her up? I can’t have anyone know it was me that took her for a drive.

“Who are you texting?” *Smooth, Reina. Let’s come off as controlling right from the start.*

She looks at me sideways, then shrugs and says, “Just telling a friend what happened to my car. What’s it to you?”

“I just,” I stammer. “I mean, please don’t tell anyone I gave you a ride. I could get in trouble, like fired trouble, if anyone finds out I picked you up in this.” Maybe she’ll buy that.

“Fine, whatever.” She continues her texting, though.

All I can do is hope she doesn’t mention me.

When we pull up to the garage, I punch the button on the remote attached to the visor. As the garage slowly opens, I see Scarlet standing there, spreading out a sheet of plastic. That’s not going to look creepy at all. She could at least hide herself from view until I get all the way inside, but Tiffani doesn’t seem to notice her.

“Okay,” I say. “That’s my car.” I point at my Civic and she makes a face. Obviously, she doesn’t consider it much of a step up from the minivan.

I pull in and park next to my car. She grabs her backpack and gets out. By now, Scarlet has had the good sense to get out of sight. When Tiffani opens the passenger door of my car and starts to step in, I come up behind her and slam the car door into her, crushing her between the frame and the door. There is an awful snapping sound. Skinny girls are so fragile. Scarlet comes from behind me, grabs her hair and smashes her head onto the top of the car.

Tiffani with an I drops to the ground.

43

When she comes to, Tiffani with an I finds herself lying naked on her back on top of a plastic sheet, staring at my garage ceiling. Her arms are underneath her, duct-taped together at the wrists. She tries to scream but the piece of duct tape over her mouth muffles the sound to a barely detectable level. Every inch of her body is shaved or waxed, completely hairless except for the long golden locks on top of her head. She looks like a Barbie doll. Hostage Barbie.

Stripping her nude wasn't necessary, of course. I can kill her just as easily with her clothes on, which will be burned with the body, so it doesn't matter if they get bloody. It was Scarlet's idea. She says when the victims are naked, they feel humiliated and powerless, which makes them fight back less. They know they are not the ones in control. Without their clothes, they don't feel hope that they are going to walk away, and so they don't even try. No

clothes, no dignity, no power, no fight. That was the theory, anyway.

She kicks her legs and tries to sit up, but she lacks the abdominal strength to make much progress. This girl probably couldn't kick off a weighted blanket. I should probably have bound her legs. I let her flail like a turtle stuck on its shell as I start to undress myself. Things are about to get messy and I don't want to have to burn my clothes, too.

"Are you getting ahead of yourself?" Scarlet asks, watching from the shadows.

"Oh, I almost forgot." I let my T-shirt drop back down and I pick up Tiffani's cell phone off the pile of her clothes. "I just need to make sure you didn't say something you shouldn't have."

I hold the phone to her face to unlock it, but she squeezes her eyes closed. Between that and the tape over her mouth, the cell phone doesn't recognize her as the owner. I guess we're doing this the hard way.

I move the phone to my left hand and pick up my trusty chef's knife with my right. I really should name this thing. Maybe I'll start calling it Petunia. That doesn't feel quite right for a murder tool, but it was the first name that came to mind. I'll workshop some better ones later.

When she sees the knife, Tiffani really starts thrashing, so I straddle her and sit on her spray-tanned thighs. She is so small and thin, controlling her is like controlling a child. She is completely powerless under me. I hold the knife to her throat, pushing the tip in just a tiny bit until I see a trickle of blood. The site of it is arousing.

"Listen, I really need to see what is on your phone. I'm going

to take the tape off your mouth, and you are going to look at it and not make a sound. Understand?"

She nods. Keeping the knife to her throat, I set the cell phone on the floor then rip the tape off her mouth, leaving a red patch around her lips. Picking the phone back up I am able to unlock it this time. Tiffani starts to squirm, but that just makes the blade push in a little farther.

"I wouldn't move if I were you," I say as I check her recent texts.

She stops struggling immediately and stays still except for the rapid rise and fall of her chest as she whimpers, spittle gathering at the corners of her mouth. Her tears make her mascara run.

The only recent text was to her friend Vicki. So, it is Vicki with an I! Mystery solved, and now I can die in peace. But it's not me who's dying today.

Trying to scroll through her phone one-handed is difficult, so I give her a look of warning and set the knife down so I can I read the text exchange:

Dude the craziest thing just happened and now this girl is taking me to class... Dana I think was her name?

What happened??

Somebody slashed my tires!
Can you believe that shit?

NO WAY!!!

What girl?

Remember that weird girl we studied with that one time

What one time?

Hello??

Tiff????? OMG do I need to call the cops?

“Seriously? You can’t remember my name? Again?”

“P-p-please,” she sputters. “If you let me go, I promise I won’t tell anyone about this. I swear to God.” Fear drips from the edges of her words.

I add to the text exchange, reading aloud as I type:

Sorry she wouldn’t stop talking... Made it to campus!

Ur good

Satisfied the trail won’t lead back to me, I swipe over to the Find My app to make sure nobody tracks her phone. Thankfully, no one does so her presence in my garage will not be seen by anyone. I will bring the phone with me to campus when I’m done here and drop it in a bush somewhere so that when somebody finds it, her last text message can be confirmed. Clicking the phone off, I toss it back on the pile of her clothes.

I stand and remove my shoes and socks, setting them next to hers. Her brow furrows as I remove my shirt.

“What are you doing?”

“I don’t want to stain my clothing. Blood is impossible to get out, you know.”

She looks from me to the knife on the floor next to her and slips into panic mode. I watch a yellow pool form between her legs as her bladder empties. Good thing we laid down the plastic first.

“No! Noooo!” She starts screaming.

Shit. Why didn’t I re-tape her mouth? I instinctively pounce on her and cover her mouth with my hands. She tries to bite at them but it’s ineffective. I do have a bit of a problem now, though. The duct tape I removed from her mouth creased and stuck together after I tossed it aside. I need a fresh strip, but the roll is over by Scarlet.

“Hey,” I shout. “A little help? Bring me some tape for her mouth.”

“You got this,” Scarlet says. “Use what you got.”

She’s useless. *Think, Reina. What do I got?* The plastic crinkles underneath us as she tosses her head side to side and squirms her body around. That’s it, the plastic.

Keeping one hand over her mouth, I reach for the corner of the plastic sheet above her head with the other and pull it down over her face. I remove my other hand quickly and pull down on the other side so that it’s tight over her mouth and nose. This keeps her quiet, but she’s fighting harder than ever now. I hold the plastic down, pinning both my hands to the ground. Scarlet joins me, kneeling behind Tiffani’s head so she’s facing me, and places her hands over mine. Together we watch as the fight starts to leave

Tiffani.

The plastic is transparent enough I can watch her face. The screams have been replaced with a desperate struggle for air as she sucks the plastic into her mouth deeper and deeper in a futile grasp for breath. She does not break eye contact. Tiffani just stares at me, wide-eyed, her beautiful eyes desperate, pleading. Dying. I see God in that last moment when the spark fades from her baby blues, and then she is gone.

Scarlet slides her hands over mine as she leans back on her heels, not breaking contact until our fingertips touch. I collapse on top of Tiffani, feeling both fulfilled and spent. I just need a moment.

When I get up off her body, I realize I don't need to spill actual blood to feel satisfied. It's all in the eyes. That's where the soul lives and dies. That's where the magic happens. The eyes are the window into the essence of a person.

Grateful not to have to deal with the messy cleanup I had prepared for, I grab my shirt and start to put it on.

"Check yourself," Scarlet says.

I look down and notice a spot of blood on my chest. It must have come from where I'd nicked her neck and transferred to me when I was lying on her. After checking my bra to make sure it's clean, I grab Tiffani's blouse from her pile of clothes. Licking the corner to wet it, I wipe the blood off myself. I hate to ruin such a cute top, but it's getting burned with everything else anyway.

Scarlet and I get her body completely wrapped up in the plastic with all her clothes and her now emptied backpack and move the murder burrito to the back of the garage. We throw tarps over it to keep it hidden until we can dispose of it after hours tonight. Risky,

STEVE MEDDAUGH

but what other choice do we have?

After reengaging the automatic garage door opener, which we had disabled in case anyone came for the hearse while we were in here, I gather up Tiffani's cell phone and the contents of her backpack. I throw everything in my car, then head out to scatter it all around the university like the ashes she's destined to become.

44

Classes were brutal today. It was a late night last night disposing of Tiffani's body, because Ryan was working late and I fell asleep waiting for him to leave. He never works late, so I didn't expect this. Another reminder I can never be too careful and that I should always expect the unexpected.

I had woken up on the couch, just after midnight. Scarlet was asleep next to me, another one of her anime shows blaring on the TV. We got the job done but I only nabbed a couple hours of sleep before I had to get ready for school.

Now, I am debating a nap before I have to go work the evening shift at Wildfire. Sometimes when I don't power through, a nap can make me feel even more drained and I'm worthless. Scarlet is out doing God knows what so I should take advantage of the peace and quiet.

Entering my bedroom, I notice my latest keepsake sitting on

the dresser. A little baggie of Tiffani that I didn't even bother to tuck in a drawer. I can't just have bags of ash hidden all around the apartment. It seems like something that might draw questions I don't want to answer and I'm already getting sloppy about where I put them. Scarlet would say to own it. But how do I own this kind of souvenir? Souvenir. This gives me an idea.

I sit down at my desk, open my laptop, and pull up Amazon. People save beach sand from vacations all the time and display them proudly, showing off how well travelled they are. Pre-tentious? Maybe a bit, but a perfectly acceptable thing to collect. And guess what human ash looks like?

After a quick search, I find the perfect thing: it's a 16 pack of mini glass jars with cork lids. They are a 10ml capacity, just right for what I need. I would hope I don't need 16, but these don't come in a smaller set. My mind drifts and I picture 16 bottles filled with the remains of my victims, and I am charged with electricity. This feeling is followed by a sudden and strange remorse for something I haven't even done yet. Yet.

This is out of control. I feel like I have a dual personality, one that enjoys the slaughter, the ecstasy of death, and the thrill of the hunt. Then there is the other personality, the one who is an actual human being. Ignoring my duality for the time being, I click the "Buy Now" button and order the small jars.

There is no way I'm going to fall asleep now. I've amped myself up again. Feeling hungry, I decide to go find something to snack on but as I pass Scarlet's room, I notice the door is open a crack. Did she come home without my hearing her?

"Scarlet?" I call out as I knock on her door.

My knocking pushes the door open wider to where I can see in.

QUEEN OF THE MURDER SCENE

There is no sign of her, so I push the door all the way open, calling her name once more. The room is empty, but I notice her journal sitting on the desk. I see her scribbling in it all the time and I'm dying to know what she writes in there. I know it's a violation of privacy, especially of sacred roommate code, but screw her. She has intruded on my privacy in so many ways I've lost count. I don't care anymore so I enter the room. I have to look.

As I reach the desk, I see the familiar red lightning bolt logo on the black faux leather cover. It's one of our Wildfire journals that we sell at the coffee shop. I have a few of these, myself. I've seen her hanging about outside but had never seen her come in. She must have bought this when I wasn't working.

Running my hand over the cover, feeling the texture, I debate whether I should open it and look inside. Of course, I shouldn't. I grasp the ribbon bookmark sticking out of the bottom and use it to lift the journal open anyway.

I don't know what I expected to see, but it certainly wasn't this.

45

Flipping through Scarlet's journal is like watching a dream unfold into a nightmare. The pages start out clean and precise. Everything is neatly written and uniform, but soon the writing appears at different angles, some lines written bigger than others and unevenly spaced.

I'm just scanning the words, but she seems obsessed with someone. Like, sociopathic. It is not lost on me that I've had my own obsession, but mine was normal. It was love. This chick is genuinely unsound.

As I continue to peruse the notebook, I see coffee stains that illustrate a sloppiness which mimics the change in penmanship. Other pages have mysterious water stains splattered on them. Could they be from tears? One page even has a hole burned through it, perhaps from a cigarette, though I've never seen Scarlet smoke. Maybe she lit a candle to set the mood for her mad

thoughts and an ember dropped from match to page. Or maybe the hole was burned intentionally to permanently erase something written that should never be seen. Mysteries abound in this volume of dark musings.

Her writing, disturbing as it is, has a lyrical quality about it, like a deranged soliloquy. Things like, “Leave me ruined, show me that I’m human,” or “Give me violence, kill the silence.” This girl is sick! She needs to get help.

The further in I get, the messier the handwriting. Things are written in all capital letters in places, sideways in others. She seems to have abandoned all formatting.

There are also sketches and doodles scattered throughout. At first, it’s hearts and x’s and o’s. There’s even a lipstick print where she kissed the corner of one of the pages. But then the drawings get dark. There are flowers that are bleeding, thorny vines snaking around the words, a throne on fire, and what looks like a self-portrait where she’s scribbled out half her face in angry strokes. My psych professor would probably say this represents a duality where she is trying to hide one side of her personality. But with Scarlet, who knows? Maybe she just didn’t like how that part of the picture turned out.

Some of the pages are slightly stuck together by something red and tacky. After peeling the pages apart, I’m pretty sure it’s blood. I should probably be extremely bothered by this, but the blood on the pages isn’t the thing that freaks me out. It’s the most recent entries, the ones I turned to when I first opened the journal, that scare me.

A few pages prior, she had taped a scrap of brown paper that looks like it was torn from some ancient parchment. It has a series

STEVE MEDDAUGH

of repeating characters.

ころす,ころす,ころ,ころす

From there to the bookmarked page, she had copied those symbols. Every single page, from the spine to the edge, was filled with the same characters. Over and over again. Was she punishing herself? Was it therapy? Or was she just driving some point home in her psyche, committing it to memory?

I wonder what it means. I'm afraid to find out but I need to know, so I take a picture of the last page and put the journal back exactly how I found it.

There's only one person I can think of that might be able to help me out. I know I'm going to regret this, but I have to try.

46

I don't want to ask Kyle for any favors, or accidentally bond with him on anything, but the symbols I saw in Scarlet's journal looked Japanese to me, like the kind of writing I see on those shows she likes to watch. Since Kyle is into Anime and all things Japan, I figure he might know what it says. He's always bragging about how he reads manga graphic novels in their native language. Such a nerd.

He might prove himself useful if he can tell me what it all means. What choice do I have? I can't figure out another way to interpret what I saw written in the book.

"Hey, Kyle. Got a minute?" I say after my shift ends. I know how he is about using work time for personal business. Well, my personal business. He talks about his own crap all the time.

"No, you can't work overtime. Go home," he says.

He is not going to make this easy. "Actually, I need your expert

advice on something.” I try not to let the sarcasm slide its way into my voice. That gets his attention.

“Well, I am an expert on many things. What is it?”

I pull up the picture on my phone and show it to him. “Do you know what this says?”

Kyle squints at the image, then snatches the phone from my hand.

“Hey...”

But I let it go because he seems to recognize something. He is pinching and zooming, then recoils.

“Good God, Reina!” He holds the phone out to me like it is a dead rat. “What is this, some kind of joke?”

“No.” I take my phone back from him. “It’s not a joke, I just really need to know what it says.”

“Who wrote that?” He takes a step back from me.

“It’s for a school research project.” I lie, desperately hoping it doesn’t actually say anything that incriminates me. Why didn’t I think about that possibility before? Did I just make a huge mistake? I’m feeling desperate now.

“Where did it come from?”

“I have no idea; it was just part of the materials my professor provided.” I am developing my story in real time. *Way to be prepared, Reina.*

He tilts his head as he seems to consider my answer, like he’s not sure he believes me. “What kind of project is this?”

“Kyle,” I plead, “what does it say?”

“Fine, fine. It’s the same phrase over and over again. It is the hiragana spelling of *Korosu*.”

“And what does *Korosu* mean?”

QUEEN OF THE MURDER SCENE

He looks me in the eye with a seriousness I've never seen from him before, and maybe a little fear.

“It means, to kill.”

47

Korosu, korosu, korosu. Kill, kill, kill. The phrase plays over and over in my head like a song. An earworm that seems to wind uncontrollably through my brain.

Why Scarlet wrote that repeatedly, I may never understand. It's like she was in a trance, her hand guided by something evil. Something that called out to her to put pen to paper, and now those words call out to me.

I arrive home from work to find a package at my door. I love the internet. Snatching up the box, I go inside and immediately head to the kitchen to open it. After I pull my scissors out of the drawer, I change my mind and put them back, grabbing the Leatherman tool instead. Seems appropriate to use a souvenir from my first kill to open the container that is about to hold the souvenirs of all my kills.

Inside the package are the 16 mini glass jars I ordered. One of

them is broken, but it doesn't matter, I only need three. For now. They are absolutely perfect. The area of the base is about the size of a penny and the bottle stands two inches tall.

I need to make sure I know which bottle is who, so I find a black sharpie in the drawer and grab one of the corks. I carefully write a number one on the underside of it, the part that will be inside the bottle on top of the ashes where no one will see it unless they take the cork out. If anyone is doing that, I probably have bigger problems than answering why I numbered my 'sand collection'.

After repeating this with numbers two and three, I run to get my hidden baggies from where they have been delicately tucked away in my dresser. Careful not to lose track of which baggie is which when I bring them out, I set each one in front of the bottle they will go in.

Korosu, korosu, korosu.

The diameter of the bottle opening is less than half an inch, so pouring the ashes in could get messy. An idea forms as I spot my notebook on the kitchen table from when I was studying earlier. I tear a sheet of paper out and roll it into a funnel. Sticking the narrow end in the top of the first bottle, I open the baggie with Evan's ashes and slowly pour the contents in.

There is just a little bit left when the bottle is full. I shake the excess out in the sink and repeat the process with Jason and Tiffani's ashes.

Kill, kill, kill.

I press the corks into the tops of each bottle and rinse out the sink. I toss the baggies in the trash and retreat to my room with the three filled containers.

STEVE MEDDAUGH

Excited to finally be able to display my treasures, I set them on top of my dresser, putting them in order left to right, starting with Evan. I drop onto my bed and lay back, my arms up, fingers interlocked behind my head. I stare at my fine work.

I look at each bottle in turn and relive the precious moments I shared with each of them. Desire fills me until I feel like I'm floating, then guilt pushes me back down. Contrary feelings rip me apart from the inside, rebuilding me, forming me into something new.

Korosu, korosu, korosu.

Kill, kill, kill.

It's funny how when we descend into dark places, instead of seeking help from outside, we want to sink in deeper. We dig in and crave the hurt or the depression or whatever it is that weighs us down. We become protective of our pain. We own it and don't want anyone to take it away, even though it hurts because it becomes a part of us, and we no longer know who we are without it. We become afraid to know.

I am not a monster. I am not a good girl, either. I am who I am and I feel at peace with that now.

And so, I decide to wear my psychosis like a cozy sweater stitched together with murderous desire and dyed with the blood of all my victims.

I accept who I am and crown myself the queen of the murder scene.

48

Well, that didn't go as planned. After spending the last few days working up the courage to admit it out loud, thinking Scarlet would be proud of my progress, of my acceptance of who I am, I told her I accepted the role of murder queen.

"You don't deserve the throne," was her reply.

Not the response I was expecting. "What do you mean I don't deserve the throne? Isn't this what you've been pushing me toward this whole time?" I was incredulous.

"The crown is mine, and I really don't plan to resign it to you. I don't trust you to be the one in control. You don't really wanna lose the fear. That's the part of you that still feels human."

"I do, though, that's what I'm trying to tell you. I can rise above who I was and be something more. Something like you."

"You can dare to try and then suffer, my dear. If you become me, you will be buried in your madness."

Too late. I have already slipped into insanity.

“I need to go,” I say and head for the garage.

I need space from Scarlet, but I literally need to go anyway for a pickup. I don't have the energy to deal with her so I'm thankful for the distraction.

I had fallen asleep, hard. I slept all day and probably would have slept all night if I hadn't gotten the phone call. There is a body that needs picking up and brought to the crematorium tonight. It's almost 11:00 p.m. so I must have been out for like eight or nine hours. Somehow, I feel exhausted anyway. The emotional toll of coming to grips with who I am is not the only price I'm paying. This is all taking a physical toll, too. But duty calls.

When I get to the hearse, I open the back to make sure I have the cot ready and all my supplies.

I never in a million years expected to see what waited for me inside.

49

It is hard to tell for sure because of the plastic, but she looks like she might be my age. Staring into the back of the hearse, I am beyond shocked. Wrapped in plastic sheeting, stained with blood, is the body of a young woman. But how did she get here? Did I do this and forget?

Scarlet. I am seething now. I yell as loud as I can at the ceiling, “Scarlet!”

I run to the side door to go up and get her, but when I open it, she’s standing right there. I nearly run smack into her. When I step back, she saunters past me, into the garage like she’s here to talk about book club, not unidentified dead bodies.

“What the hell is this?” I demand pointing at the hearse. “No, *who* the hell is this?”

“It’s time to start my own collection,” she says with no hint of guilt or remorse.

“Did you kill her? Where did she come from?”

Scarlet smiles at me with that same sinister smile I see in my dreams. “Don’t you recognize her?”

My heart drops. I know I have to look again, but I can’t seem to move.

“Here, let me help you,” Scarlet says as she walks over and tears the plastic away from the girl’s face.

Forcing my legs to move, I join her at the back of the vehicle. There is something familiar about her. I come around for a closer look and my jaw drops, my hand involuntarily goes to my mouth. It’s Vicki with an I.

“Scarlet, you can’t just go off killing people and bringing them back here. Why did you do this?”

“She needed to be silenced. She was starting to ask too many questions trying to figure out who the weird study girl was.”

“How would you even know that?”

“I watch and I listen. I hear conversations in the student union building, or in the library, or just walking around campus. I kept myself close to your little study friends, always in earshot, just to make sure there are no loose ends. You can thank me, later.”

That explained why I always see her sneaking around. I guess it wasn’t me she was spying on, but this is not okay. “I’m not going to be your body disposal service. This is my gig, not yours. You have to stop going rogue on me, one little slip and you ruin my life. Do you even care?”

“Of course, I care. And I don’t wanna destroy ya. But you can’t stop me, I’m a machine, no emotion. See, this is the difference between us. You have too many emotions and you suffer in your feelings and your worries. How can I not take advantage of all

this?" She spreads her arms wide and does a full 360 spin. "A perfect scene for the murder queen."

This is where I lose it and tackle her. I've never wrestled or tackled anything in my life, but here I am rolling around on my garage floor with the bane of my existence. I scream as I pull at her hair, trying to get the upper hand, but she is stronger than me. By a lot.

"I'm going to kill you!" I scream.

Scarlet manages to push me away and stands, leaving me lying on my back, breathing heavy. "That hurts, Reina." She puts her right hand over her heart. "Because you give me something worth living for." Then, pointing at the body in the back of the hearse, she says, "This isn't what upsets you. It's not the dead bodies or my actions that eat at you. It's that I make you see who you really are. My words are what make everything burn."

I start to cry. "Where did you come from? Are you even real?"

"Oh, I'm real, alright. But you won't ever take me out. You can kill your little victims and send them to hell. They are weaker than you. And you can always kill what's immortal. Just stop believing in it and it will cease to exist. But it just doesn't apply to me. I'm something more than all that. I'm here whether you believe in me or not, and there's no getting rid of me."

She reaches out a hand to help me up. I smack it aside and get myself up.

"I will find a way to get rid of you," I say with zero confidence.

"This should go without saying, because it's not something I like to conceal, but I have no mercy and I never will. And if you wanna destroy me, you better open your eyes 'cause you can't even see the fact that I just can't be controlled by anything." She

stomps away, her boots heavy on the garage floor. Before she exits, she turns to face me. “But let’s see you try.”

God, she’s scary. Snapping myself out of it, I realize how far behind schedule I am now. There is a family waiting for me to come get their loved one, and I have another body already in the back of the hearse.

I would leave Vicki’s wrapped body in there, but people tend to want to watch me load their deceased as they say a silent final goodbye. That leaves me with only one option. It’s not the best-case scenario, but Scarlet left me no choice.

Being dark outside, I don’t even bother driving around first, I just back the hearse up to the crematorium door and unload the body inside. Before I do anything else, I turn the incinerator back on to reheat. Preparing Vicki’s body for burning, I notice there are no belongings other than the blood-stained clothes she was wearing. No bag or purse, or even a phone that I can find. Scarlet must have disposed of her possessions already. Nothing I can do about that now.

I place her in a cardboard casket with her clothes, leaving it on the autoloader until the retort is ready. It should be up to temperature by the time I get back from my pickup. I’ll rinse off the plastic and dispose of it while she’s being incinerated. It’s going to be a long night.

As I drive to the residence I’ve been called to, I literally pray to God that nobody shows up at the crematorium before I can get back to store the new body and slide Vicki into the furnace. It’s not likely to happen, but leaving her body and the bloody plastic sheets just sitting there in the open until I can process her into ashes makes me nervous.

QUEEN OF THE MURDER SCENE

My prayer makes me think about what Scarlet said before. She talked about how you can always kill what's immortal, as if I could will God away. Just like that, an omnipotent being would cease to exist. But not Scarlet. She claims it would be easier to get rid of the almighty than destroy her. I shiver as I still hear those chilling words bounce around in my brain.

It just doesn't apply to me.

CHAPTER 4

XI.

"P.S.Y.C.H.O.T.I.C."

50

“Girl, you can’t turn that in.” Audrey drops the paper on the table.

We are sitting across from each other at Wildfire. I wanted a second opinion on the poem I wrote for my English class before my shift starts. Scarlet thought it was brilliant, but I feel like she gets off on trying to get me in trouble. Audrey is on break and my shift doesn’t start for another seven minutes. Kyle is watching us and checking his watch, practically jumping out of his skin because he wants to tell us to get to work so bad, but he can’t. He is ready to pounce if we are one second late.

Sometimes I really want to take Kyle out. I mean *really* want to. I would get so much satisfaction watching him die. It would be a slow death for him, and I would soak in every second of his whiney anguish. But he’s inside my circle. That’s the term Scarlet gave for the people around me that are an integral part of my life,

whether by choice or not. My friends, family, co-workers, professors, anybody I interact with on a regular basis are part of my circle.

Anyone in my circle is off limits, because there is too much risk someone will want to talk to me if any of them go missing. Talking with the authorities should be avoided at all costs. I promised I would avoid the circle, but I really want to make an exception for Kyle. I want payback for all the times he thought he was so superior. I want to show him that I'm the one who is superior. I am the queen—

“Reina!” Audrey is waving her hand in my face.

“What? Sorry, what did you say?”

“I said you can't turn that in.”

“Wait, why not? What's wrong with it?”

“Oh, well let's see.” Audrey snatches the paper up again and reads it out loud:

“There's something inside
 From which I can't hide
 They laugh at my presence
 They laugh when I cry
 My eyes have gone wild
 Their light isn't human
 I can feel myself smile”

She sets the paper back down, keeping her hand on top of the sheet. “This might draw some questions. I have a few, myself. It kinda makes you seem...” She looks around to make sure no one is eavesdropping then leans forward, lowering her voice, “P.S.Y.C.H.O.T.I.C.”

It takes me a second to process what she's spelling. I feel my

face flush when I figure it out.

“I mean, seriously, is everything okay with you?”

No, definitely not. “Yes, of course,” I say.

“So, what is this all about, then?” she asks.

Think fast, Reina. “You know, it’s about feeling insecure. We all feel that sometimes, right? Like the world is judging us, or laughing at us, and we don’t feel like we belong. But we have to love ourselves for who we are.”

She doesn’t look like she is buying it, but then she says, “Okay, if you’re sure everything’s really okay. You haven’t seemed yourself lately.” She reaches across the table and puts her hands on mine.

“Yeah, no I’m okay.” I try to be convincing. “I was just being dramatic, you know, poetic license, and all.”

“Well, I’m still not sure I’d turn it in. It’s pretty dark, Reina.” Something catches her eye, and she says, “Oh, speaking of dark...” She looks over at Kyle. “Kyle! Turn up the volume.”

It isn’t hard to get his attention; he is still watching us. There is a TV mounted on the wall and the picture is usually on, but the sound is always off to keep the quiet coffee shop atmosphere. I don’t even know why we have it, to be honest. When he sees what is on the television, instead of telling us to get to work, he hurries behind the counter and fumbles around for the remote. When he finally finds it, he points it at the TV and unmutes the breaking news with the click of a button.

“...another university student has gone missing.

This is the fourth known disappearance in the last two months and the FBI has now joined the investigation. No bodies have been found but

investigators have not ruled out homicide. Could this be the work of a serial killer? Or has a criminal organization infiltrated our small town, stealing our young men and women for some unknown purpose? Tune in to the 5:00 news for more on this story.”

Audrey looks at me and asks, “How are you doing with all this? I know that boy you were crushing so hard on is one of the victims who disappeared. I recognized his picture on the news.”

“Yeah, that was him.” I don’t know how else to respond.

“Are you scared?”

“No, not really. I try to stay with crowds and if I’m alone, I always have this.” I hold up my keys with the pepper spray attached.

“You seem pretty calm, I must say. Unlike poor Kyle over there.”

Kyle looks like he thinks the killer might be in this very room and is coming for him next. He seems really freaked out. Interesting. The ironic part is the killer actually is in the room, and I would come for him next if I could. Well, the Alanis Morissette kind of ironic, not the real kind.

Everyone is freaked out these days, so I guess I can’t blame him. He should be scared. He’s the right age and the perfect profile for a potential victim, but he unwittingly knows the killer and the circle makes him safe. There’s your real irony.

Many students have decided to leave school recently, putting their education on hold to return home or transfer to another university. The police don’t know anything, and nobody feels safe.

The mood, the electricity flowing through this town, is exciting

STEVE MEDDAUGH

to me. I am the cause of all this. Me. I've been a nobody all my life, unnoticed and unappreciated. But people appreciate me now. They fear and respect me because I am the thing that stands between them and life and death. I am like a god. No, more than that. I am becoming like Scarlet.

“Well, shall we get back to it?” Audrey asks.

I nod and stuff my poem into my backpack. We walk past Kyle, and I say, “Starting my shift now, Kyle. Sorry it's a couple minutes late.”

Kyle doesn't even look at me. He just stands there staring at the screen.

“Good God,” is his only response.

51

“They’re talking about me on the news and all over town,” I say to Scarlet when I get home from my shift at Wildfire.

“Us. They’re talking about us,” she corrects.

“Okay, fine. But mostly me. I do all the hard work.”

“It seems like maybe you’ve turned a corner, babe. Good for you.” She gives me one of her sly and slightly condescending smiles.

It’s true. I’ve decided that releasing my pain through the blood of cutting myself is not going to touch the need I feel. ‘Cause the blood that I bleed, it is no longer red. It is black like the words that replay in my head.

Korosu, korosu, korosu.

“My sanity’s gone and my morals are wrong and I know what they all say.” I tap my forefinger to my temple.

“Oh, do you now? Okay, my dear, what do they say?” Scarlet

asks, smirking.

“That I’m out of my mind, that I should go to hell. And they are right.”

“They don’t even know who you are. You will be fine. You’re not going anywhere.”

“Do you think I am blind? I know what I’m doing. I can see that it’s wrong. Do you think I can’t tell how this ends? I know where I’m going. I’m on a path and both you and I know where I’ll go. And when I get down there, I’ll sit on my throne.”

“Right, because you think you’re the queen of murder, now.” Scarlet steps way too close. “Let me tell you something, you are not in control here. Your hands are tied up, you are not free. What are you gonna choose? To be normal again? No, this isn’t control, it’s resignation. It feels like yesterday you wanted out. I seriously wondered, will you jump from the window or hang from the noose? Will you cut your wrists, or will you rip off your face? Now you say you want to ascend to dethrone me, but can you? Will you abandon your old life altogether and rise up, or just further debase the things you couldn’t do while still holding on to them?”

“Things like what?”

“Like live the life of a regular college student, keep the status quo, be a good girl. Do you not value those things still?”

“No, I don’t,” I say, but I don’t believe my own words.

“Of course, you do. I see your true self and you are still happy to just bask in the glory of all that’s mundane. You think you are fine now, but your behavior has been inconsistent. Your next victim could make you reject the desire and consume all the pain like you used to.”

“I won’t reject the desire, anymore. I’m ready to embrace it completely.” *How do I make her believe me?*

“Little girl, I get that you take pride in your work, but you need to be proud of your pride,” she points to my bedroom, “and the things that you hide.”

“I don’t understand, am I supposed to show off my conquests? Take credit for my acts of violence? What good does all that do me if it just lands me in prison?”

“I don’t mean hide from the world, there are things you still hide from yourself. Things you don’t see clearly yet. You still need to break through the endless haze of your emotions and kill them before they kill you.”

Is she right? I don’t even know anymore. Someone please call the asylum.

52

I don't have time for this. Kyle has called some sort of all-employee meeting tonight and I really need to study. I've been sleeping through classes and falling behind lately. I'm not sure how it got so bad, it's like I have blackout periods where I can't even remember what I was doing but it apparently isn't homework. Tonight, I was planning to really focus on schoolwork and then Kyle calls us in for this last-minute mandatory meeting.

He probably wants to do some lame-ass team-building thing to make himself feel like he's such a great manager. Ooh, or maybe he's announcing he's quitting. There's no way I could be so lucky, but a girl can dream. Whatever it is, hopefully it won't take very long and I can get back to what I need to do tonight.

I park on the street out front and as I walk to the front door, I see everyone already gathered inside, standing in a huddle in the FOH, the front of house. For some reason, I get a hinky feeling.

When I open the door and step in, my apprehension is confirmed. Standing in the middle of the crowd is a uniformed police officer.

My mind is racing, trying to figure out any missteps I might have made, any mistakes or clues left behind. Is the officer there for me? Why would everyone be here, though? Only one way to find out.

As I join the group, Kyle calls out, “Reina, about time!”

“Am I late?” I look down at my phone. It’s 8:15. Dammit, I’m 15 minutes late. How do I keep losing time? I swear I left in plenty of time to get here.

“It’s okay, we were just about to get started,” the officer says as he extends a meaty hand for me to shake. “Thank you for coming. I’m Officer Hogweva.”

“Reina.” I reach out my hand, tiny in comparison, and we shake. Officer Hogweva is well over six feet tall but has a calm demeanor and soothing voice that puts me at ease. A gentle giant.

“Don’t worry, nobody is in trouble, and nobody is in immediate danger,” he says, apparently picking up on my nervousness.

“The police are visiting all the businesses,” Kyle says, trying to appear official and in-the-know, but I can see he’s nervous, too.

Officer Hogweva says, “That’s right. As you all know, there have been a few disappearances of college students. We are just talking to everyone we can to find out if anyone might have seen something that could be helpful, but also to offer some safety tips to hopefully prevent any more disappearances. If anyone is uncomfortable speaking up in front of the group, I will stay as long as needed and sit with you one-on-one over there.” He points at a table that has his duty bag, a clipboard, and notebook sitting on it.

It looks like he is set up for interviews. Or interrogations.

I look around the group and see a lot of scared faces. People are biting their lips, wringing their hands, or looking at the floor. Kyle looks like he's going to pee his pants. At first, I think about how pathetic they all look, then I remember I should probably blend in a little so I also cast my eyes downward.

For the next ten minutes, Officer Hogweva goes over safety tips, such as never go out alone, don't talk to strangers, always let someone know where you are and when you change locations so your whereabouts can be accounted for at all times, and other common-sense behaviors that every girl knows but the boys haven't ever had to consider before. Kyle is taking notes.

When Officer Hogweva finishes, he asks if anyone has any questions or information to share. There are a few questions, but mostly around whether or not the police have any leads. He explains the FBI has provided a preliminary profile and that they no longer believe there is an organization behind this, that it is the work of a single individual. Other than that, he can't talk about specifics until an official profile is published. Once everyone figures out they aren't going to get any real answers, they stop asking questions.

"Okay, I want to thank everyone for coming in tonight. It's important that we work together as a community. I'll stay as long as necessary in order to talk with anyone who wants to have a private discussion. Come find me over there," he nods toward his table, "otherwise, have a good night."

Thank God, now I can finally get on with an actual good use of my time. Kyle is already bee-lining it for Officer Hogweva's table. Before I can begin my exit, someone grasps my arm.

“Hey, kiddo, you okay?” It’s Audrey.

“Oh hey, yeah I just have lots of studying to do and don’t want to be here.”

“I’m sure you don’t, but not because of studying.”

“What do you mean?”

Audrey takes me gently by the shoulders and turns me so we are eye to eye. “You know what I mean.”

“Evan?”

“Yes, I’ve been thinking about this since last week when I asked you how you were doing. It must be so hard to be just starting up a relationship only to have it cut short in such a horrific way. I knew something was off with you.”

“Oh. Yeah.” Thinking about Evan surprisingly brings a wetness to my eyes. I don’t even have to act. “It’s fine, that never went anywhere. I gave him my number, but he never called.”

“I can see that it is not fine. Maybe you think if he hadn’t gone missing, he would have called?”

“Maybe.”

I hate lying to Audrey. Like, really hate it. She is the closest thing to a friend I have. I’ve pretty much been a loner since I moved here. Between school and two jobs (and murder) I haven’t really had a chance to form any close relationships. Scarlet doesn’t count. She is my roommate. And she is critical for keeping me sane right now, even though she is also the one driving me crazy. But she is no friend.

Audrey is a little older, like an actual adult, but she has truly been a friend to me, which is why it’s so hard not being honest. “Listen, I really need to go study.”

“Okay, girl. But if you ever want to talk about it, you call me,

okay?”

She lets go of my shoulders after a comforting squeeze. I turn to leave, but when I put my hand on the door, I hear, “Hold it right there.”

I freeze in place and can hear Officer Hogweva walking toward me; his leather duty belt and pouches creak with every step. I slowly turn to face him.

“Reina, was it?”

I nod and wipe at my wet eyes, making a show of how upset I am by all this “missing victims” business.

“I just wanted to give you one of my cards. I’m passing these out to everyone here tonight. If you witness anything suspicious or think of any information we might find useful, give me a call.” He hands me his business card and picks up on my agitation. “I promise, we are doing everything we can to catch this guy.”

His manner is so calming, but you can tell he would take you down in a heartbeat if he thought you were a threat.

“How do you know it’s a guy?” I am feeling strangely bold right now.

“Excuse me?”

“Why couldn’t it be a woman who’s responsible for these disappearances?”

I don’t know why I’m even planting this seed, but it gives me a physical thrill to toy with the cops like this. It’s like an adrenaline rush you might get from skydiving or bungee jumping. Potentially life-threatening, but makes you feel alive.

Officer Hogweva rubs his chin as he considers this for a moment. “The preliminary profile didn’t actually specify, I just assumed. A female suspect seems extremely unlikely in a case

QUEEN OF THE MURDER SCENE

like this, but you make a good point. We shouldn't rule anything out yet."

I smile at him and say, "I just want to feel safe again. I hope you find whoever it is soon."

"Yes, ma'am. You have a good night."

I can feel his inquisitive eyes watching me as I walk away. Good.

53

I'm pretty proud of myself. I have reigned over this city for nearly five months now, a hidden ruler who executes the less worthy. From my bed, I admire the six ash bottles now sitting proudly on my dresser. Six notches in my murder belt. Scarlet has started her own small collection too, which began with Vicki with an I. I gave up trying to control her and am letting her have her fun. For now. But I have made it clear I am the master of this circus.

Someday people will know my name as a queen for the history books. A queen among the likes of Bloody Mary Tudor. But not until I'm done. Nobody will know my name until I'm ready because the cops are clueless.

After the news video I just watched on my phone, I can see they still don't know what is happening. They have no bodies, no physical victims, no direction. They don't know if they are after a

murderer, kidnapper, or some secret cult that is snatching away susceptible college kids that are easy to indoctrinate. Someone even floated the idea it might be alien abductions. Idiots.

I did have an unwanted encounter with Officer Hogweva about three weeks ago. I was out jogging, doing recon for soon to be victim number six, when I heard a siren chirp at me. The police have been vigilant about patrolling the last few months and it pisses me off. They seem to be everywhere, always watching, making my job harder.

I stopped my run when I heard the siren and turned to see Officer Hogweva leaning out from his rolled-down window. I removed my earbuds that were cranking “Back In Black” by AC/DC.

“Hey there,” he said. “You probably shouldn’t be out running alone.”

I stepped up to his patrol car. “I’m fine,” I said. “I’ve got you watching out for me.” I tried to act flirty but inside I was freaking out, paranoid that I had been caught casing the area.

“You really should find a running partner.” He took a closer look at me. “Have we met before?”

“No,” I lied.

He snapped his fingers and pointed at me. “The coffee shop. Reina, was it?”

The one thing I didn’t need was for the police to know me by name. “Oh, yeah...” I pretended to barely remember.

“I just want you to be safe. If you’re going to insist on running by yourself, stay extra alert.”

“Sure thing.” I gave him a salute and a smirk, then turned to continue my run. As I was putting my earbuds back in, I could

hear Officer Hogweva yelling after me.

“I mean it. Find someone to run with!”

I gave a little wave as I jogged away. Once I realized my fears were unfounded, I was able to relax. He wasn't questioning me or what I was doing, he was just protecting poor little me, the potential victim. He didn't find me a suspect at all.

Nobody suspects this crazy co-ed. Not to this day. I make a finger gun and point it at my row of bottles then pop off air shots at the first three in turn. One, two, three. They're coming after me, but I am not afraid of them, 'cause I'm P.S.Y.C.H.O.T.I.C. as Audrey would say.

I finger fire at the last three bottles. Four, five, six. Hey world, you have no idea what's coming after this. I still have a lot of insanity to unleash.

The police would love to catch me red-handed. At this point, it's like crimson blood is tattooed on my hands, *so come and get me before I come after you. Better drop that gun while you still have the chance.* I already feel a knife in my hands. I might just do it too.

The thought of escalating this to make law enforcement my victims sends electricity through my body. I feel invincible. I will keep on killing and it won't stop. No, it won't stop.

No, because I am completely unhinged. Certifiable. Maniacal. P.S.Y.C.H.O.T.I.C. I am.

XII.

"Hunter"

54

Run! That's the thought I wake up to, drenched in sweat, my hair matted to my forehead. I throw my covers aside, ready to bolt, then realize it was just a dream and there is nothing to run from.

It felt so real; my heart is pounding in my chest so fast it feels like it might explode. I heard the voice as clear as someone standing in my room, but there is no one here but me. I don't even think Scarlet is home. Dreams have a surreal quality about them that makes them distinguishable from real life, but what I just felt didn't feel like a dream world, it was something different. I decide to get up and check the apartment to be safe and make sure I'm actually alone.

"Scar? You here?" I call out as I exit my room but there is no response.

I knock on her door and there's still no answer. She's probably out doing things I don't want to know about but I quietly ease the

door open so I don't wake her if she's asleep. The room is empty except for her few belongings. I notice she has added a few clothes to her wardrobe. Curious, I take a look at what she has in her closet. At first, I admire her selection because it all looks like the clothes I buy. Then something about it all nags at me. Hold on.

I run to my own closet to check my wardrobe. I don't see my matching items, so I dig in my hamper to see if they are dirty. Not finding them there, I yank open my dresser drawers, shaking the dresser to the point it causes a couple of my mini bottles to topple over.

"Sorry, friends," I say as I set them back upright. I have come to think of them as friends since they have been my companions during the dark times and have helped keep my sanity in check. I talk to them sometimes and they speak to me, too. Which doesn't sound like sanity now that I think about it.

Focus, Reina. I continue looking for my clothes, but they aren't in the dresser, either. Now I know exactly where they are. Unbelievable, that bitch stole my clothes. Why did I never notice before that she had been wearing my things? Probably because she wears them so much better than me, I don't recognize them as mine.

We will have another talk about boundaries later, but right now I need to pee. I head to the bathroom and start to sit on the toilet when I get the heebie-jeebies. I quickly rise and pull my pajama shorts back up. Gripping the side of the shower curtain, I take a few seconds to summon my courage, then scream as I throw it open, certain someone is hiding there. But no one is.

I let out a deep breath. Everything is okay. I am all alone in my apartment. Strangely though, I still feel like I should be running

STEVE MEDDAUGH

from something.

55

Copper Bullets tavern is a no go these days. After two people went missing there, everyone pays attention to everything that happens around that bar. The FBI has offered a reward for any information leading to answers of any kind regarding the missing students, so people report anything they see there, unusual or not, hoping for a little cash.

Scarlet and I found a small bar called Zero's that plays hard rock and heavy metal music. It's like a biker bar without the bikers. A place where we don't stand out and where they don't check ID. The nice thing about these small-town dive bars is they don't really care how old you are. If you have money, and you don't look twelve, it's a don't ask, don't tell kind of situation. It's a college town. If they turned away all the underage students that come in, they'd probably go out of business.

We park a couple blocks away, then enter the dimly lit venue

to the sound of Metallica's "Enter Sandman" playing loudly on the house speakers. After ordering a couple light beers, we sit at a table in the corner and just watch the crowd. It is a Friday night, so the place is busy, which helps us go unnoticed. Just another couple college girls blowing off steam. Scarlet hasn't touched her beer.

"Gotta stay sharp, babe," she says.

I sip on mine slowly. It calms my nerves. I feel the danger of getting caught more than ever with everyone on edge and alert. After watching the crowd for a while we spot a guy sitting alone. He doesn't seem like he's waiting for anyone. He looks more like he wants to meet someone but doesn't know how to engage. He's got no game.

"He's perfect," Scarlet says.

We wait until his drink gets low, then leaving Scarlet to hold our table, I walk over to where he's sitting.

"Hey, can I buy you a drink?" I lean over his table, giving him an eyeful of my cleavage. I've got him too distracted to respond so I add, "Oh, I'm sorry. You are probably waiting for someone." Then I turn to walk away but he stops me.

"No, wait, I'm not expecting anyone. Sure, I'd love another beer." The look on his face tells me he has no idea what to do right now. He probably wasn't expecting to be the one getting picked up. There's probably a lot about tonight he won't be expecting.

At the bar, I order his beer and a tonic water with a lime wedge for myself, so it looks like I'm drinking a gin and tonic. Gotta stay sharp.

The bartender sets the drinks in front of me. "That'll be \$8.00. Did you have a tab open?"

“Nope.” I hand him a twenty-dollar bill.

When he turns his back to make change, I reach into my jacket pocket and grasp the tiny vial filled with crushed Rohypnol which we had prepared ahead of time. I pop the top off with my thumb before taking it out of my pocket. Glancing around to make sure nobody is looking my way, I pull it out and quickly dump its contents into the beer, then slip it back into my pocket just before the bartender turns back around and brings my change.

He hands me two fives and two ones. “Thanks,” I say leaving the two ones on the bar. He snatches them up and starts wiping down the bar without even glancing up. Perfect.

I take my time walking back with the drinks, giving the roofie time to dissolve. I set them on the table then sit without waiting to be invited to join him.

I hold out my hand. “I’m Monica.” No sense using my real name.

“Joe,” he says and shakes my hand. He takes a very large drink of his beer before saying anything else. He is clearly nervous. “So, do you go to school here? I haven’t seen you before.”

“Yeah, I live off campus,” I say, “What about you?”

“Same.” Another big drink of beer.

After a short awkward silence while I twizzle the cocktail straw in my drink, I make my move. “So... my friend and I were thinking of having a little fun tonight.”

“Your friend?”

“Yeah, she’s sitting back there.” I point with my drink.

He cranes his neck around to get a look at Scarlet. “I can’t tell which one— wait.” He spins back to face me. “What do you mean by fun?”

“I mean the sexy kind.” I bring the glass up to my mouth and rub the straw slowly across my bottom lip, letting my tongue caress it before I close my mouth around the top and give it a big, hard, suck without breaking eye contact.

Joe takes another big gulp of his beer. It is almost gone already. He wasn’t supposed to drink that fast. The roofies take about 30 minutes to start fully working. I might have to get him another drink.

“What do you say, one more drink then the three of us get out of here?”

He just nods and finishes the last of his beer, then tries to find Scarlet again in the back of the room. “Which one is your friend?”

“Why don’t you get yourself that drink and I’ll go get her and bring her over?”

“Cool,” he says and practically runs to the bar.

I take my drink with me and walk back to Scarlet, who looks like she’s seen a ghost.

“We have to get out of here.” She stands, her beer still untouched.

“What? Why? It’s too soon. The drugs haven’t even begun to take effect yet.”

“She found us.”

“Who found us? What are you talking about?” I have never seen Scarlet look scared. Didn’t think she was capable of it. Who did she see? I wonder if it’s whomever she was getting away from when she came to live with me. I look around but, I don’t see who she sees.

Scarlet grabs my forearm and leads me away toward the door. As we pass Joe’s table, I drop my drink on it, so he knows I’m

coming back. When we push through the door, I can hear Joe's voice calling out from the bar.

"Hey, where are you—?" Then the door slams behind us and we are outside.

Scarlet finally lets go of my arm and says, "We gotta run." Then she literally takes off running. "Run!" she calls out, already putting a good amount of distance between us.

"What the...?" I can't believe she just took off like that.

I am debating whether I should start running or just walk back to the car like a normal person, and that's when I feel the icy shiver run down my spine.

56

Rough hands grab me from behind and pull me toward the back of the building. I want to scream, but for some reason I don't. They keep me controlled, holding my arms behind my back so I can't turn around. Glimpses are all I can see. They are wearing a black hoodie and the hood covers their face.

Just when I find the will to scream for help, I feel the cold steel of a pistol pressed against my temple.

“Don't fight. Don't make a sound.”

The voice is low, but definitely feminine. Jeez, she is strong. I comply and let her maneuver me to the back parking lot, behind a putrid smelling dumpster. She has my face pressed up against it and I'm partially bent over so I have no leverage and can't move.

At first, I think it's the cops and that I've finally been busted, caught in the act. But then I realize the police don't take you around to the back, to the darkness where no one sees. They would

make a big show of this. “Who are you?”

She leans forward, her hooded face next to mine, and whispers in my ear. “I’m one step behind when you close your eyes.”

I immediately think of the dream I had the other night. It feels like someone has been following me into my dreams lately.

“I’m breathing on your neck. I’m the chill down your spine.”

I should be petrified but queens don’t fear their subjects, so I keep pressing. “Who are you? And what do you want from me?”

“I’m your shadow, your ghost. I’m here to collect the payment you’re running from.”

“What payment is that?”

“For the lives that you’ve spent.”

Now I’m actually scared. I shiver as dread consumes me. *Have my actions finally caught up with me?* “Are you here to arrest me?”

Suddenly, she spins me around and shoves me back against the dumpster. The hooded figure takes a step back and lowers the gun but somehow I still feel pinned to the metal container behind me. She cocks her hidden face to one side, evaluating me, as if deciding whether to tell me more.

“You’ve gone too far, Reina. I know your thoughts. You taunt me with words that don’t make a sound. You mock with your actions. You laugh with no doubt in what you are doing. As if it is somehow your destiny. It’s not. It’s mine.”

“I’m not mocking you. I don’t even know who you are. You don’t know the pain I’ve gone through just trying to stay sane.”

“Liar. You relish the pain. Well, cherish it more, ‘cause after this there’ll be nothing to feel anymore.” With that, she raises the gun; the grey metal glints in the moonlight.

Her hands are so thin and bony, they almost look skeletal. I still

can't make out a face; it remains completely enshrouded in shadow within the hood.

I reject the tears that threaten to spill. "If you're going to kill me, at least tell me who you are."

"I go by many names. But perhaps you know me as *Santa Muerte*."

I can feel the blood drain from my face. My knees buckle and I drop to the ground.

"That's right," she says, "fall onto me now. Your time is running out."

The Grim Reaper. Death itself has come for me. Maybe the rotten smell filling my nostrils isn't the garbage.

"You don't look how I expect."

"I find it's better to blend in. And this is my scythe now." She waves the pistol in the air.

"Why are you here? You shouldn't exist. You don't belong in this world." I keep talking, hoping to postpone whatever happens next as long as possible.

"What doesn't belong is you. I'm here to stop you from doing my job. I take this very seriously and it's not your place."

"Reina!"

We both look in the direction of the voice that called my name. It's Scarlet. She came back for me! I use this distraction to lunge at my captor. She goes down but rolls away, out of my reach.

She looks between Scarlet and me and apparently decides this is not my time, after all. She gets up and starts to back away from us, keeping the gun pointed in our direction.

"You think you have risen to the level of gods, where you can decide life and death? No, you are trying to ascend what is in-

surmountable for mortals. But keep trying and when both of your feet fall under steps you couldn't climb, I'll be there to pull you under. I will drag you to hell."

Scarlet is at my side and helping me up. "Let's get out of here," she says. "Run!"

We run off together as fast as we can, leaving whomever that was in the darkness.

Back at the car, too out of breath to speak, we get in and close the doors. I start the engine and then a sudden bang hits my hood. We both shriek. At first, I thought I hit something, but I haven't even put the car in gear yet. I look out my windshield and see the Reaper standing there, her palms on the hood of my car like she can stop me from moving.

"I will fucking run you over!" I scream.

"I'm going to take back what is mine!" she screams in return. "You think you can take my title away? Well, I'm coming back, so you'd better run away."

It feels like she is screaming inside my head, not outside the car.

"Go! Go! Go!" Scarlet is yelling.

Then I remember something Scarlet said. You can always kill what's immortal. Maybe if I don't believe in the Grim Reaper, it will disappear. I close my eyes and tell myself this isn't happening. None of this is real. But the fright in Scarlet's voice right now is very real.

This isn't going to work, so I open my eyes again. To my shock, the Reaper is gone. I slam the car into drive and hit the gas. Looking in my rear-view mirror as I speed off, I see no sign of her.

But I still hear that voice. The one that comes from another

STEVE MEDDAUGH

dimension and spears straight into my soul. The voice that says,
“Run!”

57

It's too hard to study when I am still freaking out about meeting Saint Death herself, or whoever that was, last night. Could it be true I have been acting the role of the Reaper and crossed some supernatural lines? Maybe this is a sign I should stop. I should quit while I'm ahead, but I don't think I can.

I really need a distraction right now and this homework isn't cutting it. Scarlet went to bed early. I don't know how she can sleep at a time like this. Especially after what we saw on TV earlier tonight.

Scarlet and I had been talking about possibly returning to Zero's next weekend, hoping to find Joe sitting alone again, when he appeared on the evening news. He was speaking with a reporter about how he had been drugged the night before by a girl named Monica, who was acting "weird". Fortunately, his description of me was a little off too. Memories, especially intoxicated ones, are

unreliable. The police were visible in the background, their red and blue lights silently flashing on their cars. I recognized one of the officers standing just in frame, as if he wanted me to see him and know he was watching. It was Officer Hogweva.

“Fucking Hogweva!” I slam my fist on my desk as I recall seeing him on the news. I hope I didn’t wake Scarlet, but that guy is going to be a problem. Actually, I hope I did wake her. Why does she get to sleep while I wrestle alone with the stress of everything falling apart?

I look over at my little friends lined up on my dresser. Still frustrated with having to leave Joe behind at Zero’s, I shove my laptop forward. Schoolwork isn’t happening right now. Last night had been the perfect opportunity, ruined by an unwelcome visitor.

I decide Scarlet does not get to rest while I’m suffering. We need to figure some things out. I am about to go wake her when I hear my phone ding. I pick it up and see there is a text from imthegrimreaper2018@gmail.com. *What is this?* My finger trembles as it hovers over the screen. With my heart in my throat, I tap to open the message. It reads:

I’m right at your door and I’m
counting to three

I hear three slow knocks on the front door. 1. 2. 3.

58

My heart stops beating. Every part of my body is temporarily frozen. There's no way in hell I'm answering the door. I should find somewhere to hide, but there's nowhere to go. That text message is freaking me out. I feel like I'm in a horror movie right now. Could it really be the Grim Reaper at my front door? Or is it the cops? Did Officer Hogweva finally catch on and bring the cavalry to take me in? Death or life in prison, I'm not sure which scenario is worse.

Slowly, I force myself to stand and move to my bedroom door to listen. At first there is nothing, then I hear the front door slam open. I open my door a crack to see what's happening. A hooded figure storms in and grabs my murder knife from the kitchen then whips its shadowed face in my direction. I gasp and slam my door shut. The Reaper has come back for me. Before I can lock my door, the Reaper is pushing her way in, forcing me to stumble

back.

“Hey, you can’t just come in here like this.” I try to show some resolve.

“Of course, I can. Don’t need no permission to take you with me.”

“What do you mean take me with you? Take me where?”

“You went through hell. Now you’ll go through it again. Only this time it will end in eternal peace for you. Or eternal suffering. That part is not up to me.”

“Why? Why are you doing this to me?”

“It’s not a question of why, it’s a question of when.”

This isn’t good. I have a strong feeling the when in question is right now. I need to distract her while I figure out an escape plan. “I see you still do prefer the blade, after all.”

The Reaper looks at the knife and says, “I do miss my scythe, it’s true. Guns are so boring.”

I guess that’s lucky for me because my chances of surviving a fight with a knife are higher than a fight with a gun. I look around for something to protect myself with. Glancing in my vanity mirror that sits on the back of my dresser, I get a better angle to peer into that hood, but all I see is darkness. There’s no face to the voice. Only a blackness that matches my heart.

Speaking of black hearts, where the hell is Scarlet? The Reaper was not so strong when we were both together. Like having a witness around weakens it. Strength in numbers.

You can always kill what’s immortal.

“Scarlet!” I call out as I try to look for a path to run past the entity in front of me.

“You think you can escape me? Go ahead. Run!”

I take a step forward, but the shiny blade is slashing out at me and there's no way I can move past without getting cut.

She laughs a deep, menacing laugh, like she's amused with how helpless I am. "I told you I'm coming back; there's no escape this time."

With that she steps forward, and I move backward, matching her steps until I am pushed against my desk. Trapped.

I observe myself in the mirror and I see, maybe for the first time, who I truly am. Who I've become. It's not the little girl my parents raised. It's not the girl everyone back home knew and loved. I am something now that is unlovable. Something unredeemable. Maybe it's time for this all to end.

The Reaper raises the knife over her head. "It's my turn to pass on judgment. You can't escape your fate."

Knowing that I can't, I resign myself to the inevitable. I close my eyes and as I feel the blade slowly enter my body, my mind just screams:

Run! Run! Run!

XIII.

"The End
(Stars Always
Seem to Fade)"

59

I can tell the wound is fatal. It's too late to run. The Grim Reaper is gone, I felt her presence leave. I open my eyes and see the knife sticking out of my abdomen. I wrap my hands around the handle and debate whether I should pull it out or not. Will removing the blade delay my death, or hasten it? Does it matter?

They say your life flashes before your eyes in your final moments, like a movie, but it's not like that. Not exactly. It's more like all the threads of your existence are finally sewn together and you can see the finished tapestry. You've been walking past trees one by one and now have risen above to see the whole forest all at once. Everything just makes sense.

I don't regret anything but wish I could forget, 'cause all the things I've done and all the things I've said don't go away. They stay with me. Like a constant loop inside my mind that's always on repeat.

I know it was wrong but there's nothing to be done anymore. I won't forgive myself 'cause pity doesn't help anymore, either. It was all for love and there is some solace, some peace, in that.

I see the jars of ashes on my dresser and drag myself to them to say a final goodbye. I pull the knife out and don't feel a thing. Blood trickles out, my life draining with it. Resting the knife on the dresser top, I pull myself up to a standing position. After debating whether to scribble the names of all the lives that now lay in these glass coffins to give some peace to their loved ones, I decide not to. I can't fix any of this so why even try.

They'll never know 'cause I'll never say anything about the memories that live inside my head. They stay with me, they don't go away. They haunt me every night while I'm lying in bed. Will they haunt me in death?

If they do, so be it. This is the cake I baked, heart sprinkles and all, and now I have to eat it. Feeling weak, I try to just embrace these last moments.

"Well," I say to my souvenirs in bottles, "This is the end. So long, my friends."

Sharp pain grabs me like my insides are being wrung out. I feel dizzy.

"It's a little too late to..."

60

I must have lost consciousness for a minute. I am collapsed on top of the dresser, but something is shaking me. Something brought me back.

“Reina. Oh God, no. Reina!”

Or someone.

“Reina, wake up.”

I open my eyes and see Scarlet, pale with worry. At first, I am relieved to see her. Maybe she can save me. Then I realize she is the reason for all of this. She is the drug dealer that fed my addiction.

With a sudden surge of adrenaline, I am up, and I seize her, spinning her around so I have control of her from behind. I pick the knife back up and hold it to her throat.

“This is all your fault,” I say.

We look each other in the eye through our reflections in my

vanity mirror.

“Reina, don’t do this. I only ever wanted to help you, to take some of your pain away.”

“No, you are my pain.” I grab her ponytail and yank her head back, fully exposing her neck.

“Let me go!” she screams.

“Oh, there’s nowhere to run,” I say and tighten my grip.

Death is upon me, there is no time to weigh moral consequences anymore. With tears streaming down both our faces, I drag the blade across her neck. As blood streams out all over me I think about what I am doing and hope that with bloodstained hands I make amends.

As I watch Scarlet die in the mirror, her image fades until all I see is my own reflection. The knife in one hand is held to my bleeding throat, my other hand clutches a long black wig.

Oh... what have I done?

Dropping the knife and the wig I stumble to my desk and look at my laptop. On the screen I see my mail app still open under an account called **ImTheGrimReaper2018**. I am devastated.

It was me the whole time. It was all me.

I look out my bedroom window at the night sky. It’s a clear night and I can see the stars. I was a star for a brief period of time. I was a queen.

I am trying to hold on, but everything is getting dim. Stars always seem to fade. I wish I could do this all over. I know I can’t. It’s a little too late to start again.

Start again...

THE END.

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