

Dead Reckoning logline:

A tabloid writer investigating a series of grisly unsolved murders discovers a possible supernatural connection to his town's deadly, century-old race riot.

Chapter 1

Ridley, Florida (near the Alabama border)

September 7, 2021

2 AM

The boy stood in the moonlit kitchen, his heart pounding and his pajamas soaked with sweat. He didn't remember climbing out of bed and walking across his bedroom carpet, pushing open the door, careful not to make noise as he stepped barefoot across the kitchen's tile flooring. As he looked over his shoulder and through the dimmed dining room to his mother's closed bedroom door, he could hear her steady, even breathing through the gap at the bottom of the door. It would be so much better if she dreamed of something pleasant. Their recent vacation at the beach, possibly, when he'd been stung by a stingray and to make him stop crying, she'd told him to pee onto his own foot, something she'd read would help with the pain. And he had, right there at the water's edge, his mother holding a towel up to give him some privacy and him laughing through his tears.

The boy turned his head back toward the kitchen counter, his eyes finding the knife rack next to the toaster. Now he remembered why he had risen and come here. The voice in his head, one he had never heard before tonight, calling out to him in his sleep so distinctly that his eyes had snapped open and his body jerked up, as if on puppet strings. The voice commanding him to come here into the kitchen and remove one of the knives from the rack.

When he reached up and closed his fingers around one of the ebony handles, the voice in his head halted him.

Not that one, the one above it...

He did as he'd been ordered, sliding the butcher knife from its slot. It felt heavy in his hand. He'd never held it before now, being just nine, his mother always telling him it was too dangerous for him to use.

“What do you want me to do?” the boy whispered into the semi-darkness.

Go to your mother's bedroom. Turn the doorknob slowly and lift it upward as you open the door. Remember, it squeaks otherwise.

Knife in hand, he followed the voice's instructions, his footsteps barely audible on the cold tile. Turning the knob, he lifted upward and swung open the door. The hinge didn't squeak. Pushing the door open, he walked silently across the carpet until he came to the side of the bed. When the voice came again, the hideous thing that it suggested he do went against all his natural inclinations. Despite his youth, there was no way to reconcile it in his mind.

Take the knife in both hands... there, like that... and raise it above your head...

He knew what he was about to do was wrong. Yet he couldn't stop himself. The voice was too powerful. Too insistent. It seemed to consume his mind, all but for a tiny space that remained his alone, the part that recalled just yesterday him making his mother a homemade birthday card out of construction paper and peeling filaments from a piece of driftwood he'd found during their vacation to the beach, using them to fashion a homemade bracelet for her. She'd hugged him, slipping it onto her wrist and telling him that she'd never take it off, not even when she showered. She was wearing it now, in fact. He could tell, even though her hand lay partially beneath her head, just below her mouth that curved upward in a dreamy smile.

Then that memory faded as the voice grew louder and louder in his head, chanting almost, demanding he do the thing he knew he could never undo. Like unseeing something you saw, or unhearing something you heard. That last remaining part of himself tried to block the voice out, feeling that if he could make it go away, he could leave his mother's room, replace the knife, and go back to bed. She would never know about this. Tears welled in his eyes as he began to lower the knife to his side.

No! ordered the voice. *Do as you were told...*

He raised the knife again. Just a sliver of himself was left now. Had his mother really sat him at the dining room table yesterday to give him his monthly haircut? Had she held a mirror in front of his face and declared that he was without a doubt the most handsome nine-year-old on Earth? His oldest memories clouded over by the shadowy figure that now fully resided in his brain, the boy's eyes widened with fear, his teeth grinding together to keep hold of those fond memories, because he knew failing to do so would mean finishing this thing. He fought with everything he had to focus on the memory of her kissing him on the cheek, brushing a few loose hairs from the towel around his shoulders before heading into the kitchen to make dinner. Hot dogs and

macaroni and cheese, his favorite. He'd eaten two helpings, then had helped her wash the dishes before going into his bedroom to play video games. Then later, her popping her head through his cracked bedroom door to tell him she was going to the store, that they were out of medicine, assuring him he'd be fine alone for just a few minutes.

Love ya, kiddo, she had said before leaving. The last words she said to him.

“What will happen to me afterwards?” the boy whispered into the night.

The voice was soothing, reassuring. *I will take care of you.*

The boy raised the knife above his head in a double grip. In that moment before the last of his former self slipped away, he willed himself to remember her face as he now saw it, serene and at peace. He imagined her face that same way as her head rested not on her cloth pillow but a finer and silkier one, her perfectly still body lying in a satin-lined casket with her hands folded across her chest, her mouth stitched closed and smiling like an angel.

Do not wait...do it now! the voice in his head commanded.

And like a good boy, he did.

* * *

9:15 AM

Rayne Dawson guided his Nissan Altima into the Fairmont Apartments parking lot, noting several marked police cruisers blocking a section of spaces in front of a ground-floor unit. He

scanned the complex, noting it was comprised of four two-story buildings. Twenty units per floor, each with recessed front doors. Two more cruisers, both unmarked, and a forensics van sat parked directly in front of the fifth apartment down from where he'd parked. From his position near the complex's front office, Rayne saw yellow crime scene tape encircling the apartment's front entrance and outer grassy area. He eyed a team of detectives and forensics techs conversing on the lawn inside the taped area. Groups of residents looked on from the sidewalk outside the cordoned zone, whispering among themselves and alternatively shaking their heads. From his contact in the police department, Rayne had learned that the first cop on the scene had arrived three hours ago, after a concerned neighbor in the complex had answered a knock on his door to see the young boy standing there holding a butcher knife, caked with dried blood.

Get down to the Fairmont and get dirty had been his instructions. Ingrid, owner and editor-in-chief of *The Weekly Roaster*, North Florida's leading weekly gossip magazine, had texted him mere minutes after the news had broken. *Find what you can and have a story on the dashboard by close of business tomorrow.* Rayne, fresh off a late night arguing with Deidra, his ex-wife and on-and-off lover, had dutifully taken his dog Zeke for a quick walk before hopping in the shower and making the drive here. In his three years reporting for the *Roaster*, Rayne had learned early on that by "getting dirty," Ingrid meant she expected her reporters to dig deeper than those who worked for mainstream outlets. "I want you to get filthy," she'd told Rayne on his first day. "You'll know you're doing your job when you make more enemies than friends."

Rayne had obliged, quickly earning respect from Ingrid and the five other reporters on the *Roaster's* payroll, by outperforming all of them in just his second year there. He'd even acquired the nickname 'The Dirt Devil,' a moniker he detested but had been helpless to shake, due to the fact that he *had* made more enemies than friends. All despite his easy-going, laid-back

personality. Ingrid had been correct in her assessment that reporting on tough stories that exposed the bad in people would mar his image. But he wouldn't have changed a thing. He'd continued to ask the tough questions and expose enough secrets in the community to ruffle feathers that hadn't wanted to be ruffled. Now, after texting his police contact and requesting all crime data for the Fairmont complex specifically, as well as for all violent crimes committed in the Ridley city limits over the past five years, he jotted notes onto a legal pad and decided that since he preferred to have as much information as possible before cold-questioning people, he'd wait fifteen minutes for a response before trying the complex's office manager.

It came in five.

Emailing you all Fairmont police calls since it opened in 2016

Got you violent crime data for entire city going back 10 years instead of 5, cause I'm anal like that

You owe me beers and wings

Phil Jensen, his old college buddy. Rayne had roomed with him during their sophomore year at UF. Despite their many differences, the two had remained friends over the years, with Phil finding work as a civilian statistician with the local PD shortly after graduation and Rayne following his journalism dream by first working for several newspapers, then finally the *Roaster*.

A few minutes later, an email notification. True to form, Phil had delivered. Scanning the information, Rayne downloaded the attachment onto his laptop, then read Phil's postscript: *Did you see the news piece about the second murder there?*

He sent his response: *That's why I'm here. Previous tenant killed his elderly wife in same apartment two years ago.*

Phil emailed back almost immediately: *I anxiously await reading your story next time I grab ice cream and diapers. Good luck!*

As Rayne killed the ignition, having enjoyed the AC before stepping out into the heat of the day, his phone rang. Deidra. "I'm working," he said without saying hello. Deciding to leave his legally registered gun in the glove box, figuring he wouldn't need it here, he grabbed his briefcase—a well-worn, soft-sided leather model with leather handles—off the passenger seat and hopped out.

"Can you come over tonight so we can finish talking?" Deidra asked.

Rolling his eyes, he made his way up the walk and paused beneath the shaded awning. "I'm not fighting anymore, Deidra. I don't have the energy."

"Not to fight. I just want to know why you left so angry last night."

He sighed. "I don't like being called a coward. If that's not the pot calling the kettle black, I don't know what is."

"If you're referring to my parents, we've been over that."

Jesus Christ, he lipped. "I don't have time to talk now. I'm working."

He listened to her expel a frustrated breath, wishing he could just hang up and be done with the whole thing once and for all. But he knew that wouldn't be possible. He'd have to deal with her later, knowing that their discussion about why they'd divorced would ultimately return to the subject of Deidra having hidden the fact she was marrying a Black man from them until a week before their wedding, and Rayne's refusal to have children with her. The fact that they'd remained good friends and even lovers after their divorce hadn't meant those sore spots had gone away entirely, much to his regret.

"Tonight is fine," he said finally, and hung up without saying anything else. Stuffing his phone in his pocket, he stood there a moment to settle himself back into business mode. He planned on asking whoever manned the business office the series of questions he'd prepared. He hoped they talked. The fact he wasn't a cop often played into his favor. People were funny like that. They saw a badge and imagined sitting in a courtroom someday, telling lawyers and a judge something they'd already told an officer or detective. But telling their story to a writer, namely one who worked for a gossip magazine... that was a horse of another color. People loved being part of a salacious story, especially when that story could be found at a supermarket checkout lane the following week instead of in the clinical setting of a courtroom two years later.

He had already gotten a description of the dead woman—Beth Timmons, thirty-two years old, white single mother, one child, employed as a medical tech at the time of her death. One semester away from finishing her bachelor's degree. Shame. Not much known about the woman's son and suspected killer, other than his age and that he was currently being held in a state juvenile facility.

Swinging open the office door, he stepped inside and was instantly surprised. In contrast to the working-class neighborhood the complex had been built in—and contrary to the austere,

centrally-facing white block apartment buildings—the office was adorned with smartly-tiled floors, Key West-toned paint, and tasteful Art Deco decorations. No one else appeared to be in the office save for a thirty-something Hispanic woman behind the front desk. As he made his way toward her, making sure to plant a gracious smile on his face, Rayne was struck by the woman’s striking good looks. Puerto Rican or Dominican, he deduced. Light complexion, with shoulder-length curly hair and large, expressive eyes that creased at their corners when she smiled.

“Can I help you?” she asked, her eyes quickly appraising his business attire. Forgoing a tie today, he’d gone with a blue button-down beneath a tweed jacket and dark designer jeans.

“Hopefully,” he said, extending his right hand toward her. “Rayne Dawson, with the *Weekly Roaster*. I’m doing a story on the murder here last night and was wondering if I could ask you a few questions.”

When she shook his hand, her smile fell flat, and she assumed a professional air. “Veronica. I’m the leasing manager here.”

“Nice to meet you. Fancy office here,” Rayne said.

“Thanks. I happen to be the decorator too since the owner has about as much taste as a snail. I’m impressed—the last time something like this happened, it took until noon for the *Roaster* to send one of their jackals to start nosing around. No political dramas or sex scandals to write about?”

Raising a finger, Rayne asked, “Wait a second, isn’t a jackal a scavenger?”

“Exactly.” It was just the two of them here in the office, and the awkwardness hung in the air as an Elton John song played through the office speakers.

“I’ve always considered myself more of a fox, actually,” he said.

“Oh really?”

“Yes. Foxes are more playful than jackals. And they make better mates,” he added with a grin.

“I read somewhere that a male fox is called a dog,” she said with an air of satisfaction.

“Correct. But dogs aren’t just man’s best friend—they’re women’s too.”

He eyed a photo on her desk of a woman bearing Veronica’s resemblance next to a smiling little girl of about three, and a yellow-haired collie. When Veronica noticed him looking at the picture, she glanced at it and sighed. “Ollie. He passed last year—a brain tumor. My niece gave him that name the day I got him... Ollie the Collie. She took it hard, but I think I took it worse. Adults lose a lot of their resiliency once they learn how life really works, I think.”

Rayne managed a meager smile. “Yeah, I suppose.”

She looked away from the photo and met his eye, her shoulders relaxing and face opening into a more friendly expression. “I’m sorry, that was rude of me just now. I know you’re just doing your job. It’s just been so heavy around here all morning, with cops and reporters crawling around the place. I already told the police everything I know, so I’m not sure what help I can be.”

“You’d be surprised how much information people forget,” he said, deciding to get right to the point. “If you don’t mind me asking a few questions, I’d really appreciate it.”

“Sure, but the owner is here, and he’ll probably ask you to leave if he comes out. Just warning you.” She placed her crossed arms atop the desk and glanced at a closed office door to her right.

Rayne removed a notepad and pen from his briefcase. “How well did you know the victim?”

“Not well since they just moved in five days ago. Nice woman, and hard-working, from the few conversations we had. Her son was such a sweet kid. The day she signed the lease, she brought him in to the office and he told me I had the prettiest hair he’d ever seen. He even drew my picture. It’s just terrible to hear what they’re saying he did to her.”

Being nine years old and killing your own mother was bad enough, Rayne thought. But stabbing her fifty times with a butcher knife while she slept was about ten levels up from terrible. “I can understand how hard this is for you, having known her,” he said, turning circumspect. “In my line of work, I’ve come to realize more than ever that the living are the ones who suffer, not the dead.”

“Still not easy for you, I’m sure,” she said. “Reporting on so much sadness.”

He nodded. “Are you willing to answer a few questions that the police may not have thought to ask?”

She glanced toward the closed office door again. A man’s raised voice suddenly came from behind it. “Mr. Thompson doesn’t allow us to comment on tenants’ rental information. I’m sure you understand.”

Rayne figured as much. “How about this—I ask a question and instead of answering normally, you shake your head for ‘yes’ and nod for ‘no.’ That way you won’t positively reveal anything to me, deal?” He’d done this before, most recently on an assignment of alleged environmental corruption. The construction foreman had sympathized with him due to the fact that the foreman’s brother had once been a journalist, embedded with combat troops in Afghanistan.

Veronica gave him a dubious look, and he replied, “Look, I know you don’t owe me anything. I also know the reputation my magazine has. But think of it this way—that poor woman deserves

her story to be told right. I get facts that regular reporters don't get. That's why I love writing for the *Roaster*. My leash at the newspapers I worked for was about an inch long."

Veronica nodded to herself, seemingly impressed. "So, you must really be their top gun."

"I try."

"And that part about considering yourself a fox—that was top-level stuff. I like a confident man."

Rayne winked at her, then dove right in with his questions. "To your knowledge, did anyone else ever live with the mother and child since they'd been here?"

After considering a moment, she nodded. *No*, per their arrangement.

"Okay. I already confirmed that the police had never been called to that apartment in the short time they lived there. But domestic issues don't usually result in police calls, especially when kids are involved. Any complaints from neighbors about seeing bruises on the boy? Noise complaints, anything like that?"

Veronica nodded vigorously. He scribbled *No* for that question in his notepad, then asked her if the victim had had any observed habits during their several interactions that may have indicated something like this would ever happen. Seeming frustrated by the question, Veronica nodded again. Switching gears, Rayne asked whether she knew if the boy's father was in the picture.

Veronica gave a vigorous nod. *Father absent*, Rayne noted, reasoning that most women who had spoken with each other on more than one occasion usually knew each other's relationship status, as well as vital information about their children.

He went over another dozen questions, expecting her to hold a hand up at any second to halt the interview. But she remained game enough, alternatively nodding and shaking her head, not in a perfunctory way but appearing to give his questions great thought. When he came to the last of them, asking if there was any possible connection she knew of between this current case and the one from two years before with the old man killing his wife, Veronica vehemently nodded.

Rayne scribbled more notes. *No evidence of family violence. Learned behavior unlikely. Healthy, loving relationship, based on no known police reports associated with them. Then, No suspected connections between the two cases. Police and apartment manager confirm.*

“I appreciate you being such a good sport,” he said to her, stashing away his notepad inside his briefcase. “I’m going back to my car to start my story. Do you mind if I take a stroll around the building once the police clear the scene? I promise not to bother anyone. It helps ground me when I can see the subject I’m writing about.”

Just then, the office door to Veronica’s right opened and a thin man in his fifties with graying hair, a fake tan, and tropical-themed shirt approached the front desk. He gave Rayne a disapproving once-over before asking Veronica how much longer the police would be. “The detectives said around noon,” she replied.

When the man scowled, his equine face screwed up even more than when it naturally rested. “Make sure to have the cleaning team get that carpet up before they scrub the rest of the place. And go ahead and take it out of circulation. No one this side of Timbuktu will want to rent it now, thanks to the goddamned media assholes.” He took a step toward the front door, stopped, and turned back toward Rayne. “You’re not one of *them*, are you?” he asked, pointing a finger at him.

Rayne held up both palms. “Just researching my story, sir,” he said. “Rayne Dawson, from the *Weekly Roaster*.”

“I don’t care who you are or who you work for. Just stay out of my business. And watch what you write about this place, or I’ll have people I know have a little talk with your owner. I know who she is.” He shifted his gaze toward Veronica. “And remember—no information they can’t get through public records.” Then as fast as he appeared, he turned on his penny loafers and pushed out the front door, the whole time mumbling about the media and dead women.

“Mr. Thompson?” Rayne guessed, watching the man storm down the front walk toward a parked red Mercedes SUV.

“None other,” Veronica said, offering a humorless laugh. “He can get a bit cranky at times, especially today, but who can blame him? He’s been good to me since I’ve been here, so I can’t complain.”

For the first time since entering the office, Rayne noticed her perfume; something fruit-based he couldn’t quite place. He removed a business card from his jacket pocket and handed it to her. “If there’s anything you think of later that you can add, no matter how small you think it is, please let me know. My story is going live tomorrow.”

She took the card, read it, then placed it on the desk. “That’s a unique name—Rayne. I’m sure there’s a story behind it.”

“Everyone has a story,” he said, shrugging. “And I meant that—don’t hesitate to contact me if there’s anything else you can think of that may help. Strict anonymity, of course.”

She said okay, and Rayne thanked her before heading back to his car. With the AC blowing and radio on low, he opened his laptop and began the rough draft of his story. Intermittently over the next two hours, he glanced up to observe the crime scene techs and detectives come and go from the apartment. Two domestic murders in the past two and a half years, and in the same apartment. Even more tantalizing was the fact that each perpetrator's age had been far outside the norm for that sort of crime—nine and seventy-eight. Talk about adding intrigue to an already strange coincidence. Wishing to concentrate part of his story on that, Rayne added a note about that first case, typing the line *Possibly interview old man?* That was certainly something the regular press may not think to do.

He conducted a quick Google search and discovered the man was still being held in the local jail, awaiting not just his murder charge but a competency hearing. Deciding to take the initiative, and knowing his article wasn't technically due on the magazine's online dashboard until 5 PM tomorrow, he brought up the county jail's website and secured a visitation appointment for nine the following morning. A shot in the dark, but a shot nonetheless. If the old man agreed to talk at all, Rayne figured he'd count himself lucky. But if the man were like most people facing such heavy charges, he'd sit down at the video monitor long enough to listen to Rayne introduce himself before hanging up the receiver and walking away.

Finishing the only part of the story he felt comfortable with for now, Rayne closed his laptop and stared off at the modest homes across the street from the complex. A row of towering palms extended down the street like a rank of one-legged wooden soldiers. Two children raced each other on scooters, their mother stepping out onto the stoop of their house to yell at them before shaking her head and disappearing back inside. As Rayne's mind drifted, his hand reached out to mindlessly caress the leather case on the seat beside him. An old memory had been threatening

to resurface in his mind, the same memory he had been successful at warding away countless times over the years. Like an epileptic sensing the aura of a seizure, he'd come to the point of recognizing the memory coming on, then forcing it away through sheer willpower. He didn't have time to visit it right now. He had work to do. The thought of dealing with his assignment, the memory, and Deidra at the same time was too much to bear. But he knew that old ghost wouldn't stay gone for long. It was like a boomerang in his mind. Sometimes he threw it and it stayed away for weeks, months even. Other times, if his thoughts were angled just so, like a hand changing position on the boomerang, it caught a different current and returned faster than he anticipated.

Forcing himself to focus on his current assignment, he reminded himself to add as much humanity into his story as possible. All the better for readers of a magazine considered more of a tabloid than true journalism. He felt he'd be helped tremendously by learning more about the victim—what she'd been like, insight from her friends who cared to speak with him—and whatever information he could get about the child suspect. He determined to dedicate himself fully to the story, preparing to not sleep at all these first twenty-four hours if necessary. The victim deserved that, as they always did. Even though some critics of the *Roaster* used such phrases as “mostly smut”—or more recently, “journalism that preys on the most sacred aspects of decency and privacy”—he was proud of the work he did. Not that he expected to be nominated for a Pulitzer, but still. Haters would always hate.

On more than a few occasions he had experienced showdowns with Ingrid, a woman of slight stature but towering personality, and even greater conviction. Several times she had stood firm on those subjects she cared fervently about, demanding that Rayne report on her own carefully chosen topics. But on other occasions, Rayne had gotten his way once he convinced her about a

story's nature, winning an increasing level of autonomy until the two of them had arrived at a place of mutual respect and understanding. Their professional relationship had become a marriage of convenience. Rayne had a wide latitude to do his work on his own, rarely coming into the office, so that he had spare time to work on his own ongoing investigation—not so much an investigation as an obsession, really—and consistently delivering on his promise to write solid articles that kept readers of the *Roaster* coming back for more.

With just under thirty hours to go until his hard deadline, Rayne felt a growing sense of pressure that came with the knowledge that as it now stood, he truly only had half a story. He was convinced the other half lay buried somewhere between the facts he already had and a greater truth. Two unconnected killings back-to-back. In the same apartment, no less, both killers proving to be the unlikeliest of subjects. There was more there, to be sure. Like a man drilling for oil, it would be his job to strike it, or come up with dust.

Chapter 2

1 PM

The police had finally taken down the tape and eased their way out of the lot, vehicle by vehicle. The detective team and forensics personnel had come in and out of the apartment the entire time he'd sat there. Nosy neighbors stood on the walk at various times, shading their faces from the sun as they commiserated with one another. When the last police vehicle left, Rayne shut off the Altima's engine and hopped out into the suffocating heat of the day. Wishing to beat the crime scene clean-up crew he suspected would be arriving soon, he walked past the apartment's front door, taking a quick look as he went. Nothing unusual there, save for powder marks from where the forensics crew had taken fingerprint samples. He made a mental note to add that detail to his story for context. Heading to the end of the walk, he made his way around the building until he came to an open grassy courtyard that centered the four apartment buildings. On the ground floor of the building opposite the murder site stood an older African American woman, watering a hanging pot of flowers on her small open patio. Observing him walk along the sidewalk that ran along the middle of the courtyard, she shot him a wary look. Rayne waved at her, but the woman turned back to her chore without bothering to return it.

Since the murder (or murders, when you considered the old man's case) had occurred in apartment 16-C, and the first-floor units were numbered in ascending order from the direction he had first come, Rayne was about to count units as he walked until he came to the right apartment.

Checking to make sure no one was watching him (the old woman appeared to be the only person out back), he stepped off the paved path and walked through the grass until he came to 16-C's open concrete patio. He found the sliding glass door's vertical blinds closed. No surprise there. A smaller window to the apartment, the only other one back here, had its mini-blinds closed as well, but Rayne discovered one of the narrow slats bent in such a way that he was able to cup his hands around his eyes and peer inside. A boy's bedroom, judging from the baseball-themed wallpaper and race car-shaped bed. The bedroom door stood half open, offering Rayne a partial view into the white-tiled living room, and beyond it the kitchen. *Where the boy got the knife*, he thought. He saw another doorway directly across the hallway from the boy's room. The mother's bedroom, he deduced. Its doorway stood halfway open, and despite the low light in that part of the apartment, Rayne was able to make out the edge of a maroon-colored stain on the carpet there.

Jesus, he thought, imagining the boy rising from bed, fallow moonlight streaming in through the windows. In his mind's eye he saw the boy padding sleepy-eyed into the kitchen, where he had slid the largest knife from the rack and taken it to his mother's bedroom door. Had he considered what he was about to do before he'd opened it and stepped inside? What had gone through his mind while he stood there watching her sleep, then plunging the knife down over and over? Had he considered how his life would forever be changed, how the life that had born him into this world would cease to exist before he finished his gruesome task? It was sad, more than anything. Two lives gone in nearly an instant. But as he peered into the space that just the night before had housed a normal family, Rayne thought to the case before it, the old man's, feeling a widening sense of tragedy grow within him. *Two families were destroyed in here*, he thought. *And by their own family members, no less*. His assignment seemed even more important now. The reverence

that coursed through him, looking at the normal living areas where both families had resided—one directly after the other—raised the question within him of whether uncovering the rest of the story he suspected to be there may now be more important than he had already guessed.

A voice behind him made him jump. He turned to see the old woman standing on the sidewalk with both hands planted on her ample hips, scowling at him. Despite not committing a crime by snooping in an unoccupied dwelling, he still felt like a Peeping Tom. “Excuse me, what was that?” he asked her.

The woman cocked her head to the side. “I *said* it’s shame enough what happened to his momma without strangers gawkin’ at the place, Lord’s sake.”

Rayne felt his cheeks and ears flush. Waving in apology, he walked past her to the sidewalk, hastily mentioning that he didn’t mean any disrespect, then hurried back to his car. A definite payoff for having waited almost three hours. Ingrid would love the bloodstain reference. Sitting behind the wheel, he let the air conditioning blow against his damp face and neck for several minutes, before guiding the Altima through the lot and back out onto Sheridan Street. Already in the area he had planned on visiting later today anyway, he figured now was as good a time as any to make his weekly visit to the place he’d first visited one year ago, when he’d put into effect the gut-wrenching decision that had taken him months to realize. Knowing the emotional toll his visit would take, he considered putting Deidra off until tomorrow. He dreaded that more than anything. But he knew there would be no way of avoiding her today, that doing so would only be a temporary solution, like kicking a can down the road. Slipping his Ray-Bans on to guard against the blazing September sun, he recalled the image of the maroon-colored carpet stain and wondered if God had been watching when the boy had done what he’d done. And for that matter, when the old man had taken a pillow from his bed and stood over his sleeping wife.

A mile from his destination, he stopped to pick up some takeout: soup and a sandwich. Finally arriving in the convalescent home's lot, Rayne grabbed his briefcase and the paper bag from the front passenger seat and walked grimly through the building's front doors. A plump woman seated at the reception desk raised her eyes from a crossword and smiled hugely as he approached. "Hey, Rayne," she said, noticing his paper bag. "Gonna try lunch again?"

He shrugged. "Hi, Marcy. You know what they say—Rome wasn't built in a day."

She smiled again, this time a bit more sadly. "Yeah."

"Yeah..." He stood there for a second, looking back toward the front door, and considered leaving, figuring that none of this mattered much. It was ridiculous, really. If teams of doctors and psychologists hadn't been able to fix her, what made him think he could? His recent habit of bringing her lunch, wishing to feed her when only the nurses had been able to do so after multiple attempts each meal, had become a personal challenge of sorts. If she remained this way, he resolved to continue trying, one weekly visit at a time.

"I really admire your persistence," Marcy said, her face becoming hopeful. "She'll come around soon. I'm sure of it."

Rayne sighed. "I don't want to get my hopes up. Last week the doctor used the word 'indefinitely' for the first time."

Marcy's face screwed up like she had bitten into something rotten. "That must be one of the worst words in the English language if you ask me. It... it doesn't seem to allow a person closure."

Rayne nodded his agreement. After signing the guest log, he turned left down the hall until he came to a partially open door. Per his custom, he knocked before entering, even though he knew from experience that she wouldn't answer. Easing the door open, he spied her there in her hospital bed in the same position he'd last seen her in a week ago, the crisp white blanket pulled up past her waist and her face turned away toward the unshaded window.

"Food delivery," he announced, stepping into the room. "Italian wedding soup, your favorite." He set the still-warm container onto the bedside tray table and took the chair closest to the window. Her eyes were open, but even now as he sat in her field of vision, he detected no recognition in them. As always, it seemed she looked *through* him instead of *at* him. Still, he smiled and scooted his chair closer to the bed, so he could reach up and take her right hand in both of his. As he looked at their intertwined fingers, he noted with alarm how pale her skin had become—unusually white and waxy after a year of self-neglect in this same bed—and how it contrasted even more than normal from his own medium-brown skin.

Her white-and-pink gown hung partially off one shoulder; he reached over and pulled it back up. Smoothing out a few stray strands of her unbrushed hair, he sat looking at her for a moment before digging into the bag and opening the plastic soup container. Removing the included plastic spoon from its covering, Rayne stirred the still-steaming soup before collecting a half-spoonful. Blowing on it, he held it up to her lips while cupping a hand beneath her chin.

"Try it. They made it fresh today," he said, looking into her vacant eyes. Her lips parted slightly when he touched the spoon to them, the too-pale tongue within moving slowly out to touch the warm broth. "Good!" he exclaimed, scooting a bit closer to her. "Try some of the pasta too."

Hopeful that she would finally eat for him, he rotated the spoon so that a small tube of pasta sat pressed to her lips. But she either didn't want it, or whatever recollection of reality she had briefly experienced, passed from her. Her mouth closed, the faintest flicker of life that had appeared in her face now gone. Rayne set the spoon down on the tray table and closed the soup lid, his lips forming a firm line. How many trips now? Almost a hundred, he thought, and all the same result. More visits in the beginning, of course, when he'd been here every day for the first couple months, sometimes taking naps on the too-small loveseat they'd been nice enough to drag into the room for him. As the months had continued, his daily visits had waned to twice weekly, until he'd finally settled into his current routine. Not that the ten-minute drive was anything difficult. But as he'd come to realize soon enough, his work and personal life had begun to sag under the emotional weight that coming here produced. He had begun to feel like a drowning man with rocks in his pockets. That he had been the one to sign the paperwork placing her here, months after finding her lying catatonic on the kitchen floor, had been his final *mea culpa*. No doctor or psychologist could ever change the understanding he'd come to that day when they'd loaded her onto an ambulance gurney. He remembered picking up the calendar from the floor, one she'd apparently been holding, because it was normally fixed to the wall but had been found next to her. He recalled frowning, wondering about the significance. And then it had hit him like a ton of bricks, one hand covering his mouth as he'd realized with searing anguish the cause of her condition—the date, or more specifically, the anniversary of the worst thing to have ever happened to either of them.

And now of course the associated memory threatened to reemerge again, the one he'd mostly managed to keep locked away in his mind like some rabid animal that never died. He looked

dully at his still-wrapped sandwich and placed it back in the bag, along with the soup she'd barely touched. His stomach growled, but there was no way he'd be eating now.

"I'm writing a new article," he told her, switching into a more conversational tone. "Some pretty dark stuff. It puts in perspective all those times you said that I'd be the death of you someday."

He laughed despite himself. He let the sound of it linger for a bit in the stillness of the room.

Synopsizing his week, he told of the new workout he'd tried at the gym, the cool new Thai place down the street from his condo, even the bitter argument he'd had with Deidra the night before, and how he wondered if this would finally be the straw that broke the camel's back with them. It could have been a fruitless exercise, telling his mother everything. But as the doctors had suggested, a bit of normalcy for a patient in her condition could work wonders. So, he continued to keep his voice soothing and patient. Her listless and glazed eyes continued to stare toward the window without a hint of recognition or emotion in them, however. *One year already*, he thought when he'd finished speaking. *Jesus*. It was like a needle being held over a spinning record during a game of Musical Chairs. When the needle would be lowered, and the music resumed, was anyone's guess. The doctors' words echoed in his mind: that a person in her mental state could recover suddenly or languish within their own frozen consciousness until the day they died.

What the doctors had not said was something Rayne discovered more and more after each visit—that the patient's loved ones tended to die one piece at a time right along with them.

After a few minutes of sitting with her in silence, he reached up to trace along the contour of her sunken cheek with the back of his hand. He let it linger there momentarily, thinking once again how different people could appear on the outside but still be so similar inside. He thought back to how many times people had stared at them as he had walked hand-in-hand in public with her, or them holding silent questions in their eyes as they'd learned of their relationship. None of that

seemed to matter now. All that did matter to him was simply being here, and next week as well, and all the ones following, if need be.

He stood and looked down on her motionless form, feeling his throat grow thick. “Love you, Mom,” he said, then grabbed his briefcase and the paper bag before heading straight out the door.

Stopping at the front desk, he offered Marcy a grim smile. “Still no luck, huh?” she asked, her face sympathetic.

He sighed. “I started to think so, but no, not really.” Marcy looked down and shook her head. “Guess I’ll see you next week.”

As he started to head out the exit, he stopped and re-approached the desk. Placing the paper bag atop it, he said, “Enjoy.”

“You’re not going to eat it?” Marcy asked.

Despite the fact he hadn’t himself eaten today, he replied, “I’ve lost my appetite.”

Chapter 3

2:10 PM

He worked the rest of the afternoon from home, planted on the couch in front of the muted television. Although he'd long discovered the benefits of working in social atmospheres—be it snuggled in a corner booth at a local coffeehouse or visiting one of his favorite bars—today he felt more comfortable writing from a position of tempered solitude. Bachelorhood had its perks, for sure; time for himself was always as close as his own front door. But along with it came a certain loneliness that, although preferred over the idea of screaming children and a nagging spouse, it tended to cause the walls to close in on him at times. His dog Zeke, a ten-year-old black lab that currently lay curled in his bed not far from the couch, provided him that perfect balance.

Pausing with his fingers on his laptop's keyboard, Rayne heard Ingrid's voice ringing in his ears: *You're a talented writer, Rayne, but you need to push yourself. A great journalist doesn't just give people what they want, he gives them what they need.* In his three years working for the *Weekly Roaster*, Rayne had seen Ingrid fire even award-winning writers due to missed deadlines. And he understood why. The *Roaster* was in direct competition with not just the local newspaper, but the larger ones in the state whose circulation reached them here in the panhandle. More so than that, there were the national gossip magazines to contend with, as well as TMZ and other television and internet sites who peddled up-to-the-minute news for an ever-consuming

public. The fact that Rayne usually had two days to write his pieces, regardless of content, didn't matter to Ingrid. The woman could be fickle with convention. She'd once assigned Rayne a story to write in one afternoon after feeling that waiting until the following week's edition would cause the magazine to lose the scoop altogether. And since Rayne consistently achieved his deadlines, producing top-notch articles that came in at exactly the word count Ingrid had preferred, he'd unwittingly become a victim of his own success. There would be no way he'd get an extension on this story, regardless of what he uncovered. Especially now, as the longer he stared at the blank screen on his laptop, the harder it was for him to complete the last part of his piece. He'd already included all known facts, even adding a bit of the artistic flair he was known for. He typed out a line, stared at it for ten seconds, then deleted it. Several minutes later he repeated the process, clacking out something that fit better.

Two years before young Alex Timmons stood on a neighbor's doorstep covered in his mother's blood, a different but no less horrific tragedy unfolded between those same apartment walls he and his mother had occupied.

Better, but he thought it still needed work. Deciding to finish it after he gave it time to breathe, he saved what he'd written and made himself a sandwich, finally feeling hungry. Zeke popped up out of his bed and stood at his feet, expectant. Digging out a treat from the cupboard, Rayne tossed it to his faithful roommate, who gobbled it and retreated to his bed. Eating with his feet propped atop the coffee table, Rayne opened his briefcase and removed part of the old file he knew like the back of his hand. He'd done this countless times before—randomly selecting a portion of it and wondering before he flipped through its contents what part of the case he'd picked. This folder contained relatively recent information gleaned from long-retired detectives and neighbors at the time. Nothing of importance, he knew, thinking of how many times he'd

thumbed through this same folder but losing count. No leads, and certainly nothing which a current cold case detective would be able to reopen the case with. He'd tried that twice already. Each time, the detectives had shaken their heads ruefully, pity in their eyes. *It's been so long, Rayne*, they'd explained. *Cold cases are called cold for a reason. Ten years would be considered an eternity. But thirty...*

He replaced the folder and dug deeper into the briefcase, leafing through a collection of handwritten notebooks, both his script and those of witnesses he'd procured statements from over the years worn and smudged, from his own fingers turning the pages hundreds of times. The words, some his own, seemed like a foreign language now. He found the original 1991 police report, the one he'd probably read a thousand times already. Finding it, he stared at it more than he read it. The twelve-page document seemed as inadequate now as it ever had been. As if his entire life had somehow been encapsulated in its meager pages. But then again, even a hundred pages wouldn't have been enough. A thousand, even. After five minutes he gave up and stashed it back in the briefcase, his fingers brushing against the familiar plastic sandwich bag containing the one item he suspected would bring forth the memory if he removed it and rolled it between his fingers, just as he'd done many times before while sitting on the couch with Zeke snoozing at his feet.

Not now, he told himself. *Stay disciplined*. Removing his hand from his case, he decided to hell with waiting and reopened his computer. He scrolled through the attachment Phil had emailed him earlier. He began to consider that the story may find its true completion somewhere in other crimes, that somehow the connection between the two cases could be explained that way. Rayne felt his hunch was a long shot at best; but he also knew from experience to trust his hunches. True enough, they didn't always pan out, but he likened chasing wild thoughts and gut instinct to

one of his favorite sports quotes. Wayne Gretzky, the famous hockey player, had once said “you miss one hundred percent of the shots you don’t take.” Story leads, Rayne had long discovered, were no different.

He searched through the initial report from the Timmons murder this morning, comparing it with the completed two-year-old report from the first murder. Nothing striking at first glance. Neither family had known one another, and no common contacts existed. The news had grasped onto this oddity, already broadcasting the coincidence as this morning’s main story. But coincidences were just that. It was considered amateurish to write about them and not explore a greater reason behind them. That only roused newfound frustration inside of Rayne, because he knew one day may not be enough time to strike oil. It had happened numerous times before—him sending in a story, only to discover a vital piece of missing information the next day. But that was the life of a journalist, he knew.

He moved on to the included crime data: ten years of sexual assaults, simple and aggravated batteries, murders. He highlighted all the reported murder cases in that time span—forty-five in total. In a city of just under 90,000, he thought that wasn’t bad, considering the national average sat at just around fifty for a similar population and time. He found no other killings involving perpetrators under twelve or over seventy. No surprise there, which only made each of these two cases more unusual. Moving on to geographic aspects, he found none of the other murders had occurred even within one mile of the Fairmont complex. Not a huge surprise there either, considering Ridley was generally a low-crime community, with most of its violent crimes (murders included) occurring in a concentrated area west of downtown. Known for several teen gangs, drug dealing, and the city’s lowest income neighborhood, the relatively small area had accounted for a full forty of the forty-five murders in Ridley during those ten years.

“And that apartment alone had two out of the other five,” Rayne said aloud, half to himself and half to Zeke. But Zeke had become accustomed to his master’s verbalized ruminations and continued to lay his head on his bed. Rayne typed a few lines, reading them back to himself.

Forty percent of the non-West End murders occurred in that one apartment. With odds like that, a person would need to flip a coin and come up with heads twenty times in a row.

Next, he read the entire Henry McElroy police report, all twenty-five pages of it. The old man had given a full confession, beginning his morbid tale by describing his wife’s overnight stay in the hospital the night before the murder. Complications from her implanted pacemaker. Henry had described being unable to sleep beside her that first night she’d come home, then had decided to sleep in the spare room. The next day all had seemed normal until after dinner, when his wife had fallen asleep on the couch. *Wheel of Fortune* had been on the television, he’d said. A short puzzle, a “thing,” and despite only three blank spaces remaining, he had been unable to solve it. Then suddenly the answer had struck him—Rubik’s Cube—and he had just blurted it out when he blacked out without warning.

He vaguely recalled waking, standing from his recliner, and going into the bedroom where he’d picked up one of the pillows from the bed. He recounted as having felt an inexplicable desire (the observant detective writing the report had noted Mr. McElroy’s eyes widening as he’d spoken the word ‘desire’) to walk back to where his wife slept on the couch and suffocate her. He had never laid a finger on her before, he stated to the detectives, and had no motive to do as he did. His first love, his wife had been in overall good health, both mind and body. Claiming to have still been very much in love after nearly fifty years of marriage, he went on to describe in detail what had happened next. He’d heard a voice in his head commanding him to press the pillow down hard over her face. When he did, he claimed his wife had woken immediately and clutched

desperately at the pillow, nearly succeeding in breaking free from it until Henry had lain atop her with his full body weight. The muffled cries from beneath the pillow had frightened a part of him, Henry had reported. But disturbingly, another part of him had felt an overwhelming sense of pleasure over the act.

Then, in the chilling and emotionless tone that only a police report could produce, Henry said he belted out the song “Bali Ha’i” from the Broadway musical *South Pacific* while his wife still scratched and kicked from beneath him. The song had been her favorite, according to him. He’d never sung it before, and he didn’t know why he’d done so in that situation. Mercifully, her body had finally gone limp beneath him. He reported waiting another full minute before standing and removing the pillow from her face. Having looked down on her half-open eyes and tongue lolling from her mouth “like a toad,” he’d told of the urge to laugh right then being so powerful that he’d refrained from doing so only by biting into his fist so hard he’d drawn blood.

Rayne read through the forty West End murders to eliminate them from having any connection to the two in the apartment. A few reprisal gang killings; several domestic-related slayings; a local prostitute found strangled in an alley. Other run-of-the-mill cases that had no bearing on the two apartment cases, he judged. He moved on to the other three non-West End cases. A highly publicized shooting of a bank guard during a robbery, a case of a murder-for-hire detailing a jealous husband plotting for months to kill his ex-wife, and a college-aged girl poisoning her entire family during a holiday feast. All three of these cases had occurred miles from the Fairmont, with the last case happening in an affluent neighborhood across town. With no proximity connection between the two Fairmont murders and all the others he researched, as well as no repeated MO, Rayne felt it safe to officially eliminate the Fairmont, and by association the apartment itself, as having any special consideration for his story. *Too bad*, he thought, feeling

something may be lying just below the surface but not understanding what it could be. He muttered something under his breath about coincidences being a funny thing, remembering when he'd run into an old high school buddy in the bathroom of an obscure Nashville bar while on vacation. And of course, there had been the story he'd written last year of the downtrodden woman who'd won a million dollars on a scratch-off lottery ticket. Rayne had suggested they reenact the sequence at the store where she'd bought her ticket, for dramatic effect. The *Roaster's* readers loved those added elements he incorporated into his stories. Following Rayne's suggestion, the woman had walked inside and bought the identical items she had bought during her first visit. Scratching off her new ticket, the woman had stood open-mouthed as she'd shown him the results—five thousand dollars per month, for life.

Rayne checked his cell phone, having turned the ringer off to concentrate better. Two text messages, one from Deidra asking what time she should expect him later, and another from a number he didn't recognize. He texted Deidra back first, telling her to expect him around 8 PM. The second message made his eyebrows rise:

Veronica here

I just remembered something that may interest you about the apartment

We can discuss over drinks after I get off work if you want. I'm free after 5

Curious, he thumbed a reply:

How about The Catch on Emerson, 5:30?

Seconds later:

Great, see you then

Placing his phone down, he frowned. He wondered what on earth she could have remembered about the apartment. Over the next hour, he went back over the police reports and crime logs a second time, finishing with the same conclusion. Nothing significant at all. That both he, an experienced investigative reporter, and the police had found nothing should have been proof positive that the Fairmont was safe to cross off as a potential connection. With five o'clock approaching, he let Zeke out to do his business, fed him dinner (promising to make up their planned walk around the lake the following day), then changed into a casual blue Henley T-shirt that accentuated his toned upper body. His senses told him this could be more than just business if he was being honest with himself. Veronica had been a real stunner, and that had been while in professional attire and speaking about a woman who had just been slaughtered by her nine-year-old son. Locking the front door behind him, he looked up to the languid September sky and was reminded that a great story was often like a great woman. Sometimes you found them in places you never thought to look. And rarely did they simply land in your lap.

* * *

5:15 PM

He got there early, choosing a high-top beside the floor-to-ceiling windows that looked out on the busy galleria. Trendy but not stuffy, The Catch was one of his favorite haunts. He'd written his share of assignments here, even some fiction, which he found had made him a better writer. With black terrazzo floors and white marble tables, the place held a certain noir flair that left Rayne feeling he could get away with wearing a suit and fedora there and not stand out. The oldies set playing on the sound system only added to the retro vibe the place generated.

She arrived right on time, wearing a sleeveless satin blouse that accentuated her full cleavage, and a white sarong that hugged her hips and legs. Her curly hair was pinned up into concentric coils, giving her an Athenian-like appearance. She wore little makeup, simply because she didn't need much, Rayne thought. Her naturally rosy cheeks and bright smile contrasted just slightly with her light brown complexion. The only jewelry she wore was a single, thin-stranded necklace with a small silver pendant. As she approached, Rayne stood and pulled her chair out for her. As they took their seats, he tried his best to conceal the pleasant surprise from his voice.

"When I saw your number, I thought you'd be someone trying to sell me something," he joked.

Laughing, she replied, "I was once fired from a telemarketing job on my first day, after my boss caught me apologizing to the people I was calling."

Their waitress arrived and took their order—an espresso martini for her, a craft beer in a frosted glass for him. "After you left, I put the whole thing out of my mind," she continued. "It was a lot

to keep thinking about. Mr. Thompson wasn't himself, either. First, he told me to close early, then when I turned out the lights and went to lock the office for the day, he asked me why I was closing. He's on edge, with all the bad publicity the complex is getting."

"I don't blame him for being upset," Rayne said. "Two domestic killings on his property in two years. I can't imagine anyone else ever wanting to rent out that apartment now. The law says he must disclose to future tenants what happened there. Not that the news isn't reporting it anyway, me included."

"That's what I wanted to tell you. After you left earlier, I was listening to the office radio when a commercial came on that reminded me of the girl."

"What girl?" Rayne asked, just as their waitress arrived with their drinks.

Veronica took a sip of her martini and wiped a bit of chocolate foam from her lips with her napkin. "One of our first tenants. It was right after the complex was built, five years ago. She came in and put down first, last and security deposit, all cash. Her parents had given her the money as a high school graduation gift. I remember her asking for a ground floor unit, which is weird because most single women we get prefer the safety of being upstairs. Anyway, it happened just a few days later."

Rayne took a pull of beer from his glass and frowned. "What happened?"

"She killed them."

"Killed who?"

"Her whole family," she finished, taking an even bigger sip from her drink, as if the alcohol would insulate her from whatever she was prepared to say. "Poison. She put it in the

Thanksgiving dinner she helped prepare. Then she just sat there pretending to have a stomachache while her parents and brother ate it. At least that's what she said after they arrested her."

Sudden realization dawned on him. "Wait—was she a college student?"

"Yes. That's what reminded me about her. The radio commercial was about the local community college. She'd come into the office to pay her rent one day, complaining about some of the classes she was taking there."

"And the police found her in a trance still sitting at the table hours later, with her dead family members lying on the floor around her?" Rayne asked, his eyes narrowing with the memory.

She shuddered. "Yeah."

Rayne nodded. "I remember reading about that when it first happened, and then again today when a friend of mine sent me the crime data I requested. But why would that be of interest to me?"

Veronica shook her head. "You're not getting it—I didn't remember because of what she *did*. I remembered because of the apartment she lived in at the time."

Rayne paused to consider the seemingly inconsequential nature of her statements. But then his eyes widened, and he nearly choked on a mouthful of beer as the significance hit him. "You mean *that* apartment?"

She nodded emphatically. "Yes, 16-C. That's what I've been trying to tell you."

Rayne leaned back in his chair, his eyes finding the ceiling. Everything had gone surreal to him in those seconds after hearing the number. “Are you sure?” he asked, planting both hands on the table.

“Of course I’m sure,” she said, setting her lips in a line. “I’m the one who rented the apartment to her. And I’m the one who rented the same unit to the old couple after it went vacant for two years. I told them about the case out of consideration, even though the crime hadn’t been committed there. But they just laughed it off and said people have been getting killed since before the Bible, so what was the big deal? Mr. Thompson is all about the bottom line, so for him to have taken it out of circulation for that long really tells me how bad he felt the publicity was.”

Rayne explained the numbers he had run earlier about non-West End murders. “When you compress the ten-year period I was looking at down to the five years the complex has been open,” he said, “and add the fact that all three murderers lived there consecutively, it means that this is either an astronomical coincidence or there’s an actual connection no one has found yet.”

They both sat quiet for several beats. Veronica looked down to her glass, a somber look in her eyes. “I rented that place to all three of them. I—I don’t know how that makes me feel.”

Rayne looked thoughtfully out the soaring window next to them, considered something, then shook it away. The beginning melody of an old R&B classic began on the bar’s sound system. The place had livened up in the short period they’d been there—happy hour groups and a handful of couples of varying ages. Silverware clinked against plates and alcohol-induced laughter rose around them. The surreal sensation Rayne had just experienced intensified. His earlier instinct that something else lay beneath the story solidified inside his mind now, like a blazing neon sign. He had no doubt now that a connection existed. Its nature, and how to find it, would be his

mission over the next twenty-four hours. He decided that if he didn't discover it by then, he'd run with what he had, then ask Ingrid to let him publish a follow-up if he got more information later. After scribbling a few more notes, he looked up to meet Veronica's concerned gaze. "I've got to run this by my editor. There has to be something the police missed."

Shivering, Veronica hugged herself. "This is getting freakier by the minute. I don't like it."

Rayne held both hands up in a gentle, halting gesture. "Try not to feel responsible. One thing my job has taught me is that shit happens all the time, and rarely is there anything we can do about it. I've found that my stories are just a collection of weird stuff that gets thrown together and splashed onto the page. I'm a reporter. It took me awhile to understand that that means exactly what the title suggests. I report things that already happened."

He forced his mind to set the issue aside for now. A beautiful, interesting woman was sitting across from him, one with a cool personality and pretty, brown eyes. They finished their drinks, changing course from the apartment cases to usual first-date topics. He learned that she liked to sew and had once played volleyball on a college scholarship before her mother's cancer diagnosis had caused her to drop out so that she could care for her. After her mother died, Rayne learned Veronica had married the wrong man, moved from Orlando to Ridley seeking a simpler life, and divorced. Several years later, she'd landed her current job as property manager at the newly-built Fairmont to scratch out a living, while she took one class each semester to hopefully finish her business degree. Ordering a second round and some appetizers, their mood became light enough that they even shared a laugh about the troupe of midget wrestlers Rayne had once written about. To gain added insight for his piece, he explained that he'd accepted the champion wrestler's challenge to a spectator-filled match. When he described how the midget had pinned him in under ten seconds, Veronica laughed so hard tears rolled down her face.

“Hey—you never told me about your name,” she said after Rayne paid their tab and had walked her to her car.

“I thought I’d get away with skipping that story,” he said, shaking his head.

She opened her driver’s side door, placed her purse atop the seat, then turned around to face him. The sun was low in the sky and cast a healthy glow on her slightly upturned face. Rayne was close enough to her to see her dilated pupils—they had seemed to expand the moment she’d turned to face him, their bodies half an arm’s length apart.

“My mom was eight-and-a-half months pregnant with me when she and her best friend took a road trip to Georgia,” he explained. “They took her friend’s old Volkswagen bus. Right after the bus broke down on the side of the road, and before they could flag down help, my mom’s water broke.” Veronica made a scared face. “Tell me about it,” he continued. “Her friend was a nursing school dropout, but I guess she’d remembered enough to walk my mom through it. Just as she started delivering me, a storm passed over them. How my mom tells the story, the rain pounded so hard on the roof, she didn’t hear my cries after I came out. She made her friend hold me upside down and spank me just to make sure I was alive.”

Laughing, Veronica took a step toward him and swatted his arm good-naturedly. “That’s a great story! You should be proud to tell it.”

He shrugged. “I hated my name growing up. The kids would tease me about it all the time.”

She waved her hand. “In school I got teased because of my bubble butt. Kids would come up to me and say, ‘*bu-bu-butt*’ this and ‘*bu-bu-butt*’ that. I guess it happens to everyone, like a rite of passage.”

Her shoulders relaxed even more, and a genuine smile brightened her face that up until then had seemed taut with the stress of the day. She brushed aside a curly lock of hair that had come undone from one of the bobbies, then tilted her head to expose her bare neck. He could place her perfume now. Jasmine and strawberries. Her lips parted and she bit the lower one, the one Rayne studied as he took an instinctive step closer to her now. And then that almost atmospheric electricity that often precedes a first kiss rose between them, and just like that they brought their mouths together, Veronica falling a half step into his broad chest and him catching her by the hips. He brought one hand to beneath her chin, tilting it upward so that her opening lips moved more firmly onto his mouth. With Mariah Carey's sultry voice floating to them from the bar's outdoor seating area, and the western sky announcing the coming dusk, they kissed that way until they each opened their eyes and their mouths parted, a bit breathless, unsure of how long they'd been standing there in the parking lot with people walking by, someone in the next lane over whistling at them.

"Wow," she said, blushing. "As soon as I saw you walk into the office earlier, I imagined kissing you. Don't think any different of me for admitting that."

Rayne expelled an excited breath. "As long as you don't think any different of me thinking the same thing."

They both laughed. "I had fun," she said, seeming then to remember why they'd met here in the first place. "Let me know how things work out with the story. You have my number..."

"I will," he said, meaning it. "And thank you for the info about the girl. Now that I'm sure there's something more to the story, I'm going to call my editor as soon as I leave and ask for a delay."

“Well, I hope you get it,” she said, her face turning solemn. She climbed into the driver’s seat, said goodbye, then shut her door. Rayne watched her back out of her parking space then turn toward the lot exit.

When she pulled out into traffic and sped away, he dialed Ingrid’s number. “I found a connection to the two murders,” he said, explaining the connection to the college girl. “Any way we can delay the story until next week? My instincts say that another outlet might get the whole scoop and put it out first if we publish too soon.”

There was a short pause from the other end of the line, then Ingrid’s practical voice came back with the answer Rayne suspected he would hear. “No chance. This edition is thin enough after the mayor story fell through. I was banking on his mistress granting us that interview. Just write up what you have. We’ll just have to risk someone else running with what we put out.”

Rayne persisted, but Ingrid’s answer was still a hard ‘no.’ Hanging up, he jumped into his car and started the engine. His blood was up. That familiar adrenaline he felt when a hot lead began to pan out pumped through his veins. Ingrid trusted him to deliver with whatever information he already had, and he would do his best to deliver. This was the kind of story he lived for, after all, and he didn’t want to let it lie in wait while one of the more prominent publications seized it first. Mystery, intrigue, and controversy—it was all that made up the *Roaster*. But Rayne had the sense that as good as the story would be without any added depth, it could be even better.

Potentially explosive. As he guided the Altima toward Deidra’s place, the humid September wind blowing through his open window, he decided that if Ingrid wouldn’t grant him a delay, he would make sure this story ended up the best he’d ever written, regardless.