

FIRST 7 CHAPTERS FREE

IT'S A CURSE  
TO REMEMBER



# STORM

GURPREET KAUR SIDHU

BOOK ONE



# STORM

GURPREET KAUR SIDHU

SAMPLE

## STORM

Gurpreet Kaur Sidhu

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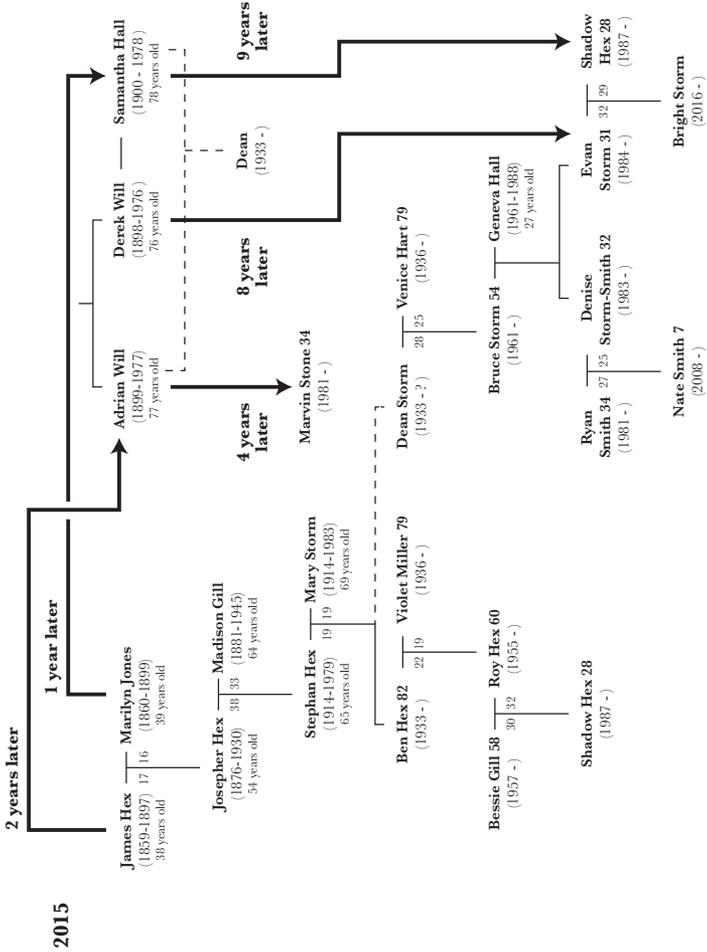
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# FAMILY TREE



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## CHAPTER 1

**T** heir fairytale all started with one look. Derek Will fell in love with Samantha Moore. Everyone envied their love story. He was the perfect gentleman and she was the beauty with class.

Six months after dating, Derek proposed on one knee with a 5.36-carat yellow cushion cut micropavé halo diamond. It was stunning to the eyes and left Samantha in awe. But that was far from important.

After the honeymoon phase ended, things started to settle in—and that's when Samantha realized who Derek really was.

The night took a sickening twist in the home of Derek and Samantha Will.

Derek came home, aggravated about something unclear to Samantha. Derek had changed slowly after marriage. There were no more late-night conversations or handholding. Derek expected Samantha to clean, cook, and keep the house well-maintained without any kind of help. It was unusual to find a housewife who lived in Pool View *not* to have a maid. With the kind of money Derek brought home, there was no question as to why they couldn't afford a maid, a butler, *and* a gardener. Derek's intentions were to keep Samantha locked in the house

as long as he could, and it was exactly how things panned out. He went to work and was successful at his job, while Samantha stayed at home and made sure the house was tidy and in order before Derek came home. But today, it wasn't the diurnal routine Samantha was prepared for.

Samantha had been throwing up all morning, so as like any other human being, she rested. Samantha slept all through the afternoon, only waking half an hour before Derek's arrival. She started on dinner, hoping Derek wouldn't arrive earlier than usual, but it seemed that the universe was not on her side.

Derek arrived home, pissed about something—it had to be something work related, she figured, but it wasn't Samantha's place to ask. According to Derek, it was none of her business.

Derek walked into the kitchen only to find dinner wasn't set on the kitchen table like it had been every day for the past five years. He glared at Samantha, assuming she had been out in the city having a good time, or having an affair. Even if she attempted to explain herself, he wouldn't believe her. Instead he'd believe whatever he made up in his mind because that was what *he* believed to be true.

The silence frightened Samantha. She had no idea what to expect.

Derek took the pot of boiling pasta and watched the water drain in the sink, then threw the pasta all over the kitchen floor. Samantha backed away slowly, not wanting him anywhere near her. The farther she was, the better. But where could she possibly go? She watched his every move. Her heartbeat rang in her ears.

He stood still for a moment, looking around. Samantha eyed the knife that lay on the counter, which she had been using to cut the lettuce. She sensed Derek knew what she was thinking. His eyes followed hers, but once again Samantha quickly became his center of attention. He inched forward,

looking at her. She saw the anger, rage, and frustration in his eyes and knew in her gut he was going to take it out on her. But it was just a matter of how.

“I thought I made it clear. Dinner should have been on the table by the time I walked in through that door,” he growled. His voice rose. “You take me as an idiot, don’t you?”

Samantha shook her head. “No,” she quickly answered.

“I work my ass off every single day to make a life for us,” he continued. “All I ask from you is to clean this house, and put food on the damn table! But you can’t even manage to do that, can you?!”

The corner of his mouth lifted as he unbuckled his belt and admired its thickness.

“Oh god,” she whispered under her breath.

Her eyes filled with fear as Derek took a step in her direction. Samantha moved but not quickly enough. She knew all of it would be over sooner if she just took the beating. If she tried to escape, it would only anger him more. Derek came at her and whipped her across the back and then across her chest.

His wife’s crying pleas didn’t stop Derek. He continued to slash her with his belt until he felt satisfied, but the beating didn’t end there either. He gripped his hands tight around her neck until her face turned pale, then shoved her to the ground. A mischievous grin crept across his face as he stared at Samantha struggling. She lay there coughing, uttering the words “I’m sorry.” But Derek didn’t care if she was sorry or if she was sick. He was going to make her miserable until she bled.

Derek continued to whip Samantha across her back, only to turn her over and continue the lashing across her chest and stomach. Her wails became louder.

“Derek!” she cried out. “Please!”

He grabbed her by the hair and dragged her across the kitchen, into the living room where he continued to severely

lash Samantha on the face. She covered her head in agony.

“Derek! Please stop. I-I-I’m sorry, I’m sorry!”

He forced her hands away from her face, then slapped her once, twice then a third time before he brought the brutal beating to an end. He stood baring over her as she lay on the floor.

Samantha’s eyes, red, began to swell. By the end of the night, they would be swollen shut. Her lips were cracked. Her teeth were covered in blood. Her back and chest ached. She could see the blood on the white carpet, through her blurry vision. Her mind slowly began to shut down.

Derek turned her face over with his foot so he could see the pain in her eyes. He looked at her and shook his head in disgust.

His voice was calmer now. “None of this would’ve happened if you made dinner. When will you learn?” He scoffed. “I’m tired, so don’t waste your time in the kitchen...but I do want this mess cleaned up before you go to bed,” he said, fanning his index finger over the blood on the carpet. “This all better be spotless by the time I wake up tomorrow morning, do you understand?”

Samantha gave no response. She merely couldn’t. It hurt to move her lips, and she had no energy to speak.

“I didn’t hear you. What did you say?” he said, expecting a response he knew he wasn’t going to get, but he was going to force it out of her anyway. “I can’t hear you, Samantha. It’s not that hard to say yes.”

Samantha used all her strength to nod, agreeing to do what he asked her.

“I need to *hear* you say it. Say the word, Samantha. I know you can do it. I need a verbal agreement.” He crouched near her.

She could hear Derek breathing over her. Again, with all the

strength she had left in her, through her swollen and bleeding lips, between sobs, Samantha uttered the word “Yes.”

Satisfied, Derek went upstairs, leaving Samantha on the living room floor.

There was really nothing she could do. She had no money. She didn't have a way of making her own living. Derek, the clever man he was, gave her the option of leaving. But where would she go? To her family? She was too ashamed to ask them to take her in. They warned her for marrying Derek in the first place. Did she listen? No. She dropped out of college and gave up everything to be with this man and...now he'd taken her life. It came as a shock to Samantha that after all this, he still continued to let her breathe. Why not end her life instead?

And then...

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## CHAPTER 2

**E**van Storm woke up panting and sweaty. He looked around and realized where he was. He was in his home in Lake View. He was sitting up in his bed, his hair and back drenched in sweat. He reached for the hand towel he'd set on the nightstand the night before.

He glanced over at his alarm clock. It was 3:30 in the morning. This memory of his past life had been haunting him for months and every night he woke up at the same time, terrorized. He wiped his face, trying to remember everything he could. Evan had questions that no one could answer. Why was he remembering his past? What was the meaning behind all of this? Why was this happening to him? And why all of the sudden?

Evan crawled out of bed, steadily walking to the bathroom. He flipped the switch as he stepped onto the warm tiles. Even though it didn't snow in Lake View, winters had become more cold in the recent years, but bearable. Thankfully, Evan had renovated the floors of the house, having heated floors installed. "The beauty of technology makes life a lot simpler," he said to the installer. He stood with his hands resting on both sides of the sink, gazing into the mirror before him. He looked

a lot like Derek Will. His blue eyes twinkled as he raised his chin upward. Evan traced his finger across his jawline, feeling the growing fuzz.

He didn't know much about himself in his previous life. Whether or not he had children, he wasn't sure. There were a lot of things that were unclear. However, he was aware of how cruel Derek was to Samantha. It made Evan's body cringe as the image of Samantha lying on the floor, bloody, crept up on him.

He turned the faucet, letting the cold water run for a moment, wondering how inhuman a person could be. He took another look at himself before splashing his face with the water. As Evan raised his head, he looked into the mirror and behind him stood Derek, with a grim face and a smile that made the tiny hairs on his back stand up. Evan felt his soul slip away from his body for a moment before jumping back in. Time stood still. The only thing that Evan could hear was his loud thumping heartbeat.

"He's not real," he repeated to himself, "he's *not* real. *You're...not...real!*" Evan grasped the sink with both hands and shut his eyes. His body shivered with terror. Evan knew this was imaginary, but seeing Derek made him feel like death was waiting to take him. He let out a grunt in agony. He felt his soul was being grasped by Derek's presence. He took a deep breath and counted to three. When he opened his eyes, Derek was gone. "It's just your mind playing tricks," he told himself after gaining composure.

Very rarely Evan would see Derek after he'd wake up from the night terrors. The first time he'd seen Derek was during the first week the nightmares began. Evan had punched the bathroom mirror out of horror and shock. Now, he was still trying to figure out why Derek would appear out of the blue. What role did Derek play in his life with the current situation

he was dealing with? Evan knew Derek's appearances served some type of purpose but he couldn't pin the exact reason just yet.

He wiped his face with the towel and hung it behind him next to the shower.

On his way out, Evan switched off the light, and slowly got under the covers. The bed sheet was a little damp from his sweat, but he'd gotten used to it.

Evan lay in the dark as the moon illuminated his room, making the painting on the wall visible. Evan studied the artwork, remembering how he had purchased it. It brought some sense of peace when he couldn't fall back asleep.

The painting, called *The Twister*, was a mixture of bold colors swirled together. It was created by a local artist in Pool View—it was the first painting that caught Evan's eye when he stepped into the art gallery, on the day of its grand opening a year ago. It was the same day he met Harmony. He thought that there was certainly no one as beautiful as she was. After standing and stalling for fifteen minutes, he finally worked up the courage to ask Harmony out on a date.

It had been two months since Harmony broke up with Evan. All of her belongings had been moved out and the painting was the only reminder of Harmony that was left in the house, along with the memories they created together.

When his mind wandered back to Samantha, Evan mentally replayed what he remembered from his dream. This helped him recall the memory more vividly in the morning so he could write it down in the journal he kept.

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At the crack of dawn, Evan went downstairs and made himself a hot cup of espresso. It was the right way to start off the day. It was a peaceful sunny Saturday. He went about

pouring in a small amount of milk and sugar, stirring it around with a spoon, and tossing the spoon into the sink afterward.

Evan sat at the kitchen table in his pajamas with his journal and pen sitting in front of him—replaying the entire dream in his mind.

He picked up his pen and began to write.

*December 12, 2015:*

*Woke up at 3:30 again, remembering Samantha throwing up. She lay there on the bathroom floor, with her hand over her stomach. When Derek came home, he beat her with his belt over and over because dinner wasn't ready. It all started from the kitchen and then the beating moved to the living room. He hit her in the face. She was crying and kept asking him to stop but he wouldn't. After I washed my face, I looked in the mirror and saw Derek standing behind me. It made me cringe. It's been two weeks since the last time I saw him.*

He put the pen down beside his journal, staring at the words that quickly dried on the paper. Evan ran his fingers through his short chestnut-brown hair, trying to make sense of the memory he was haunted by. There had to be a reason for Evan to remember his past life, but whether his past life had anything to do with him now, he was unsure. He took a sip of his coffee as his eyes lingered over the other entries.

The creak in the hallway disrupted Evan in his thoughts. He turned to the living room to see his grandma, Venice Storm, looking over the coffee table. She was a tiny old woman, with the softest voice that coincidentally matched her kind soul. She almost looked like Mrs. Claus, with her rosy cheeks, her sparkling blue eyes and her face almost wrinkle free. Her glowing skin truly disguised her age well. She was a year shy from turning eighty, but didn't look a day over sixty.

Evan gradually walked into the living room with his coffee

mug in one hand.

“Darling, what happened here last night?” Venice asked, looking over at Evan, even though she already knew.

She was a psychic.

Evan looked at the mess he had left on the coffee table last night before heading to bed. Since it was winter vacation, his teaching duties as a psychology teacher at Walsh Pierce High School were currently on hold. Evan, partially drunk, had unloaded a box of old family photos all over the table to put in to a family album. But instead, his productive evening ended up reminiscing about all the things that had gone awry.

“The goal was to get all these pictures in to an album,” Evan said, pushing the photos toward the middle of the table, making room for his mug.

“Yeah, I can see that, darling,” she said, scanning the table.

He picked up a photo with his parents and his sister, Denise, at the beach. Evan was four years old and vividly remembered chasing Denise around with a dead crab. It was the last photo taken before his parents’ death.

“Unfortunately that didn’t happen,” he said, setting the picture back on the coffee table with the rest.

“Put these pictures back in the box,” Venice ordered. “I don’t want you spilling coffee all over them. I’m not even sure if I have the negatives for these pictures.”

“I’m sure Dad put them somewhere.” Evan paused, wondering what Venice was doing here on a Saturday morning. “Aren’t you supposed to be at work?”

“I had thirty minutes to spare, so I thought, why don’t I go visit my little darling and see what he’s been up to lately?”

Venice worked as a therapist in her private clinic located in the central business district, where she used her psychic abilities to her advantage. She hid the fact that she was able to predict what was going to happen in the future from her

patients for many reasons.

Many years ago, when she tried to prevent her husband's death, Grandpa Dean, she learned what the consequences were for trying to change his fate. The universe was not too pleased with Venice trying to prevent what was meant to happen. The only way Venice *could* use her psychic abilities was to answer questions, generally yes and no questions. It kept her out of trouble from the universe, since there was a *very* thin line that was easy to cross.

Venice's soft bouncy gray hair brushed against his cheek as she planted a kiss on his forehead. She headed into the kitchen with her purse hanging off of one shoulder.

"There's coffee if you want some," Evan said, carefully stacking the photos in a pile and putting them back in the box. "It was nice of you to drop by," he said as he put the lid back. "Unannounced," he added.

Ignoring his last comment, she replied, "I think I'll just have orange juice."

Venice retrieved the juice from the refrigerator. She poured herself a full glass before putting the carton back in the refrigerator. Venice sat at the kitchen table with her fingers wrapped around her glass. She noticed the ungraded papers in his office.

"I know what you're going to say," he interrupted, pulling out the chair in front of her and taking a seat.

"I wasn't going to say anything," she said as her eyes flicked away. "You're still in your pajamas," Venice pointed out. "What's going on, darling?"

Evan looked genuinely confused. "What are you talking about?"

It was a Saturday and being in pajamas was comfy.

"You're not the kind of person who leaves things unfinished," she said, subtly eyeing the stack of papers. "You haven't been

the same ever since you started remembering your past life, and I know this breakup wasn't easy either."

Evan wasn't much the feelings kind of guy. He wasn't comfortable talking about a situation unless he felt the *need* to. With Venice being a professional therapist, Evan never felt comfortable letting her in, but somehow she always managed to lure Evan in and just as he started to express his thoughts, coincidentally she had to be "somewhere" or was "going to be late for a session with a patient." It was almost as if she wanted him to explore his feelings on his own, and the only way to achieve that goal was by her poking her way in.

He analyzed his blue mug all around, finding it to be flawless. "So much has happened in the last couple of months. I'm trying to figure out where to go from here."

She nodded. "I know it's hard when people walk out of your life. I understand that, but you can't keep moping around here and feeling sorry for yourself."

"I'm not doing that," he quickly answered. His eyes met hers for a moment before they traveled back to his mug. "I've been doing some productive research," he added.

"Oh darlin', are you still trying to figure out what your past life memories mean?"

"The Sikhs believe that you're reincarnated over and over because of your previous life's wrongdoings. Reincarnation ends when you live a rightful life, and that's when you get to become one with God."

"Will you stop with that nonsense? You're not even a Sikh!"

Evan nodded. "True. But it's one reasonable explanation. There are some people out there who remember their past life but it's just something they remember. Unlike them, I'm taunted by these memories, over and over. It's not normal, Grandma. There's a meaning behind it. There has to be."

"You're being ridiculous. You're wasting your time with this,

Evan. I know you don't like to hear it but I have to be honest here."

"Let me ask you this then: Why is it that when I wake up, I feel like I've done something wrong? I feel guilty for something I did in another lifetime, another place. That feeling lingers throughout the day." He looked at her sternly. "Something's telling me that there's a bigger picture here. I'm not gonna stop until I figure it out."

Venice sighed, not knowing what else she could say or do that would convince Evan to give up chasing a memory that meant nothing. To Venice, Evan was chasing a ghost. She wasn't sure how long it would be before Evan realized he was wasting his time and put it all behind him.

As long as he was on winter vacation, he had every minute to spend analyzing, researching about this phenomenon that he couldn't explain.

"Have you met your next-door neighbor yet? It's been a while since they moved in, haven't they?" Venice asked, changing the touchy subject.

"No," he said, pausing for a moment, wondering how long it had been since the house was sold. "I've seen their car parked out in front when I go for a run, but that's about it."

"Is dinner at Denise's this time?" she asked, taking another sip.

"Yeah. She's going to the hospital afterward to see Ryan. So I'll be babysitting Nate."

There was dead silence in the room. Venice never discussed what happened the night Ryan was sent to the hospital. In the past, when Evan or Denise asked whether or not Ryan would make it through, or why Venice had never warned Denise, she would change the subject. Neither of them knew whether or not Venice hiding Ryan's accident was a good or bad thing.

"How is she?" she said, taking a deep breath.

Evan broke eye contact. “Not much has changed, Grandma.”

“She’s not still upset with me, is she? I want to give her some space but she needs to understand I was doing the right thing. I’m always trying to protect this family and...”

“I know, Grandma, but that’s not how Denise sees it. It’s going to take her some time to come around. Give it some time.”

Venice let out an anxious sigh.

“She’s been short with me ever since.”

“I know,” he said softly.

It pained Venice to know that Denise indirectly blamed her for Ryan’s accident.

He retrieved Venice’s glass once she was finished and placed it in the sink. He looked out the kitchen window and saw the unfinished garden that he had planned to finish during the break. Mud was all around the garden and holes all around the fence. It seemed as if a gopher had made its way around the premise, trying to make itself at home.

Every morning while drinking coffee, he stood in front of the kitchen in his pajamas looking out the window and thinking about getting to work—perhaps doing some landscaping, changing the atmosphere of the garden his mother once planted. He had a lot in mind with what he wanted to do with the garden. Evan envisioned a long pathway that separated a Japanese garden on the left-hand side with a koi fishpond. He’d planned on building a bridge that would cross over the pond. He wanted to work in a waterfall, loud enough to drown away surrounding noise. On the opposite side of the pathway there would be grass where Nate could play soccer, and someday he would kick the ball around with his own children. There would be simplicity and tranquility once he stepped into his backyard, something that he longed for. At the end of the pathway, he pictured a gazebo where he could sit back and

relax and let the worries of the day slip away. He imagined Harmony sitting beside him, his arm wrapped around her. They were supposed to grow old together with the changing world, but the one thing that wouldn't change would be the two of them sitting together and simply enjoying each other's company.

"This is another one of your projects that are yet to be completed, I see."

Evan chuckled.

"Harmony and I were supposed to finish the garden, but things don't always pan out the way you'd hope," he said with a forced smile. Life had a funny way of proving how plans were ultimately a human's way of trying to control life. "I bought a gardening magazine from the nursery downtown. I'll finish it."

Venice raised an eyebrow, not completely sure if Evan had this gardening project under control, or his life under control for that matter. The unfinished family album said so otherwise.

"I hope so," she said, planting a kiss on Evan's forehead. "Take care of yourself, sweetie," she said before making her way to the front door.

Evan stood in the doorway and watched as Venice got behind the wheel. Moments later he heard the engine come to life.

Before she pulled out of the driveway, Venice looked back at Evan and waved goodbye. All she managed to think about was what was going to happen in the next week. As always, she was guilty for keeping this secret to herself for all these years but never found the right time to come out and tell Denise and Evan something that they should've known years ago. She felt burdened with this secret. Venice would go over the scene of how she would tell them the truth, but the fear kept her from coming to terms with what she hid from them. Her

grandchildren may hate her for the rest of their lives.

The truth was going to come out soon, but how prepared was she?

And like before, she was stuck right in the middle.

But as always, the universe managed to throw a curveball at her.

## CHAPTER 3

Venice sat in her office with her worn out diary resting on her lap. Some pages were loose and the writing from the beginning of the diary was now faded. She had her diary ever since she made her first prediction. Everything that she had predicted was noted and every prediction that occurred was written to the exact detail from memory—the time, date, place, people who were involved.

Venice's mind was fixated on Evan and Denise. The future was heartbreaking. It made Venice lose all interest in helping her own patients. She was furious, sad, and angry at what was going to happen. There was nothing that she could do to stop any of it from happening either. Even if she did take action, consequences would soon follow. This gift at times seemed like a curse.

Venice closed her diary and shut her eyes. She needed to take a mental break before her next patient.

Just as she started to drift off, the unexpected knock on the door startled her.

“Venice, there's someone here to see you,” said Candice Bridge, Venice's secretary. Candice quietly slipped into the room, closing the door behind her.

Candice was a tall brunette, who liked to dress in floral and silhouettes regardless of what the weather was like. She loved wearing bright lipsticks and heavy mascara.

“Who is it?”

“He wouldn’t say, but he claims he knows you very well.”

“He refused to give you his name?”

“I told him you wouldn’t see him unless he had an appointment.”

“And?”

“He sent me in here,” she said, flustered.

Venice thought about it for a moment. The light bulb went off in her mind. It wasn’t often that she had unexpected visitors but she knew exactly who it was.

“Okay, send him in.”

The old woman leaned over and pulled open the bottom drawer of the rectangular table next to the chair where she placed her diary.

Even though she knew who he was, it took her back a bit when Bruce walked into her room. She could see Bruce was aging well. His hair had started to gray. He was a lot thinner than the last time she saw him. Candice closed the door behind him.

“I wasn’t expecting to see you so soon.”

“Not all your predictions are on point, from what I recall,” Bruce said. He made himself comfortable on the sofa across from Venice, with the coffee table separating them. He unbuttoned his blazer, crossing one leg over the other. “So how’ve you been? What’s new around here?”

“Bruce, it’s really nice seeing you, but you’re here for one of two things. Which one is it?”

“I can’t come and see how you’re doing once in a while? Do I need a reason to be here?” He chuckled.

Venice sighed, knowing with Bruce there was always a

reason. “What do you want?”

Bruce kept steady eye contact with her before breaking the tension. “I think it’s time to tell them the truth. They deserve to know what happened, what *really* happened that day, and I think you would want the same for them.”

“I agree, but I don’t think *you’re* ready. I see you once in a blue moon. You don’t even make appointments anymore, which is a risk on your end,” she said, aggravated. “You can’t show up whenever you please then disappear until who knows when. They lost their mother and then their father. I can’t have you breaking their hearts again.”

“I didn’t come here to get your permission.”

“I know you didn’t come here to get my permission. You’re a grown man. You just want someone to tell you *not* to go forward with it. See, you’re still a little skeptical about telling them the truth because then it’s out there in the open. What if they don’t want you in their life? I bet that thought ran through your mind a hundred times, didn’t it?”

Venice was boiling with anger inside. She knew this moment was a long time coming but still, she felt the emotions, which were out of her hands. She was only human for heaven’s sake.

“If you really wanted to tell them, you would have told them a long time ago, regardless of what was going on in your life at the time.”

“You know exactly why I chose to do what I did!” Bruce shouted.

While Candice was supposed to be busy answering phone calls, making appointments for Venice, instead, she found herself listening to Venice and Bruce’s conversation through the wall. Candice had never seen or heard of Bruce the entire time she’d been working for Venice, which was almost three years now. But she knew one thing: there was a long history between the two of them. And who was “them” they kept

referring to? She continued to listen as she pretended to appear busy.

“I left because I couldn’t handle it,” Bruce said, raising his voice. His veins bulged from underneath his skin as he defended himself. “My life was a wreck. Do I have to remind you what happened? I couldn’t tell them because I couldn’t handle the thought of them rejecting me or looking at me just like the way they looked at me when their mother died. But I’m at a place in my life where I’m ready.”

“You have no idea what’s going on in their lives right now,” she objected.

“If you let me be a part of their lives, maybe I would know something. You’re the one who told me to leave, remember? And that’s what I did. Look where it got me.”

“I never said not to come back! You made that call. I waited for you to show up. I waited for a phone call, but you never called.” Venice held back the tears that had crept up on her as her voice rose. “I did what I had to do. So *don’t* pin this on me. I wasn’t the one who walked out on their family. You had every breathing second to come back home...but you didn’t. It wasn’t easy on me either, Bruce.”

“You think *I* had it easy? For the past twenty-seven years, I wasn’t living the life. I wasn’t taking it easy if that’s what you think happened. You knew Geneva was having an affair and you kept that from me. Do you have any idea how I felt when I found out you *knew* about the affair the entire time? It made me question my entire childhood. It made me wonder what else you hid from me.”

“I didn’t have a choice,” Venice hissed.

“I was the reason why Geneva was unhappy. *I’m* the reason why she killed herself. I couldn’t look at Denise and Evan because *I* was the reason why they lost their mother.” His lips quivered. The day Bruce discovered Geneva’s limp body came

rushing back. Bruce took a long deep breath and composed himself before continuing. “Evan and Denise need to know their mother wasn’t killed in a car accident. They deserve to know what really happened. I can’t have them questioning their childhood like I did. They need to know the truth, Mom, and I’m going to be the one to tell them.”

Venice sat in her chair, going back and forth in her mind about what the right thing was to do. She knew Evan and Denise deserved to know the truth about what happened that day. They needed to know why she told them the horrible lie about their father having a heart attack while driving, leading to a fatal car crash that took his life and their mother’s. All the lies she told Evan and Denise were catching up to her now. She knew one day the lies would haunt her. However, her predictions were off. Venice predicted she would be dead by the time Bruce came around to telling Evan and Denise the truth. The ambiguity in her predictions made her question herself.

“Are you working right now?” she asked, switching the subject.

Bruce looked a little confused. “What’s that got to do with anything we’re talking about?”

“I’m asking you a simple question. Either answer it or see yourself out.”

Bruce stared at her for a second before responding. She was firmer since the last time he’d seen her. “I’m a contract worker. People hire me to fix things for them.”

Judging by Bruce’s fancy sleek gray suit, Venice sensed Bruce wasn’t telling her the entire truth.

She pursed her lips. “How long have you been a contract worker?”

“Ever since I left. Why does this matter?”

Venice looked down at her watch.

“Bruce, we’re going to have to discuss this another time. I’m expecting a patient in just a little bit and I don’t like to keep any of my patients waiting.”

“What’s there to discuss?” Bruce said. He rose from the couch and fixed his cufflinks. “I said what I needed to say. I wasn’t asking you for your blessing.”

Venice remained seated in her chair. She wasn’t at all pleased with Bruce or the way he was going to handle this delicate situation. Ever since Bruce learned the truth about Geneva, there had been friction between the two of them. Although Venice knew Bruce resented her for it, which she accepted, she didn’t want the same outcome for Denise and Evan. Bruce was too stubborn to understand that timing did in fact play a huge role in coming clean.

When the time was right, Bruce wasn’t ready. Now that Bruce was ready, Denise and Evan were not prepared, given everything that was going on in their lives.

“Like I said, Evan and Denise have the right to know what happened, but not right now,” she said, slipping back on her glasses.

“Who are you protecting anyway?” Bruce asked, raising his voice once again. “I don’t think it’s about Evan and Denise anymore. You’re just trying to protect yourself.”

Venice was taken aback by his comment. “I’ve been protecting this whole family from the moment you were born,” she said calmly. She looked deep into Bruce’s eyes and saw the little boy he once was, following her around the house as soon as she got home from work. She remembered the tears Bruce had in his eyes when he held Denise for the first time. Now, Venice didn’t recognize who was standing before her. “Close the door on your way out and never raise your voice with me again.”

Bruce stood still for a good moment before walking out of the room.

Once the door closed behind him, Venice began to weep. She felt the world turning against her. She knew Evan and Denise would be furious with her for keeping this secret from them for so long. The thought of losing Evan and Denise made her heart ache. Every choice she made was to protect her family, and some of the choices she made in the past were coming to haunt her now. She knew if she had told Bruce that Geneva was having an affair, in time Bruce would've killed himself. On some level, she knew she was being selfish for keeping the secret from him, but it came down to losing either Geneva or Bruce. Not all of Venice's predictions were correct, but she didn't want to risk losing her only son. So, Venice did what any mother would've done in her position given the circumstances.

Venice grabbed a tissue from the coffee table and wiped the tears away at the sound of the knock on the door.

"Come in," she said, taking a deep breath and wiping her nose.

Candice peered in, not expecting to see Venice in a fragile state.

"Hey," Candice said with concern. "Is everything okay?" She hadn't heard the entire conversation. A missing sentence here and there threw her off entirely but something told her the meeting between the two of them did not end on a good note.

She met her eyes. "Yeah...everything's fine," Venice said, clenching the tissue in her hand.

"Okay," Candice replied with a smile. "Mrs. Kingston called and rescheduled for next week Tuesday."

Venice nodded. "Thank you for letting me know."

Candice smiled as she closed the door.

The old woman opened the bottom drawer, pulled out the journal, and began to write.

## CHAPTER 4

**E**van stood in front of the house patiently on Kentwood Drive in Dusk View, a city half an hour away from Lake View passing through the central business district and MidView. He held a chocolate cake topped off with chocolate-covered strawberries bought from Bernie's, his favorite bakery. He peered into the window looking for Denise. He could see her pacing back and forth in the kitchen. She was wearing a pink apron that hung off her neck. Denise never really bothered tying her apron around her waist. "I'm going to take it off anyway," Evan remembered Denise saying on multiple occasions.

Evan pushed the doorbell button once again, hoping someone would come to his rescue. It was freezing. Dusk View was closer to the ocean than Lake View. The temperatures dropped lower and a lot faster than they did in Lake View but like Lake View, it never snowed. The homes were bigger and newer with very limited space in the front and backyard compared to the homes in Lake View. When he caught a glimpse of Denise as she turned away from the oven, he motioned her to come open the door for him.

Denise hurried over to the door. Her apron swung behind

her from side to side like Batman coming to the rescue. The dramatic effect of gravity came to a halt as she stood still, unlocking the door.

“Oh, thank god you brought dessert,” Denise said, noticing the brown box in Evan’s hands with *Bernie’s* stamped across it.

Denise Storm-Smith held the door as Evan entered the house. It was nice and warm.

“I was going to bring ice cream but then I remembered how much Nate hates ice cream in the winter,” Evan said, walking into the kitchen with Denise only a few feet behind him. “He’s a weird kid. I loved ice cream in the winter when I was younger. You remember that? Getting brain freezes and then Grandma giving us that look that said it all.”

“Tell me about it. I could hear her *I told you so’s* in my head when she gave us that look. I think it rubbed off on me. I do that with Nate sometimes,” she chuckled.

“Sometimes? You’ve given me that look more than Grandma ever has.”

Denise rolled her eyes and scoffed. “Stop exaggerating.”

“You know I’m right.”

“You should call her sometime this week. She’s worried about you.”

Denise turned back with a blank stare. This was the third time he’d mentioned this to her and even though she knew Evan was right, she didn’t like hearing it.

Evan set the cake in the refrigerator and looked around the kitchen island. Denise had cooked up a storm today.

“Were you on some crazy diet this past week?” Evan asked, eyeing everything in front of him.

There was cheese lasagna in the oven, garlic bread, Caesar salad, green beans, and the last dish he assumed was a bowl of potato salad. Denise never cooked like this; only during the holidays and special occasions.

She looked over her shoulder as she opened the oven door to check on the lasagna. “What?”

“Holy, that smells good,” Evan said. He closed his eyes and sniffed the air as the aroma filled the kitchen. “Why did you make so much food?”

Denise sighed. “I wasn’t sure if salad and lasagna was going to be enough, and plus, leftovers are always good. You want some wine?” She turned to the wine cooler and pulled out a bottle.

“Sure, why not. Where’s Nate, by the way? He’s usually in the kitchen trying to help.”

Denise frowned as she set the wine glasses on the counter and began to pour. “He’s out on the porch. When he woke up in the morning to feed Firefins...”

Her frown finished the end of her sentence.

“Oh, that’s horrible. Ryan bought that fish for him, didn’t he?”

“Yeah,” Denise said, pushing the cork back into the wine bottle. She handed Evan his wine glass and took a seat beside him.

“He came downstairs in the morning with tears in his eyes. His eyes were puffy, like super puffy...it was really heartbreaking. I remember him asking Ryan over and over again if he could get a pet. After all the begging, Nate finally got his fish.” Denise’s eyes traveled to the screen door where she could see Nate sitting on the porch, with his arms folded on his knees and head lowered. What really pained Denise was Ryan wasn’t there to console Nate. Lost in thought, she began to daydream. Her mind jumped from one scenario to another, each worse than the last.

Evan’s multiple elbow nudges didn’t help Denise out of her trance.

“Denise.”

“Huh?” Her pupils, dilated, slowly went back to normal when she met Evan’s eyes. She gradually took another sip as she came back to reality.

“You okay?”

“To be honest, I don’t know. Ever since the accident, it’s just been a nightmare. With running a company, raising Nate... sometimes I just feel like I can’t even breathe. I feel like my brain is going to explode.”

Evan put down his wine glass and wrapped his arm around Denise. “I’m sorry Denise. I really am.”

“I know,” she replied as she took a sip.

Ryan’s car accident had taken place in October, which put him in a coma for a month and a half. It had been a month since Ryan awoke, remembering everything but not recalling Denise ever being pregnant with Nate.

“Is he showing any improvements?”

“No,” Denise said, turning to Evan, “I mean, he’s walking and talking. He’s getting his physical therapy and the doctor said that he’ll be discharged from the hospital in the next few days. That’s really good news, but—”

“You haven’t told Nate huh?”

“No, I haven’t. I don’t know how,” she shrugged, not wanting to go into detail about how Ryan was handling it, which certainly didn’t help Denise.

Evan and Denise sat in silence. When the kitchen timer went off, Denise quickly scooted off her chair. She grabbed the oven mitt off the counter, as she made her way to the oven and pulled out the sizzling hot lasagna.

“Holy, that smells so damn good,” Evan said again, eyeing the tray as Denise brought it over to the counter.

The cheese bubbled while the oil rested on top.

“I just hope it tastes as good as it looks,” Denise mumbled, as she examined all sides of the lasagna dish. The confidence

started to kick in once Denise cut into the lasagna, seeing that it had been cooked thoroughly. “Can you go and get Nate for me please?”

“Yeah, sure thing,” Evan said, rising from his seat. He walked to the screen door, peering through quietly before stepping out onto the porch. Evan joined Nate Smith on the steps, who was layered with a gray coat and a red scarf around his neck. Evan looked at Nate, who didn’t bother to turn around.

“Hey, buddy,” Evan finally said. He waited for a response from Nate, but got nothing. Evan playfully nudged Nate, hoping to get his attention.

Slowly, Nate lifted his head from his knees, craning his neck sideways, meeting Evan’s eyes. “Hi, Uncle Evan,” he said in a somber voice.

Evan could see the sadness through his big brown eyes.

“How’s it going?” Evan asked, trying to make the conversation upbeat.

“Firefins died today.”

Evan never had the experience of talking to a child about death. What was the right thing to say? Nate was only seven years old. Evan was pretty sure the topic itself was too much for a seven-year-old to comprehend.

“I’m sorry buddy.” Evan paused for a moment, trying to think of something comforting to say that would put Nate in a better mood. “You can always get another fish...”

“I can’t replace Firefins,” Nate sighed. “It won’t be the same.”

Evan was surprised by the response Nate gave. He had no idea how well Nate comprehended death. Nate was much wiser at his age than Evan was when he was seven years old.

“That’s very true,” Evan agreed. “Hey, you lost your toof,” he added, noticing the gap between his front teeth.

Nate ran his finger across the gap. “Yeah,” he giggled.

“What’s so funny?”

Nate’s teeth gleamed as he roared with laughter remembering the funny incident.

“Last week when my tooth was really loose, I pulled it out right in front of my mom. She made a disgusting face, Uncle Evan. It was so funny! And she almost threw up.” Nate held his stomach as he laughed.

Evan remembered the pranks Ryan pulled in the early years of their marriage before Nate was born. In a lot of ways, Nate definitely took after his father.

“Are you hungry? Dinner’s ready.”

“Yeah, I kinda am,” Nate said, getting up from the porch.

Evan stood tall beside Nate. He followed his uncle back into the house, where Denise had already set the dinner table. She smiled at Evan, feeling a bit relieved after she witnessed the change in Nate’s mood.

They sat around the kitchen table, passing the garlic bread, taking one piece each, each dish going around the table once.

“So what have you been up to lately?” Denise asked Evan.

Her eyes flicked to her right. Nate had just put in a steaming hot piece of lasagna into his mouth. Within a split second, Nate spit it out onto his plate, waving his hand back and forth in front of his face and panting. He scrunched his face while his tongue stuck out like a puppy on a hot summer day.

“Oh sweetie. Here,” she said, picking up his glass and handing it to him. “Drink some soda. It’ll help cool off the burn. You gotta be careful, hun.”

She watched Nate as he took a couple of sips before putting his glass down on the table. On another note, she realized how long Nate’s hair had grown in the last couple of weeks, brown and curled at the ends. Just like Ryan’s. Even though Ryan wasn’t here with them, just looking at Nate made her feel Ryan’s presence.

Denise turned to Evan and asked, “Are you almost finished with the garden?”

Evan grinned in embarrassment. “No, not really,” he said, locking eyes with Denise, knowing what she’d say next.

She shook her head in disappointment. “You’re so consumed in this belief that these episodes you’re having mean something,” she said, biting into some lasagna before continuing. “You’re letting your life pass you by. I mean, what if you figure out—which shouldn’t take long—that these dreams or memories, whatever they are, really don’t mean anything? You’re going to look back and regret not taking that time doing something that mattered. Something more productive, like, I don’t know... *dating*.”

“You’re really not going to let this go, are you? And I’m not ready to date just yet, either.”

Denise put her fork down. “No, I’m not. I understand you want to know why you’re having these episodes, but I just think that they’re taking control of your life.”

“They have, Denise,” Evan said, wishing Denise wasn’t right. “You don’t know what it’s like to wake up feeling like you’re living a double life. It feels like my past is controlling me. There are times when I dread going to sleep. I don’t want to wake up in the middle of the night, screaming and drenched in sweat. My life is a nightmare, Denise. I want it to end and the only way that’s gonna happen is to figure out why I’m remembering these parts of my life.”

Denise looked at her brother with concern. She was starting to realize it was more serious than she thought.

“Okay,” she said, picking up her fork again. “Just don’t lose focus on the things that matter in your life now. Like your career and family.”

“Don’t worry, I’ve got it handled.”

She gave him that look—the one arched eyebrow, pursed

lips, and a glare.

“I know what I’m doing,” Evan reassured her.

“Okay,” she said, quietly collecting some green beans with her fork. “So, there’s this new girl who moved from Pool View. She’s one of the interior designers. Real pretty. I was thinking what a cute couple you two would make.”

“No, Denise. You’re not going to set me up. You do a horrible, *horrible* job setting people up.”

Denise gasped in shock. “What are you talking about?”

Evan looked over at Nate, who was quite enjoying the conversation between his mother and uncle. “Your mother,” he began, “she thinks she’s cupid.”

Nate giggled at Evan’s comment. “Cupids aren’t real.”

“Exactly,” Evan responded. He turned to Denise. “Nate knows what he’s talking about.”

Denise stabbed some bits of lettuce and a crouton with her fork and said, “But love exists and you need to go out there and find it, then get married, and if you’re not going to look,” she said as her voice started to rise, “then let me help you.” She gazed at Evan as she chewed, eyes widened in curiosity.

“I don’t disagree that love exists, but I don’t think I’m ready to give it my all. I did that with Harmony and look where it got me. One amazing year down the drain.”

“You’re being so cynical. Just because it didn’t work out with one person doesn’t mean the next one is going to be the same,” she said, raising her eyebrow as she continued to chew. “You always had a problem opening up with women—”

“Wait, wait, wait,” he said, holding up his hand in defense, “that’s not true.”

Denise exclaimed, “That’s *totally* true! After you go through a break-up, it’s like you never want to date again. You’re so scared of getting hurt again that you just push the idea of being in love and being happy aside all for a fifty percent

chance of getting your heart broken.”

Evan scoffed, not wanting to admit Denise was partially true. “I don’t want to bring someone in my life if I’m not ready, and I certainly don’t want *you* setting me up with anyone. I’ll find someone.”

“How?” Denise asked, expecting an on-the-spot answer. “You’re an introvert. You rarely ever go out.” She turned to Nate and noticed three-fourths of his plate empty. “Here you go, baby,” she said sweetly. She leaned over, picked up a piece of lasagna with a spatula, and slid it onto Nate’s plate.

Nate’s eyebrows furrowed and whined, “But I’m not hungry.”

“C’mon, you didn’t have a good breakfast today. That’s a very small piece, sweetie. You need to bulk up. Don’t you want to be big and strong when you get older?” she asked, meeting his eyes.

Nate looked down at his plate, not too happy. “Okay,” he said in a glum voice.

“Denise, he’s only seven. What’s he bulking up for?”

Denise turned to Evan, disregarding his comment. “Oh, don’t swerve your way around this. Where are you going to find someone, huh?”

Evan shrugged. “A dating website? The library?” He saw the horrified expression on Denise’s face and quickly said, “Those are *some* of the ways of meeting people. Plus, why are you so worried about me finding someone?”

Her eyes flicked to the garden. She used her knife and fork to cut a piece of the lasagna. “I don’t want you to be alone,” she said with a sigh. “Take Mr. Brar, for example. He and his wife loved each other more than anyone I know and after Mrs. Brar passed away, he said something to me that I’ll never forget.”

“What did he say?”

“He said a life partner makes life a hundred times better. I want the same for you. I mean everyone deserves someone, especially you.”

Denise knew the kind of guy her brother was. He was a gentleman with a soft, kind heart. He was the type of man who would open the car door, cook dinner, buy cute little presents, and ultimately make the woman feel like a princess. Denise knew her brother would make a great husband and father one day and she knew deep down, that’s what Evan wanted too.

Evan smiled and reached over, softly squeezing her hand. “Stop worrying. It’ll happen when it’s supposed to.” He sighed, knowing Denise’s concern was coming from a good-hearted place. “I envied Mr. and Mrs. Brar’s relationship, though. They were the neighborhood lovebirds.”

“It’s hard to be a cynic when you see a couple like that.”

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Later that evening, Denise drove down to Lake View Hospital where Ryan was admitted while Evan stayed home with Nate. The big plans Evan had for the two of them was to sit in front of the television, watch movies, and eat some of the delicious cake he’d bought from Bernie’s Bakery.

As Denise pulled into the parking lot, it started to feel a lot like home. Sometimes Denise would come and visit Ryan during lunch and after work before she picked up Nate from the recreation program she’d enrolled him in. Or she wouldn’t go at all. Those were the days where she would cry to herself after the day at the office was over. She tried her best to keep herself from falling apart but life got the best of her at times.

She got out of the car and felt the cold winter breeze against her face. Denise walked through the parking lot in her long beige coat, looking at the surrounding cars. There were families who were sitting in the hospital waiting room hoping

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for good news, or sitting by the bedside of their loved ones, hoping to take them home. For the longest time Denise felt alone in her situation. But as her visits became more frequent, she realized she wasn't the only one going through a rough time. Other people were walking in the same shoes as her. She shivered, feeling the warmth take over as she entered through the automatic doors. The lights were bright and sharp, causing Denise to squint.

As she waited for the elevator, Denise heard a woman sobbing. She looked down the hall and saw a middle-aged woman standing outside one of the rooms, wiping away the tears. Denise's heart sank. The woman looked helpless as she stood there, trying to pull herself together.

*Death.*

Denise was constantly reminded of death when she went to see Ryan. She didn't see this building as a place where people came to be cured. To Denise, this was a place where people came to die. Lives ended here. Her perception of hospitals was molded by the tragic accidents her mother and father had been in when she was just a child. And now, it was Ryan.

Denise stepped onto the elevator, feeling oddly nervous. The day of the accident came rushing back in bits and pieces. The arguments they had leading up to the accident were all too vivid. Everything flashed before her eyes, putting her back two months ago when she didn't think Ryan was going to make it out alive.

Exiting the elevator, she shook the thoughts away and took a deep breath. When she reached the doorway to his room, the sound of her heels caught Ryan's attention.

"Hey," he said, pointing the remote control in the TV's direction and pressing the green button. The screen went blank.

Ryan's deep-set hazel eyes gazed over at Denise. For the

past few days, Ryan started growing a scruff. He ran his hand through his hair and sat up straighter.

“Hey,” Denise replied softly, pulling the chair in the corner closer to his bedside. “How are you doing?”

They looked at each other knowing very well how Ryan was doing.

“I’m good. How about you?”

“I’m...” She thought for a moment, not knowing how to answer the question. “Doing good,” she finally replied. “I brought some more pictures for you.”

Denise unzipped her purse and pulled out a brown envelope containing a couple dozen photos of them in various locations and events. “These are the ones from when Nate was just born,” she said as she handed Ryan the envelope.

Although a little irritated, Ryan remained calm and opened the flap, pulling out the pictures Denise had gathered. He flipped through them, analyzing each one carefully, moving onto the next with the hope it would trigger a memory that would help him recall his son. And just like the day before and the day before that, nothing. He shook his head as he put the pictures back into the envelope, handing it back to Denise. Ryan knew Denise was trying to help but it felt like a smack in the face every time he looked through the photos Denise brought along, not being able to recall that specific memory.

She looked at Ryan with disappointment. Not that it was his fault, but because just like every day, she’d hoped today was the day Ryan remembered just a tiny piece of his life that he’d forgotten after the accident.

Denise put the envelope back into her purse, and set it aside. “It’s okay, babe,” she said, reaching for his hand. She held on tight. “We can try again tomorrow. The doctor said it was going to take time. We just have to be patient.”

“Yeah...”

Denise gave his hand a squeeze. “What’s wrong? C’mon, talk to me.”

He ran his fingers through his hair, thinking about Nate.

“How the hell am I supposed to do this...?” he said, his words trailing off.

“You’re not in this alone.”

He turned to Denise, meeting her eyes. “I *am* alone in this,” he said, agitated. “I don’t remember anything about my own son. *My own son, Denise.* How am I supposed to act around him? How do I treat him? What kind of relationship do we have? I don’t feel like a father, so how am I supposed to *act* like a father to a child that I don’t even know?”

Denise’s heart sank. “I don’t know the answers to those questions, babe, but we’re going to get through this. We’ll get all the help we need. We’ll do whatever it takes to get your memory back. I promise.”

He sighed. “It feels like empty hope. What if I don’t regain my memory? Then what?”

Denise gripped tighter to Ryan’s hand with her own. She looked at him, sadness filling her eyes because she too feared life would never go back to normal. “The doctor said we should keep a positive attitude. We *are* going to get through this.” They had to.

She kissed the top of his hand, staring off into the distance, reminiscing the night of the accident. Denise remembered that night with Ryan vividly as if it happened yesterday. It was an odd windy and rainy October Saturday night. Nate was upstairs in his room while she and Ryan were downstairs, cleaning up in the kitchen.

“Do you want to watch some TV with me, like when we used to...maybe open a bottle of wine?” he had asked, putting the last dish in the dishwasher.

“No. I’ve got some work I need to finish that I didn’t get

around to back at the office.”

Denise wanted to be alone that night. She knew Ryan would want to talk about having another baby because that was something he had been bringing up lately. Denise was not in the mood to have that conversation with her husband tonight.

“You can do that later. We can watch Late Night with Jimmy Fallon,” he convinced. “You need to take some time out to relax.” He was leaning against the kitchen counter hoping for a “yes.”

Denise started to walk away, and that’s when everything spiraled out of control.

“So that’s it? This is what it’s come to?”

“Ryan, I really don’t have the time for this right now,” she said, looking over her shoulder. “I’ve got a big project I need to finish.”

“You never have time for anything these days. What’s *really* going on, Denise?”

Denise turned around with rage in her eyes. “I don’t want to talk about having a baby. I’m sick and tired of having that conversation!”

He looked at her funny. “Are you sleeping with someone else?”

Her jaws clenched. “What?”

“Are you having an affair?”

“You’re insane!”

“You’ve been ignoring me. You don’t make time to hang out. Every time I suggest we go do something, all you ever say is that you don’t have time. What the hell am I supposed to think? Yeah, *of course* I’m going to think you’re screwing someone else! Do you even love me anymore?” he asked.

Denise could see the hurt and anger in his eyes but it had already gone too far before she could cool off and have a civil conversation. “Just shut the hell up! Shut the hell up!”

“Why? Is it because I’m right? Is that why?”

“Listen to yourself, Ryan. Do you even hear what’s coming out of your mouth right now?” Denise was still yelling at the top of her lungs. Her face, bright red, was filled with fury and her eyes stone cold. “You’re fucking insane. I don’t want to be anywhere near you.”

“Oh that’s soo wonderful of you, cursing, with Nate in the house,” Ryan said with his temper now flaring. “You think being an anesthesiologist, working twelve, sixteen-hour shifts is easy? But—”

“You think running a business is easy?! Are you kidding—”

“Let me finish!” he shouted. “As husband and wife, we’re supposed to make time for each other. I’ve been trying for weeks just to get you to myself. You don’t even give a crap about me anymore.” Ryan looked at Denise in disgust and hurt.

They stood in the kitchen, giving one another cold-hearted stares.

“I’m so tired of being treated this way,” Ryan said coldly.

Denise felt her throat closing. This was the first time in their marriage they’d argued like this. The stress Denise was carrying had taken a toll on the both of them and it was too late until she realized it.

Ryan walked past her, looking at Denise dead in the eyes as he stomped through the front door. She felt paralyzed yet she could feel her body shaking. She wanted to move, but couldn’t. It felt as if her feet were glued to the ground. She stood there, trying to keep calm and together, but as her emotions amplified, the harder it became to control the tears and the cry she held in.

She slowly took steps toward the table. She pulled up a chair and sulked. She cried and whimpered. She placed her hand over her stomach where she had carried Ryan’s baby for ten

weeks. She knew how much Ryan wanted to have another baby and all she wanted was to surprise him. She wanted to break the news in the most romantic way she could think of.

They were supposed to have a candle-lit dinner and she was going to make his favorite meal. It was going to be perfect. Time, however, was not in her favor.

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## CHAPTER 5

**A**fter a forty-five minute drive, being stuck in slight traffic due to an accident, Evan finally pulled into Knight's Drive. By the looks of it, everyone was asleep and the only lights that were still on were the streetlights. As Evan pulled up into the driveway, he spotted Mr. Brar, his next-door neighbor, sitting in his wheelchair out on the porch. He put the car in park, turned off the ignition, and opened the door.

"Hey Mr. Brar," Evan called to his neighbor, "you're up pretty late." He walked toward Mr. Brar's house.

The homes in Lake View were much more spaced out compared to the other neighboring cities. Lake View itself was a much older town. Most of the homes had been fully remodeled, inside and out. Some of the homeowners had installed pools in their backyards, perfect for the summer. The downside of living in Lake View was that it had become an expensive town. Few young couples had moved into Lake View in the past five years. Most of the families that lived here had bought the homes years ago when the market was down.

Mr. Brar was a Sikh who wore a black turban as a symbol of his faith. He never ate meat or drank alcohol. His beard was

short and silver. And every time he smiled or laughed, crow's feet appeared. He dragged his oxygen tank closer to his chair, making room for Evan to sit.

"I couldn't sleep," he replied in his raspy voice. "You're coming home so late. You had a date tonight? Or was there a new club opening in downtown? I don't know what you kids do these days to be honest."

"No, I wasn't on a date or at a club," Evan said, chuckling. "It was Denise's turn to host brunch. I was there most of the day. Then she went to the hospital afterward to visit Ryan. I was on babysitting duty," he said, with a partial smile.

"How is my little girl doing? How's Ryan?"

Evan hesitated. "She's doing the best she can. She's a strong woman. Ryan's getting better over the days, but he still doesn't remember Nate." He sighed. "You can only hope for the best at this point."

"I can't imagine. Are the doctors doing everything they can to help him?"

"Yeah, they are."

"And how's the little one doing?"

"He misses his dad," he said, gazing out into the brightly lit street. "Denise still hasn't told him that Ryan lost some of his memory."

"When is she planning on telling him?"

He shrugged, not knowing exactly what Denise's plans were. "She's hoping that Ryan starts to remember so she *won't* have to explain all that other stuff to Nate. It reminds me of when we lost our parents," he said, gathering his thoughts. "I don't think she wants Nate to go through what we went through, I guess, in a way."

Memories flashed in Evan's mind of his parents. He remembered bits and pieces. His father always wore a suit to work. The first thing Evan would do when his dad came home

from work was run into his arms. He remembered his mother working around the house, singing to herself every now and then.

“Our loved ones will always be missed. Everything they leave behind is associated with some kind of memory. I can’t even look at a book without remembering Ekam. She knew how much I loved it when she read out loud and sometimes I’d fall asleep,” he said, laughing. “Some books I didn’t find interesting,” he added, quickly defending himself. He chuckled under his breath.

Evan witnessed on many occasions Mr. Brar and his wife enjoying lunch on the porch, laughing as if they were on their first date. She would wipe his mouth with her napkin and plant a kiss on his cheek. Sometimes they would sit together, silently, just enjoying each other’s company. Evan witnessed true love. It had been almost two years since Mrs. Brar had passed away.

“I miss Ekam so much,” he said, looking up at the stars, “but they’re always here with us in spirit,” he added, breaking into a smile.

The moon’s glow shined across Mr. Brar’s olive skin, making the sadness visible in his eyes.

“It gets easier, Mr. Brar,” Evan offered.

“Sometimes I think she’s gone on vacation. I wait for her every day knowing she’s not going to come back but yet I hope.” He paused for a moment, wiping away a tear. “A little part of me doesn’t believe Ekam’s really gone, but she really is gone.”

Evan reached for Mr. Brar’s hand and held it. “I’m sorry,” he whispered. It was all he could say.

There was nothing anyone could say or do that would heal a broken heart. It had to happen on its own pace.

As midnight approached, Evan looked over at Mr. Brar.

“Mr. Brar,” Evan said, yawning, “I’m gonna head home.”

Evan rose from the porch, brushing his backside off of dust.

“All right son, rest well.”

“Aren’t you going to sleep?” Evan asked, stepping down.

“In a bit,” Mr. Brar said with a smile. “Did you know a moving van came today?”

“Oh yeah?” Evan’s eyes flicked to his neighbor’s house.

“I saw them hauling in more furniture, but I didn’t get the chance to see who the new movers were,” Mr. Brar said, a little disappointed.

He yawned. “I should go say hi sometime,” he said, walking off the porch. Evan waved goodbye, leaving Mr. Brar.

As Evan walked into his home, Mr. Brar looked out into the corner of the street, away from the streetlight’s reach. A black sedan had been parked there earlier in the afternoon. Until now, there hadn’t been any movement all day. The headlights switched on and the vehicle slowly drove down Knight’s Drive. Mr. Brar watched as the sedan passed by his house, realizing what was going on.

After the sedan was in the distance, Mr. Brar wheeled his way back into the kitchen, where the phone lay on the table. He picked it up and pressed the speed dial.

Mr. Brar held the phone close to his ear as it rang, feeling intense and anxious. After six rings, he heard breathing on the other end.

“It’s only me, Bhuhadar.”

“Hi, Mr. Brar,” Bruce replied on the other end of the line.

Mr. Brar faced the window from the living room, just in case the black sedan decided to make another trip. “It’s been a while since the last time we talked, huh. How’ve you been, Bruce?”

“There have been better days.” There was silence for a moment. “I’m sensing there is something urgent...”

“I think someone from the agency has Evan under their radar.”

“Are you sure?”

“A young girl, probably around the same age as Evan, moved in next door to him about a month ago. Around the same time, I noticed the black sedan here and there. I’ve been keeping an eye out, making sure nothing’s out of the ordinary. But I have a feeling his neighbor isn’t the only one that’s on their radar.”

“I can’t start a personal assignment unless you’re a hundred percent sure. It’s going to raise questions, Mr. Brar. Evan can’t be on *anyone’s* assignment.”

“I know, I know, but I don’t have a good feeling about this, Bruce. The timing of it all...I know he’s on their radar. I can just feel it.”

There was a long sigh on the other end of the line.

“I’ve looked out for Evan like my own son,” Mr. Brar said. “Once the agents from the Secret Eye Agency get involved, you know there’s nothing much I can do to help him.”

“Yeah, I know.” He paused for a moment, knowing that interfering with another agent’s assignment was never allowed before getting an approval. “Look, I’m going to search up the ongoing assignments in the system and if I come across Evan’s name, then we’ll know for sure.”

Bruce entered his access key and pin, enabling him to log into the system to access all the missions and assignments the agents were currently working on.

“I’ll wait on the line as you do that.”

Bruce entered Evan’s name into the database to find any assignment associated with his name. Only one popped up. Bruce eyes’ scanned over to the right, looking at the location and to Bruce’s dismay, Knight’s Drive was listed as the address.

“You’re right,” he said, feeling faint. “Evan’s on their radar but I don’t know why.” He looked under Evan’s name to find what stage the assignment was on. “He’s under stage one right

now.” Bruce slammed his fist on his desk.

Mr. Brar sat in his wheelchair. His heart sank. Flashbacks of his time at the agency brutally reminded Mr. Brar of what agents were capable of.

“This is only stage one, so they’re just checking him out right now. But you have to put an end to this, Bruce. The longer this assignment stays open, there’s a higher chance of it moving up to stage two.”

There was a long pause on Bruce’s end as he sat there, in front of his computer. His eyes were fixated on the purple dot next to Evan’s name.

“I gotta see what the hell is going on. Just look out for Evan for me, Mr. Brar. I’ll keep you updated.” Bruce hung up, putting his cell phone back into his pocket.

This wasn’t good. *Not at all.*

## CHAPTER 6

**B**ruce sat at his desk, looking out of his office. The Secret Eye Agency ran a twenty-four-hour, seven-days-a-week operation. People came in and out for a hundred different reasons. One was to retrieve the special gadgets the Secret Eye Agency made available to the agents. Every gadget had special and multiple functions. The watches recorded conversations that took place within a hundred-foot radius. The navigation system in the black sedans converted into surveillance cameras. The pens recorded conversations only in confined areas. The pitch black glasses agents wore in the day had the capability to take pictures and be the eyes for agents who were positioned for backup. For every scenario, there was a gadget.

Any work done in the field was sent back to the headquarters. Since every gadget was connected to the server, all the information was automatically downloaded. The agency was the only place where an agent could go to retrieve the information. There was no way to get rid of evidence, as long as it was on the server.

Before Bruce could take any action, he had to figure out who ordered the investigation and why. Once he understood

those two crucial pieces of information, he would have to file to nullify the assignment. Given that the grounds to nullify would pass with the board of directors, it would take a couple of days to put a stop on the investigation. That was one of the options Bruce had. The other option was to go off the record and sort it out on his own without involving a third party. But that had consequences.

Either way, the clock was ticking and Evan's life was on the line.

## CHAPTER 7

**I**t was a calm, sunny Monday morning. Shadow Hex stood in her bedroom wearing a sheer black lacy undergarment. Ever since she'd moved to Lake View, life felt less stressful. There were some things she simply couldn't ignore, like the distance between she and her parents. It wasn't the six-hour drive from Pool View. It was how she left things with her parents.

She stared at the photo frame that sat on her nightstand. Her parents hugged her as she held her high school diploma across her chest. It was the last family picture they took. Her lips began to quiver and her eyes welled up. It made her heart hurt seeing how happy her parents were back then before everything changed. What tugged at her heart the most was that she knew nothing was going to be the same again.

They had picked their side, which made Shadow question how much of a parent's love was really unconditional.

Shadow moved to Lake View for one reason and that was to start over. To start her life the way she wanted to live, no control or say by anyone else. She had escaped from all of that. She wanted to leave her past behind her, but Shadow knew she would always look over her shoulder. No matter

how hard she tried, or where she went, there was no escape. Shadow didn't want to believe she *couldn't* live a normal life. But for the time being, she felt she was safe. There was hope. She believed one day her past would fade away and she would finally be able to live in the present. But as long as *he* was out there, she would always be looking over her shoulder.

Mr. Jingles, Shadow's furry gray cat, pounced on top of the bed. He looked at her with his big yellow eyes, his tail swaying. He was happy too.

"Good morning, Mr. Jingles," Shadow said. "Had a good night's sleep?"

Sometimes Shadow talked to Mr. Jingles like he was a human. Mr. Jingles gave his undivided attention as his tail swayed from left to right and then right to left, like he understood the conversation.

"I know *I* did. You look hungry." She paused. "I'm sorry for pointing out the obvious."

She stepped into her spacious walk-in closet, looking for a gray pencil skirt she recently bought. Shadow shuffled through her neatly hung clothes before coming across the skirt. She walked back out and put together her outfit. She wasn't quite in the mood to wear blue today. Shadow rested a finger on her chin, thinking of different blouses she had that would go better with the new skirt she was excited about. After much contemplation, she slipped into her skirt and buttoned her blue blouse.

She examined herself in the tall mirror, wondering if she'd gained weight. Her eyes traveled to Mr. Jingles who was silently sitting on her bed. Her attention went back to the image of herself. Her short wavy hair, the color of a walnut, had given her trouble the last couple of days. She figured trying out a new look for a new start wouldn't hurt. She walked into the bathroom and as she began to straighten her hair, Mr. Jingles

watched carefully.

Shadow sighed, knowing he was hungry and the longer Shadow kept Mr. Jingles waiting, the grumpier he would get. He was an expert at giving her the silent treatment.

“Okay, I’m almost done. Just one more minute,” she said, pulling the straightener to the end of her hair.

She stared at herself in the mirror and noticed how closely her blouse matched the color of her eyes. Her attention flicked back to her lips. They needed more color.

Scattered in the bathroom were the products she wore on her face. She picked out a shade of red lipstick, softly applying it on her bottom lip, followed with the upper lip.

She pressed her lips together, then viewed herself one more time before heading back into the bedroom closet and pulling out a black coat.

Shadow headed downstairs, carrying the coat over her arm and placing it on the sofa as she walked into the kitchen.

When Mr. Jingles heard the food hit his bowl, he jumped off Shadow’s bed and trotted downstairs into the kitchen. Shadow checked the time on her watch; if she didn’t head out for work in the next couple of minutes, she would definitely be late.

Shadow sped across town, racing the clock. As soon as she arrived to work, Shadow parked her car in the nearest spot she could find. She stepped out in her heels, slammed the car door shut, and strutted across the parking lot to the entrance of Storm, Inc. When she stepped inside, Shadow noticed the receptionist, Zoe Davenport, at her desk.

Zoe was fresh out of high school, tall and slender, and sported a bob, which she dyed ink black. Zoe preferred minimal human interaction. When applying for the job, she was only interested in the salary and not what the job entailed.

“You’re late,” Zoe said, obnoxiously chewing her visibly pink bubblegum.

“Yeah, I know. Twenty minutes.”

“That’s like...so unacceptable. Denise is going to be like... super pissed with you.”

“Wait, what?” Shadow said, catching her breath. “Denise?”

She pointed at her computer screen, which Shadow couldn’t see. “You had like...a 9:00 with Denise.”

Shadow’s hands rested on her hips and her eyebrows furrowed. “Seriously? No one told me about this meeting.”

“Is that supposed to be like...my problem?” Zoe responded.

Her eyes traveled to the clock on her desk. Zoe stared at Shadow and blew a bubble. When it popped, Zoe smiled, which quickly faded.

“What are you still standing here for?”

Shadow, in a confused state, took a couple of steps forward, only to realize she didn’t know where she was supposed to go. She turned back, not wanting to face Zoe again. “Where is the meeting?” Shadow asked.

“See that hallway?” Zoe said, pointing behind her.

“Yeah.”

“Her office is like...down that hallway. Take your first left and it’s the second door. I shouldn’t have to remind you that you’re already late, hunnay,” she said, fluttering her eyelashes.

“Okay. Thank you.”

Shadow was a little afraid of walking in the room, knowing Denise was waiting for her. On top of that, this was going to be the first time she was meeting Denise. She had no clue what Denise was like. She prayed Denise was not like the horrible bosses people talked about as they stood in line to get coffee in the mornings. When she approached the office, she took notice of the nametag on the front door. It read: *Denise Storm-Smith, CEO*. Her nerves began to kick in. She had no idea she was having a meeting with the company’s CEO.

Shadow knocked on the door and waited for Denise to

respond. A moment later, Shadow was opening the door to Denise's office.

In the corner, she saw the woman sitting at a round table with a manila folder in hand. "I'm so sorry—" she began.

"It's okay. Don't let it become a habit," Denise said with a warm smile.

Shadow was struck by how young Denise was. She had long brown hair pulled into a ponytail that framed her slightly pale oval face. Her almond-shaped eyes matched the color of her hair and her pink full lips made her look more of a model rather than a businesswoman.

"Why don't you take a seat?" Denise suggested, glancing at the vacant chair in front of her.

Shadow smiled as she sat. She placed her purse on the floor and straightened her back, making sure she was giving the right first impression. In her mind, she knew being punctual was already counting against her.

"How do you like Lake View so far?" Denise asked Shadow.

Shadow was taken aback by Denise's kindness. CEOs back in Pool View were never this kind from what she'd heard.

"It's...nice—it's different. I'm still getting settled in, but it's good." Shadow crossed her legs, becoming a little more comfortable.

"Oh, it's *very* different compared to Pool View," Denise said, propping up her elbow and resting her chin on her fist.

Denise very well knew the difference between the people of Lake View and Pool View. Quite a few of Denise's clients were in fact from Pool View, where the houses and lawns were much bigger than homes in Lake View. No woman cooked or cleaned because everyone hired help to do all that work. Every client she worked with believed they were better than everyone in Lake View. Living in Pool View was like living like a royal. Appearances were everything and being judged

by material things was a hobby. It wasn't about *who* you were, but *what* you had.

"I believe it's...either a hit or miss, if you're going to live in Pool View," Shadow said. "Either you fit in with the rest of the crowd, or you're an outcast. I grew up in Pool View, but..." she said, pausing and raising her eyebrows. "As I grew up, I realized I didn't fit in. I wouldn't survive in that kind of environment."

Denise let out a burst of stifled laughter. "I'm glad we agree on something." After clearing her throat, Denise didn't waste any time getting down to business.

Denise opened the folder and handed Shadow a sheet of paper, which was an overview of the new client Shadow would be working for.

"All right," she said, folding her hands together in front of her and getting ready to give Shadow the rundown. "You'll be working with Mr. and Mrs. Pence for their nursery. They're expecting their first child together. They've been married for two years. They decided that they were going to keep the sex of the baby a mystery. They took a look at your portfolio and wanted to work with you on their nursery. How do you feel about that?"

Her heart sank into the pit of her stomach but she didn't let that stop her feeling excited for her new client. Shadow raised her eyebrows in excitement. "I love it."

Denise nodded and continued with her rundown while Shadow gave her undivided attention.

"The colors they chose are gold and pearl white. And those are the *only* colors they're going to work with. They want everything—large moldings, curtains, blinds, a chandelier—everything that's going to make the room look elegant and classy. Currently it's an empty room so I think it'll make it easier on you to visualize where the furniture will go along with

all the other stuff.” Denise closed her eyes for a moment. She was forgetting something that was vital for this assignment. Denise pressed her fingers against her temples, as if she had a migraine.

A minute later she brought the most important aspect of this nursery to Shadow’s attention.

“I can’t believe I forgot about this. The closet is a walk-in. They’re getting the doors removed and want to install shelves and cabinets. They want the walk-in closet to be efficient. Anything and everything is accessible, easy to find... no shuffling around. The closet is their biggest concern, so I advise you to be creative, really creative. They are expecting a talented interior designer today at 1:00. So you have until then to come up with sketches of your vision for their nursery. Don’t let me down.” She grinned.

“When do they want to start on the project?” Shadow asked, referring to the paper Denise handed out earlier, since Denise hadn’t mentioned it during the rundown. Starting the project was just as important as knowing when the clients wanted the job to be done.

“Darn it. I forgot to ask them that question.” Denise rubbed her forehead and scrunched her eyes.

Shadow sensed Denise wasn’t herself. Even though it was only an assumption, it was apparent Denise had other things on her mind that were distracting her. “It’s okay. I’ll ask them when they want to start.” She pulled out a pen from her purse and took note.

“I usually don’t forget to ask my clients important questions like that,” Denise stated, thinking back to the day when she met with the Pencés. It was the day after Ryan’s accident. Denise worked half a day just to keep herself calm and then the Pencés walked in, ready for a consultation.

“We all forget sometimes. Don’t worry about it,” Shadow

replied, breaking into a soft, sympathetic smile.

“It’s not a good sign when a person in their prime starts to forget things,” Denise said, chuckling. “I’m getting old.”

“Maybe you should take a couple of days off,” Shadow suggested, peering over as she put her pen back in its designated pocket.

Denise leaned back in her chair, her arms stretched out beside her. She looked up at the ceiling, looking for some sort of sign to Shadow’s suggestion.

“I *could* use some time off.” Denise chuckled. “But clients come first and some of them are very demanding.”

Shadow nodded, understanding there was more to the story than Denise was providing. After all, she was from Pool View. There was *always* a story.

Denise got up from her seat and walked to her desk. “You should get started on those sketches and I’ll send you an email with the address.”

“Okay, sounds good,” Shadow said, rising from her chair. “I won’t let you down.” She flashed her straight white teeth.

“I’ll hold you to that. Please don’t be late,” Denise said, pulling out her big brown leather chair.

Shadow left with more confidence than she did when she entered. She liked Denise. It came as a surprise how friendly she was, but then again, this was Lake View. Majority of the people who lived in Lake View were nice and kind.

Winter had been sweet. People of Lake View were enjoying this particular winter since it hardly rained. The gust of winds that would usually whip off the hats of the elders during this time of year were calmer, but a long coat and a scarf was still needed.

Snow was never an issue because Lake View didn’t have the climate for such weather. Pool View, on the other hand, would be covered in three inches of snow this time.

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Marvin Stone stood outside of the forest overlooking the lake, looking very dapper in a dark gray pantsuit. He took out his red handkerchief and wiped his nose. He was more sensitive to the cold than the average person. If Marvin didn't have business to attend to, he would be in his home with the heat cranked up at eighty-five degrees in a tank top and shorts.

Marvin slipped his handkerchief back into his pocket as he admired the lake that extended beyond view. The aroma of the towering pine trees behind him reminded him of his home back in Pool View. His parents had planted a couple of pine trees in the backyard when Marvin was just a child. As the pine trees reached their peak, it had become a great hiding place for him. For years, it had been his safe spot. His parents had become verbally abusive as Marvin got older and the only place that made him feel safe was between the trees.

His childhood made him grow up into a controlling, spiteful, and deceiving man. Only those close to him would come to find out underneath the sea blue eyes and short brown hair combed over, there was the other side to Marvin Stone. A side no one could escape.

Marvin turned and faced the trees. The dirt beneath his feet left a little dust on the tip of his shiny black shoes as he walked into the woods. He kept his hands inside his pockets for warmth. Marvin could see the trail of his breath as he exhaled. During these days, there were no signs of birds or any other creatures. It was quite peaceful. He grinned.

Marvin stopped as he came to an intercom that stood in the middle of a circle of pine trees. It was the size of a football field. The sky was rarely visible from where Marvin stood. Other than minor cracks from the branches of the trees, here, there was only darkness.

He pressed the button and waited for an answer. Marvin

SAMPLE

stood looking up, outlining what was created here decades ago. A regular person would not be able to see what Marvin knew existed before his eyes. However, a few steps past the intercom was a brick wall. The only thing visible to the naked eye was the trunk of the pine tree yards away from where he stood.

“Please give me your full name, your birthdate, your agent number, and your ID please,” answered a woman’s voice.

“The name is Marvin Stone. Birthdate is 12/6/1981. Agent number is 212 and my ID is 212-412-061-980.”

“Please hold.”

Marvin waited patiently as the woman on the other end confirmed his authentication. Moments later the woman thanked Marvin as the door opened. Marvin walked inside the building, locking the door behind him.

This was the Secret Eye Agency, known as the SEA.

The SEA was a five-story building. Every floor had agents with a certain amount of experience. The first floor only consisted of the newly hired agents who answered calls by potential clients and drafted up paperwork that was requested by other agents from upper levels. The responsibilities, experience, and security clearance increased on each level. Once becoming a fourth floor agent, which would take years of experience, agents had the opportunity to apply for vacant positions on the fifth floor.

Every year the SEA held a meet and greet event where only the fourth and fifth floor agents were invited to join in. The event consisted of the chief of staff, the chief, defense team, the head of the departments, managers from every floor, retired agents, and of course, the head of the agency. The event allowed the fourth floor agents to ask questions and have one-on-one conversations with the higher levels, who would fill the empty positions on the fifth floor as they saw fit.

However, the turnover rates weren't very high. For a fourth floor agent to land a spot on the fifth floor was therefore very limited and competitive.

Marvin examined the floor, seeing first floor agents drowned in their work. Some were on the phone screening potential clients for upper level agents and others were looking at data and gathered evidence given by the upper level. Each agent worked closely with their client, making sure the two parties were satisfied at the end of the mission.

Marvin pressed for the elevator. Within seconds the doors opened. He stepped in, thankful there was no one else accompanying him up to the fourth floor. Marvin despised small talk. If he didn't have any interest, there was no point for any sort of conversation. He rarely uttered hellos and goodbyes to anyone, unless it was a client or someone higher up the chain. Other than that, Marvin kept to himself when at work.

As he stepped off onto his floor, he could see straight ahead a man in his fifties, judging by the gray hair, sitting in his office. He strode in, unsure whether this person would give him good news about the assignment he'd taken on or trouble that he wasn't quite ready to handle yet.

As he pulled the door toward him, the man rose from his seat.

"Agent 513, Bruce Storm, chief of staff," he said, extending his hand for a handshake.

Marvin, a little curious as to what brought one of the highest respected agents down to his floor, cautiously shook his hand.

"I'm well aware of your work, sir," Marvin said, slowly pulling out his chair from underneath his desk. "What can I do for you?" Marvin made himself comfortable as he awaited an answer.

"Can you explain to me about the assignment you're on?"

Assignment 01-02.”

Marvin was stunned. This wasn't Bruce's area of interest or expertise. This had nothing to do with Bruce.

“My personal assignment?” he asked.

“I looked into your file and you've put in this assignment once before but it was terminated.”

“No disrespect to you sir, but this assignment was already approved by the board of directors. I'm sure you know how it works around here,” he said, leaning back in his chair. Something didn't quite add up to Marvin as he studied Bruce. “You don't have the authority to come in here and question why I do what I do.”

“I'm well aware of my duties and boundaries,” he said slyly. Bruce unbuttoned his blazer and pulled out a folded piece of paper from the inside pocket. He placed it on his desk, with confidence. “That's why I had this document drawn up and signed for approval.”

Marvin was overcome with a deep, bubbling anger. He loathed being questioned about his work. Marvin snatched the document from his desk. He read in detail about Bruce's concern for this specific assignment Marvin was going to carry out. It gave Bruce permission to take whatever files he felt necessary in order to review them.

Taking another agent's file with documentation only meant one thing: It would slow down the process to have the assignment completed. Assignments took more time to get approved than the missions agents carried out for their clients.

Marvin looked at Bruce with a smile, but his eyes twinkled with rage.

“You took the time to have one of the rookies write up this bullshit?” He was still smiling as he spoke, making sure not to let any sign of discontent appear.

“Drawing up documents for assignments is not something

listed under my job description.”

Marvin knew something. Even though he was just a fourth floor agent with no authority, he knew how people worked. He could tell when someone was lying. He knew when someone was hiding something, which Bruce clearly was. This had just made his assignment more interesting. His curiosity about Bruce rose.

“That’s true,” he replied, folding the paper back into its original form, “but why would you take out the time to have this document written up, signed, and then hand deliver it? There is a level of concern for you, which raises questions in my mind. People only go out of their way if something matters. You care about something or someone,” he said, pointing at Bruce. Marvin grinned, knowing he was on to something here.

“I’m here to take files associated with this assignment. That’s all.”

Marvin, completely ignoring Bruce, had his own questions. “You could have just left this document on my desk. Why did you wait for me? I’m sure you have other important things to do. Why is this more important?”

“I wanted to get a sense of the kind of person you were. The profiles on the database only do so much justice. It’s different when you meet the person and get a feeling firsthand.”

“What kind of person am I?” he asked with a mischievous smile across his face.

Marvin smiled as he leaned forward, folding his hands together. He was intrigued by Bruce.

“What kind of person am I, Bruce?” he repeated.

Without any hesitation, Bruce replied, “I think you’re a paranoid psychopath.”

Marvin snorted. “You think I’m a psychopath? What makes you think that?” He chuckled, trying to contain his laugh, but

it was the only way Marvin knew how to contain the real beast that lay hidden. He rested his elbow on the armrest of his chair, his chin on his fist while he gazed at Bruce.

Marvin was going to figure out what it was that Bruce cared so much about. He had all the information he needed. It was just a matter of cross-referencing his current assignment with the previous one. Something was different in this assignment and Marvin was sure going to catch whatever it was. He was going to create hell on earth just for Bruce.

No one got in the way of Marvin. *No one.*

“I’ve heard worse,” he said. “Here, let me give you what you’re looking for. I don’t want to take up too much of your time, *sir.*”

Marvin unlocked the desk drawer that contained the last few missions he was working on and pulled out the assignment Bruce requested.

“Here you go, sir,” Marvin said, rising from his chair. He held out the black folder in front of Bruce.

As Bruce rose, there was a difference of height. Marvin happened to be slightly taller than Bruce. But that wasn’t the intimidating part. Bruce had no idea what scheme Marvin was working up in his mind at this very moment. If he knew any better, staying out of Marvin’s business would have been the *best* option. It wasn’t until *now* that Evan’s life was in danger.

Bruce buttoned his blazer as he took the folder Marvin held out for him. “Thank you.”

Marvin looked deep into his soul and said, “No, thank *you.*”

Marvin was still smiling as Bruce left his office. When Bruce was off in the distance, Marvin sat back in his chair and went to work. He pulled up the agency’s database, knowing everything he needed to know about Bruce was available.

“Agent 513, I will destroy you,” Marvin said under his breath.

Marvin typed in Bruce’s agent number in the database.

Every piece of information on Bruce pulled up in front of him. He carefully looked into Bruce's profile with great thirst to find what it was that he cared so much. Marvin pulled up his personal files from his database and crosschecked the two files to find what was different from the last time he started his assignment. Who was involved this time around? The change of place? Something was definitely different. He couldn't put a finger on it.

He scrolled further and further as he crosschecked everything that had been the same. After a couple of more scrolls down the pages, he noticed one thing different. And this was going to give him the answer he was looking for. It would unlock the history of Bruce's past, which Bruce kept secret.

Marvin grinned. Today Bruce stepped into his territory, and now Marvin was going to destroy his.