

FROZEN STATUES

PERDITION GAMES

*flawless
revenge
is art*



L.E. FRASER

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Frozen Statues, Perdition Games

Red Rover, Perdition Games

Skully, Perdition Games

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For Brian and Jeff

Should all your stars explode and your worlds turn to ash, I'll
shine a light and lead you home.

There will be comfort food and pugs.

PROLOGUE

“WHERE IS THIS place?” he asked.

“Not far.” She undid her seatbelt, slid across the split leather of the bench seat, and pressed her body against his.

As the road turned sharply, he adjusted his headlights and the high beams illuminated an iridescent cloud of swirling snowflakes. Thick brush and dense trees inclined toward a gunmetal grey sky, trapping the snow on the pitted asphalt that cut through the stony escarpment. Tall evergreens crowded against the rocky shoulders of the old two-lane highway. If they broke down, they’d be in a world of trouble.

The high beams of an oncoming truck pierced the cracked windshield of his old Buick. He tried to avert his eyes and the car skidded to the right. Looming in his peripheral vision was an ice-coated snowbank flanked by two giant rock formations. With a gasp, he steered into the skid the way his father had taught him. The back wheels did a loose shimmy across a patch of black ice before he gained control of the vehicle.

His girlfriend took a brush from her purse and ran it through her long dark hair. He could smell a hint of lemon from the shampoo she used.

"I thought you told me that Reece Hash and his fiancée... What's her name?" she asked.

"Sam McNamara," he mumbled. She talked about McNamara all the time and it pissed him off that she was pretending not to remember Sam's name.

"I only went to your parents' farm for Christmas because you said she'd be there."

The accusation was loud and clear, as if he'd offered a macabre bribe: You'll get to meet the famous private investigation duo who thwarted a sociopathic cult leader's evil plan. I'll take you to where he buried all those women and massacred seventy-two of his followers.

But the horror of Bueton Sanctuary wasn't her interest, as it turned out. It was Incubus, the serial killer. Three years ago, the psychopath had held the city of Toronto in the grip of terror before Sam McNamara exposed him. As hypnotic snowflakes twirled around the car, it occurred to him that his girlfriend's fascination with Incubus was downright creepy. No wonder she'd made such a bad first impression on his family.

As if she'd read his mind, she said, "Your family should love me as much as you because we're together. What's their problem? I mean, come on. They're pig farmers." She laughed.

"Soy."

"What?"

"They grow soy. The pigs were my little sister's 4-H project and we kept them."

"Doesn't it bother Hope that you eat her pets?"

"We don't eat them," he retorted.

“But you sell the piglets to people who eat them,” she argued. “And your older sister was a total bitch to me,” she went on. “You never stand up to Margaret.”

Bullshit, he thought, but didn’t say anything. Last week, he hadn’t shown for his weekly lunch at the university quad with Margaret because of the catastrophic family visit. That was when he accepted that he’d surrendered his balls to his girlfriend. But there were advantages to going along to get along.

She shifted in her seat and he glanced at the gentle curve of her thigh as she crossed her long legs. His eyes drifted across her flat stomach and up to the swell of her full breasts. The ethereal ambient light reflected off her jet-black hair, and her skin was so pale it appeared translucent in the strange light. She was beyond hot—way out of his league. He was just a skinny country bumpkin who suffered from anxiety. When she’d initiated a conversation with him on Bumble, he’d thought it was a joke. But they’d connected right away. Over the past four months, he’d been the envy of all his friends.

Shearing winds broadsided the car and visibility dropped to zero in the whiteout. He cringed when she started playing with the radio. The last thing he needed while driving through a blizzard in the middle of nowhere was the distraction of music. And her preference was heavy metal, which he hated. After a moment of fiddling with the dial, she exhaled in frustration, dug her phone from her purse, and expertly tapped on the screen. “Dead Memories” by Slipknot blared from the phone.

The weight of her body pressing against his leg and shoulder was making him claustrophobic. He nudged her with his elbow.

“Put your seatbelt on. I wish you’d told me how far northeast of Toronto your friend’s cabin was.”

“Don’t be a pussy. It’s just snow.”

He nudged her harder. “Seriously, babe, put on your seatbelt.” With a worried eye, he studied the sinking fuel gauge. They should have stopped at the last station, but she’d insisted they had plenty of gas to make it in and back out again.

A gust of wind threw sheets of snow across the windshield and plunged them into darkness. His stomach clenched with fear, and he bit his lip so hard he tasted blood. The labouring old wipers cleared a narrow crevasse that expanded until the road opened before him once more. He released his breath in a puff and rotated his neck to loosen the stiff muscles.

Unconcerned with the fact they had almost careened into a ditch to die of hypothermia, his girlfriend kept talking. One of the reasons he’d fallen in love with her was her charming ability to chat with anyone. He hated when he was the one who had to keep a conversation going. But tonight, he wished she’d be quiet and let him drive. Above the roar of heavy metal, she gushed over how they were family and would be together forever. How, once they found an apartment, they’d do everything together. How, once he changed his major to business, they’d have all their classes together. It would be awesome, she gushed, to spend every moment of every day side by side.

His earlier sense of claustrophobia escalated to suffocation. Cold sweat prickled his forehead and the back of his neck. The hideous visit to his parents’ farm replayed in his mind. His father had battered him with questions about how he was going to swing rent in one of the most expensive cities in North America,

pay his car insurance, and contribute to his tuition. All while keeping his marks up so he didn't lose his scholarship. The lecture had droned on for twenty minutes. He'd dodged every call and text from his family since.

The wind was now blowing at gale force and whistling through the poorly sealed windows of the old Buick. The tires kept spinning against a carpet of freezing slush that coated the asphalt. Pounding bass from the deafening music made his headache worse. He wanted to go back to his dorm room and pull the blankets over his head. No—what he wanted to do was go home and let his mother stuff him with comfort food while he played video games with his younger brother and sister.

“Oh, see those yellow markers? Turn right.” She ran her hand across his thigh and into his crotch. “I bought you a little treat.” She rifled in her bag and ran something soft across his cheek. It jangled beside his ear and he glanced at her hand. Handcuffs. Fuzzy purple fabric covered the bracelets. Dim light caught the metal chain and it twinkled salaciously. Instead of being aroused, a wave of terror embraced him as he visualized himself handcuffed and vulnerable in a wilderness cabin.

Reducing the car's speed to a crawl, he navigated the turn. The car plowed through loose snow on a narrow lane, and his stress increased with every rotation of the tires. Getting accepted into the University of Toronto's Environmental Studies program had been brutal. Why was he switching to business? At nineteen, he didn't want the responsibility of an expensive apartment or a live-in girlfriend.

High evergreen boughs protected the unplowed trail from the heavy snowfall. Driving was much easier but the road was

barely wide enough to accommodate his car. He winced as branches scraped the sides of his Buick. This was stupid. He didn't want to be stuck in the middle of nowhere during a snowmageddon. He'd only agreed to go because the road of least resistance was peaceful. It was time to man up and tell her he'd changed his mind. But the small gas station they'd passed a while back wouldn't be open now, and he didn't have enough fuel to make it back to a major highway to find a 24-hour station. They'd have to wait until morning. Tonight, after a few drinks, he'd tell her he wanted to slow down. If he chose his words with care, she'd understand.

A ramshackle log house loomed in the headlights. The car skated a few feet before stopping a foot from a rickety porch.

She gathered her belongings and reached for the door. "I popped some supplies in the trunk. Grab them, okay?"

He shut off the car but left on the headlights and stared at the log house. It wasn't what he'd expected. Sheets of plywood covered the windows. There were three padlocks securing the door. He spied a CCTV camera mounted above the door. Why did the owner need so much security out here in the boondocks?

In the side mirror of the car, his appearance depressed him. His narrow face was pale. There were dark circles beneath his hazel eyes, and his long brown hair was limp and greasy. He'd lost too much weight over the past few months, and his back and shoulders hurt from the tense drive.

Turning away from the mirror, he reached into the backseat for his overnight bag and dug out his cell. No signal. He climbed out of the car and leaned against the open door, staring at the house. Something about it felt wrong. Sam McNamara had once

told him that evil has its own energy. Her eyes had been pools of dark glass when she warned him to trust those primal instincts. You feel it, run. She never spoke of the horrors she'd witnessed, but over the past six months, she'd changed. They were scary, unhealthy changes.

"Rough drive, overactive imagination," he mumbled. The feeble reassurance did nothing to reduce his anxiety.

"What? Come on, it's cold." She was doing a little jig and fiddling with a keychain.

"I don't have a cell signal."

She shrugged. "It's the storm."

"Is there electricity?"

"Why are you being such a pussy?" She stomped away and he waited for her to open the padlocks on the front door before he popped the trunk. The interior light illuminated two large boxes. Bewildered, he examined multiple cans of meat, fish, fruit, and vegetables. Why pack so much food for a short visit?

"Are you jerking off over there?"

He slung his bag over his shoulder, stacked one box on top of the other, and heaved them from the deep trunk. Balancing the boxes in his arms, he closed the trunk with his elbow and tramped through shin-deep snow and up the steps to the porch.

She used the light on her cell to guide him through the door. The small circle barely lit a foot in front of him. He shuffled inside. There was a terrible odour. Like an animal had died. Under the rancid stench, there was a strong musk of body odour and a whiff of shit.

She poked his back. "Keep going straight."

He took a couple more lumbering steps. His legs quivered with the need to run. "This place is giving me the creeps." He placed the boxes on the ground.

"It's because it's dark. Leave the boxes and we'll go to the cellar and start the generator." She pushed him.

He stiffened his body and braced his legs. She shoved him again. Hard.

His heart thundered in his chest. The smell and the darkness were freaking him out. No way was he staying in this hellhole. "Hey, I'm sorry but I'm out. Let's find a motel." Prepared to deal with tears, he turned to face her.

The light she held illuminated her face. For a split second, he didn't recognize her. Pure rage contorted her elfin features. Before he realized what was happening, the left side of his head was on fire. Backing up, he tripped over the boxes and fell. A sharp pain jabbed his lower back when he landed. Canned goods clattered around him. His hands flailed at his sides, swiping against tumbling cans that rolled across the floor.

"Why did you make me do that?" Her voice was deep and impassive.

Dazed and disoriented, he stared up. She was holding something long and cylindrical in her right hand. Above him, the world spun. He squinted as sharp needles of pain gouged into his eyeballs. A gurgle emanated from the back of his throat.

"Now you're marked," she said.

The dizziness intensified and dots danced in front of his eyes until they joined and there was nothing but black.

HE WOKE TO the sensation of his body sliding. Warmth bathed the side of his face. A taste of coppery blood filled his mouth. When he tried to speak, all he produced was a weak burble.

She was panting and her iron grip was crushing his anklebones. His head bounced against uneven edges of wood. His dragging fingertips brushed against stairs, but his hands were nonresponsive to his brain's command to grab the edge. The smell of sewage and body odour intensified as they descended. A narrow shaft of light came from somewhere on her body, but her back blocked the source. Oppressive darkness blanketed him.

At the bottom of the stairs, she tugged him across cold earth. Jagged stones dug into his hands. She dropped his feet and there was a rattling. Grunting, he struggled to roll over but she took hold of his ankles and yanked him across a barrier. His feet fell to the ground again. She circled his prone body and loomed over his face. An LED light on a band around her head blinded him.

"They won't come because of them." Her voice was serene. "They're the bait. You're the prize."

His body finally obeyed his brain's command. He turned on his side and grabbed her ankle, trying to pull her foot from under her so she'd fall.

With a squeak of alarm, she shifted her weight to her other foot and wrenched her leg free. She kicked him in the stomach and pain lanced from his belly to encase his torso in misery. There was a clang, followed by stomping footsteps. Above him, a door slammed. Then silence.

Blind in the darkness, he crawled forward until his forehead hit a barrier. Shifting his weight onto his knees, he felt carefully

about him with his hands. It felt like metal fencing. He wrapped his fingers through the mesh in front of him and hoisted himself gingerly to his feet. Excruciating pain made him exhale in a gasp. Salty tears mixed with the blood dripping into his gaping mouth. His legs shook as he took tentative steps alongside the chain-link, moving his fingers from opening to opening. There was a lock box against the edge of a door. He continued to trace the barricade. It ended at an L-junction and he shuffled to his right. As he circled the pitch-black confinement, his jumbled brain refused to accept what his fingers insisted was there. A cage.

Someone moaned. With intense concentration, he listened. He heard it again.

“Is someone there? Hey! Can you hear me?” He shook the chain-link and the rattling echoed through the darkness. “Hey! I’m trapped.”

“We’re all trapped,” a resigned voice whispered. “Shut up. She doesn’t allow talking.”

“What’s going on? Why are we here?”

“No talking!” hissed a different male voice.

“How many people are here?” he asked. “What does she want?”

A third voice murmured from his left, “Shut the fuck up.” There was a high-pitched giggle, the deranged sound of insanity. A moment of silence followed before the voice said, “Wait for it, brother. It’s what happens if we talk.” Ominous laughter rang through the darkness.

Suddenly ear-splitting music pounded all around him. Screaming in terror, he stumbled backwards and clamped his hands against his ears in a futile attempt to block out the

screeching vocals and hammering bass. Turning in a tight circle inside his dank enclosure, he screamed until he was hoarse and all he produced were gasping sobs of despair.

CHAPTER ONE

Sam

IN THE HALLWAY, Sam shook snowflakes from her short strawberry-blond curls and stamped her feet to loosen the grime that clung to her boots. Instead of remaining on the rubber mat, the filthy slush flew through the doorway and settled into the old orange shag carpet. Not that it mattered, what with the multiple stains that already spotted it.

She understood why her fiancé and business partner hated their office. The scarred old partner desk took up most of the three-hundred-square-foot space. Bent orange metal blinds on the windows listed to the left because the cord had broken last month. A pair of dented file cabinets prevented them from opening the door all the way. The place was a dump, plain and simple, and they needed to renovate, a point Reece had been making for the past two years. He'd left the Ontario Provincial Police and joined her PI firm when they fell in love. He'd given up a lot to be with her and deserved to be comfortable. It was clear he wasn't.

Reece sat hunched at the desk, clad in a cable-knit sweater, a scarf, and a pair of thick woollen socks. A knitted cap covered most of his thick black hair. Wind whistled through the crevasses

around the window beside him and a space heater rattled by his feet.

“How’s your day?” She squeezed by the file cabinet. If she gained an ounce of body fat, she wouldn’t be able to get to her chair.

Reece grunted. He studied his laptop with an expression of disgust and blew on his fingertips. The rogue eyetooth in his otherwise straight teeth was showing, and his blue eyes were as stormy as the winter sky.

“I have to leave in an hour for a seminar,” she said.

“What? You promised to do the background checks the insurance company needs today.” His tone matched his sour expression

“Can’t you do it?”

“No, I have a paper due.”

When Reece had made the decision to finish law school, Sam hadn’t understood the ramifications to their investigation firm or to their relationship. On the rare occasions he was home, her fiancé had his nose stuck in a textbook or glued to his computer screen. Going back to school at thirty-eight wasn’t easy, and she was trying to be supportive. It was different for her because she was younger. She had only been out of graduate school for a few years when she’d entered the psychology doctoral program.

“The seminar is important for my PhD,” she said.

He exhaled loudly. “So my studies take a backseat to yours?”

“I didn’t say that.” She slouched against her chair and tried to stretch out her legs, accidentally kicking Reece in the shin. At six foot three, he had to keep his legs straight or his knees would press against the top of the short desk.

“We need to hire help,” she said with a sigh.

He raised an eyebrow and grinned. “At breakfast, when I told you I was interviewing someone this afternoon, you said—”

“The office is too small and we won’t find anyone for what we’re willing to pay.” She put her elbows on the desk and cupped her chin in her hands.

Sam didn’t like change, didn’t trust people, and didn’t want a stranger in her personal space. But it wasn’t fair to continue to dump work on Reece, and she missed spending free time with him.

“When is the first candidate coming?” She dug into the pockets of her coat for her mittens.

“At three, and he’s the only candidate,” Reece said. “His name is Elijah Watson. I can check his references, run a background check, and hire him today.”

“What? No, I have to meet him,” she said.

He scowled at his computer. “You aren’t going to like anyone. Let me take care of it. We agreed on relevant education, a valid PI licence, and computer skills.”

“It would be good if he wasn’t a criminal.” She glanced at *The Globe and Mail* on the desk. “Did you read the article about police finding a University of Toronto freshman’s body posed as a statue? How did the perp position the corpse so precisely?”

“He froze it. Read the whole article instead of skimming it,” Reece muttered and typed on his keyboard.

“I doubt the dumping ground was the primary crime scene,” Sam said as she read.

“I agree. The ritualistic aspects are frightening,” Reece said.

“The killer removed the victim’s eyes and embedded black stones in the cavities. No cause of death released yet, but they say there wasn’t a mark on the body and every inch of skin was a coppery colour.” She thought about it. “Probably some sort of tanning spray.”

“Goddam it! Now the screen is blue.” Reece slammed his hand on the keyboard in frustration.

Someone knocked on the office door. “It’s open,” Sam yelled.

A young man popped his head in. The door jammed on the carpet, and he put his shoulder against it and pushed. The door slammed against the file cabinet with a crash. He stumbled, tripped over his feet, and careened into the desk. An orange plastic visitor chair toppled, and he knocked over the second one when he tried to right it. Colour flooded his face and a long, puckered scar from the side of his nose to the corner of his right eye showed white against the blush.

“I had hoped to impress you with my professional demeanour.” He took off his parka and smiled.

He was in his mid-twenties with brown hair and hazel eyes. He was about five-seven with a wiry frame. There was no reason this young man would want to impress them. But, if he did, he shouldn’t have been wearing torn jeans and a dorky long-sleeved T-shirt with Homer Simpson’s face plastered across the front.

“Help you with something?” Sam asked.

He held out his hand. “Elijah Watson. My friends call me Eli.”

The kid was two hours early. The fact he couldn’t tell time wasn’t a good start.

She shook Eli's hand. The sleeve of his T-shirt rode up and she glimpsed cigarette burns on his inner wrist. He released her hand and tugged down the sleeve of his shirt.

Reece stood to greet him. "I thought we said three o'clock."

"Oh." He put on his parka with stiff, robotic motions. "I am sorry. I will wait downstairs. No worries."

The lack of contractions in his stilted speech was strange. He didn't have an accent, so English wasn't the issue. When Eli walked to the door, he didn't move his arms. There was an odd rigidity to his body, and he hadn't made eye contact when he shook her hand. Sam took an instant dislike to him.

"Don't be silly, sit down." Reece circled the desk and sat on one of the visitor chairs, motioning to Eli to take the other. "When you called yesterday, you never said where you heard about the job."

"Oh, well, we know some of the same people and somebody mentioned you might be hiring an intern." He rummaged through a Boconi laptop bag slung across his chest and handed Reece a piece of paper. He glanced at Sam, blushed again, and grabbed a second one that he held out to her.

Ignoring the kid's resume, she asked, "Who?"

"Excuse me?"

"Who do we know in common?"

"I graduated from Police Foundations at Fanshawe and did two years of criminology at King's College—that is, Western University. Well, not main campus. I did not get in." His eyes widened and his cheeks flushed. "I mean, my marks at King's were good enough." He shuffled his feet. "To transfer, I mean. I

have advanced first aid and CPR training and completed the mandatory training for the Ontario private investigator license.”

Eli’s stilted speech was getting on her nerves, and he’d used an evasive tactic to avoid answering. Diverting a direct question with a prolonged explanation implied dishonesty. Sam was ready to send him packing.

Reece crossed his legs and motioned again at Eli to sit. “A couple of ex-OPP cops teach at Fanshawe. I bet you heard about us from Wayne Kalstein. I talked to him last week about recommending a past student.”

“Mr. Kalstein was one of my teachers.” Eli cleared his throat. “I am a cook at the artisan pizza restaurant down the street. Customers like to watch the dough being hand-stretched.”

“I love to cook,” Reece said. “But I haven’t mastered hand-stretching dough.”

Based on her partner’s cheerful expression, Reece was probably visualizing a halo of light shimmering above Eli’s spiky brown hair. There was something familiar about the kid but Sam couldn’t place him. “Have we met?”

Eli’s eyes flicked over her shoulder again. “I do not think so.”

“No, you look familiar,” she insisted.

“Uh, well, I enjoy the bakery downstairs. The cannoli filling is excellent. I sublet a basement flat in a house in Little Italy. Maybe we have run into each other.”

“So, why do you want to work for a PI firm?” Reece asked.

“Working as an investigator is a passion, but getting onto a police force is tough. And, well, I do not drive.” He blushed. “You have to have a driver’s licence to be a cop.” He rushed to add, “I have excellent computer skills.”

“Did Wayne tell you we want someone to set up a database and scan our paper files? Is that something you can do?” Reece asked.

Eli dug into his bag. “I can create a contract repository that will catalogue the key points and give you an instant overview of all your legal documents.” He passed Reece a folder.

Reece perused the presentation and then passed it to Sam.

Eli’s ideas were impressive. In addition to listing information that she normally had to hunt through a physical contract to find, his mock-up had an alert feature that sent out a notification ninety days before the termination date. Handy, since approaching her clients before they realized the contract was expiring could prevent other PIs from poaching her cash cows.

“The pay isn’t good,” she said. “Minimum wage.”

“I do not care about the dollars. I want a reputable PI to give me a chance.”

Instead of ingratiating him to her, his enthusiasm struck Sam as desperate. “Why did you move to Toronto from London?”

He licked his lips and picked at a thread on his jeans. “I felt like a change.”

“Why did you drop out of university?”

“Uh, I ran out of money.” He peered at his feet.

He was lying. Maybe the university had kicked him out. She could find out.

Eli browsed in his bag again and produced another sheet of paper. “Here are my references.”

Wayne Kalstein’s name was on the list, so Eli hadn’t lied about that. Still. That scar kept drawing Sam’s eyes. She’d seen

enough knife wounds in her days. But it wasn't recent. His face had grown around it.

"A car accident," Eli said brusquely. "Everybody stares."

A blush warmed her cheeks. "I get it." She held out the backs of her hands. The burn scars were puckered and brown.

"I noticed," he said.

But I didn't stare, like you did.

The unspoken words hung there, a silent accusation intended to deflect from his lie. When he claimed it was a car accident, he'd closed off his body and held her eyes. When people typically avoided eye contact, a moment of intense sincerity was as good as a lie detector.

Eli stared at the depressing blue screen on Reece's computer. "Want me to fix that? From here, it looks like Windows crashed."

"That would be great." Given Reece's gleeful expression, fixing the computer would seal the deal and he'd hire Eli on the spot.

Eli bent over the laptop. The tip of his tongue poked from the corner of his mouth as he worked.

"You've got some malware, too. Bet you've received emails in your spam that use your email address as the sender. I'm going to format and reinstall Windows. Don't sweat it, though. I'll protect all your data so you won't lose anything." His hand dived into his bag and he extracted a USB drive that he popped into the laptop.

Computers must be Eli's comfort zone because he'd dropped the formal speech, Sam mused. She didn't know what to think. Maybe Eli's oddities were just nerves.

Reece jerked his thumb and Sam followed him into the hallway.

“What do you think?” he asked.

“Too bad he can’t tell time.”

“I’ll give Wayne a call and check his references.” Reece’s eyes shone with excitement. “Wayne wouldn’t send us anyone but a top candidate.”

“Did you notice his strange body language and odd speech? He doesn’t make eye contact. And what’s with the scars?” Based on his expression, Reece considered her observations shallow. “Eli doesn’t have any experience,” she added.

“Which is why he’ll do grunt work for minimum wage,” Reece said. “He has related education and is demonstrating his computer expertise.”

“I’m picking up something weird about him,” she insisted.

Reece laughed and pulled her in for a kiss. “You pick up something weird about everyone. It’s an occupational hazard as an ex-cop.”

She frowned. “Then why aren’t you more suspicious? You were with the OPP ten years longer than I was with Toronto Police Service.”

“I’m eight years older and more emotionally mature.” He turned to the office door. “I like him and I don’t want to recruit, vet resumes, and interview. But we’ll do a major background and reference check. Satisfied?”

She wasn’t but followed him back into the cramped office.

Eli was tucking an Alienware laptop back into the Boconi shoulder bag. Both the computer and bag were out of her price range.

“Thanks for stopping in,” she said. “We’ll give you a call.”

He looked crestfallen but recovered fast. “I hope you give me a chance. I will not disappoint you.”

Reece handed him a card. “I owe you for fixing that beast.” He pointed at his laptop.

“I was happy to help.” Eli turned to Sam. “Nice to meet you.” Arms glued to his sides, he marched out of the office.

She stood at the window, which looked out over the front entrance to the building. As Eli exited, a girl with long black hair ran across the street and grabbed his arm. The young woman’s mouth moved fast and she gestured passionately with her free hand. Eli shrugged out of her grasp and crossed the street. The girl jogged after him. She turned and looked over her shoulder at the building.

As she glared up at their office window, there was no mistaking the raw hatred on her face.

CHAPTER TWO

In the Cellar

Angel

HE'S SCREAMING AGAIN. Yesterday, he thrashed against the bars of his cage, hollering senseless threats and shouting obscenities until his voice turned ragged and hoarse. Today, stark terror fills those screams. The darkness is closing in on him. He'll break or he'll adapt. Either way, it doesn't matter. There's no way out.

I tried to be a good person. Even after all the energy people expended to dehumanize me, I believed I'd find love. Now, at twenty-three, I accept the truth. There are those of us who repel people. It's the antithesis of charm. You live in a world where people dislike you. A few pretend to be your friend until they've raped you of what they covet. Then their capacity for cruelty emerges. Sniping comments erode your confidence. Nasty gossip impugns your reputation. Telephone calls, emails, and text messages go unanswered. Eventually you skulk away, accepting that you're disposable. I've existed under this ebony umbrella of disdain my whole life. Is it any wonder that I've ended up here?

I was seven when the first glimmer of understanding dawned in my conscious mind. I'd stayed after school to practice for our Christmas concert. In the schoolyard, fat white flakes of snow toppled onto the hood of my furry brown coat and stuck to my red mittens like moulting ermine fur on Saint Nick's crimson suit. Above me, clusters of stars shone against a deep purple sky that clung to just a whisper of dying daylight.

My best friend, Lizzy, skipped into the arms of her smiling mother. She prattled on about the songs we were learning and the play we were rehearsing. When Lizzy told her mother that the teacher had awarded me the role of lead angel, I pirouetted. Her mother studied me with no expression. Not even the hint of a smile. She tucked Lizzy under her arm and marched her to their car.

Something tiny cracked in my heart as they drove away and left me alone on the empty playground outside the deserted school. That was the first time the voice whispered to me, and it said, Lizzy's mother doesn't like you.

I walked down the empty, winding driveway of the school to a path that ran through the woods to the street where I lived. The sheen of purple had faded from the sky. Clouds masked the starlight and the moon, making the night inky black. The wind moaned and snowflakes mutated into a swirling blizzard of sharp ice pellets. With my mittens clasped against my cheeks, I trudged along the tree-lined path as the winter wind screamed through the barren branches. My imagination conjured beasts lying in wait to drag me to their putrid lairs. Terrified, I tried to run but my feet slipped and I fell. I wept with fear and crawled on my hands and knees.

At the end of the path, I stumbled to my feet and stood under the lustrous beam of a streetlight. Houses lit up the threatening night and the woodland monsters retreated into the shadows of the forest.

As I scurried by a neighbour's home, I peeked through the open curtains of a dining room window. A family sat around a table laden with steaming dishes of food. Through the brightly lit window, a boy's mouth moved in conversation. The father laughed and slapped his son on the shoulder. Next, the girl's mouth moved, and the family shifted its attention to her. It was strange. The boy was older than the girl was. Why did they care what she had to say?

I pulled my eyes away, ashamed that I was spying, and became aware that the world had returned to normal. There was no blizzard, no clouds hiding the brilliance of the stars, and no ominous wind screeching through the trees. The monster was in my mind.

I continued walking home and wondered what we'd have for dinner. I was fond of baked macaroni and cheese but lasagna was my favourite. Now, I can't eat either dish without the pasta congealing in the back of my throat until I gag.

When I arrived home, Mama yelled at me to remove my filthy boots. I tugged them off and breathed in the rich aroma of tomato sauce and baking cheese. Steam coated the kitchen window as my mother filled the sink with hot, soapy water. A radio was playing and she was humming in perfect pitch to a song she often sang with the church choir.

"I got something to tell you," I said breathlessly.

“Tell your father, Angel, and set the table. Your sister has a project due, so you need to take her dish duty tonight.”

I raced into the living room to find my dad.

He was with my older sister. Like always. His arm was around her shoulders, and he was smiling down at her upturned face. She sat cross-legged on a velour armchair, which Mama had forbid me from sitting on because I’d dirty the fabric.

I chattered about the school pageant and the scary walk through the haunted woods. My cheeks were warm from the fading cold, and excitement made my voice high and fast.

“You’re interrupting. Again.” My father crossed his arms against his chest.

An odour of damp wool drifted up from my furry coat. I crinkled my nose, clamped my lips together, and waited for permission to speak.

My fourteen-year-old sister got up from the chair with a grimace of annoyance. “May as well listen to whatever tall tale she’s got this time.”

Mama entered the living room, wiping her hands on a tattered dishtowel tucked into the waistband of her jeans. “No one wants to listen to one of your wild stories,” she said. “If you can’t tell us about school without making up lies, no one’s interested.”

I wanted to tell them how I’d won the role of lead angel in the pageant. I wanted to tell them about the white costume and the wire wings strung with gossamer threads of silk netting and soft feathers. I wanted to make them proud.

I wanted to describe a sky that resembled a king’s lavender robe studded with twinkling diamonds. I wanted to share how I

had twirled like a prima ballerina with my hands above my head and my face lifted to the heavens.

Instead, I told a tale of escaping ogres that hid in the woods. I told them how the sky had changed from soothing purple velvet to wicked darkness, and how the wind had screamed with glee as it massacred the winter nests hidden among the barren tree boughs. I told them how I'd cringed in fear as demons tore the birds' frail bodies to shreds while the tiny creatures howled in the throes of death.

Mama clouted me across the ear. Without a word, she returned to the kitchen.

Blood pounded in my swollen ear. I stood in my wet, smelly coat with my head hung in shame, and hot tears poured down my plump cheeks.

"Liars don't take meals with the family." Father took my sister's hand and led her to the kitchen.

When my grade two class performed, the seats for my family were vacant. My older sister was singing in the church choir that night. My parents couldn't be in two places at once.

When adults don't hear children, either they stop talking or they talk incessantly. They tell stories. They lie. Either way, they grow to learn that the people they love despise them. They understand that everyone will abandon them, leaving them alone with a monster that lives in their heads. And one day, they embrace the monster as their only friend.

He's crying now and calling for his mother. But she is gone and I am all he has left. Misery will bind us together for as long as he lives.

CHAPTER THREE

Reece

REECE UPLOADED HIS completed paper to his law professor's site and stared out the window. The snow had stopped but the view was gloomy. Thick grey clouds pressed down on the city, promising more snow. He offered silent thanks to Eli for fixing his laptop. At least he hadn't had to drive to the university library. Libraries reminded Reece of Sarah and he avoided them.

At thirty-eight, Reece had had plenty of casual relationships and more than a few one-night stands, but Sarah had been his only serious girlfriend until he'd met Sam. It was funny how a man's taste changed between his twenties and thirties. Sarah had been gorgeous on the outside, but ugly on the inside. He would never again excuse immorality. Love shouldn't require you to compromise your core values. That was a lesson Sam had taught him, and Reece knew how lucky they were to have found each other.

"Give a girl a ride home?"

He turned to find the woman of his thoughts in the office doorway.

“Everyone’s trying to beat the storm home,” she said. “Let’s have a drink before we tackle the traffic.” She shrugged off her coat and flopped onto a chair. “Did you get your paper done?”

He opened the mini-fridge on top of a decrepit wicker table and poured her a glass of Chablis, which he handed her before grabbing a beer. “Paper’s done, background checks are done. I was about to call Eli’s references. How was the seminar?”

She leaned back for a kiss. “I found a subtle way to mention to the hosting psychiatrist that I applied for a clinical practicum. We’ll see if she remembers me when it comes time to set up interviews.”

Reece stifled laughter. Sam didn’t do subtle. His fiancée had probably accosted the unsuspecting doctor and badgered her into submission. It was doubtful that the psychiatrist would forget meeting Sam McNamara.

“So, I have parking,” he said. “The tenant down the hall left and we were next in line for the spot.”

“You mean where the dumpster used to be?” She frowned. “It’s dark as Hades. You’ll need a flashlight to get to your car.”

Her negativity didn’t dampen his good mood. Hunting for parking near their office was frustrating and he hated public transportation.

“Let’s see what Wayne Kalstein has to say about Eli.” Reece looked up the number and put his cell on speaker.

“Wayne, Reece Hash. How are you?”

“There’s a voice from the past. Got your email last week. Sorry I didn’t call, but I made some queries.”

“One of your old students contacted us. Elijah Watson.”

There was a long pause. “Say the name again?”

Sam raised an eyebrow and took a sip of her wine.

“Elijah Watson. Caucasian, twenty-four, five-seven, one-thirty-five, brown hair, hazel eyes.”

Sam was motioning at him, drawing a finger across her cheek.

“Six-centimetre scar across the right side of his face and a two-centimetre scar on his left eyebrow.”

“Sure, I remember him,” Wayne said. “We’re getting old, my friend. Eli reached out?”

“He did, and he fixed my computer on the spot.”

Wayne laughed. “That sounds like Eli. I told him he’d be an asset to the Canadian Cyber Incident Response Centre. But he wasn’t interested in following college with computer engineering. He’s smart enough to have made it.”

That was positive. “So what’s your overall opinion of him?” Reece asked.

“You’d be lucky to have him. What’s he doing in Toronto? Last I heard he went to your old stomping grounds at Western for criminology.”

“Well, he’s here now with a shiny new private investigator licence. What were his marks like?”

“Good, or he wouldn’t be on my referral list. He had good attendance, lots of initiative, no discipline issues, and no bullshit drama. Truth is, Reece, you wanted someone older, and over half of my referral list works in law enforcement now. I doubt you’ll find anyone else chomping at the bit to take the job.”

Reece trusted his own instincts but it was nice to have confirmation from someone he respected.

“I’d give him a chance, but that’s just my opinion,” Wayne continued. “Let’s grab a beer next time you’re in London.”

Reece agreed, put down the phone, and turned to Sam. “Thoughts?”

“Undecided.”

He took a swig of beer to hide his aggravation. They weren’t investigating a CEO candidate for a billion-dollar corporation. “I did a background check. No priors. He’s clean.”

She was tapping her foot. “Eli doesn’t use social media. That’s strange for a Millennial. So I called Behoo and asked him to dig. His report was scant. That’s so unlike Behoo.”

Reece could not believe that she’d paid a hacker they kept on retainer to run a deep web check. He threw his beer can into the recycling bin harder than he’d intended.

Sam stared pointedly at the bin.

“What did you expect a hacker to uncover?” Reece asked. “A false identity?”

“Sarcasm doesn’t suit you.” She sighed. “King’s didn’t kick him out. He did well and dropped out after his second year. If he ran out of money, why didn’t he apply for student loans?” She chewed her lip. “And I got the impression that Behoo was hiding something.”

A headache was starting to throb at Reece’s temples. “Are you suggesting a white-hat hacker we’ve used for years—a man who protected us from a vicious cyberattack, no less—is suddenly lying to you?”

She was studying him with a frown. “Why are you so grumpy?”

“What do you want to do about Eli?”

“I’m not convinced, but I trust your instincts.” She stood and balanced on her tiptoes to kiss him. “Let’s go home, grumpy.”

She ran her hands down his chest. “Maybe you need some help to reduce the day’s stress.”

He grinned. “Well, if you insist.”

As Sam gathered her things, Reece called an elated Eli with the news. After he arranged to meet their new intern in the morning, he packed up his laptop and picked up his coat.

At the top of the stairs leading to the street, they bumped into a young woman. Reece narrowly avoided shoving her down the steep staircase. He grabbed her upper arm and stared in shock at his best friend’s daughter.

Margaret Walsh’s eyes were red and swollen. She’d tucked her long chestnut hair under a red toque. She was cold, miserable, and frightened.

“I need help. I don’t want to tell my parents.” She swiped a tissue across her eyes and a smear of black mascara marked her pale cheek.

When a third-year university student refused to tell her parents something that upset her this much, it wasn’t good. Betty and Harry were close friends of his from Uthisca, the town where he’d run the OPP detachment before joining Sam’s PI firm. Withholding information about a daughter from her father was the fastest way Reece knew of to destroy a friendship.

Sam ushered the sobbing young woman into the office. “What’s wrong?”

“My brother’s gone.” Margaret wiped the heel of her hand across her running nose. “Angel was so rude at Christmas, but I shouldn’t have said anything. Bart got mad. And now he’s disappeared. He’s missed ten days of classes,” she said with a sob. “My brother’s going to flunk out and lose his scholarship.”

Reece sat beside her and took her hand. “What do you mean he disappeared?”

She swallowed a few times, struggling to contain her tears. “We have lunch on campus once a week. He never showed. I figured he was mad because of the things I said about Angel. He hasn’t answered my calls or my text messages. His roommate said Bart told him a week ago that he and Angel were going away for the weekend, but he never came back.”

“Who’s Angel?” Sam asked patiently.

“His girlfriend. He met her on Bumble.” Margaret practically spit when she said it. “It’s a dating app. Both sexes can like profiles, but only females can reach out for a chat. It’s all about hooking up based on pictures.” She snorted and held a tattered tissue to her nose. “My brother isn’t photogenic. I have no idea why someone who looks like Angel would go for him. But she did, and not even four months later, Bart is in love? Can you believe that?”

Reece could believe that. He’d met Sarah after dropping out of law school and joining the OPP. She was younger and in her first year of library science. After a month, he was sure it was love.

Sam handed Margaret a fresh tissue. “What happened over Christmas?”

“Bart invited Angel to dinner and she arrived two hours late. Strutted in like a diva, interrogated us about you two, and hung all over Bart.” Her nose crinkled. “It was like watching an audition for a porn movie. She wouldn’t eat Mom’s roast, didn’t say anything nice about the Christmas decorations, ordered Bart

around, and now my brother is gone.” Her voice caught and she pressed the fresh tissue against her nose and snuffled.

Reece considered what she had said. In summary, the family disliked their nineteen-year-old’s new girlfriend. Bart and Angel were retaliating by giving everyone the cold shoulder. They were probably having a lovers’ tryst to commiserate over how unfair it was that Bart’s family didn’t approve.

“Why was Angel asking about me and Reece?” Sam asked coldly.

Confused by her tone, Reece glanced over at her. Her face had hardened to a stone mask and her green eyes had darkened to a cold emerald.

“Morbid curiosity,” Margaret answered. “She’s obsessed with that serial killer.”

Sam’s jaw clenched. “Incubus.”

Margaret nodded. “Mom asked her to stop talking about it. But she wouldn’t. Angel was graphic, going on about how the women weren’t drugged when he tore out their wombs. How he tattooed a white lily on their ankles and kept them alive until the skin healed.” She wrapped her arms around her waist. “Angel even speculated over how scared they must have been and how much pain they suffered. My little sister cried. It was awful.”

The colour had leached from Sam’s face. Her freckles were brash spots against her pale skin.

“Angel thought it was cool that all the victims were holding a flower.” Margaret shuddered. “Can you believe that? She wanted us to guess why the psychopath picked a white lily.”

“No one knows what it meant to him.” Sam’s voice was ragged with emotion.

Incubus had killed her older sister, Joyce Russo. Few people knew this, and Sam protected her pain, refusing to discuss it. Reece suspected it was a self-inflicted penance because she hadn't found Joyce in time.

Eager to get off the subject, Reece asked, "Anything else happen at Christmas?"

"Dad argued with Bart in the barn, but I wasn't there. When they went outside, Angel told Mom that if she didn't welcome her to the family, we'd never see Bart again."

Betty was mild-mannered with a kind disposition, but steel ran through her veins. Reece had no doubt that Betty would take care of Angel in short order, but he understood why Margaret didn't want to tell her parents that Bart was missing. A few years ago, their youngest daughter, Hope, had disappeared in the middle of the night. Authorities had found her close to death. If Reece could avoid it, he'd protect his friends from going through the hell of a missing child again.

"You said Bart met Angel on Bumble, What other social media apps does he use?" Reece opened his laptop to take notes.

"No idea. I'm not on social media."

Reece tried another tack. "Did Bart bring his car to the city?" Prior to relocating to Toronto, he'd spent many Saturday afternoons helping Harry and Bart fix up the old Buick.

"I checked and it's gone."

"Have you tried to reach Angel?" Sam asked.

"I don't have a number. She said her cell wasn't working and she had to get a new one." Margaret hung her head. "I've tried all Bart's friends. No one has heard from him." Her eyes filled with

tears. "Please find him before he ruins his life and loses his scholarship."

Sam turned to Reece. "I can call in a favour and have a BOLO issued for the car."

Reece wasn't keen on asking for an official favour. But Sam had been a police officer and her father had been a respected homicide detective until his death nine years ago. There were cops on the force who owed Colin McNamara a favour and would pay it forward to his daughter. Asking for a be on the lookout for the Buick didn't cross many protocol lines.

He nodded. "I'll reach out to the provincial police, too."

"He lets me drive the car sometimes." Margaret opened her wallet and removed a photocopy of the ownership.

"Do you have a recent picture of Bart?" Sam asked.

Margaret scrolled through her cell and passed the device to Sam. "This was a month ago at a sorority party. I'm with Alpha Gamma Delta." Her lower lip trembled. "Bart had such a good time."

Sam tapped on the keys of the phone and handed it back. "Did Angel go? Do you have a picture of her?"

"Bart didn't tell her about the party," Margaret said. "At Christmas, she wouldn't let us take her picture."

"We need to get into Bart's social media," Sam said. "There should be pictures he posted of his girlfriend. What's she studying?"

"Angel wanted Bart to switch to business so they would have classes together. But three of my sorority sisters are in business and they swear Angel isn't in their classes." She frowned. "When

Mom asked about her family, Angel wouldn't answer. Wouldn't even tell us where she grew up."

There was a low-frequency hum inside Reece's head. This girl claimed she didn't have a phone, refused to have her picture taken, wouldn't share her background, and had possibly lied about attending the university.

"Okay," Sam was saying. "We just hired an intern with an IT background. Maybe he can track Bart's social media and check if your brother's been online. What cellphone plan is Bart on?"

"Rogers, same as I am." Margaret snagged a pad from the desk and wrote down a number.

"We have a contact," Reece said. "I'll ask her to ping the cell and get a location. I want a list of your brother's friends and professors. Does Bart have a credit card?"

"Dad gave us one for emergencies. It's the same number." She took her card from her wallet and Reece wrote down the details.

"The key is his girlfriend," Sam said. "What's her full name?"

"Angelina Stuart."

All the air disappeared from the room. Reece sat rigid in the chair, struggling to keep his features impassive. Sam was speaking, but the humming inside his head had increased to deafening white noise and it drowned out her words. His mouth was dry and his heart thundered inside his chest. Now he knew why Bart's girlfriend had interrogated the Walsh family.

Angelina Stuart's interest wasn't Sam. It was Reece.

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