

JAMES  
PATTERSON

THE WORLD'S BESTSELLING THRILLER WRITER

AND J.D. BARKER

THE  
**COAST-TO-COAST  
MURDERS**

A killer is on the road . . .



# THE COAST-TO-COAST MURDERS

**JAMES PATTERSON** is one of the best-known and biggest-selling writers of all time. His books have sold in excess of 400 million copies worldwide. He is the author of some of the most popular series of the past two decades – the Alex Cross, Women's Murder Club, Detective Michael Bennett and Private novels – and he has written many other number one bestsellers including non-fiction and stand-alone thrillers.

James is passionate about encouraging children to read. Inspired by his own son who was a reluctant reader, he also writes a range of books for young readers including the Middle School, Dog Diaries, Treasure Hunters and Max Einstein series. James has donated millions in grants to independent bookshops and has been the most borrowed author in UK libraries for the past thirteen years in a row. He lives in Florida with his family.

**J.D. BARKER** is the international bestselling author of numerous books, including *Dracul* and *The Fourth Monkey*. His novels have been translated into two dozen languages and optioned for both film and television. Barker resides in coastal New Hampshire with his wife, Dayna, and their daughter, Ember.

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## **PART 1**

# **LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA**

What is the mind but thin glass?

—Barton Fitzgerald, MD

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## **CHAPTER ONE**

# **MICHAEL**

## **WHERE WILL YOU BE** when your life ends?

I was in the grocery store, squeezing a mango.

Sixteen minutes ago, I took a phone call from the woman who lived in the apartment below mine in Wilshire Village, a nondescript mustard-yellow monstrosity just off Broadway on Glendale, a block from Wilshire in Los Angeles.

I left my basket in the aisle and ran the ten blocks from the store, arriving home out of breath and sweating, to find the mailman in our lobby staring at the growing puddle of water under the bank of mailboxes. The steady stream was trickling down the stairs, flooding the first-floor alcove.

I rushed past him and up the steps, careful not to slip.

My phone rang again as I reached my door. Neighbor again.

“I see it, Mrs. Dowell. Must be a burst pipe or something.” That happened back east during the winter. I’d had no idea it could happen in California.

The water came out from under my door and into the hall, pooling on the landing.

“Michael? It’s dripping down my walls, from the ceiling,” Mrs. Dowell said. “My paintings, my furniture . . . did you call the super?”

I fumbled with my keys, found the right one, and twisted it in the lock for the dead bolt. “I thought you called the super.”

“Why would I call the super? It’s your apartment.”

*Because the super could have been here half an hour ago and killed the water.* “I’ll call him the second we hang up, Mrs. Dowell, I promise.”

I pushed open the door and stepped inside. I reached for the light switch but thought better of it—I was standing in at least a quarter of an inch of water.

Mrs. Dowell sighed. “Who’s going to pay for all this?”

The hardwood floor glistened in the light of the setting sun. A small river flowed from the bedroom in the back to the living room, down the hall, and out the front door.

I could hear splashing and gurgling. “I think it’s coming from the bathroom,” I told her.

Mrs. Dowell said, “You didn’t answer my question.”

“I’ll pay for it. Whatever the damage. Don’t worry about that.”

“My paintings are priceless.”

*I’ve seen your paintings. We’ll take a trip to the flea market together and replace them.*

The bedroom was the only carpeted room in the apartment, and I sloshed through it, my shoes leaving a trail of mushy footprints in my wake.

In the bathroom, water gushed from the sink tap. The bathtub faucet too. Water cascaded over the white porcelain sides of both.

“Mrs. Dowell, I’m hanging up so I can call the super. I’ll call you back.”

I looked over my shoulder at the bedroom behind me, knowing full well that I didn’t leave the water on, so someone else had.

The room was empty, crowded with nothing but elongated shadows.

I turned to the sink, twisted the faucet, shut it off.

A towel was in the basin, blocking the overflow drain. I knew I hadn't done that.

I should have run at that point, left the apartment. I wish I had, because what came next was far worse than a stranger invading my home.

I took the few steps from my sink to the bathtub and looked into the overflowing water, down through the rippling surface at what lay beneath, lit only by the fading light of dusk. I looked down at the most beautiful face staring back at me. Her deep green eyes were open wide, her mouth slightly agape, her blond hair wavering gently with the current.

I found myself staring at her, this nude, lifeless girl in my bathtub. Smooth, flawless skin, the faintest patch of freckles on her nose.

At some point, I shut off the bathtub faucet. I don't remember doing it, though. I only remember sitting on the edge of the tub, my breath deserting me.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

# **MICHAEL**

**MY CELL PHONE BUZZED** in my hand. Mrs. Dowell again.

I hit Decline and dialed.

I did not call the building super.

She picked up on the third ring. “I’m thinking of a number between one and five.”

“Meg, not now, something happened—”

“Ah, ah, ah, you know the rules, Michael. Pick a number.”

I shook my head. “Meg, this is really—”

“Do you have any idea how many times I’ve called you in the past week? You didn’t pick up. You didn’t call me back. You didn’t even bother with a *Hey, I’m still alive but busy* text,” Megan rattled on. “Nineteen times. Is that any way to treat your sister? Dr. Bart’s funeral is next Tuesday, and you pick this week to drop off the radar? *No bueno*, big brother. Dr. Rose is all over me. ‘Where is your brother? Is he coming home? Have you talked to him? He’ll be here, right?’ It’s bad enough you won’t speak to her, but you can’t shut me out. I know you don’t want to be here for this, but you have to, Michael. I can’t do Dr. Bart’s funeral without you, I

just can't. I know you didn't get along, not all the time—all right, never—but if you skip this, you'll never forgive yourself. This is the kind of thing that haunts you for the rest of your life. You'll regret it, and there's no way to take it back. If you don't want to be here for yourself, think about me and Dr. Rose. I know she can be a bitch, but she raised us. And she's a mess right now. She's barely holding it together. We need to think about appearances too. How will it look for her if you're not here? You know how people at the university talk, her colleagues. She doesn't need this—”

“Megan—”

“Just tell me you'll be here, and I'll drop it. I won't bring it up again. You can even skip my next birthday, my next ten birthdays. Just be here for this. It's too important to—”

“Three.”

Megan fell silent.

“The number you're thinking of is three.”

“How do you do that?”

“Meg, I need you to listen to me closely. Something's happened.”

“Are you okay?”

The girl's blank face stared up at me from the bathtub, the rippling water distorting her features, a shimmer around her pale skin. She looked so calm, peaceful. She had the most beautiful green eyes. A lone bubble floated up from her lips, disappeared at the surface.

I wasn't okay. I wasn't okay at all.

“There's a girl in my bathtub.”

Megan replied, “You sound awfully sad about that.”

“The water flooded my apartment, Mrs. Dowell... I don't know who...” The words fell from my mouth, incoherent babble. My heart beat hard against my rib cage.

“Whoa, take a deep breath, Michael.”

I did. I took two. “She's dead, Meg.”

Megan said nothing.

“I . . . I don’t know who she is.”

My sister remained silent.

“Meg?”

“You’re fucking with me, right? Like the time you said you ran over that guy at the truck stop in Kansas City because he was wearing a New Kids on the Block T-shirt? Or the time you said you found a prostitute sleeping in the cab of your truck and decided to keep her? Like the time you said you picked up a hitchhiker in Nevada and left him in Utah, Colorado, *and* Missouri? Now is really not the time for practical jokes, Michael. I need to be able to tell Dr. Rose you’re coming home.”

“I . . . can’t tell how she died. Not by looking at her. I don’t see anything wrong. She looks like she’s sleeping but she’s not, not underwater. She’s not breathing. I don’t want to touch her. I know I shouldn’t, and I haven’t.”

“Holy hell, you’re serious? Did you call the police?”

“I called you.”

“You need to call the police. Right now. You need to hang up and call them.”

I did.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

# **MICHAEL**

### **CAN I CHANGE MY** pants?"

I was on the couch in my small living room.

From the corner of the room, Detective Garrett Dobbs looked up from his phone. His brow furrowed. "What?"

"When I sat on the edge of the bathtub, my pants and underwear got soaked. Can I change clothes, please?"

"No. Later. I want you to walk me through everything one more time. Start when you left your apartment this afternoon," Dobbs said.

The detective looked like he was in his mid- to late thirties. His brown hair was cropped close on the sides, longer on top, slightly tousled. He wore a black sweatshirt, jeans, and black boots. His badge hung around his neck on a metal chain. He made no effort to conceal the gun attached to his belt. I didn't know enough about guns to identify the make or model. It was black and seemed heavier than it probably was.

He looked familiar, but I couldn't place him. Then it came to me. "You used to play football, right? For Syracuse? Running back, if I remember correctly."

His eyes had been on his phone and they stayed there for another moment. When he looked up, his expression remained blank. “Are you from New York? Not many Orange fans out here in LA.”

“I went to Cornell.”

He nodded. “Big Red, huh?”

“Not really. I dropped out my junior year.”

“Last I checked, you don’t need the degree to be a fan.”

“You haven’t spoken to my parents. Without a degree, you’re not much of anything.”

“That’s harsh.”

“You were fast. Always figured you’d head to the pros.”

Another detective, I hadn’t been told his name, leaned in and grinned. “Dobbs here ran the forty in four point two-seven seconds, the same as Deion Sanders. Fastest guy to come out of Syracuse till he tore his Achilles. Then he was only as fast as the rest of us humans.”

Dobbs lowered his phone. “I tore it twice. Junior and senior year. When the NFL scouts came, they saw me as damaged goods. Stepped right on by like I was invisible. Past—”

“Past performance is not indicative of future results,” the other detective said. “He always says that. Reminds me of a financial commercial.”

Dobbs said, “I saw that phrase next to my name on one of the scout’s clipboards. It stuck, I suppose. You hear something like that about yourself, and it gets caught in your head. Coach let me finish out my senior year riding the bench so I wouldn’t lose my scholarship, but we all knew I was done with football.”

“Wilkins?”

This came from one of the CSI investigators near my bed.

The other detective, Wilkins, crossed the room.

Dobbs turned back to me. “You’ve got a good memory. I haven’t played since 2001. Christ, seventeen years now.”

“Some things do stick, I suppose.”

My eyes went to the CSI investigator. Through the open bedroom door, I watched him reach down with gloved hands and pick up a woman’s purse from the far side of my bed. He set it gently on top of my rumpled navy quilt. I hadn’t seen the purse when I came in. He reached back down and brought up a small black dress, panties, matching bra, and a pair of black pumps. He laid each item down on the bed. A second CSI investigator placed small numbered placards next to each—4, 5, 6, 7, 8, and 9. I wondered what had already been tagged 1 through 3. A third CSI photographed each item from multiple angles.

Dobbs watched me watching them, made another note on his phone. “You said you don’t know her?”

“I don’t.”

He tilted his head. “Looks a lot like you know her.”

“I don’t,” I repeated. “I have no idea who she is.”

He nodded toward my front door. “We found no sign of forced entry. You said it was locked when you got home, right?”

“It was, yeah.”

“The dead bolt, the knob, or both?”

“Just the dead bolt. I don’t bother with the other one.”

Two other CSIs were busy mopping up the water with large yellow sponges. They squeezed them out into white buckets. On masking tape, across the side of one bucket, printed in black blocky letters, was a case number, my last name, my address, and the number 2; the other bucket had the same information but with the number 3. I imagined yet another CSI studying that water in a lab somewhere, one drop on a slide at a time.

“Hey, Dobbs? We got an ID.” Wilkins was busy going through the contents of the purse. He held up a driver’s license. “Alyssa Tepper. Twenty-two years old. She lives in Burbank.”

Dobbs nodded at me. “Alyssa Tepper. Her name mean anything to you?”

I shook my head.

Wilkins whistled. “Hey, look at this.” He held up a baseball card. “This is a ’36 Joe DiMaggio from World Wide Gum.”

Dobbs went over to him. “Valuable?”

“In pristine condition, they can be worth upwards of ninety thousand. The back is jacked up on this one, though. Half the paper is missing. Left corner is torn. Still worth a pretty penny, but nowhere near that much.” He placed it on the bed along with the various other items found in the purse.

Dobbs leaned into his ear and said something I couldn’t make out.

Wilkins nodded, took out his cell phone, and made a call.

I knew that baseball card.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

# **MICHAEL**

**THEY FOUND A KEY** in her purse. The key fit my dead-bolt lock.

That was two hours ago.

When my building super finally showed up, the uniformed officers standing at my apartment door wouldn't let him in. His eyes met mine from the hallway. I turned away.

The water had been cleaned up, the buckets hauled off.

Dobbs was in my bedroom or the bathroom. He had closed the adjoining door so I could no longer see inside either room. There were at least twelve other people in there.

He'd left me on the couch. The same officers who kept my super out were clearly tasked with keeping me in.

When my bedroom door finally opened, two women from the medical examiner's office wheeled a gurney out, a zippered black bag on top.

Dobbs followed behind them, watched as they went out the front door, then sat beside me on the couch. "Your pants still wet?"

"Damp. It's okay. I'm fine."

He tossed a pair of jeans at me. Underwear, socks, and a worn Big Red sweatshirt followed. All of it had been pulled from my suitcase on the bedroom floor. A CSI investigator stood behind him with a large, clear plastic bag.

Dobbs said, “Change out of your clothes into those. Everything goes in the bag. Do you have anything in your pockets?”

“I told you I didn’t the last two times you asked. One of the patrol officers checked before you got here.”

His eyes dropped to my jeans. “Turn your pockets inside out. I need to see.”

Although frustrated, I did as he asked. Everyone had a job to do. Dobbs seemed satisfied. He nodded at the CSI.

The man with the clear plastic bag stepped up beside me and held it open.

I frowned. “Right here?”

“If you’re shy, we can go into the hallway or the kitchen. Bathroom and bedroom are both off-limits.”

I thought about my super out in the hallway. Probably Mrs. Dowell and who knew who else were standing out there too. I turned my back to Dobbs, faced the couch, and stripped off my clothes. Everything went into the plastic bag, and I dressed in the clothes Dobbs had brought me.

The CSI investigator pulled the drawstring on the bag, then took out a Sharpie. He wrote my name, a case number, and 47 on the front. The shoes found beside my bed had been tagged with an 8 and a 9. That meant there was a lot of evidence I had yet to see.

Through the bedroom door, I caught a glimpse of the open drawers, bare mattress, and items pulled from my closet and stacked against the wall—everything from clothing to sports equipment, photo albums, and various boxes I hadn’t bothered to unpack since moving in.

Wilkins saw me and closed the door.

Dobbs asked me to take a seat on the couch. “Was anyone here when you left?”

I’d gone over this a dozen times. Not just with him but with the first responders. *He’s just doing his job*, I told myself. I drew in a breath and started from the beginning. “I got in late last night and slept until a little after two this afternoon.”

“Where were you last night?”

“Working.”

Dobbs read from his phone. “You said you’re a long-haul truck driver, correct?”

I nodded. “For Nadler Distribution, off Wilshire. I pick up wine here in California and haul it back east. On that end, I load up with craft beer and bring it back.”

“How often do you make the trip?”

“Three times per month.”

“When did you get in last night?”

“I pulled into the distribution center just after midnight. By the time I finished up the paperwork and offloaded, it was nearly three. I got home around three thirty.”

“You didn’t stop anywhere between the distribution center and your apartment? No late-night snack, cigarettes at a convenience store, no bar, nothing?” Dobbs had his phone out again, no doubt comparing what I’d said this time to what I’d said the previous times.

I shook my head. “I ate on the road. I don’t smoke, and I’m not much for the bar scene. I was tired. Everything ached—sleeping in the cab of a truck for a week will do that to you. I just wanted a shower and my own bed. I came straight here.”

“Alone?”

“Alone.” I nodded.

“Did anyone see you? Is there someone who can corroborate that?”

“Nadler Distribution will have records of my arrival, offload, et cetera. There’s cameras.”

Dobbs said, “We’ll get that information. That’s not what I mean. Can anyone confirm you arrived home alone?”

“At three thirty in the morning?”

He nodded.

I looked down at my hands. “No. The building is quiet that time of night.”

Dobbs typed something into his phone: “Let’s backtrack a little bit. How did you get home? Where did you park?”

“I walked. It’s not very far. I like to stretch my legs after a long haul.”

“You walked,” he repeated.

“Yeah.”

“I’ll need the exact route.”

I told him. I imagined he would check traffic cameras.

He looked toward my front door. “You don’t have a security system. Don’t you worry about your possessions, being that you’re away from home so much?”

I shrugged. “I don’t really have anything worth taking. Nothing that can’t be replaced.”

“How long have you lived here?”

“About two years.”

“Yet you haven’t hung up any pictures. Looks like most of what you own is still boxed up. Sparse furniture. A few essentials in the kitchen. Toothbrush, razor . . . not much of anything in the way of personal items,” Dobbs pointed out.

“Like you said, I’m not home very much.”

“No real security on your building either. No cameras. Your key unlocks the front door. No records, no time stamps.”

“It’s private. I like that. Sometimes it seems like everything people do is under a microscope. Recorded and cataloged in a dozen different places,” I said.

He looked down at his phone. “When we check your social media accounts, are we going to find Alyssa Tepper?”

“I don’t have any social media accounts,” I said. “I told you, I don’t know who she is. You’ve got my phone. Go through it, I don’t care.”

Dobbs glanced up at me. “Yeah, we’ve got your phone.” He returned to his notes, then said, “You got home around three thirty, showered, and went to bed? Nothing else? No contact with anyone?”

“I was tired.”

“Yeah, you said that. Then what happened?”

“I slept until around two this afternoon. Got up, took another shower to wake up. Ate some lunch, then went out to see a movie.”

“What movie?”

“The latest Marvel film.”

“I’ll need your ticket.”

“My ticket?”

“Yeah. Your ticket from the movie. Your ticket stub.”

“I tossed it.”

Dobbs tapped at his phone again. “Can you log into your credit card account and show me the purchase?”

“I paid cash.”

“You paid cash.” Dobbs repeated this softly to himself. “Tell me about the movie.”

I frowned. “I found a dead girl in my bathtub, and you want me to tell you about a movie?”

He smiled. “I don’t need the blow-by-blow, just the major plot points. I love a good Marvel movie.”

Frustrated, I closed my eyes for a second and rubbed my temples. *He’s just doing his job. He’s just doing his job.*

I told him about the film, what I could remember.

When I finished, he said, “Can you tell me something about the movie that I haven’t already seen in one of the previews? We’ve all seen the previews.”

The truth was, I had fallen asleep shortly after the film started. I missed most of it. I only went so I could get out of the house, relax, unwind a little. When you’re cooped up in the cab of a truck by yourself for a week, sometimes it’s nice to get out and be surrounded by people. Parks, libraries, anything to break up the isolation. Sometimes it’s a movie. I told him the truth.

Dobbs studied his notes. “So even though you slept nearly ten hours and got up only two hours earlier, you couldn’t keep your eyes open—that it?”

I nodded.

“Anyone see you there? Anyone you know?”

“No.”

He sighed. “What time did the movie end?”

“Five fifty. I checked the time on the way out.”

“And then you went where?”

“Big Six Market on Sixth and Rampart.”

Dobbs said, “You walked?”

“Yes.”

“And that’s when your neighbor called?”

“Mrs. Dowell said there was some kind of water leak, so I dropped everything and came straight back. That’s when I found her.”

“And you called 911.”

“Correct.”

“After you spoke to your sister.”

“Yeah, I called her first.”

He had grilled me on that earlier, unsure why I would call her before calling the police. Now he said, “I want you to think long and hard before you answer me this one *last* time. Do you understand?”

I nodded.

He looked me directly in the eye. “Are you sure you don’t know Ms. Tepper?”

I returned his gaze; I didn’t hesitate. “I’m certain.”

Dobbs shook his head, turned back to his phone, and scrolled through his notes again. After nearly a minute of silence, he stood. “Get up. We’re going to take a ride.”

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

# **MICHAEL**

**DETECTIVE GARRETT DOBBS PLACED** me in the back seat of a white Ford sedan parked between two Los Angeles PD vans in the yellow zone in front of my building.

Although it was nearly one in the morning, a surprising number of my neighbors had been up and about, their apartment doors open, as we walked past. Harvey Wilfong from two doors down had set up a lawn chair in the hallway and sat there with a six-pack of beer. I smiled awkwardly at all of them. Most turned away. Mrs. Dowell met my gaze, but her face was so full of disappointment, I found myself looking down at my hands.

The Ford was unmarked, but the floodlight on the driver's side gave it away as a police car. There was no barrier between the front and back. An ancient Panasonic laptop was bolted to the dashboard. Fast-food bags littered the floor. The back seat was upholstered in some kind of black vinyl. Two metal eyebolts protruded from between the cushions, no doubt for fastening handcuffs. Detective Dobbs had not handcuffed me. He had not read me my rights. When we left my apartment, I'd expected him to do both.

“Who is Megan?” Wilkins said, climbing into the front passenger seat. He held my phone, sealed inside a plastic bag.

“My sister.”

“She’s called about a dozen times.”

“Can I call her back? Let her know what’s going on?”

Wilkins tossed the bag aside and fastened his seat belt. “Nope.”

“Am I under arrest?”

Before Wilkins could respond, Dobbs got in and started the car. He got us out from between the vans and onto Rampart. We turned on Sixth and drove past the park.

“Where are we going?”

Dobbs glanced at me in the rearview mirror. “You tell me. You don’t recognize the route?”

I shrugged. “I know MacArthur Park.”

We got on the 110 for about twenty minutes. There was a surprising amount of traffic for the late hour. He took an exit just after the 101 flyover. “Chinatown?”

“Lookie there, it’s all coming back to him now,” Wilkins said.

“What’s in Chinatown?”

Neither man answered.

Dobbs took several more turns—a right here, a left, two more rights. He knew where he was going—he didn’t use a map or GPS. On Cleveland, I spotted two LAPD patrol cars and another van, similar to the ones parked in front of my building.

Dobbs pulled up behind them, shifted the Ford into park, and looked up at me again in the mirror. “Where are we, Mr. Kepler?”

I frowned. I had no idea. I hadn’t been to Chinatown in at least a year.

Someone dressed in white CSI overalls exited the van nearest us and went through the open door of the building to our right. Beyond the door was a narrow staircase. On one side of the door there was a laundromat; on the other, a pizzeria. A sign on the

open door said STUDIOS AND ONE-BEDROOM APARTMENTS FOR RENT! and gave a phone number.

“Michael?”

Dobbs again.

I said, “I... I’ve never been here.”

Wilkins pulled his wallet from his back pocket, took out a dollar bill, and handed it to Dobbs. “Double or nothing inside?”

Dobbs pocketed the money. “You’re on.”

I leaned forward. “What’s going on here?”

Both men got out of the car.

Dobbs opened my door. “Want to lead the way?”

I just stared at him, puzzled.

He rolled his eyes. “Christ. Okay, come on, we’re going inside.”

## **CHAPTER SIX**

# **MICHAEL**

### **DOBBS WENT FIRST.**

I followed him through the door and up the narrow staircase, Wilkins right behind me. An ancient floral-print wallpaper covered the wall, peeling in some places, torn away in others. The wood steps and railing were covered in so many layers of paint, I could barely make out the intricate carving on the banister. The heavy-gloss white paint on the steps was marred with scuffs and grime. The stagnant air stank of old cheese and chemicals from the businesses below.

The top of the stairs opened into a hallway with six doors. The one at the end on the left stood open with an overweight uniformed officer perched on a wooden chair next to the door, a half-eaten burrito in his hand. He gave Dobbs and Wilkins a nod and gestured toward the open door. “In there,” he mumbled, bits of beef tumbling from his full mouth.

“You’re a pig, Horton,” Dobbs said, walking past him and into the apartment.

I had stopped in the hall.

Wilkins gave my back a push, forced me inside.

A man in a white dress shirt, khakis, and a loosened dark blue tie came over when he spotted Dobbs. His gray hair was cropped short on the sides; he was bald on top. He was probably in his fifties. He held a clipboard in his hands, used it to point at the room behind him. “We left everything as is, just like you asked. I can’t keep my team standing around, though—we need to process this place. I’ve got another one downtown after we finish up here.”

“We won’t be long,” Dobbs said. “Ian, this is the man I told you about, Michael Kepler.”

Reflexively, I offered my hand. “Pleased to meet you.”

The man only stared.

Dobbs looked at me. “Ian Dantzler here heads three of LA’s crime scene investigative teams. Been with LAPD for twenty-two years now.”

“Twenty-three,” Dantzler corrected him.

Wilkins dropped a heavy hand onto my shoulder, looked at Dantzler. “Mr. Kepler says he found the vic in his bathtub after going out for a movie. Says he has no idea who she is. Says he’s never seen her before in his entire life. Figured we’d bring him down here, see how that goes.”

I absorbed about half of what he said.

My eyes were fixed on a framed photograph sitting on a small table near the door beside a bowl holding several loose keys and some change. A wood frame, stained a deep cherry. It was the image within that frame that had caught my eye, though, the image that held me. A photo of me with a very much alive Alyssa Tepper standing outside gate 4 of Yankee Stadium in the Bronx. My hair was a little longer; I hadn’t worn it that way in some time. We both smiled at the camera, our hands entwined.

“This is her apartment,” I said softly.

“Wait for it,” Wilkins said, his grip tightening on my shoulder.

“I don’t . . . understand. I’ve never met her.”

“Fuck me.” Wilkins released my shoulder, pulled out his wallet, and handed two more dollars to Dobbs.

Dobbs pocketed the money but his gaze never left me. His lips were frozen in a sort of half grin. “Are you seriously going to deny that’s you?”

I felt my face flush. My cheeks grew warm, hot. “It’s fake . . . got to be. Photoshop or something. Some kind of trick or a joke.”

On the floor, between the small table and the front door, were several pairs of tennis shoes. Two of those pairs were obviously female; the third I recognized. Size 11 Nike Air VaporMax LTRs. The right one had a dark smudge near the toe where I had spilled coffee. By the time I’d tried to scrub it out, the stain had set. I hadn’t seen them in a while; they’d been misplaced somewhere in my closet.

Dobbs caught my millisecond glance at the shoes. “When we pull DNA, it’s going to match yours, right?”

I didn’t say anything.

“Your brain is no doubt chewing through a million thoughts,” Dobbs said. “While you’re being quiet, and it’s probably best that you do, I’d like you to consider one more thought. Possibly *the most* important thought you will ever consider in your life. If you tell us the truth now, if you cooperate, everything will be far easier for you. When we file charges, and we *will* file charges, they will be lesser charges than if you continue to deny your involvement in the death of Alyssa Tepper. LA County has some of the nastiest prosecutors in the country. They’re bitter, angry, fed up with all the bad press they receive, so when they get a case they see as a slam dunk, they take it to the rim. They milk it. They’ll make an example out of you and they’ll do it publicly. California is a death-penalty state when it comes to capital offenses, so you might find yourself standing in the gas chamber when the dust settles. Even

if they don't actually kill you—the last execution was more than a decade ago—they'd have no problem keeping you on death row for the rest of your life. You're, what, twenty-six? That's a long, long time. You cop to all this, you tell us the truth, and you're probably looking at only twenty to thirty years, maybe less if you keep your head down, stay out of trouble. That's not bad. You'd be out in your forties or fifties. Plenty of time to pull a new life together. Because you could still have a future, if you chose to."

Dobbs turned back to Dantzler. "Do you mind giving us a tour of Ms. Tepper's apartment? I think Michael has a right to know what else we've found."

## **CHAPTER SEVEN**

# **MICHAEL**

## **THERE WERE SEVERAL OTHER** photos.

On the coffee table, there was one with Alyssa Tepper and me kissing outside a Hard Rock Café. In a silver frame beside the couch, one of the two of us with the famed Hollywood sign in the distance. Four of me alone, grinning, smiling, laughing. I remembered none of them being taken. In the small kitchen, held to the refrigerator with a Pizza Hut magnet, was one of me standing in the open door of my truck. Alyssa Tepper sat sideways in the driver's seat up behind me wearing a white tank top and shorts, her legs wrapped around my chest. She had a Nadler Distribution ball cap perched at an angle on her head. My tongue was sticking out, and I had a goofy expression on my face. The photo was crinkled, faded, worn, as if it had been carried in a pocket for some time before finding a home next to a to-do list and a calendar from a local real estate agent.

I stared at that last one.

I stared at my own eyes looking back at me. Familiar, yet not.

I'd had only two girlfriends since moving to Los Angeles and I hadn't shown either of them my truck, where I worked. I

wasn't ashamed; I loved my job. Security at Nadler was tight—nonemployees were not permitted on the lot for insurance reasons, and when I had the truck out, I was on the road. I didn't linger in LA long enough to visit with anyone or take pictures.

"She looks happy there," Dobbs said. "You make a cute couple."

"*Made*," Wilkins said from behind us.

Dantzler cleared his throat. "Yes, well, there's more for you to see in the bedroom."

He led us down a narrow hallway—bedroom on the left, small bathroom on the right. I stopped and looked in the bathroom. A CSI investigator was busy bagging up two toothbrushes—one pink, one blue—a men's razor, a half-used bar of soap, and several other items I couldn't see from where I stood. When she noticed me watching her, she pursed her lips and closed the bathroom door.

"In here," Dantzler said from the bedroom.

The bedroom was small, no more than eleven by thirteen. A full-size bed was pushed into the corner opposite the door, a scratched and worn nightstand beside it. There was a dresser against the wall to our right. There were more photos in here—I stopped looking at them; my gut was churning. The bed was unmade, white sheets tangled in a brown quilt at the foot. Rumpled pillows tossed about.

An empty tripod stood near the back of the room. The video camera that no doubt had been perched atop that tripod was now on the dresser; wires trailed from the front of the camera to the back of a small flat-panel television. The screen was on but blank.

Dantzler looked to Dobbs.

Dobbs nodded.

The lead investigator pressed several buttons on the camera and an image appeared. Grainy. The only light in the room came from candles on the nightstand. It was a side shot of the bed. On it, Alyssa Tepper, naked, her back arched, eyes closed, writhing as she

slowly rose and fell. She rolled her head to the side, her hair moving from one shoulder to the other. Hands came up from beneath her, slid up her bare belly to her breasts, brushed her nipples. Hands I knew, arms I knew. When one of those arms came back down and pushed the quilt aside, then pushed it to the floor, I wanted to turn away. I didn't want to watch, but I couldn't look away. Like everyone else's in the room, my eyes were fixed on the screen, my eyes locked on my body beneath hers, my own face glancing at the camera briefly before turning back to her and smiling, my voice whispering her name before sitting up and pulling her against me in the dim light.

"Turn it off," I muttered.

Again, Dantzler looked to Dobbs.

Again, Dobbs nodded.

The screen went blank.

Dantzler pulled open one of the dresser drawers and stepped aside.

Dobbs nudged me toward the open drawer. "Take a look."

Inside were several pairs of jeans, socks, underwear, a couple T-shirts. Some folded, others not. The drawer was nearly full.

"I think we've all had a drawer like this at one point or another," Dobbs said. "A little home away from home. You're not quite ready to bite the bullet and move in, but you're spending enough nights with her to warrant some space. I don't know about you, but I always found that moment nice, when a girl gives you a corner of her place. It shows she trusts you, finds comfort in your presence. I suppose it also means she drops her guard a bit, sometimes a little too much. Do you recognize the clothing, Michael?"

I didn't reply.

"I bet you do," Dobbs said. "I bet you remember the day she gave you that drawer."

All three men watched me close, studied me. I didn't look in

the drawer—I wouldn't give them the satisfaction. The top of the dresser was cluttered with headbands, jewelry; earrings and necklaces sat in an open wooden box. My eyes fell on one particular necklace near the bottom—a bird feather attached to a thin leather strap. A sparrow feather.

I quickly looked away.

## **CHAPTER EIGHT**

# **MICHAEL**

**THEY TOOK ME TO** LAPD headquarters on First Street.

This time, Dobbs did handcuff me, although I wasn't read my rights.

None of us spoke in the car.

Inside the building, Dobbs and Wilkins guided me past the front desk to a bank of elevators on the east wall. We got in one, exited on the third floor, and crossed through a large bullpen humming with activity despite the ungodly early hour. The dozens of desks, tables, and chairs were filled with people from all walks of life—gangbangers and prostitutes and men dressed in drag; old people and screaming children; a man in a four-thousand-dollar suit with a twenty-something woman wearing an equally expensive dress, both shouting at two uniformed officers. Their hair was disheveled, and he had a tear in his right jacket sleeve. At first I thought they were the victims of a mugging but then I realized they were both in handcuffs with a ziplock bag of colorful pills on the desk between them and the cops. At the far end of the room, I was photographed and fingerprinted. The female

officer, clearly proficient, rolled my fingers one at a time over the digital reader.

When she was finished with me, Dobbs tugged at my arm and Wilkins gave me a shove. They led me down a hallway, deeper into the building, leaving the noise behind us.

Dobbs opened a door marked INTERVIEW ROOM 7—DO NOT ENTER WHEN RED LIGHT IS ON and ushered me inside. “Get comfortable.”

He left. The door locked with a loud *clack!* and I was alone.

I sat there for two hours.

I had never been in an interrogation room before, but nonetheless, the space felt familiar. I’d seen enough of them in films and on television and it was clear that those in Hollywood didn’t travel farther than LA for their inspiration. The room wasn’t very large, maybe ten feet square, with a drop ceiling and fluorescent lights beaming down. The cinder-block walls were painted a muted gray. A metal table was bolted to the wall and the floor with two black cloth chairs on one side and a single chair on the other. A large one-way mirror filled the wall to my left, and a camera faced me from the corner above. I tried to sit in the single chair but with my hands cuffed behind me, I had to sit on the edge of the table instead.

Two hours.

Dobbs returned alone carrying two cups of coffee. He set them down on the table and closed the door with his foot. “Turn around.”

He removed the handcuffs and told me to take a seat.

I rubbed at my wrists. “I’m supposed to get a phone call.”

“In a minute.”

“You haven’t even read me my rights.”

“I haven’t arrested you.” Dobbs slid one of the coffees toward me. “Take a seat.”

I lowered myself tentatively into a chair. “I need to call my sister. She’s got to be worried.”

Dobbs pursed his lips, turned his own coffee cup counterclockwise, and took a drink. “Have you thought about what I said?”

I looked him dead in the eye. “I have no idea who that woman is. I’ve never met her. I’ve never been to her apartment. I’ve certainly never slept with her. Somebody is trying to set me up.”

Dobbs looked down at his coffee cup, turned it slowly again. “Give me a DNA sample.”

“Why would I do that?”

“Why not? If you’re innocent, there’s no reason not to, right?”

I shook my head. “Not until I talk to my sister. I want my phone back.”

“Your phone has been logged into evidence. You can file a petition to have it returned to you but I can tell you, it won’t be released until this case is closed.” He pushed the second cup toward me. “Drink some coffee. Relax. Let’s just talk, okay? Just the two of us. Try to clear this up.”

“Right. Just the two of us. Who’s behind the window there? Who’s watching the camera feed?”

Dobbs glanced up at the one-way window. “Nobody’s in there and the camera isn’t on. No blinking red light. It’s just us now.”

“Right.” I smirked, took a sip of the coffee. “I know how this works.”

“Have you been arrested before?”

“You said I’m not under arrest.”

He waved a hand. “You know what I mean.”

“I’ve never been inside a police station before.”

“Really?”

“Never.”

“Never been in any trouble at all, huh? Perfect citizen?”

“I do my best.”

“Tell me about Alyssa Tepper.”

I took another sip of the coffee. “I’m not gonna kill a girl in my own apartment, then call the police to report it.”

“You’re on the road for, what, two-thirds of the month? Everyone’s got needs. Did she cheat on you? Did she catch you cheating on her? Tempers flare, emotions take over, bad things happen. I’ve seen it before, Michael, more times than I can count. You can be straight with me.”

“I’ve told you the truth from the beginning.”

Dobbs head tilted to the side. “Have you?”

“Yes.”

“You told me your name is Michael Kepler. Since we’re being honest with each other, why don’t you start by telling me your real name.”

## **CHAPTER NINE**

# **MICHAEL**

### **THAT IS MY REAL** name.”

“Your prints came back as belonging to Michael Fitzgerald,” Dobbs said. “You’re in the system because of your commercial license.”

“I’m adopted. Fitzgerald is their name, not mine. I was born Michael Kepler.”

“Legally, your name is Michael Fitzgerald.”

“Well, that’s not me. Never has been.”

“You’re not fond of your parents, are you?”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

Dobbs shrugged. “I looked them up when your prints came back. The Fitzgeralds are well known back east, a family of considerable resources. Both shrinks, right? I found their names on dozens of websites. Academic stuff, mostly. Over my head, for sure. Well respected in their fields, tenured professors at Cornell, your alma mater.” He lowered his eyes. “Sorry to hear about your father. Aneurysm, right?”

“Adoptive father.”

Dobbs twisted his coffee cup again. "They're a family of considerable resources."

"You said that already."

Dobbs curled his fingers around the edge of the table. "I suppose that's why you called your sister first? Give her a chance to run some interference?"

I looked at him, puzzled. "I'm not sure what—"

Two knocks at the door. Swift. Hard.

The door swung open.

Detective Wilkins came in, followed by a heavyset man wearing a charcoal-gray suit so perfectly fitted that the tailor might well have come marching in behind him holding a needle and thread. The man's salt-and-pepper hair was slicked back, appropriate for an evening out, not walking into a police interview room at four in the morning. His sharp eyes held the wisdom of a man in his sixties, but his face and his even sharper, beak-like nose belonged to a much younger man, late forties at the most. He carried a slim leather briefcase, which he set in the middle of the table between me and Dobbs. He turned his gaze first on the detective, then on me.

"Is it safe to assume you haven't said anything to this upstanding public servant or his colleagues?" A deep voice, all bass. His manicured fingers triggered the latches on his briefcase; he reached inside, removed a notepad and pen, then closed the case. "Never mind, don't answer that." He turned to Dobbs and Wilkins. "Gentlemen, can you give me a moment with my client?"

Dobbs nodded reluctantly and stood. When he reached the door, he knocked twice, then turned back to me. "I know you're guilty, Michael. Know how I know?"

I only looked at him.

"You never once asked me how she died."

The man in the gray suit raised his hand. "No need for

jabs, Detective. You've traumatized my client enough. Out. Both of you."

An officer opened the door and stepped aside. Young guy, short dark hair.

Wilkins smirked and seemed about to say something, then apparently thought better of it. He pushed past Dobbs and went out the door. Dobbs lingered a moment longer, his eyes still locked on me, then he left too. The door closed behind him.

The man in the gray suit dropped into Dobbs's seat; the frame groaned under his weight. "An overdose of propofol."

"What?"

"That's what killed the girl in your bathtub. An overdose of propofol. She was injected here." He touched the left side of his neck. "It's a drug typically used by anesthesiologists, a sedative."

"I know what propofol is."

He frowned. "I wouldn't tell anyone else that. Ignorance is bliss, and you, my friend, need some bliss."

"Who are you?"

"Philip Wardwell. Our firm has done a significant amount of work for your father over the years. After you spoke to your sister, she talked to your mother, who in turn called our New York office," he said. "I'm based in Los Angeles, so I was dispatched."

I lowered my head and ran my hand through my hair. "I didn't want my mother to find out about this. Megan shouldn't have said anything."

Wardwell shrugged. "Well, she did, and I'm here. I plan to help you avoid a jail cell for the foreseeable future—try not to get too dizzy with gratitude." He flipped through several pages of notes on his pad. "I just spent the better part of an hour reviewing the evidence with those two detectives. It is substantial but primarily circumstantial."

"Primarily?"

"They have one witness. One of Tepper's neighbors, a Velma Keefe. She told them she saw you with Alyssa Tepper twice—two days ago and last week. Says she passed you both on the stairs. She ID'd you from a photo lineup."

"That's ridiculous. I've never met Alyssa Tepper. Somebody is trying to set me up," I insisted.

He gave me a sideways glance, then returned to his notepad. "They told me about your field trip to Tepper's apartment. If we need to discredit this Keefe woman, we can say she saw you when the police brought you through. I'm not worried about her." He flipped the page. "I saw the photographs, video, clothing. They're rushing DNA on a number of the items they pulled out of there. Did they tell you what they found in your building? Beyond the items that were near your bed? Did they tell you about the garbage chute?"

I shook my head.

"They pulled out a trash bag, same brand as under your sink. The bag was stuffed full of women's clothing, Tepper's size. One of the blouses, purple with white trim, matches her outfit in one of the photographs with you they found at her place."

I had no idea what to say to that so I said nothing.

When it was clear I wasn't going to respond, Wardwell went on. "They found a phone too. A disposable cell. The log showed calls and texts dating back nearly three months."

"Not with me."

Wardwell said dismissively, "Circumstantial, anyway." He placed his pad and pen back inside his briefcase and snapped the lid shut. "The phone was wiped clean, no prints. Nothing on the bag itself or any of the items found inside. They're pulling a warrant to check your truck at Nadler. I imagine they'll have that by the time the sun comes up."

"This is crazy," I muttered. "What do we do next?"

Wardwell stood and knocked twice on the door. “We get you out of here.”

The door opened and the dark-haired officer looked in. “Yes?”

Wardwell grabbed the man by the collar, pulled him inside, and slammed his head against the cinder-block wall three times. The officer crumpled to the ground, blood trickling from his ear.

## **CHAPTER TEN**

# **MICHAEL**

**WHAT THE FUCK!** I jumped up from my seat and backed into the corner.

“Get his gun,” Wardwell said, sliding the toe of his shoe into the doorway before it could close and lock us in.

I shook my head. “No way.”

Wardwell rolled his eyes. “You’re some kind of Boy Scout now? We don’t have time for a crisis of conscience.”

He jammed his briefcase into the opening, freeing his shoe, then knelt down beside the unconscious officer.

“Is he dead?”

Wardwell stood with a grunt, fumbled with the leather strap on the officer’s gun, and pulled it from the holster. He tucked the gun under his belt at the small of his back and smoothed his suit jacket down over it. “Walk directly next to me, don’t make eye contact with anyone but me. Look like you belong, and nobody thinks twice.”

“I’m not going anywhere with you!”

“Do exactly as I say, or I’ll start shooting people. It’s a Glock

twenty-two—fifteen rounds in the magazine, another in the chamber. I'm a good shot. I'll take out at least five to ten people before someone gets a bead on me. You want that on your head?" Wardwell picked up his briefcase and held the door open. He quickly glanced into the hallway, then back at me. "Come on, move."

I went.

I knew I shouldn't but I went anyway.

I stepped out into the hallway, fully expecting a dozen cops to jump me. A female detective walked by, her head buried in a folder, gun slapping at her hip.

Wardwell pressed his free hand against my back and steered me to the left. At the end of the hall, he turned us to the right. "Good," he said in a low voice. "Keep moving. Make a left up ahead."

Wardwell was leading us deeper into the building, in the opposite direction from Dobbs, Wilkins, the officer who took my prints.

"End of this hall, make another right."

We passed a janitor emptying trash cans, lost to some song in his earbuds.

Two more lefts.

A right.

A service elevator.

Wardwell pressed the button. "Almost there."

I started to turn, see what was behind us.

He squeezed my shoulder. "Don't."

The doors opened.

We stepped inside.

He pressed the button marked P2.

When the elevator doors opened again, we were in the parking garage. "The blue Ford, over there to your right."

The level was only about a quarter full. I spotted a Ford Escort parked beside a concrete support pole. A wreck of a car, at least fifteen or twenty years old. The hubcap was missing from the right

front wheel. Faded navy-blue paint, pocked with dings and dents and patches of rust.

I glanced over at Wardwell. His suit was probably worth more than the car. “Are you even an attorney?”

He fished the keys out of his pocket and tossed them to me. “You’re driving.”

The car wasn’t locked.

I climbed into the driver’s seat. The tattered beige material was patched with duct tape.

Wardwell took out the gun, got in the passenger side, put his briefcase on his lap. The door squealed and closed with a thunk. Sweat trickled down his brow, the fast walk taking a toll on his large frame. “Go, damn it. Start the car!”

“Why are you doing this?”

He appeared puzzled. “This is what you paid me to do.”

A wetness slapped against my face before I registered the sound of the gunshot, heard the shattering of the passenger window. Wardwell jerked toward me, then fell forward, his eyes blank.

## **CHAPTER ELEVEN**

# **MICHAEL**

**I DON'T KNOW HOW** long I sat there, my limbs paralyzed, my heart thudding wildly. The shot echoed off the concrete and faded away, replaced with the sound of rapidly retreating footsteps. Then the garage was quiet except for my breathing. My gasping, quick breaths.

Wardwell's empty gaze seemed to focus on the gun in his own hand, still resting atop his briefcase, his finger less than an inch from the trigger.

I touched the side of my face. My fingers came away slick. Not with my blood, though. Wardwell's.

The bullet had entered the front right side of his head and exited the back left. Owing to either a carefully placed shot or an extremely lucky accident, I was alive and unhurt.

I wiped my hand on the side of the filthy seat.

Instincts took over in that moment and I let them. If I thought about what I was doing, I wouldn't do it. I wouldn't do what needed to be done.

I twisted the key.

The engine sputtered, caught, and came to life with an aggravated groan.

I put the Ford into drive and followed the exit signs from the second level up to the first, toward daylight. Not one of the officers in the several police cars that passed me gave me a second glance.

Wardwell had left his parking ticket on the dash. I fished Wardwell's wallet out of his jacket pocket and paid the twelve-dollar fee with his Visa card.

The name on the card was not Philip Wardwell.

An alarm went off as the arm went up, a wailing through the structure. I didn't know if someone had heard the shot or found the officer down in the interview room, but I didn't care. I made a left on North Main Street and didn't look back.

## **CHAPTER TWELVE**

# **MICHAEL**

**ROLAND EADS," I SAID** into the pay phone.

I had circled the block around the police station, then made a left onto Fourth toward Sanford. From there, I drove to the fish market. Nobody followed me.

I knew I couldn't go back home. I couldn't go to my truck—that was the first place they'd look.

The Los Angeles fish market officially opened at six in the morning, but the restaurant buyers, tourists, and locals lined up long before that.

What I needed was a crowd.

Someplace I could disappear.

Someplace I could dump the Ford.

I drove behind the old Edward Hotel and nestled the wreck between a Dumpster and a large pile of trash partially covered by a blue plastic tarp.

The engine sputtered a few times, then dropped off.

The dead man beside me was large. Too large for such a small car. He had shifted during the drive, but his slumped body remained

wedged between the dashboard and the passenger seat. His ruined head lolled toward me.

I pulled the briefcase from his lap, careful not to touch the gun. Inside, along with the notepad and pen, I found a cassette tape. I must have stared at the handwritten label for at least a minute, my heart pounding at the sight of it, before finally shoving it into my pocket.

I kept his wallet.

I searched his pockets for a cell phone but found nothing.

With napkins from a discarded McDonald's bag on the floor, I wiped my face, the steering wheel, the dashboard, my door, his briefcase, anything I remembered touching.

And I left him there.

I didn't want to, but I had no idea what else to do. What else could I do?

The gas station on Fifth had a bathroom around back. I bolted across the parking lot, locked myself inside, fell to the ground beside the grimy toilet, and threw up into the bowl.

My hands were shaking.

My heart was pounding.

I couldn't get enough air.

I threw up a second time, nothing but yellow bile. My stomach churned, wanting to get rid of more, but there was nothing left.

I rolled to the side and closed my eyes.

I had to calm down.

I forced my breathing to slow.

Deep breaths—in through my nose, out through my mouth, as Megan had taught me. The burn of adrenaline began to ebb. My heart slowed. When I finally managed to stand, my legs almost folded under the sudden weight. I stumbled over to the sink and got a good look at myself in the mirror. The eyes staring back at me were not my own but those of a much older, very tired man.

I pulled my stained sweatshirt off and scrubbed my face and hair to get rid of the red. The white and gray too—I tried not to think about that. The water swirling around the drain ran red, pink, and finally clear. I did my best to clean the sweatshirt. I tore off the tag and turned it inside out, then pulled it back over my head.

By the time I'd finished, twenty minutes had passed. I found a pay phone on Stanford and dialed Megan collect.

"I can barely hear you. Where are you?" Megan said. "Who did you say?"

"Roland Eads," I repeated into the pay phone. I covered my other ear and tried to twist away from the people pushing past me on the sidewalk. "I'm at the fish market."

"I didn't call anyone," Megan said. "I've been worried sick, calling you all night, but I didn't talk to anyone else. Not about this."

"So you didn't tell Dr. Rose?"

"I'd never do that. At least, not unless you told me to. Christ, Michael. You've never met this girl? Are you sure?"

"I don't know who's doing this or how, but someone is setting me up."

"But it was you? In the video?"

Two patrolmen walked by me. I turned away. "If you didn't send this guy, somebody else did."

"Why would someone frame you for murder?"

"I have no idea."

I pulled out Roland Eads's wallet and picked through the contents.

Ninety-three dollars in cash, the Visa card, and a driver's license. Nothing else. The address on the license told me this man lived in Needles, California—a small town on the Nevada border nearly four hours away. I knew it from my route. I kept the driver's license out and shoved the rest in my pocket. "Megan, I need you to do me a huge favor."

“Of course, anything.”

“I need you to get into Dr. Bart’s office and see if his Joe DiMaggio baseball card is still there.”

Megan grew quiet.

“Meg.”

“I’m here.”

“Can you do that for me?”

After a moment, she said, “His office is locked, Michael. Dr. Rose has the key. Nobody has been in there since he died. She won’t even let Ms. Neace in there to clean.”

Ms. Neace had been our parents’ housekeeper for the better part of thirty years, but nonetheless, Dr. Bart had rarely allowed her into his office—she could go in only on Friday mornings, when he was at the university. Even then, Dr. Rose watched over her as she worked.

“Please, Meg. This is important. The police found a card just like it in Alyssa Tepper’s purse,” I told her.

“It can’t be the same one.”

“A 1936. Half the paper on the back was missing, and the left corner was torn.”

“For real?”

“There’s something else,” I told her. “She had a sparrow feather. I saw it in her apartment. It was on a leather strap, like a necklace.”

Megan said nothing.

“Meg, please,” I pleaded.

“Are you sure it was a sparrow feather? There’s, like, thirty-seven million kinds of birds, Michael, and they’ve all got feathers.”

“I’d recognize one of those feathers from a hundred feet.”

“You need to come home, Michael. Right now. Just come home.”

I looked down at Eads’s driver’s license in my hand. “I can’t. If I run, they’ll find me. I need to figure out what’s going on.”

“Maybe we should tell Dr. Rose.”

“No way.”

“She can protect you.”

“Promise me you won’t.”

Megan didn’t reply.

“Meg? Promise me.”

Finally, she said, “Promise *me* you’ll come home, then I’ll think about it.”

“I will,” I told her. “As soon as I can.” I hung up before she could object, because Megan *would* object.

At a small drugstore, with money from Roland Eads’s wallet, I bought a baseball cap, sunglasses, and a T-shirt. Not much of a disguise, but all I could put together. I also bought a disposable phone. I changed in the alley behind the store, stuffed my sweatshirt deep into a Dumpster, then dialed Megan from the disposable phone. The call went to voice mail.

I fished the cassette tape out of my pocket and glared at the handwritten label.

*Dark room—M. Kepler—August 12, 1996.*

Dr. Bart’s handwriting.

I was four in 1996. The year I went to live with the Fitzgeralds. I needed a cassette player, and I knew where to find one.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

# WRITTEN STATEMENT, MEGAN FITZGERALD

To Special Agent Jessica Gimble, the lovely Detective Dobbs, and their friends in law enforcement—

Okay, fine, I'll write it all down. Every last word of it. Not because you asked me to, but because I think it may be the only way all of Michael's story gets out there. The truth of it. The nuts and bolts. I'm certainly not going to leave it up to any of you to piece together. I've spent the past two days watching all of you try to gather evidence and figure out what really happened, and while that was pretty entertaining, I can't let you twist in the wind forever. You're clowns in a circus car. Our tax dollars at work—what a joke. I owe this to Michael. I've got no intention of throwing him under the bus—he managed to crawl under there all by his lonesome. But when the dust settles on these last forty-eight hours, I do want to be sure the facts are straight. And you clearly need a little help in that department.

So here it goes, all that you've missed, spelled out nice and neat on a legal pad. I'll try and keep it between the lines and in tight cursive just as Dr. Bart would have wanted. The language of a lady, as Dr. Rose would insist. Pay attention, kids—it's time to go to school.

My shit of a brother hung up on me!

He called me from a pay phone somewhere in LA not only to repeat that he'd found a dead girl in his bathtub but also to tell me how his attorney had decided to bypass the court system and bust him out of jail. He finished with the attorney catching a bullet in the head soon after exiting said police station.

He rattled all this off, then he hung up on me! I hit Redial from my call log but the line just rang and rang, a dozen times at least. I couldn't call him back on his phone; he said the police had that. I did the only sane thing I could—I rolled over in my bed and screamed into my pillow.

I felt better after that. Nothing like a good scream to clear the head. You all should try it, maybe you could actually do what you're paid for.

That's when I caught the smell of breakfast wafting up from downstairs—bacon, eggs, English muffins...Ms. Neace, no doubt. It seemed odd for such a normal thing to fill my senses after Michael's phone call.

I pushed back my sheets and down comforter, sat on the edge of my bed, and caught the naked girl staring at me from the full-length mirror in the corner of my room. Even from that distance, I spotted the bags under my eyes, the tangled mess of my brown hair. At least my boobs looked good. I gave the nips a tweak. I could always count on the girls.

I had spent the entire night dialing Michael over and over after he'd found that body. I'd texted too. Dr. Rose always insisted I get at least eight hours. I probably slept half that. *No bueno...*

No way I could let Dr. Rose see me like that. She'd know something was up if I planned to help Michael, and that wasn't

an option. I snatched my robe from the back of my dressing-table chair, threw it on, and fumbled with my hairbrush.

One hundred strokes, fifty per side.

Better.

Little concealer under the eyes—much better.

I glanced down at my desk at that point, and I'm not gonna lie, I stared at it a few minutes.

Dr. Bart bought me that desk when I was a kid. An antique Cutler rolltop, more than one hundred years old, in perfect condition.

“This desk belonged to a schoolteacher in Buffalo during the First World War,” he told me on the day he presented it. He’d guided me down the hallway and ushered me into my bedroom blindfolded. “Her husband left to fight in the war, and she sat here every night writing him letters, praying for his safe return. He never did come home, though. When she passed at the age of eighty-one, she left the desk to her grandson, an attorney in the city. It remained in his office until I purchased it at an auction last week. This desk has seen the birth of equal rights, the Great Depression, multiple wars, the rise and fall of nations, the deaths of Kennedy and King, and the destruction of the Twin Towers. Imagine the secrets held within that polished mahogany. This desk is a witness to history, and now it’s part of your history to own, to cherish—you will write its next chapter before passing it on to your own children one day.”

I was five.

WTF, right? Who says that to a five-year-old?

Twenty minutes later, I wrote my name across the front with yellow crayon. Dr. Rose cleaned it before Dr. Bart saw what I’d done. I never did like antiques much, anyway.

There’s a hidden compartment under the center desk