

# **You Belong to Me**

a short story

By Jenny Medenwald

## YOU BELONG TO ME

Every killer has their own beginning. Even The Sweetheart  
Strangler...

## CHAPTER ONE

No one grows up aspiring to be a serial killer—least of all me—but the perfect recipe of violent tendencies, a penchant for mischief, and occasionally some kind of childhood trauma (in my case I only needed the first two ingredients) often culminates into a flipped switch. A sweet, awkward, bumbling pre-teen turned voyeuristic monster. Innocent boyish spying moments morphed into creepy stalking. Loving affection turned unwanted attention. The beast simply builds over time.

And indeed, my troublesome ways started out as excusable instances and learning experiences. I was once caught peeking into a neighborhood teen’s window (“caught” once doesn’t imply that it happened once). Parents were called, lectures were halfheartedly given, but no one believed that it was lascivious. *Boys will be boys* and *He’s just curious* were two of the many euphemisms thrown around during that time. Perhaps if someone had thought to take me to counseling or more thoroughly questioned my behavior, maybe we wouldn’t be where we are today and the Sweetheart Strangler wouldn’t exist.

Sure, my parents were caring, loving and involved, but because of my intelligence and natural charm, I was swiftly able to convince them that all the incidents were nothing more than unfortunate misunderstandings. Despite the police reports.

Nevertheless, my seemingly childish shenanigans quickly led to more risky behavior throughout my teenage years: public indecency, assault, violation of a restraining order, and other misdemeanors. Because I was underage,

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the court always released me on probation or with orders to complete so many hours of community service. Not a chance that kind of punishment would fly these days. But it did then, and so my monster was allowed to develop.

I left home not long after high school, following a particularly nasty fight with my parents. They wanted me to apply for college, I explained that I had no immediate plans for continuing education and instead intended to travel the world while I figured out what I wanted to do with my life. They were frustrated but I walked away before they had time to say much of anything in the way of an argument.

And so, I was barely nineteen when I took off in the dead of night, far away from Abilene, the small Texas town where I'd grown up. For reasons still unbeknownst to me, I wound up in Idaho and it was there that I met Caroline. A top-heavy waitress with red hair and two-inch brown roots who worked at a local strip club. A sleazy dump, The Cat's Tail was in a low-income, high crime seedy neighborhood on the outskirts of Boise. The drinks were cheap and most of the tits were fake, but the bouncers didn't card and every customer was too drunk or stoned to notice me, a skinny teenager amongst men. If anything—and laughably so—they were in more danger than I was. Creepy is a far leap to a murderer in the making.

Caroline “Cherry” (her stage name) let me pay her for sex even though it was strictly against club policy. We'd fuck quick and dirty in the back of her 1998 Chevy Impala after her shift then she'd smoke a cigarette and I'd question her about women and sex. I'm sure she assumed I was some horny teenager who couldn't manage to convince someone his own age to sleep with him. My actual

intention was to remain in the shadows and associate with people who were less likely to notice odd behavior.

One night after I'd been fired from my job at the local grocery store (it's not in my nature to follow orders from morons) I wound up at The Cat's Tail just as Caroline was leaving for the night. She could tell I was upset and asked if I wanted to come back to her place. I nodded, unable to form normal sentences through my fury, and she drove us back to her duplex just a few miles from The Tail.

She let me into her half of the house, apologizing profusely for the mess, and wound her way back to what I presumed to be the kitchen while insisting that I make myself comfortable. My hands shook like a feening addict and her words slipped around my ears, fuzzy and incomprehensible. I couldn't define what was happening to me. I'd never experienced this rush of emotions before, so furious, so *focused*. A growl started low in my ears and grew until it was a deafening roar in my head and I clapped my hands over my ears.

I remember Caroline walking back into the room and hurrying over to me, asking if I was okay. She touched my forehead with the back of her fingers and I wondered if she'd ever been a mother; it was such a maternal reaction. Instead, before I realized what was happening, I reached out and clamped my hands around her neck. The harder I squeezed, the more the pounding thunder quieted, the screaming in my head lessened. Until I realized it was Caroline screams. The noise stopped about the time her neck cracked beneath my fingers and instead of horrified, as I would have expected, a strange sense of calm came over me. I'd held someone's life in my hands for a brief

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moment before deciding her fate. The roar spoke to me, assured me. This needed to be done.

When the screaming ended, when she was finally still, the magnitude of what I'd done sunk in. Again I waited for the revulsion, the sickening realization that I'd catapulted myself into a category reserved for psychopaths and violent criminals. And still, all I heard was the satisfaction of the voice inside.

I'd always known I was different, my interests never matched up with other boys, my reactions to violence and death rather lax in comparison, but this development only reinforced my oddities. Surely when one human kills another, the first sensation shouldn't be relief.

You may have been able to guess thus far—or perhaps not, it's difficult to judge an audience—I am of above-average intelligence. Quite high, although I won't embarrass you with specific numbers. And based on this alone, I knew that I had to wipe all evidence of my existence from that house and Caroline's car.

It was a painstaking process that took nearly all night before not a trace of my DNA could be found anywhere associated with Caroline (except The Cat's Tail, of course, but my DNA would be mixed among some of Boise's least fine citizens).

Before I let myself out, I glanced once more at Caroline, committing to memory the scene before me. It felt right at the time, strangling her with my bare hands, the sensation of her life draining from her body, watching my reflection in her unfocused eyes. But that didn't mean I intended on slipping up again. That was a one-time

accident where I let the roar get the best of me. It wouldn't happen a second time. I was much too smart for that.

Unfortunately, we both know that not to be the case, otherwise what would be the point of this story. Still, Caroline was my first and she'll always hold a special place in my memory because of that. I learned a lot from her, reliving those brief moments of her death and the hours leading up to and after. She is where I honed my skill, learned how to pick my victims, became accustomed to various weapons. But my hands have always been my weapon of choice.

Due to my intelligence, I've always been a curious fellow and as such, spent every waking hour for the next several months after Caroline researching serial killers and murders, rapists and stalkers, trying to figure out the reason for their origin, desperate to learn. And also desperate to know if there was any way to reverse my development into such a man. As it were, I never found anything of much merit.

Although the duration between Caroline and my next victim was as long as it would ever be. The demons—my new name for the personification of the roar—subsided for a year before the overwhelming urges rumbled in my belly, begging to be heard.

Caroline's murder remains unsolved to this day.

## CHAPTER TWO

After Caroline's murder, the only indication of an investigation came in the way of a quick drop in by the police one dreary afternoon at The Cat's Tail. They questioned the patrons who all admitted to knowing who she was, recognizing her name and picture, but not having any information about her brutal murder.

Once I was sure it wouldn't seem obvious, I packed up my things—whatever I could fit in my car, anyway—and fled Boise. Somehow I'd known the urges—the demons—were returning and I wanted to be prepared. I couldn't let them catch me off guard again.

Having done my research, I knew I would be more difficult to track across state lines. That's when the FBI jumps in, but first, someone has to notice a pattern. And I was betting on that taking years. Especially if I could channel my patience, planning my attacks with precision.

Do not be fooled, things are not as they seem on *Criminal Minds* and other homicide hunter shows. Police departments are often understaffed and underpaid and cases—even murders, though that may surprise many of you—have a tendency to slip through the cracks. Particularly if there are no solid leads. Crimes are committed every day and without squeaky wheels or new evidence, they fall to the bottom of the slush pile.

After a few brief pauses in towns of which I don't even remember the name, I found myself one sunny fall afternoon in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Though I'd never enrolled in college, my high school grades were exceptional. I was sure I could pull off a fake degree and so



applied for an associate professor position at Michigan State. It was much easier than I'd expected (paperwork is surprisingly simple to create) and before long I found myself at the front of a classroom teaching Intro to Psychology to a group of no less than four hundred wide-eyed freshmen.

I enjoyed nearly a full year of blissful silence, despite my suspicion that the demons would strike soon. No monsters in my head. No urges to put my hands on someone, watch a co-ed undress in the dark at night, stealthily follow a lady through a maze of side streets and parking lots. Almost eighteen months since the unfortunate incident of Caroline.

Then Megan Thomas walked into my classroom.

She was irresistible. Her long brown hair and twinkling blue eyes were in sharp contrast to one another and it was mesmerizing. She appeared innocent, wide-eyed and curious and someone that I'd very much like to...educate.

Somehow I managed to complete my lecture (which that day was ironically on stalking and the psychology behind it) and got lucky enough that she stopped by the front of the room at the end of class. As it turns out, she was a transfer student from a small college out east and thus had missed my first three lectures of the semester.

"Would it be possible to meet with you outside the classroom so I can catch up?" Megan twirled a strand of hair between her fingers.

Would it indeed. "Of course. I have my regular office hours, but because of the amount of material we'll need to cover, it may be better that we schedule a few one-on-one sessions." The demons were awakening, stretching wide

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their horrific toothy mouths. But the brief if ever-present fear that they would leap back to life was snuffed out the moment Megan smiled.

We agreed to meet once a week for coffee, beginning that afternoon, until she was caught up. I'm sure it's not hard to believe that I had a difficult time concentrating for the rest of the day, eager to be near her.

Later that afternoon, at a coffee and tea shop on campus called The Daily Grind, Megan and I learned about each other. Despite the abnormality, I lacked any friends and hoped to be able to blur the lines by offering up some personal details. Plus, I needed to practice my story. I'd already changed my name when I came to Michigan (Riley Andrews) and so there was no need to lie about that. But when I described my family and upbringing, I changed a few minor details. Parents became abusive, siblings were hardly existent since they were so much older than I was, and thus I was practically an only child.

As I said the words, it became easier to believe the lies myself. The sympathy on Megan's face was encouraging. In fact, I struggled to restrain myself from further dramatizing my life to resemble a daytime soap opera in an effort to intensify her reaction.

We met four times outside of class, only screwing once, hasty and barely inside her dorm room door (private room, how convenient). That was in week three. From that moment, I realized it was a mistake. She was unnaturally clingy, desperate to be in constant contact with me and made her desperations known so obviously that I would

find her sitting outside my house or my car when I'd leave for the day.

Likely, it was due to childhood neglect or a level of insecurity typically seen in trauma victims. Either way, it was out of control. The demons were growing in their insistence, only this time I knew that my safety and freedom depended on it. Never mind *her* safety. If she got too nosy, it could mean my past ripped open wide for the public to see. She needed to be taken care of. It hadn't been in my original plan, but it was vital to my survival, I could see that now.

And so I left her a message prior to our fourth and final scheduled session that we should meet at her off-campus apartment. I knew this would excite her, give her reason to believe that something else was about to happen when in fact, I had the place set up for her demise by the time she arrived. Her surprise gave way to terror when she realized her death was imminent.

I was nothing if not swift, incapacitating her with a needle just behind her earlobe, satisfying my demons while I wrapped my long fingers around her slender neck. There wasn't a struggle, just the peaceful slip to the other side. But the satisfaction, interestingly enough, was the same. Cleanup took half the time of setup and I was pulling out of her driveway, no trace of my presence, before the sun set.

My next move was a bit trickier. I still had several weeks left in the semester at Michigan State and I hated to leave the psychology department in the lurch. But to stay meant compromising my potential safety, my future, my everything.

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I considered all the possibilities that night, glass of whiskey in hand, while I graded midterms, and came to the conclusion that I simply could not afford the courtesy of finishing out my tenure. I thoughtfully penned a letter describing an unfortunate family situation back east that needed my immediate attention and promised to be available should the department heads require a second opinion on a candidate.

By the time the sun rose the following morning—resignation letter emailed to Professor Colin Braithwaite—I was thirty miles out of town, allowing the car to steer me to my next home.

My time spent in Michigan may have been short, but one lesson I learned was how easy it was to reinvent myself. Which would make remaining several steps ahead of the law all the more possible for the next several years.

## CHAPTER THREE

I know you won't believe this—I hardly believe it myself—but having left Ann Arbor in the dust, it occurred to me to schedule an appointment with a therapist. The demons were growing in wickedness (I was surprised as any that this was even a real possibility) and I needed to find a way to stop them. I recognized that I was putting myself in danger by voluntarily involving myself with someone with the education to see right through me (although I'd like to think I'm capable of outsmarting most psychologists). But I'd done it again, this time practically against my will, and this needed to end before it became a real problem. A *serial* kind of problem.

After Michigan, I'd followed my instincts and ended up in Oxford, Ohio. Apparently, something about college towns sucks me in. I suspect it has to do with the vulnerability of teenagers on the cusp of adulthood. The sudden, shocking freedom of limited responsibility combined with little to no chaperones and zero regard for their own safety. Naïve enough to believe my lies and daring enough to not care.

This girls' name was Joley Dunn. Another non-descript lithe, brunette co-ed on campus who soon attached herself to me. It became obvious early on that she was not smart enough to recognize danger when it was breathing down her neck.

As soon as I recognized the tried and true signs that my demons were tugging at their leashes, I scheduled an appointment with a therapist. Now, before you roll your eyes and accuse me of temporary insanity (although even

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I'm want to admit that if it looks like a duck and quacks like a duck...) my actual intent was to prevent the demons from ever rearing their ugly head and hurting anyone again. I can talk to myself (and directly to the demons if that's easier to imagine) until I'm blue in the face, but quite frankly they just don't listen anymore. And so, I thought that bringing in a moderator, if you will, just might be the trigger I needed to lock up the beasts and throw away the proverbial key.

Thirty minutes into my first session with Dr. Osfreed and I wondered if the real reason I'd scheduled the appointment was to try and get myself caught. Hell, there I was voluntarily conversing with someone who had the education and knowledge to read and profile me. It was a real possibility, but one that I dismissed because I knew in my heart that I didn't *want* to get caught.

"So why are you here, Mr. Atkinson?" Osfreed was a bespectacled man with a nose so tiny in its existence that I'm surprised it had the ability to hold up the glasses on his face. What he did have going for him was a full head of peppered hair at what had to be every bit of fifty years old.

"My anger is getting the best of me," I said, unable to meet his eye. I'm surprised I couldn't feign more mystery. "And I want to learn to manage it before it gets out of hand."

"Has it gotten out of hand in the past?"

No question should have been a shock but for some reason, I found myself speechless. "Yes, a few times."

"Do you want to talk about those times?"

I shook my head wondering how long before he'd be able to diagnosis me. Or figure out what I am. The amount

of concentration to maintain my façade—emotionally, physically, mentally—was unbelievable, but I knew the slightest slip of character and Osfreed would have me pegged. And then arrested or committed

“I can only help you with what you’re willing to talk about,” he said, in a tone meant for me to feel at ease but it made my skin crawl. So, instead of confessing my real sins, I invented stories about how I’m a rageaholic, flying off the handle at everyone and pushing those closest to me away, sometimes violently.

In true shrink form, Osfreed prescribed some techniques meant to stop the anger before it raged out of control and wanted me to work on those before our next appointment. I left feeling as though the demons were laughing in my face. So much for frightening them into submission.

I won’t go into gory detail on poor Ms. Dunn but suffice it to say that my first appointment with Dr. Osfreed was indeed my only and I escaped before the ink was even dry on my contract with Ohio State University.

I’d been right about the demons and mistakenly allowed them a slice of Joley and she saw them in my eyes. Terrified, she told me she never wanted to see me again. This was after a nice night—dinner and a movie—and I panicked. The strong need for someone in my life was overwhelming and when she walked away from me, it was more than I could handle. Admittedly, I didn’t even look in the eyes when I killed her. Ashamed and embarrassed that I’d let the demons get the best of me yet again.

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My life continued in much of the same way for the next six months. I hovered in a few different cities but none that suited me. So after the third town in as many months, I took more care in selecting my next home and settled on Champaign, Illinois. For whatever reason, it seemed to be easier for me to blend into Midwestern towns.

It might strike you as odd, or perhaps even lucky that I was able to find gainful employment in every location in which I settled. Truth be told, I've always been a bit lucky, but that's a story for another day.

In that particular situation, there weren't any available openings with the university so I settled for a job at Starbucks in the interim. So, to bide my time until I could get a more respectable position, I brewed coffee, whipped lattes and churned hot chocolate until I smelled like roasted beans long after I'd showered at the end of my shift. My favorite aspect of my job as a barista that I hadn't considered was all of the exposure to *people*. I'm an avid people watcher, as you may not be surprised to learn, and the sheer volume of customers my location received in a day was staggering.

During my third week, my knowledge hovered somewhere around Expert Level and I was busy practicing my foam designs when I heard a high-pitched voice barely able to project itself above the din of the coffee shop.

"Excuse me? I think you got my order wrong," the voice said meekly.

Now, I am human—despite what I may sometimes say to myself in the mirror—and so even I am subject to mistakes. But an incorrect order?



“What was your order?” I asked, looking up to meet the gaze of the most stunning brunette I’d ever seen. Her hair was likely envied by any woman in her presence, soft, dark curls with no hint of frizz (a term I am familiar with thanks to living with two sisters) and her eyes were the color of coffee beans. How appropriate.

“I had a grande skinny cappuccino no foam.”

I’d gotten carried away. “I’m so sorry about that. You see I’m learning how to create those nerdy foam designs and I suppose I was so busy showing off that I neglected to notice that your order was for no foam.” I produced a dazzling white smile and she returned the expression, almost unwillingly, it seemed. But I did have that effect on women. Still do, I suppose. I reached for her cup so I could see her name. “Kate, is it? I’ll whip up a new one if you’ll give me just two minutes.” She nodded and smiled again before I whisked away her cup and went about remaking her coffee.

The story of Ryan and Kate is particularly sad, not just because it involves the eventual demise of a beautiful young woman, but because all but the last chapter is so normal. We flirted, we dated, and regardless of whether or not some people believe I’m capable, we fell in love. Our romance lasted a year, which was a surprise to both of us, but especially to me. The demons remained dormant and I believed I’d found the cure: love.

Kate began and completed her senior year of college; I attended her graduation and was able to meet her parents and one of her aunts. It was after the ceremony, emotions running wild. Excitement, pride, and apprehension at their baby girl all grown up. I stood in the background for a few

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moments while each of them embraced Kate separately and again as a group, each more excited than the last, throwing questions at her like they were the press and she was a famous starlet.

Her father acknowledged me first and it was then Kate remembered my presence.

“Oh! Everyone, I want you to meet Ryan, my boyfriend.” She grabbed my elbow and pulled me towards her.

*Boyfriend.* Sure, I knew that was our unofficial status, but it wasn't like she'd introduced me to anyone since I'd met a few of her friends a while back. And there hadn't been a title beside my name. Just “Ryan.”

Kate's mom and aunts circled me, touching my arm, giving me hugs, but her father remained by his daughter's side. Anyone else would see a loving, attentive father who wanted to bask in the light of his daughter for as long as she was his little girl. But I saw through him. Or rather, he saw through me. I wouldn't say he was cold but he remained distant when he shook my hand and gave me a hard stare.

The rest of their visit was lovely (if you were Kate) and more than awkward (if you were me), her father never taking his eyes off me.

Despite the odd reaction from Kate's father, I thought that meeting her family would further prevent the demons from coming out to play. How could I hurt someone when I knew their family? Theoretically, more people to connect to meant that my chances to hurting someone would lessen, right? The thought gave me strength and I knew I was

transforming into a better man, someone who was worthy of her.

After graduation, Kate pondered her next step. She wanted to be a teacher in downtown Chicago at one of the public elementary schools and she wasn't sure if she should stay in Champaign to earn her Master's in Education or if she should transfer to Chicago and launch her career. She struggled with the decision for a while. After some time, I got the impression that she was trying to determine first if I intended to come with her should she move (in a permanent sort of fashion) or if our relationship as it stood would fly away as fast as a freed bird. The panic didn't set in as quickly as I would've expected, but as the days passed I felt an increased pressure to move forward with Kate.

It came to blows one night when she confronted me, demanded to know why I wasn't interested in proposing to her. Ironically I'd already purchased an engagement ring. Not the traditional diamond solitaire most women would expect. No, I'd chosen a unique piece, just like Kate, a deep purple, princess cut amethyst set in white gold with a halo of diamonds. I removed it from the box every night after she fell asleep and imagined different ways to present it to her. But no matter the thousands of ideas, none seemed good enough for her. And as time wore on, the harder she pressed for me to propose, the harder it became for me to want to. Interestingly enough, even with the ability to analyze myself I still couldn't see past my own feelings.

The beginning of the end came one snowy night after a romantic dinner to celebrate Kate's acceptance of a job offer in Chicago (she'd decided without any promises from me, for which I was proud). We were curled up on the

couch in her house, fire crackling in the background and some cheesy movie paused on TV while I opened another bottle of wine.

“You should know, I’ve started seeing someone else,” Kate said with all the casual air in the world, as if she’d just told me she’d purchased a new pair of socks. At first, I was certain I’d misheard her.

“What on earth for? You’ve spent the last three months talking about getting engaged and wanting to move in together,” I said, bringing the opened bottle into the family room. She couldn’t be serious and if she was, I had every intention of talking some sense into her. We were perfect, she and I. And she was quite possibly the only thing keeping the demons quiet.

She shrugged her shoulders and I saw how sharply the bones protruded beneath her skin. How had I not noticed how thin she’d become? Was it intentional? Meant as a ploy to gain the attention of other men? Or was the stress finally too much?

“And you’ve made it clear by not taking any action that you’re not interested. I can’t wait around forever, Ryan.” The callousness in her voice was new but firm, as if she’d practiced this speech in front of a mirror for weeks.

“Kate, be reasonable. You know how much I love you and I deserve some time to adjust to the idea of taking the next step—which, I might add, is a *very* significant step.” I rested my hands on the back of the couch, kneading the pillows with my empty hand to calm myself. “I’ve never once indicated that I’m not interested, and over the course of our relationship you’ve never been able to say that you questioned my intentions.” But it didn’t matter what I said

or how I said it. Kate's ultimatum was clear: propose or leave.

Under this kind of pressure, it's expected that anyone might become anxious, furious even. So when the wine bottle slipped from my hand and crashed to the floor, shattering into thousands of chunks and shards, I barely noticed. Kate leaped from the couch, her ankles splashed with merlot. When Kate backed away from me, a look of fear reflected in her eyes that I'd never seen on her (plenty of other women from my past, but never her). I might as well have been blind. She stopped retreating toward the kitchen when her calves hit an antique wood table behind the couch and that's when she decided to not be afraid anymore.

"I gave you your chance, Ryan Atkinson, and you've just strung me along. My future is far too important to sit around and wait for a man I thought loved me. Seth *does* love me and is ready to marry me."

Later I would wonder how long they'd been seeing each other and if this other guy was already promising rings and forever, if he was even real. But at the moment it only struck me that I was losing her. And in that second it became more than my demons could handle. The hurt allowed them to slip through the restraints I'd so carefully built over the last fourteen months and I lunged towards Kate, unaware of my actions. She stumbled backward, shifting the table and in doing so, knocked a small elephant statue to the ground. Ellie—as she fondly called the elephant—had been a gift from her aunt and uncle upon their return from South Africa when she was a girl. Ellie was carved from marble and so handled the tumble well.

Unfortunately, as Kate tripped over the table leg in an effort to escape me, she fell and landed with perfect precision on Ellie, leaving a wide gash just above her ear. Blood poured from the wound and the shock on Kate's face mirrored mine. I tore my shirt over my head, pressing it as hard and as gently as I could to the side of Kate's face.

"Don't you leave me," I cried, my voice breaking. The demons were nowhere to be found. They'd already done their dirty work.

"Ry—I'm s—sorry," Kate said, her voice raspy and weak. Mistakenly I peeled my shirt away for a second to see the extent of the damage and when I saw the depth of the wound, I realized that I could either call an ambulance and attempt to save her life or run and save my own. Not needing another second to consider, I fumbled around in my pocket, regardless of the blood coating my hands, smearing across the phone screen as I dialed 9-1-1.

*"911, what is your emergency?"*

"Please, I need an ambulance sent to 1391 Timber Trace, apartment D."

*"Sir, can you tell me what's going on? Who is in need of medical care?"*

I could hear the operator typing furiously and hoped she was sending a message to the nearest paramedic station while asking questions that didn't matter. "She fell and hit her head, massive amounts of blood, please *hurry!*" I hung up the phone knowing I had limited time before I would be caught red-handed—quite literally.

My medical training was slim, but I at least knew to elevate the wound above her heart. I grabbed a pillow from the couch and gently laid Kate's head on it, thinking

ironically at how Kate was always chastising me for dirtying her pristine white pillows as the blood seeped through the fabric in a sickening Rorschach's pattern. Her eyes were closed and her breathing shallow. I knew it was a matter of time before she bled to death and I urged the paramedics to hurry faster, speed limits and red lights be damned.

“Hang on, Kate. They're on their way.” I rolled the ring box around in my pocket, no longer concerned with where I smeared her blood. By the time I left tonight Kate would be imprinted on me for the rest of my life. Beautiful, innocent Kate. Number three. My phone rang again. Unknown number. Must be the 911 operator calling me back. Standard procedure. Instincts kicked in which is good because my emotions threatened to overrun and put me in serious danger.

I removed the battery and sim card from my phone and smashed both with the heel of my shoe, careful to sweep all the pieces into my hand before dropping the remains into a Ziploc bag. I knew damn well my fingerprints covered this entire apartment—too many surfaces to wipe down before Kate's help arrived. No matter. I'd be long gone by the time the fingerprints came back in AFIS anyway, matching the other crimes I'd perpetrated.

I took another longing gaze at Kate, trying to erase the way things had been just days before, slowly destroying the memories and hopes of what could have been, what our future held before I'd ruined it with my hesitations and doubts.

Sirens echoed somewhere in the distance and I knew my escape window was closing. My options were to stay

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and answer questions about what happened here—which would inevitably lead to questions about my past, nosy cops digging into where I'd been before Champaign which may or may not lead to the terrible things for which my demons were responsible. Or run. Disappear into the night and forget all about Kate and Champaign.

Horribly torn between self-preservation and what was probably the one time love of my life, I leaned down to kiss Kate on the cheek. Her breathing was shallow and her pulse fluttering beneath her already pale skin. In fact, it was turning an unhealthy shade of gray.

Sirens closed in, less than two blocks away by now. Thank God she'd driven tonight, picking me up at my house on our way to dinner then back to her place.

Sure I couldn't wait any longer I gave Kate a second kiss goodbye, pleading with her to hold on another two minutes before I slipped through the back door. My hands, shirt, and face were covered in blood but I'd been careful enough to keep my shoes clean lest I leave footprints and a trail that screamed FOLLOW ME! I WENT THIS WAY!

In between the parking lot and the back fence, I saw the flashing blue and red lights urging me to move quicker. I hustled over the fence, scaling the chain link like I'd spent years perfecting it as a kid. Which is impressive because I spent most of my childhood reading books and spying on women; not playing outdoors like a normal boy.

I arrived home and found myself overcome by anxiety. Never in my life had I been so afraid, so sad, and so hopeless and I sank to my knees, unable to hold my own weight any longer. And for the first time since I could



remember, I sobbed until my eyes were swollen and the sun lit the horizon.

Desperate to know Kate's condition, I contemplated the best ways to determine her fate. I could call both of the two local hospitals but I was doubtful they would provide any updates to someone who wasn't family. I could call the police station and claim to be her friend, worried because I hadn't heard from her in a day. But I didn't want them to question me about when I saw her last. I could watch the news like a normal person, hoping for an update on a horrific crime in a safe community. Or I could drive by her house, see if the police tape still hung, laced like stitches across her front door, and hope to find a security officer willing to answer some questions for a few subtly-passed fifties.

In the end, I opted to watch the nightly news. It was the least conspicuous method and a decent first pass. If that neglected to provide anything I would narrow my choices from there.

My head ached from the emotionally spent evening and I downed four aspirin and chased it with a shot of whiskey before I settled down in front of the sunrise news.

No matter how much I'd prepared myself for the inevitable, seeing the headline that a recent graduate from the University of Illinois had died from injuries sustained in a tragic home accident was almost more than I could bear. I didn't own a gun, but for the first time in my life, I wish I did. I would've ended my life.

The next two days passed in a blur, judging from the amount of broken dishes and holes in the drywall, I can

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only imagine what happened. The news was on around the clock as I awaited any update on the investigation into Kate's death.

In the first twelve hours, I learned that Kate had died in the ambulance on the way to the hospital and the paramedics had been unable to resuscitate her.

In the first twenty-four hours, I learned that the crime scene experts were inspecting her apartment for any clues involved in the struggle.

In the first thirty-six hours, I learned that the coroner was calling Kate's death "suspicious" but not necessarily a homicide.

And in the first forty-eight hours I learned that authorities had issued a widespread search for Kate's family, friends, and romantic acquaintances. They were all being called in for questioning. I'd been pacing the house, listening to the monotonous voice of Channel 4's Shae Smith, when I heard the announcement. The warning. I set into focused mode, grabbing several suitcases and duffle bags and packing as quickly and efficiently as possible.

Two hours and forty-three minutes later the house was pristine and—shy of a sign in the front yard—looked as though it was on the market awaiting its next owner.

I turned the block and passed two cop cars headed in the opposite direction. I could only assume my house was their intended destination. I vowed never to get that close to being caught ever again and to never get that close to another woman.

One quick deviation before I left Champaign forever... locate Kate's supposed lover, Seth. Don't get your panties

in a twist, I only wanted to see if she was being truthful and if the man actually existed. There was also a bizarre curiosity to see if he was better than me—more successful, more handsome, older. In an effort to distract myself from the news frenzy surrounding Kate’s death, I’d hacked into her Facebook, as well as her cell phone account, and learned that the Seth she’d referred to during our fight was a man named Seth Nichols.

From what I gathered on his social media accounts Seth was a veterinary technician in Mahomet, a town just a few miles outside of Champaign. The smiling pictures of him and his buddies depicted a guy with sandy-blond hair and blue eyes. His “liked” pages included charities (mostly for animals), the Chicago Bears, the University of Illinois, and a local hardware store. Relationship status: “it’s complicated.” His pictures showed selfies with his dogs (Bear and Sosa) and a few with Kate but none that stood out as romantic.

This information was great but not enough to confirm one way or another. It was time to see Seth in person. Minutes later, I’d plugged his address into my phone and was headed to Urbana, Champaign’s sister city.

Seth lived in a duplex on the outskirts of town, the houses a little rundown and in need of repair. And it was just my luck that he happened to be stepping out his front door just as I pulled into a parking lot across the street. Dressed in scrubs and juggling a backpack, coffee mug, and keys, he held his phone in his mouth while he tried to lock the front door. He looked average enough, someone who would’ve cared for Kate, and it almost broke my shriveled heart, jealousy coursing through my icy veins, to

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realize that he was still blissfully unaware, oblivious to the fact that his supposed girlfriend was lying alone and cold in the city morgue.

He managed to lock up and shuffled out to the driveway to a clichéd forest green Honda Civic hatchback, exhaust pouring from the tailpipe as soon as he got her started.

I still hadn't quite confirmed what I went there to learn, only that Seth was a real person. But not for sure if Kate was telling the truth about their relationship. I was torn on whether or not to stick around and learn the truth, or ensure my survival and get the hell out of town before my past caught up with me.

As always, I opted to save myself and sped away in the opposite direction of Seth. If my curiosity was still going strong by the time I arrived at the next town I could dig more with the assistance of a hacker or two. Who doesn't have at least a few friends in low places?

## CHAPTER FOUR

I vowed as I hauled ass out of Champaign to never give my real name to anyone again. I used a pseudonym in Michigan, but for some reason I had given Kate my real name. But not again. It was too dangerous. Of course, my fingerprints were on file (although with no name attached) and anyone could ID me if we'd met face-to-face, but at least it might hold off the authorities for longer if they couldn't match the name with the face or the prints.

I spent less time selecting my next location in the hopes that I could acclimate quickly lest someone come searching for me. The demons had been silenced, having gotten their fill from the rage involved in Kate's accident.

My next stay was in Lawrence, Kansas. Just far enough away from Champaign but close enough to settle in quickly and quietly. I lucked out in that the university had an open position for an associate professor of psychology. I altered my resume, leaving out the Champaign detour (I'd only worked at Starbucks anyway) and changed my name to Alex Rowan.

Settled into an apartment I admitted—without much surprise—that I was still curious about Kate and Seth. I had to know what they were. And so, I Googled, as one does when attempting to find someone to perform some illegal searches, and one anonymous individual gave me the name Satish Singh. I had no clue what I was getting myself into and worried that I may fall into some kind of trap.

But my mind wouldn't let this be and so I took the risk one night and sent Singh an encrypted message and signed it "RA". I received a reply within thirty minutes with an

address in a sketchy area of downtown Kansas City. Without pause, I hopped in the car and drove, a tiny voice niggling that this could be a trap but my ego was so desperate to understand the meaning of Kate and Seth's relationship that I didn't care anymore.

Singh instructed me to meet him at a park at sundown. It sounded so mysterious but again... desperation breeds creativity. As the only person—Indian or otherwise—in the park, it was hard to miss Satish. Hunched over his laptop while sitting on the bench, I noticed he was painfully thin and lanky. When I approached him, I could see the screen's reflection in his glasses, though it was hard to tell what he was doing.

"SS?" I asked, confirming before I sat beside a strange man who may or may not be dangerous.

He acknowledged my presence with a sharp nod and pushed the glasses up on his nose before turning his attention back to his laptop. "Name of the subject."

"Seth Nichols."

"Additional information?" Still didn't look away from his laptop.

"Veterinary technician in Mahomet, Illinois; earned his degree from the University of Illinois, no known aliases or criminal record."

Rapid typing, eyes scanning the backlit screen in the darkening Midwest sky. "Seth Anderson Nichols, born January 4, 1989, in Champaign, Illinois. Parents deceased, no siblings. Graduated top of his class at the University of Illinois. As of today, employed at Mahomet Animal Hospital as a veterinary technician, home address is 8990 Rutherford Dr., Urbana, Illinois. Phone records indicate

regular communication with Byron Smithfield, former fraternity brother; Sarah Leigh, paternal grandmother; and Kate McKean, unknown relationship.”

“How often did he communicate with Kate?”

“On average, three to four times a day.”

“For how long?”

“Approximately two months.”

That was it then. Kate hadn’t been lying. I slid the envelope of cash across the bench, thanked Satish, and walked out of the park, more alone than ever before.

Having familiarized myself with the town, I opted to head out to dinner one night in search of a companion. In the past, it had always taken the demons a substantial amount of time after they’d been satiated to want to kill again, so I thought I was safe for a while. Especially since I’d been so close to Kate. Her engagement ring remained tucked in the back of a dresser drawer, a painful reminder not to get too close to anyone.

Still, I longed for that same relationship we’d had. And on a college campus, it wasn’t difficult to find a young woman eager to land an established, moderately attractive man with whom to connect.

Alexis Jane “AJ” Cooper was that very girl. Her appearance resembled Kate’s and I’m quite sure that’s what struck me first. The long coffee-colored hair and green eyes. Her personality, on the other hand, was spectacularly different. Where Kate had been soft-spoken and gentle, AJ was demanding and fiery. My appreciation for the finer things in life—that Kate had shared—was lost on AJ who preferred cheap whiskey and cigarettes with her greasy

cheeseburgers from a local bar. And that's where I found her.

Positively famished after unpacking my apartment (not my normal MO since I never knew how long I'd stay in a place, but this time it was cathartic) I wandered down the street towards the oasis of neon lights promising great beer and good food. Hopefully, we'd agree on the definition of "good."

I sidled up to the bar and ordered a grilled chicken sandwich with a side salad and a light beer. Wine was my typical drink of choice but after Kate...well, I was sure it would be a long while before I could even look at red wine and not think of that white pillow...

"You're not from around here, are you?" I heard a face full of food ask. Despite my disgust, I turned to my left, not prepared for Kate's twin to be seated beside me, mouth indeed full of what appeared to be a partially masticated bite of burger. She chased her oversized bite with a swig of amber-colored beer and stuck out her hand, covered in ink. "I'm Alexis Jane. AJ for short."

I'm not a mysophobe (germophobe for you not familiar with the scientific term) by any means but I hesitated before grabbing her hand. No amount of guessing could provide answers as to where those hands had been. "Alex Rowan. And yes, I'm the new associate professor of psychology at the University of Kansas. I assume you're a student?"

She nodded, stuffing her mouth with the final piece of burger and a fry or two for good measure. "A senior this year, majoring in psychology, so I suppose we'll see a lot of one another."



I wasn't sure yet whether this excited or terrified me. She resembled Kate so much that I wanted to take her in my arms and apologize for what happened. As I glanced over to the stranger beside me, I noticed an anticipatory look on her face. As though she'd spoken and I hadn't yet responded.

"My apologies, I was off in my own world. What was it you said?"

"I asked if you lived around her too." Another swig of beer.

I nodded. "Just moved into the apartment complex around the corner. You?" I knew I shouldn't fraternize with a potential future student but whom else did I have to talk to? And she looked so much like Kate...

"A couple blocks over in a duplex with a friend of mine. He's never home though, double major and a bartender so he crashes there for a few hours every night and splits the rent with me. Sweet deal, actually." She hesitated for a minute, tipping her mug until the last drops of beer entered her perfect pink mouth, before she continued. "You could come over. If you want. I mean, I just finished telling you that my roommate is never home so we'd have the place to ourselves." She gestured overdramatically with her hands. "I'm sure there are a few beers in the fridge. We could finish getting to know each other before it becomes taboo or whatever."

I wasn't accustomed to a girl behaving so forward, especially towards me, but something about her drew me in and I found myself asking for the check and downing the rest of my beer before I could think twice.

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The sex was hot and slow, her mouth hard on mine and her fingers tangled in my hair as she teased the clothes from my body. Being dominated in any sense of the word was new for me. It was a nice distraction from the missionary I'd become so accustomed to with Kate.

Beautiful, reliable Kate. I shook my head, trying to clear it of her memory and focused on the sexy woman in front of me. Well, on top of me. When it was over, she rolled off and reached for her nightstand, grabbing a pack of cigarettes and lighting one before she offered the pack to me. I politely declined and shifted towards the bathroom, praying her roommate hadn't snuck in unnoticed in the last twenty minutes. The clock read just past eleven-thirty and I remembered her mentioning that he only dropped by for a few hours a night to sleep.

The coast clear I tiptoed across the hallway (though I'm not sure why since I'd just confirmed AJ and I were the only two there) and inhaled a breath as soon as the door was closed and locked. Hands braced on either side of the sink I stared at myself in the mirror. *Who was this man in the reflection?* I looked like I'd aged five years since I left Illinois and hoped that time pitied me and slowed down.

A knock on the door. "You alive in there? I don't need the cops called to my place." I wondered what she had to hide but thought better of asking and hurried along.

"Just splashing some water on my face to wake up. Out in a second." When I emerged from the bathroom, I came face to face with AJ, standing naked in front of me. "Jesus, girl. You sure know how to make a man's morning."

Her Cheshire cat grin let me know she knew what she was doing. "I'm just going to shower and then you can

walk me to work.” I wondered where her work was, what the hell she did that her shift didn’t start until the middle of the night, and why I was responsible for escorting her there. I dressed quickly, hoping for a quick opportunity to snoop before she emerged from the bathroom but she finished in record time (this woman was definitely not Kate reincarnate) and ran her fingers through her black hair before throwing on a pair of ripped jeans (I believe the hip kids call them “distressed”) and a KU sweatshirt.

“Where is it you work again?” I asked, searching her cluttered floor in vain for my other shoe. She kicked it out from under a pizza box before responding.

“I work the security graveyard shift at a research facility on the west side of town. Mostly I monitor the building so college kids don’t sneak in to steal the chemicals to get high.”

Damn. This girl was strange. But she was a good lay and kept my mind off Kate. Still, I wasn’t sure how long I would be able to tolerate her.

We walked along in silence and for the first time in my life, I was wary of the situation. AJ was unpredictable. *Could she know my secrets?* I’d been so careful the night before not to get drunk lest I reveal my past. Surely she couldn’t have any clue about the terrible things I’d done. The horrific violence of which I was capable.

“Well, it’s been real, Alex but I’ve got to protect the people.” She broke the silence so suddenly I jumped as if she’d touched me. When she turned to face me, she paused, though for what I wasn’t sure.

“AJ, you know this isn’t going to happen,” I said, indicating the two of us. “I may be your teacher in a matter

of days and to continue would be inappropriate.” She stared at me as though I’d sprouted horns.

“Continue what? I just needed a good fuck and you happened to sit down next to me at The Fat Cat. Don’t get me wrong, I know I’m weird, but you, my friend, are a whole different breed.” She waved her hands in front of her in a circular motion, indicating all of me. “I have zero interest in dating you—or whatever it is you do with chicks—so don’t worry, I’ll find someone else the next time I need to get laid.” She turned to leave and I heard her mutter the words “creepy” and “loser”.

I don’t know if the demons overheard or if I was so angry at Kate’s tragic death that I snapped, but her words set me off and I wrapped my hands around AJ’s neck before she took another step. It was over quickly and I dropped her body to the ground with little ceremony before checking my surroundings. We’d arrived at the back of the building so there was a handy dumpster less than thirty feet away. Another swivel of the head to be sure no one had caught the show and I grabbed the bitch by her ankles, dragging her behind the dumpster where she could rot until trash day.

Four days. I’d made it four days into my venture in Dorothy country before forcing myself to find my next home. The unpacking barely complete I could hardly wrap my hands—head, Freudian slip—around having to repeat the process all over again. Either I needed to find a way to morph into the nomad I was becoming to compensate for my violent lifestyle or I needed to stop the demons. At the present moment one seemed much more feasible than the

other and so I trudged back to AJ's to make sure I hadn't left any clues.

This time I would stick around until I'd formulated some kind of plan as to where I was headed next. Not to mention, I'd done a good enough job concealing my last several demon-inspired mishaps that I was confident that I could stay with no threat to my freedom or my safety. At least for now...

Lexington, Kentucky. Just far enough away but still in the Midwest (as we've already established is my preference).

It'll be a shame to leave what had turned out to be a pretty nice career change. I'd enjoyed my tenure—despite the short four days that it was—as an associate professor of psychology at KU and would be sorry to leave, however, the investigation was intensifying. At least Kate's death was still classified as accidental and the others are still unsolved, now considered cold cases, but when the body of a nice KU student is found discarded behind a dumpster with strangulation marks, the masses understandably demand justice. The police chief had made a public announcement the day before yesterday and while I'd never been afraid of authority, the man seemed hellbent on finding “the monster” and bringing him to justice. It would've been sheer stupidity for me to stick around any longer, despite the odd desire to taunt them, prove they'd never catch me unless I surrendered.

Every box I pack, every several-hundred-mile trek across the expanse of cornfields and cow farms, I take a little less. Packing and moving are always a pain but the frequency with which I've begun to change my location has

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made me realize that most “things” can be replaced with ease.

And so, four moves under my belt, I left for Kentucky with a total of two suitcases (all clothing and personal items) and four boxes. There wasn't much in them, a few family photos (unframed) a diary of sorts since there isn't anyone to talk to, and small keepsakes from each of the girls. Some might call these trophies but it was never about the conquest. I wanted to remember each of the women who died at the hands of these ruthless beasts. I never want to forget what I've done. Because while I'm not proud of the brutality I've wrought, for each of the girls who've suffered as a victim, there are countless others who've been saved because I was strong enough to overpower the demons. Those girls matter more, but it's harder to acquire trinkets from the live ones.

As with many of the states I've lived in in the past several months, I'd never been to Kentucky and upon entering, realize why it's nicknamed “the bluegrass state.” At the ripe age of twenty-two, I didn't expect to be introduced to a new color but here it is. A green so thick and rich it's as though the sky dripped down and mixed in with the grass. Five minutes in and it's going to be pretty hard to convince myself to leave. Horses on every farm (though I've never been a huge fan of getting too close... they're intimidatingly large) and a clear blue sky. Even the air is lush, easier to breathe.

Prior to departing Kansas, I'd done my research and already had a job and a living situation lined up. Of course, I wasn't lucky enough to be able to secure employment

with the psychology department at the university so I managed to find an opening with the university bookstore. At the least, it would put me in direct contact with the students and give me the opportunity to learn the layout of the campus.

I know this is in direct opposition to my defeating the demons, but I couldn't help myself. There were times I was cocky enough to think I could restrain myself if I ever felt the rumblings again. Like an addict thinks he's capable of handling one drink.

I rented a house on the edge of campus (and even acquired a few new belongings for decoration) for almost a month, going about my ways, people-watching and studying the different curriculums of the psychology group so that I could better learn when I was given the responsibility to run my own.

I'd also discovered an unexpected joy of cooking. Eating out proved to be expensive, and while I had some money—plus whatever I earned at my job—eating out several times a day was not sustainable. So I learned to cook healthy meals for myself.

I was doing quite well until one evening I realized that I'd neglected to purchase a key component for vegetable lasagna: parmesan cheese. I was baffled as to how I could forget such an important ingredient, but desperate not to ruin the dish—or leave the stove on to dash back to the store—in a last-ditch effort I'd popped next door to my neighbors' house.

We'd never met and in fact I didn't know what to expect when the front door opened to reveal a college-aged girl with mousy brown hair. Her glasses had slipped down

her nose, making her look more nerd-like than sexy teacher, and her skin was olive and unblemished. Positively gorgeous.

“Hi, I’m Reese Anderson, your next door neighbor. Any chance you have some parmesan cheese?”

Her grin was electric. “I’m Lizzy and my father is Italian.”

“So that’s a yes?” I said, returning her smile. She escorted me through her house—immaculately clean—and into the kitchen. Another amateur chef must have lived in the same house because the smells emanating from the stovetop were mouthwatering.

“So what are you making? Something worthy of this very expensive parmesan cheese, I hope.” She turned to open the fridge.

“Vegetable lasagna. I’m new to the cooking realm and am trying to stick with healthy-ish meals for myself.”

“That sounds delightful. Eggplant or squash?”

Well, color me impressed. “Squash. I never was much of an eggplant fan, although I’m sure it has its uses.” She spun around and offered me a tub of what appeared to be fancy grated cheese. “And I certainly don’t need this much. If you’ll let me run next door and measure, I’ll bring back the tub in a flash.”

She laughed and the sound sent lightning under my skin. One of those moments where just seconds before you would’ve sworn you could never be happy again and then suddenly the world is full of promise and hope. “Don’t worry about it, neighbor. I’d like the excuse to see you again. Tell you what, how about you agree to cook dinner



for me and Dasha in exchange for a tablespoon or so of cheese?”

“Who’s Dasha?” I asked, realizing that that wasn’t the important question.

“My roommate. She’s at work now but should be home in about an hour. Got enough lasagna to share?”

Two hours later, I found myself walking over the cracked, uneven sidewalk, praying I didn’t trip and drop the dish of vegetable lasagna—complete with parmesan cheese. I’d showered and shaved, hoping this night could turn into something longer term. I know I hadn’t known Lizzy for more than ten minutes but she had the potential to be someone I was interested in getting to know better. And thanks to Kate—and despite what I said earlier about never getting close to anyone again—I was even more interested in proving my theory that love was the cure for my demons.

Dinner was fantastic, Lizzy was hilarious and charming, and her roommate, Dasha, was smart with a dry sense of humor. We kept the conversation light, minimal detail on backgrounds, which I appreciated—although I wondered what past life details they had to hide as well. They gave each other the occasional side glance throughout dinner and when the meal was over and dishes done, Dasha asked if I’d like to stay for a drink. I agreed, though I’m not much of a drinker, and she poured three glasses of whiskey.

Several drinks later and I vaguely recalled Lizzy leading me to a back bedroom. Dasha said something as we walked away but I didn’t catch it. This is the reason I don’t drink. I find myself out of control enough, let alone adding alcohol to the mix, which exacerbates everything.

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The next few hours were a blur but one section stood out, even the following day. In the middle of sex, Lizzy pulled me on top of her while she laid on her stomach. “Doggy-style,” she said, biting her lower lip. I’ve experimented plenty with sex and had knowledge of the position, but when she grabbed my left hand and wrapped it around her neck, the sensation was electrifying. If I hadn’t been drunk before this would have had me out of my mind. The fact that I wasn’t sober may have also been the reason that I didn’t worry about how far I could accidentally take this bedroom play.

When it was over and we lay beside each other, spent and out of breath, she propped herself up on an elbow and studied my face.

“You’ve never done that before, have you?”

*Not during sex and certainly not any time that didn’t end with someone in a body bag*, I thought wryly. “No. Did that just occur to you at the moment or have you done that before with other men?”

She shrugged. “Someone taught me a long time ago, introduced me to S&M, and let’s just say I know what I like. The question is did *you* like it?”

I liked it more than I would ever let on. The realization that I could utilize my hands without harming someone—and even better, that they would *enjoy* it—is not a situation I’d ever considered before. If nothing went wrong, this could be a game changer. But I could never allow myself to lose control.

Lizzy and I had dated for a few weeks when she invited me over one Thursday night. Not only were dinners with Lizzy

and Dasha entertaining, often lasting late into the night with stories from their jobs and family lives growing up, but also because Lizzy was an unbelievable chef. She was currently a culinary student and could constantly be found practicing new techniques. If I came over before dinner, she would teach me things here and there about prep work, which spices worked with different meats. It got to the point where I would bring over the food I cooked for myself strictly for her feedback.

Anyway, this particular Thursday summer night Lizzy mentioned dining on their back patio under the sunset with a potential fire pit session later. I promised to contribute the makings for smores and a bottle of whiskey.

Dinner was delicious, smores spectacular and we were just breaking into the bottle of Woodford Reserve when Dasha excused herself to the bathroom. The moment she'd closed the back door Lizzy slid her chair closer to mine.

“So, I know we've done some...experimenting and I thought we could take it to the next level.”

I wracked my brain. *To what could she possibly be referring?* She'd further educated me thanks to her experience with S&M, so I couldn't imagine what we hadn't touched on (no pun intended). Lizzy noticed my blank, confused stare and continued. “I was thinking we could try a threesome. Dasha is totally into it—I mean, she and I have shared a guy before so it wouldn't be anything new for us—but you're so sexy and it would be so much fun. What do you think?” She walked two fingers from my waistline to my neck.

I sipped on the whiskey, biding my time to figure out how to politely decline, when Dasha returned.

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“What did he say? Did you say yes?” she asked, glancing towards me. Although I wasn’t sure because she’d never said as much, I suspected Dasha was Eastern European with her cropped blonde hair and ice blue eyes. Her accent was subtle, more pronounced when she’d been drinking.

“I’m not sure that’s really my thing. I never assumed we were exclusive so if you want to bring another guy in, I’ll excuse myself and let you two do your thing.” I rose to leave hoping this wouldn’t seem as weird tomorrow as it did right now with half blood, half whiskey running through my veins.

“Reese, we want you,” Lizzy said, out of her seat and in front of me in a flash. *How did she move so quickly?* Shit, I must have consumed more alcohol than I realized. I gently removed her hands from my chest and shoved both my hands in my pockets.

“Lizzy, that’s flattering it’s just, I’m not into that sort of thing.”

“Do you not find us attractive?” Dasha said, suddenly beside Lizzy and with her hands all over my ass. So this was all a ploy. I have no doubt many men had succumbed to their seductions in the past, but to be honest, I wasn’t attracted to Dasha. As cute as she was, she wasn’t my type. And the longer this discussion went on, the less attractive I found Lizzy as well.

“We just want to play,” Lizzy said, deepening her voice. I removed her hands a second time, held them in front of me and forced her to look me in the eyes.

“I’m flattered, really, but I am not interested, Lizzy. Now, it’s been a lovely evening and I’d like to go home.

Let's get together again soon for coffee or dinner. It's my turn anyway."

But she just couldn't let it go. "What's the matter with you? Can't handle two strong women? I knew you were a pussy the moment I met you." Lizzy swung at me without the intention of making contact, and I noticed Dasha roll her eyes and head inside. She must have seen this performance before. The demons squirmed in my belly and I knew I had to get Lizzy away from the house. If they struck here, Dasha would know I was responsible. At least if Lizzy died somewhere public there would be reasonable doubt that someone else was responsible for her death.

I grabbed Lizzy by the wrist. "Let's go somewhere for another drink."

"Where? We have booze here." The slur in her words was subtle but it was there. Good. The drunker she got the easier this would be.

"There's a bar downtown that I've heard hosts karaoke on Thursday nights and I'm in the mood to sing." I gave her a charming smile hoping I could hold off the demons just a little longer.

"Fine. I'll tell Dasha."

"Don't worry about her. She's probably asleep by now anyway. Besides, it's not like you're not out with someone you know."

She shrugged and swayed before following me out to the car. We were downtown in ten minutes and by the time we headed into the bar, I was sober as a nun. In the first twenty minutes, Lizzy downed three tequila shots and two whiskey sours and resumed her unconvincing plea to get me into a threesome with her and Dasha.

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“I just don’t understand why you won’t play with us,” she said, her voice slurred but sounding even worse since she tried to put a pouty emphasis on her words. “We’ll do things to your body so tantalizing you can’t even imagine.” At this, she pressed her hand to my crotch and squeezed. Hard. I wasn’t sure what kind of seduction she had in mind, but if this was any indication, I was not interested.

“Lizzy, this is becoming tiresome. I’ve already made myself clear. Now, how about you and I have another drink and forget this conversation ever happened?”

My response sent her straight from sweet and sassy to bitchy and belligerent. So much so that I was grateful for the loud noise and crowds to cover her voice.

“Another round?” The bartender paused in front of our barstools. I had a hard time hearing him over the din of the band but it was obvious what he asked when he gestured to our empty glasses. I nodded and turned back to Lizzy who’d quieted long enough for me to wonder if she’d passed out on the bar top. I should be so lucky. As soon as I made eye contact with her she was at it again, spitting names at me that weren’t anything new.

I’d had enough. Before the bartender returned with our drinks I’d plopped down a fifty and escorted Lizzy through the back door—out to where the bar staff escaped for cigarette breaks—and into the parking lot. The place had been packed and with all the alcohol and noise, I hoped it was less likely we’d be seen and remembered.

“Where are you taking me?” She growled, yanking her arm away from me. Well, tried to at least. I held firm and escorted her to the car. Thankfully, I’d opted to drive hers because I would need to be able to escape on foot. Without

a word, we got in the car and I moved to undress her. Assuming she knew where this was headed, Lizzy tore her clothes off surprisingly fast in the tight space and straddled my lap in the front seat once our clothes were gone. Unsurprisingly the sex was rough and just as I'd hoped, Lizzy pulled my hand to her neck, encouraging the demons. Only this time, they didn't let up, not even when she clawed my hand until it bled.

Minutes later, I folded her body into the backseat and covered her with her discarded sweatshirt. I scraped my skin from beneath her fingernails before dressing and sneaking off into the night, never to be seen or heard from again in Kentucky.

I'd stuck around for a total of six weeks and three days, which, while longer than my previous stay of four days, was still so much shorter than I'd hoped.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Lizzy was messy, there's no question. And I had the concern that I'd murdered out of anger twice. AJ and now Lizzy. Caroline, Megan, and Joley were more out of necessity, their safety and mine. The demons are horrible (hence the name and all) but there is a vast difference between killing out of need and killing out of anger. One has a tendency to be structured, methodical. The other is dirty, rushed and riddled with mistakes. Mistakes that could get me caught.

I never before believed in working *with* my demons, but on the drive from Kentucky to St. Louis, (my next stop), I had a chat with them and laid it all out. Without question, I could not lose control that way again.

I had every intention of locking them up for eternity. But I at least hoped that bargaining would buy me time until I figured out a way to be rid of them once and for all. Hostage negotiation, if you will.

You may wonder if I ever tried another method to destroy that part of myself. And the answer is yes. Over the years I'd tried proven methods (antipsychotics, antidepressants, mood stabilizers) and alternatives (meditation, herbs, and hypnotizing) but nothing kept them away. I resigned myself to the fact that it was likely a product of my personality, not to be easily changed.

St. Louis University offered a magnificent opportunity to join their psychology team. I'd hoped for another associate professor position but all they had available was a teacher's assistant. By taking it, I would put myself at the top of the



list for the next open AP position. “Should be less than eighteen months,” the administrator informed me during the interview. Mostly I would call myself a realistic optimist but even I have a hard time picturing myself here eighteen months from now.

And so I’d found a house to rent near campus. Not too close lest I be mistaken for an actual student, but close enough that I would be able to ride the bus to the psych building and walk to the grocery, dry cleaner and other necessary evils.

One afternoon, on a day I didn’t have class, I opted to wander the city, familiarize myself with the different shops and restaurants. I still cooked for myself but restaurants were a nice opportunity for dates and other social gatherings. The truth is, every morning on my way to the university I passed by a small pottery shop and found myself drawn to a woman seated at the pottery wheel, focused intently on her craft. She had short, brown hair, always tucked behind her ears with a stray chunk falling over dark eyes. Regardless of the weather, she wore a short-sleeved, V-neck t-shirt so I could see her bare, long, delicate neck. Her name was Emily. Even from a distance, I could read her hand-painted name badge, the “i” dotted with a delicate pink heart.

The first time I saw her alone in the early hours I knew she would be perfect. As much as I’d tried to deny it, I’d still been looking for Kate’s replacement. Someone else I could share my life with; keep the demons away for good.

One particular morning I paused outside the broad window, “Pottery Studio” etched in the glass just above where my head reached. She mesmerized me, the way she

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worked in her trance-like state. As if no one else existed around her. I wanted to shock her, show her that *I* existed.

Every day spent in the classroom my thoughts drifted to Emily and the deep pools of her eyes. Each morning she was so close to me, almost within reach. And God knows I longed to touch her. Perhaps, if I waited long enough, she would reach out to me. But of course, she didn't know I existed. I had to remedy that. But I had no idea where she lived or if she was even a student at St. Louis University so I needed to find a way to meet her.

One afternoon, class canceled due to the professor having fallen ill, I strolled past the pottery shop on my way home, earlier than normal, and found that she was still there, sitting in her normal spot at the pottery wheel. But the studio was packed, other wheels scattered sporadically around the modest-sized room with unfamiliar potters.

Emily—my Emily—was an instructor.

And now I knew how to insert myself into her life.

That night I went online, found the studio, and paid the fee to join a series of once-a-week classes. Beginner, naturally. Even I'm not an expert at everything.

After the first group class, I feigned difficulty and Emily was nice enough to stick around after the scheduled time to give me some one-on-one instruction. And the rest, as they say, is history. I continued my classes but we saw each other outside of the studio as well. Once for drinks after she'd had a fight with her mom and another celebratory dinner date when I'd graduated from her beginner pottery class.

The beauty of it was that for the first several weeks I'd felt *normal*. There were no dark, evil voices lurking in the

back of my subconscious, waiting to pounce as soon as I relaxed. No haunting reminders of the other girls—Kate especially. We were just a normal couple.

We went on dates, spent nights together and opened up to one another about our pasts. Well, Emily did, at least. I was always careful never to reveal too much lest my past manage to catch up with me. When Emily would ask about my family or my childhood, I feigned a deep hurt. Something terrible had happened to me. That's what I hoped she believed. Despite what I'd done with several of the others, I gave her my real name, but I had lied about my job (IT consultant for a marketing firm downtown).

The Night It Happened began so well. I'd promised her a romantic night alone; away from the stresses of work and our increasing arguments, typically over my emotional unavailability and her desperate need to connect.

We began our date night at Blood and Sand, a small, swanky restaurant just off the Landing downtown, ordering calamari and crab cakes with a bottle of 1996 Di Bruno Pinot Grigio, my interest in fine dining and wine increasing as I cooked more and more complicated meals for myself, and Emily when she dropped by my house. She swirled the crisp liquid around the glass and brought it to just beneath her nose. I watched her close her eyes, inhale. She was so trusting, so sure of what she wanted in life—and I was surprised to find it made me envious.

Her expression when I left her still haunts me. More than anyone except Kate. Certainly more than I'd anticipated. The demons had done a number on her. A relationship similar to Kate's but the endings couldn't have been more

different. Her deep brown eyes frozen in the landscape of her face, unfocused and glassy. As with the others, I'm sorry I was the last person she saw before I finished her off, but for some reason, it was imperative that she see the monsters. I needed her to see the demons responsible for her undoing. Or maybe *they* needed her to see them.

I gazed down at her one last time and, noticing the deep purple bruises bloom, I re-tied the lime green scarf around her neck, covering most of the purplish-blue hue. I bent down and kissed her on the lips, realizing the risk in sticking around. When a hot, tingling sensation shot to my groin, I jumped back in surprise, as if someone had just yelled my name. Glancing around to be sure no one was nearby, I slipped off into the shadows, headed home.

I closed my eyes and concentrated, trying to push the feelings of arousal out of my mind. I've always been turned on by women, but never by killing them (strangling, sure, but not the actual act of murder) and certainly not after they died. Maybe it was due to my experiences with Lizzy... Instead, I chalked it up to coincidence and cursed my wicked thoughts, wishing I possessed the willpower to ignore them, but the demons only seemed to worsen over time.

Back at my house, I was sharply aware of the solitude. Emily had become a regular visitor and I found I missed her laugh and the smart conversation more than I'd expected. And, instead of being comforted by the isolation—as I'd been several times in the past—the monsters having disappeared at least for now, I wept.

As it was after every time the demons took control, I promised myself that the next time I'd be stronger. The

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next time, I wouldn't let the demons assert control. Next time, I'd fight.

## CHAPTER SIX

The first time I saw her I'd been ready to leave the frat house, tired of feigning interest in keg stands, painfully loud music that made my bones ache, and peeling the sorority girls off my pants leg. Not every male at the party was interested in hooking up but no one could've told them that.

Two weeks after my twenty-third birthday and I expected to be at a much different place in my life by now. Instead, I'd escaped from St. Louis, the cops hot on Emily's murder, and run straight to Bloomington, Indiana. I was frustrated at not being able to find a job of which I was worthy, so I'd rented a place from a psychology professor on sabbatical.

Paul Lewis lived out on Griffey Lake in a magnificent house, which I promised to care for in his absence. Still, instead of using his name, which would've been easy, I'd begun using my real name again. I'd given pseudonyms for so long the name Ryan Atkinson almost felt fake.

Having circled the entire house several times and about ready to call it a night, I spotted her on the dance floor. Chestnut brown hair and dark eyes. She was striking...actually she looked ready to puke. The psychology training kicked in. My brunette was having a panic attack. (Amazing how much my studies in psychology have come in handy over the years.) The girl I'd seen with her earlier in the night had disappeared into one of the upstairs rooms with a boy who looked like the very definition of a frat boy. I made my way over to the girl

and above the din of the music, I whispered in her ear, “Are you okay?”

No response. In the instant before she hit the floor, I caught her in my arms and led her outside. The autumn night air was just crisp enough that it kicked her respiratory system into gear and she gasped.

“Just breathe. Take deep breaths and relax. You’re out of there now; we’re the only two people around. Open your eyes. Just keep breathing. In through your mouth, out through your nose. In, out.”

The beautiful girl opened her eyes and took into account her surroundings, just as I’d instructed. Finally, she turned to me. “Are you starting to feel a bit better?” My voice was low and smooth, comforting.

She nodded and did her best to smile. I wanted to help her so I asked her to stay still for a minute. “I’ll grab you some water. I promise I’ll be back.”

She nodded again and I ran inside. I returned with a bottle of water and a bag of pretzels. There wasn’t much to be found in a frat vending machine so I was hopeful those would suffice for the time being. I handed her the water and waited while she twisted the cap and drank deeply.

“I didn’t mean to intrude back there. It’s just, well you weren’t looking too good and I didn’t want you to pass out in front of everyone.” I meant that sincerely. I was concerned about her wellbeing. That hadn’t happened since Kate. I didn’t want to think about that.

“No, I appreciate your concern, thanks. Although passing out in front of people *is* one of my specialties, I try not to show off.” Despite her current situation, she managed another smile.

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“I’m Ryan Atkinson, and you are?”

“Harper Cunningham. Nice to meet you.” Beautiful name for a beautiful girl.

“So, this is your first frat party?”

“Wow, that obvious, huh?”

I shrugged, trying not to further her embarrassment. “I have a sense about these things.”

She blushed and turned her head in an attempt to hide the bloom in her cheeks. She glanced at me again, studying my face and before I could stop myself, I reached up and scratched my several-days-old beard. “I guess I missed a few spots, huh?”

She laughed awkwardly and said, “I’m sorry. I’m still out of it,” before taking another swig of water. “So, how did you know there was something wrong with me in there? What gave it away? And be honest, how many people were staring at me?”

“Well, truthfully, most people didn’t even notice because everyone in there is wasted,” I said, shoving my hands in my pocket so I didn’t do anything stupid like touch her face. “Plus, I happen to know something about panic attacks and their symptoms. I majored in psychology, so it might as well have been written on your forehead.” I bit my lip—both because I knew it made me appear younger and because it was a hard-to-resist endearing look—and folded my hands between my knees.

“Well, I’m glad to know I have the common sense to succumb to an attack near someone who at least has the decency and knowledge to help.”

“See, you’re improving every time.” I nudged her with my elbow. I didn’t know where this Ryan came from but I



was more relaxed and at ease in Harper's presence than I had with almost any other girl. Except maybe for Kate, but with Harper, I found that memories of Kate were fading, like they were stuck in a fog. I couldn't see through clearly anymore.

"I don't want there to ever be a next time. This is my first attack in almost two years."

"You know, there are a lot of different solutions. Just from what I've seen your case doesn't seem to be severe. You would likely benefit from small doses of anti-anxiety medication or even therapy sessions. I know it's not my place to say, but if you want to improve your quality of life, you can." Good thing I knew what I was talking about; I wasn't interested in ruining anyone's life with made up bullshit.

"I know. I was on medication for a while, but I didn't like it. I was always tired because I couldn't ever sleep deep enough, I had horrifically real dreams, and I felt more neurotic on the medication than before. I saw a therapist for a while and she gave me some coping strategies. I just should have known better than to come to a party where I knew there would be a large group of people." She shook her head before glancing up to see the puzzled expression on my face. She rolled her eyes and responded before I could even ask. "I know, I know. Why would I attend a huge university with such a socially crippling problem?"

"I understand your reason for attending IU, and I respect the fact that you're trying to get this under control without medication. Like I said before, I believe you possess the mental capacity to overcome your challenges, but the process won't be easy. Maybe you're faced with

some level of anxiety for the rest of your life. In some cases, there is no cure, only treatment.” Despite knowing the ramifications if I’m not as in control as I think, I rest my hand on her shoulder. “Although if it’s been several years since you tried medication, there are new drugs on the market that are likely to have fewer side effects. Just something to consider.”

“Well, if everyone was as understanding as you are, maybe I wouldn’t feel so ashamed.”

I nodded and reached up to pat her back. She yawned, almost startling herself and I checked my watch.

“Well, it’s late. I assume you don’t have any interest in going back in there?” I gestured to the house with my thumb.

“Nope, can’t say that I do. I’ve had about all I can handle for one night. Now I’m exhausted.”

“Anxiety attacks have that effect. If you don’t mind my asking, where do you live?”

“Wright. My roommate and I walked here, so I know my way back.” Having explored campus in my first few weeks here, I knew where that was. Just down the street a few blocks, in fact.

We stood in unison and she moved to leave without me but turned and smiled. I wasn’t sure what else to say so I smiled back and reached out my arm in front of me in a gentlemanly fashion, waving my hand towards the sidewalk. “You don’t actually think I’m just going to send you on your way after watching you nearly fall apart in there, do you?”

“Oh, don’t be ridiculous. I am perfectly capable of walking myself home. The sidewalk is lit the whole way

and there are still parties raging everywhere. Plenty of witnesses.” She smiled at her last sentence as though trying to be convincing.

“Well, as stubborn as you are, I promise, I’ve got you beat. Not to mention I pride myself on being a perfect gentleman,” I replied and strode up beside her. “My mother would be horrified if she learned I did any less.” I offered her my elbow in an overdramatically polite gesture and tried not to think about the fact that my mother hadn’t crossed my mind in years. “It would be my pleasure to ensure that you arrive back to your dorm. I wouldn’t be able to enjoy the remainder of my evening without the affirmation of your safety. Besides, with my luck, I’ll find you wandering around the quad tomorrow and feel utterly responsible. At least this way you’re confined to your dorm room.” I smiled broadly and noticed that she was holding back a laugh.

As we walked down Jordan arm-in-arm, I remained quiet. Harper did as well and while I wondered what was on her mind, I was just as content in her presence. The demons were nowhere to be found. As we crossed Tenth Street at the light, Harper turned her face up to me and smiled softly.

“What’s on your mind?” she asked.

“How I got lucky enough to escort this beautiful lady home.” Cheesy, but weirdly true. She blushed again.

As we stood under the eaves by the door, she fumbled around for her keys. She finally grasped the metal and as she did, I handed her a small piece of paper.

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“My phone number. In case you need anything. Or ever want to hang out.” I smiled in spite of myself. “Goodnight, Harper.”

“Goodnight, Ryan. And thanks again.” She disappeared inside the door and I began my walk across the quad, waiting a minute before I turned and walked backward a few steps, knowing she would look out her window. I gave her a smile and a wave before continuing across the grass, trying not to get my hopes up about Harper Cunningham. Because maybe—just maybe—she would be the one to help me conquer the demons.

JENNY MEDENWALD

**Other books by Jenny Medenwald:**

*Hell on Heels*

*The Lucky Strikes*

*I'll Be Watching You*

*The Lightning Riders*

*Every Move You Make*

*She Dreams in Color*

*Next in Line*

*Every Breath You Take*

## **About the Author**

Jenny was born and raised in the Midwest and has since settled in Indianapolis. Once a Midwest girl, always a Midwest girl, she supposes. Not enough snow for her liking, but at least we experience all four seasons.

She loves: coffee, the smell of fresh cut grass, red wine, winter (mostly the snow), bonfires, summer concerts, rainy days curled up with a good book, tattoos, all animals, the ID channel (it's research!), the hubs and, of course, writing. Not necessarily in that order.

She hates: obscenely hot weather (sweating without exercise or a bathing suit is just awful), rude people (why?), and bad grammar (come on now). Also not in that order.

Thanks to a copywriting job that didn't actually provide 40 hours of work, Jenny wrote her first book not long after graduating with an English degree from Indiana University. You can only play solitaire so long. Since then she couldn't STOP coming up with ideas and as such, has several young adult novels published (mostly thriller and fantasy). So safe to assume there are always more coming...