

# Chapter One

I STUDY SERIAL KILLERS. THEY'RE LONERS. Obsessive-compulsives. People who lack emotion and fantasize about violence. Intelligent people who on the outside seem normal.

Interesting thing is, I fit that profile. I have urges. I plot ways to violently make people pay for what they've done to others.

Nature versus nurture. Of course I've studied that. I've got good parents with decent genetics, so for me I've always suspected it's something else. Except . . . I have no clue what.

I don't know why I am the way I am, why I think the way I think, why I do the things I do. All I know is that I'm different. Always have been. I can't remember a time when I *didn't* know something was off in me.

At ten, when other kids were coloring with crayons, I started tracking serial killers and keeping details of their murders in a journal—a journal no one has ever seen but me.

Now, nearly seven years later, most teens hang out with friends. I, however, prefer spending my spare time at the courthouse—with Judge Penn to be exact. He tries all the hard cases.

His staff expects to see me, believing my lie about wanting to go into law, and so I give my customary nod as I enter the back of Penn's court and quietly take my usual spot in the left rear corner. I sit down and get out my summer reading just in case today's calendar is boring.

It's not.

A balding, short, pudgy, accountant-type man sits beside a slick lawyer he's obviously spent a lot of money on. The Weasel is what I decide to name him.

In the viewing gallery sit a handful of women; three are crying and two stoically stare straight ahead.

On the stand is another of the expressionless ones, and she's speaking, "... classical music, a candle. He knew his way around, like he'd been in my house before. He handcuffed my ankles and wrists to the bedposts and stuffed gauze in my mouth so my screams couldn't be heard. He cut my clothes away and left me naked. He wore a condom and was clean shaven, *everywhere*. He had a full-face mask on."

*No evidence.*

“He raped me,” she matter-of-factly reports, and then describes in detail all the vicious ways he violated her.

“I’m going to be sick,” the woman in front of me whispers before getting up and leaving the room.

I continue listening to the details, mentally cataloging them. Details don’t bother me. They don’t make me sick. They don’t make me want to leave a room. If anything they draw me in because they are just that—details, facts.

A few of the women in the room sniffle, and I glance to the Weasel. Although he’s doing a good job of keeping his emotions blank, I catch a slight smirk on his lips that kicks my pulse.

This is one of the things I consider a talent of mine. While some people show every emotion, I show none. And I can read others’ body language, others’ faces when they think they’re doing a stellar job of masking. The Weasel obviously thinks he’s getting away with something.

Thirty minutes later the Weasel is found not guilty due to lack of evidence. As he walks from the court room, his slight smirk becomes more visible when he glances at one of the sniffing women.

This is another thing people make the mistake of—confidence, cockiness, ego.

The Weasel will rape again. Of this I’m sure.

If it is my destiny to be a killer, I’m going to need a type.

And today decides that my type will be criminals—specifically, those who have managed to avoid punishment.

I turn seventeen next week. The Weasel will be my birthday present to myself. I think I've just found my first victim.

## Chapter Two

AS I PUSH DOWN ON THE FRENCH PRESS plunger, I glance across the kitchen counter to my fifteen-year-old younger sister. She's the quintessential "perfect" teenager. Popular, student council, flat-ironed blond hair, okay grades, cheerleader, great clothes, curvy, cute body.

These are not the reasons I dislike her. I know the *real* Daisy. Her popularity is milked from others, her blond hair is fake, her okay grades come from cheating, and she plays the I'm-your-best-friend game a little too well.

"Who makes French press every morning?" she says snidely, always showing me her true self.

I don't bother responding.

My still-sleepy eight-year-old brother shuffles in and wraps his arms around my waist. “Morning, Lane.”

I give him a hug. “Morning.”

Both Daisy and my brother, Justin, are half siblings to me. Although I remind myself of that fact nearly every day with Daisy, I’ve never once with Justin.

Justin had been labeled learning disabled early on, but looking at him you’d never know anything’s wrong. There’s just something not firing up there in that complicated brain of his.

I put my arm around his skinny shoulders. “You scared about starting the big team-taught classes this year?” He used to be in all small self-contained ones.

“A little,” he mumbles.

“Your teachers wouldn’t have recommended it if they didn’t believe in you,” Daisy says encouragingly.

Our mutual love of Justin is the only thing that keeps me somewhat, and I do stress the word “somewhat,” okay with my sister.

Our mom clicks into the kitchen on her sensible heels. “Good morning, children!”

“That’s a little too cheery for a first day of school,” I joke.

She tugs on the tips of my long kinky red hair. “Love it down.”

I gift her one of my rare smiles. “Thanks.”

I divide the strong roast between two travel mugs and slide one across the granite counter to Mom. She grins as if I’ve just served up the Holy Grail on a platter, and *that* is the reason I go

through the trouble of making great coffee every morning.

She gives me a peck on the cheek, then leans down to do the same to Justin. “Phew, go brush your teeth.”

He breathes on her just to be ornery, and shuffles off to the bathroom.

Mom rounds the kitchen island to kiss Daisy, who does her customary avoidance by hopping off her stool and heading up to her bedroom.

This is yet another reason why Daisy tiptoes a fine line with me. Let Mom kiss you already. It won't kill you.

Pretending she's not hurt, Mom turns to me. “My first big day too.” She motions to her navy suit. “Good?”

Mom works in DC at FBI headquarters. So does my stepdad, Victor. That's where they met after my dad died. Except Mom's climbed the promotions ladder a lot quicker than Victor. Her latest step up is the biggest ever. Director of the behavioral Analysis unit. They handle serial killers.

*What did he do when you caught him?*

*How did he pick his victims?*

*Was there a lot of blood?*

*There's a video of the kill room? Can I watch it?*

Mom had always patiently answered my questions as honestly as possible, writing it off as healthy kid interest. But when

I asked her that last one, I could tell it weirded her out, which is why I stopped asking questions several years ago.

“You look great, Mom. Very director.”

She grabs her purse. “Dad’ll be back in a few days from California, and then we’ll all do a celebratory dinner.”

“Sounds good.”

“Justin doesn’t have aikido today, but he does have after-school tutoring.”

I nod. “I know.”

She laughs. “Of course you know. You get your organization from me.” She waves her hand around our overly neat house before opening the front door. “Later. Can’t wait to hear about first days.”

*You get your organization from me.* That puts it lightly. Mom’s a bit OCD. Attention to details, combing facts, noticing the small things. It makes her very good at her job.

Dressed in my usual skinny jeans, snug tee, and gray Pumas, I grab my school stuff and head out to my Jeep Wrangler. As I wait for Daisy and Justin, my thoughts trail to the Weasel. I wonder what he’s doing this very second. He’s probably heading to work, like every other adult. Unlike every other adult, he’s going to sit in his safe little office, think about the women he’s raped, and plan the next one. Just the vision has me clenching my jaw. . . . He’ll get what he deserves.

Justin and Daisy come out of the house, and I refocus my energies on driving. At the elementary campus Justin climbs



out. “You’re going to do great,” I tell him, and he gives me that toothless grin that always tugs at my heart.

Daisy and I pull in to the high school, and she’s already climbing out before I stop. In my peripheral vision I see her bound away and join her sophomore clique.

I’m in the gifted-and-talented program so most of my senior classes are in the GT wing.

“Slim,” my last-year lab partner greets me as I enter the main building.

“Hey.” I’ve been called Slim for as long as I can remember. I’m five-eight, skinny, and flat-chested. It’s not like I try to be skinny. I eat normal. Mom says I get it from my real dad’s side of the family.

At my locker the science club president comes up. “How’s it going, Slim?”

Sometimes I wonder if people remember my name’s Lane. “Good.”

“Go anywhere this summer?”

I spin my combination. “Nope.” Just the courthouse, but that’s my little secret. Among other things . . .

He hands me a flyer. “I’m assuming you’re doing science club again?”

I take the flyer. “Sure.” The science club is my main attempt at socializing. Other than that I keep to myself, don’t speak unless I have something notable to say, and don’t care what people think. If that avoidance behavior makes me unpopular, then so be it.

“Great. We’re aiming for the national plaque this year, so we can use all the smart we can get. We’re looking at . . .”

His voice fades away as my thoughts trickle in. I need to go to the main office and make sure I snag the TA job for the library this year. Sure my scores are high enough, but I need extracurricular if I’m getting into UVA’s Biology program.

“All right. First meeting’s next Wednesday after school. See you then,” he says, and heads off.

“Yeah, see you then.”

I go through my first day of senior year as expected. I do indeed get the TA job. I go to all my classes with the same teachers and same students as my other years. When you’re in GT, it’s like that. There are no surprises. Boring’s good. At least where normal life’s concerned, boring’s good.

I don’t see my sister until it’s time to leave. “I’ll catch a ride home,” she tells me. “We”—she motions over her shoulder to her pack of annoying friends—“are going to hang out.”

I nod and don’t bother reminding her Mom wants us all home by seven for dinner. If Daisy doesn’t remember, it’s not my problem.

Justin’s in his after-school tutoring program so I head straight to the army surplus store. I need to browse supplies and brainstorm a little. I have to figure out how I’m going to deal with the Weasel.

## Chapter Three

I MET MY ONLY REAL FRIEND, REGGIE, when I was eight and she ten. We shared bunk beds at a science and technology summer camp. We immediately clicked on a, let's just say, weird level. We "got" each other. We let each other be who we needed to be. We were okay to sit for an hour and not speak. We were who we were, and that was fine with both of us.

When I was ten and she twelve, we attended our usual summer camp. There was this girl who picked on everybody. She was horrible. She'd rub poison oak on girls' underwear. She'd pour acetone in shampoo bottles. She'd take pictures in the showers and pass them among the boy campers.

Pranks are okay, but hers were way too mean-spirited to qualify as pranks.

When I told Reggie that I wanted to make the girl pay, Reggie didn't blink an eye.

And when I told her *how* I intended on making her pay, Reggie said, "Want some help?" I knew then that we were soul mates.

But I didn't make Reggie help me—my thing is my thing. And when the girl showed up the next day with an oak rash on her ass, acetone burns on her scalp, *and* naked pictures all over the boys' cottages, she never messed with anyone again.

Making people pay for their dysfunctional aggression allows me to deal with my own urges. I learned that a long time ago. When I first shared that thought with Reggie, she nodded and replied, "I get that."

Reggie's from upstate New York, and summer camp was always the only time we ever saw each other. She earned a full-ride scholarship to MIT.

She's got to be the smartest person I know, and she's got her cyberfingers in everything. Thanks to her I've learned a thing or two about hacking, about covering my tracks, about using different IP addresses so things can't be traced. Of course I'm nothing at her level, but I can do basic things like get an address for Paul Dryer, otherwise known as the Weasel.

I grab my book bag. "Mom, I'm gone."

"Set the alarm when you get home," she yells from her bathroom.

There's a late-night coffeehouse a few blocks away from our house. At first I went to be alone, to study, to drink coffee. Between Daisy, Justin, and my parents, I've always found it hard to concentrate at home.

Mom respects that I need my space, and as long as I'm home by midnight, she's okay with me going to that coffeehouse.

Yes, at first I used to really go there, but over the past year I've used the time to prowl the streets. I drive the neighborhoods people avoid. I watch drug deals go down, hookers get picked up, and drunks stumble the sidewalks. I follow them . . . watch them . . . learn them . . . I absorb the fear that at first watching them caused but now only draws me in. It both puzzles and mesmerizes me.

I crave my night outings, and on more than one occasion have caught myself zoning out during the day thinking about them. Sometimes they consume me. They fulfill a part of me I've yet to figure out. I can't help but wonder that if just watching these deviants causes my blood to race through my body, what will actually taking one of them down do to me?

That last thought rolls around in my brain as I drive my Wrangler straight to the Weasel's address and park across the street. In the one spot not illuminated by a streetlamp, I get out my binoculars and zero in on his third-floor condo. Immediately I pull back.

The man's not shy at all.

Naked, he strolls around his condo brushing his teeth and then talking on the phone. He gets done with that and goes on to ironing. Personally, I don't care for being naked. I prefer clothes. Nakedness is too . . . unhygienic for my taste.

Time passes and he eventually dresses in khakis and a polo. He grabs his keys and leaves his condo. Minutes after that he strolls out the complex's front door and, whistling, heads down the street.

My heart kicks in as I watch where he's going, and it only makes me more excited for how the night will play out. He can't be going far—he's on foot.

From my Jeep I watch him head a couple blocks down and straight into a restaurant. I climb out and follow the same sidewalk path until I'm standing outside the door he just went through. I step to the right and peer through the glass into the full restaurant. I inhale some fortifying air, grab the handle, and step inside.

It's packed, and no one really notices him sitting at the bar and sipping a white wine.

I remember hearing Victor say that a white wine was a sissy drink. I suppose that's why the Weasel's ordered it—to make himself look mild.

There's a ton of people waiting for a table, so I merge with the group, standing along the wall, making it look like I'm waiting too. It's a good thing this place is not just a bar, other-

wise I would've already been carded and asked to leave.

Despite the fact it's September and still warm outside, the manager has the heat on inside the restaurant. I prefer cold. Always have. My core body temperature runs hot.

It doesn't take but a few minutes for a woman to approach the Weasel. I can't hear what he's saying, but he's got the I'm-just-an-awkward-nerd routine down a little too well. And the woman is falling for it, big time—just like all the other women did. She's probably ten years younger than him and too stupid to realize he really isn't drunk.

Pity lays are what they give him. Or at least what they *think* they're going to give him.

The thing about the Weasel is that he doesn't have a type. The women in the courtroom had been tall/short, chunky/skinny, blonde/brunette.

This one wears her black hair short and displays big boobs that definitely don't look fake.

"Miss?" The hostess waves at me. "Table?"

I snap out of my staring. "I'm waiting for someone." I check my watch to make it look true.

"It's going to be an hour wait at this point. Want to go ahead and put your name in?"

"No, thank you."

She gives me a polite smile and goes back to hostessing. I go back to staring.

The Weasel and Big Boobs progress in the get-to-know-you-drunk thing, and sometime later they stumble from the restaurant—her really wasted and him faking it. I see her pass him a car key. They're going somewhere not on foot.

It didn't occur to me they would drive, and so as normal as I can make it seem, I head from the restaurant, jog the couple blocks back to my Jeep, and hope they are still there when I return.

They are, leaning up against her car out front, making out. I watch, a little disgusted at their sloppy display, waiting for them to make the next move.

He pulls away from their groping and climbs into her car to drive. Twenty minutes later they arrive at a Cape Cod. They go inside and I know, based on what I heard in the courtroom, how it goes from here. She wants it, the Weasel refuses (as he did with all the other women), choosing instead *talking*. The talking I'm sure convinces the women he's harmless.

An hour later he finally emerges. He walks the perimeter of her house before heading from the neighborhood, getting into a cab, and pulling away. Miss Big Boobs will be his next victim—this I'm sure. I hope I'll be there to take him down.



## Chapter Four

I SPEND THE NEXT UNEVENTFUL COUPLE of days going to school, doing my normal routine, and eagerly thinking about the Weasel. Each night I spy on him as he does his naked routine in his third-floor condo, and I fantasize about how I'm going to make him suffer.

On the third night I park in my usual spot, get out my binoculars, and see him naked, standing in his bathroom, meticulously shaving his face, arms, chest, legs, and pubes.

*No evidence.*

Tonight will be the night. My whole body vibrates in expectation.

While he continues his ritual, I start my own with the supplies I bought from the surplus store and the one I stole. . . .

I stuff my springy red hair into a full-face ski mask, slip my leather gloves on, and tuck my long-sleeve dark tee into my black cargo pants.

*No evidence.*

Into those cargo pockets I put a Taser, the stolen tranquilizer gun, zip ties, and my lock pick. This is my first time and my personal kit will likely change as I fine-tune my methods. I recognize this and am looking forward to that evolution.

The Weasel drives from the underground garage in his perfectly normal Corolla and pulls right past me.

I don't immediately follow. I know where he's headed—the Cape Cod and Miss Big Boobs.

About twenty minutes later I pull onto her street and right past the Weasel's Corolla. He's already gone inside.

I park in the darkness under a tree and cut my engine. I lower the face portion of my mask and take a second to calm my anticipatory nerves. This is it. The night I become me. The start of everything. In my mind it goes two ways: Either I kill him. Or I don't kill him.

If I kill him, he deserves it for how he raped all those women. If I don't kill him, I'll make him suffer, and I'll enjoy every minute of it. It'll curb the urges I have lived with for years and have only mildly satiated. Tonight is the night I completely fulfill that dark, missing side of me that has persistently been clawing at my insides. I want to do this. I *have* to do this.

When I feel ready, I climb from the Jeep and stay to the shadows as I approach the house. At eleven in the evening no one's out in the sleepy, family neighborhood.

I skirt along the side yard and make my way to the back door.

Years ago Victor taught me how to pick a lock. It was all for fun, of course. He had no clue I'd really be using the skill.

He also taught me how to shoot.

I crouch at the back-porch door, fumble with the pick, and accidentally drop it through the wooden slats beneath my feet.

*Dammit.*

I step down and scramble through dirt and leaves, looking for my pick. *I'm such an idiot. I can't believe I dropped the pick.* I push aside more leaves. *Where is it? There!* Its silver glints a teeny bit in the moonlight, and I reach for it, noting my hands are shaking. *No, no shaking hands. Be calm.*

I pick it up and fist it tight to not only force my hands to stop trembling but also to ensure I don't drop it again. Next time I'll pack two.

I crawl back up onto the porch and concentrate on a steady hand as I try again. The lock makes a silent *click*, and beneath my mask I smile.

I step over the threshold, silently close the door, and immediately hear classical piano. I give myself a second to orient and slowly head toward the music. Halfway down the hall, I stop, close my eyes, and blow out a very—long—calming—breath.

My eyes snap open, and I focus on candlelight flickering from a room just ahead. A vanilla scent wafts through my senses. As I draw closer, I hear whimpering and the sound of clanking metal. The two combined mute the throb in my ears and have me stepping through the doorway.

The Weasel stands in a shirt and boxers, with a face mask of his own and his pecker hanging out. The woman lies naked and handcuffed to the bed, gauze shoved in her mouth.

She sees me and immediately starts thrashing.

The Weasel turns, and through the face mask he wears I see his eyes widen.

*This is it* echoes across my mind, but I don't move. The Weasel seems confused for a second, then quickly snaps back to reality and makes an awkward lunge for me. I clumsily dodge away. *Face your attacker.* My sensei's words float through my brain. I'm doing everything wrong. I'm in the opposite direction!

I redirect and go toward him, blunder with the snap on my cargo pocket, and yank out my Taser. He tackles me to the floor. *Umph!* All the air leaves my lungs, and somewhere in the back of my mind I think, *I should've had the Taser out and ready.*

We roll a few times across the floor, our panting breaths filling the air. He lands on top of me and reaches for the Taser at the exact second I remember my death grip on it. I raise it up, point it toward his back, and hope to God it doesn't hit me,

too. I squeeze the trigger, barbs fly out, and his whole body arches away from me.

That was close. *Too* close.

With a grunt, I shove him off me and scramble to my feet. My heart kicks into overdrive as I watch his full body spasm and listen to his shrieks. *Slim justice*.

I take in the barbs suctioned to his butt and lower back and experience a moment of both gladness that I hit him and disappointment that it wasn't his pecker I pinged. I'll have to practice my aim.

Before the .3 joules runs its course, I turn his short pudgy body over onto his stomach, and like I've seen cops do on TV, I use zip ties to secure his wrists, thighs, and ankles. I pull extra tight. Probably too tight, but I don't care. So what if his extremities experience blood loss.

I pick up the Taser and give him another jolt just to see him spasm, just to hear him yell, and to surge the blood through my veins again. His limp pecker catches my eye, and pure adrenaline spikes every nerve in my body as a new thought springs to life.

On the bedside table lies a butcher knife he would have used to intimidate and torture his latest victim. I walk over to it, pick it up, and its large blade catches the light of the flickering candles. Holding it in front of me, I slowly stalk back across the bedroom to his hog-tied form.

He sees me coming, and his body begins violently shaking with the fear he more than deserves to feel. I wave the blade in front of his face, and he whimpers like the pathetic rapist that he is. The snivels roll through my body, fueling it with a desire for righteousness.

“P-p-please don’t,” he begs.

*Please don’t what? Do to you what you’ve done to so many others? Make you pay for your disgusting self? Assure no one else will ever suffer by you again?*

He responds to my silence with a high-pitched wail that heats my core to near boiling. With one last wave of the blade, I run it up his bare shaved thigh and draw a stream of blood. He screams even louder, before falling completely silent as realization dawns that I left his precious pecker alone. But as soon as that sinks in, he starts screaming again.

I yank his mask off and cram it in his mouth, and he goes blessedly mute.

The woman’s thrashing body has my attention swerving over to the bed. I disengage the Taser cartridge and go to her. Crying and whimpering, she stares wide-eyed at me.

I cover her naked body with a blanket and pull the gauze from her mouth.

“Please,” she croaks. “Please help me.”

I look around the room. I had thought about this part really well—how to help her and stay anonymous at the same

time. I take the phone off the bedside table and lay it right beside her head.

“Please”—she jerks at her restraints—“are you sure he’s secure?”

I nod as I dial 911. The sound of the operator answering shoots realization through me. *I have to get out of here.* I bolt from the scene, through her house, across her yard, and back to my Jeep.

*She’ll be okay. Help will come soon.*

I climb into my Wrangler, take my ski mask off, and shove it in my glove compartment. The Weasel’s blood catches my eye. *Shit.*

*Shit. Shit. Shit.*

It’s on my glove compartment, my clothes, my door handle, and anything I touched with my gloved hands. I messed up. Big time. I’m such an imbecile. I’ll have to be more careful, more alert, more organized next time. No fumbling, no awkward dodging, no leftover blood. I need to have it all figured out. It has to be cleaner. Premeditated.

Okay, think. It’s eleven forty-five, and I have to be home in fifteen minutes. I have a change of clothes, and I have a first aid kit with alcohol wipes. I’ll shove my blood-streaked clothes in a plastic bag and immediately wash them when I get home. I’ll wipe my Jeep down with alcohol and then wash it tomorrow and detail the inside. No one will know anything.

Quickly I change, and as I'm slipping out of my cargo pants, my fingers brush the tranquilizer gun still in my pocket, loaded with enough stolen sedative to destroy a man three times the Weasel's size.

*I didn't kill him after all. . . .*



## Chapter Five

TWO MORNINGS LATER I'M IN THE KITCHEN, and the Weasel is all over the news. Just the thought of tasing him and helping that woman fills me with a craving to do it all over again.

Yes, he's all over the news, as is the Masked Savior.

*Masked Savior?* You've got to be kidding me.

"Ugh, that's awful," my sister groans. "That man raping those women. God, Lane, why are you watching that? Turn the channel."

I give my sister a look. What's the big deal? It's just the news. Daisy rolls her eyes. "Don't you feel *anything*?"

I grab the remote and turn the channel. I'm not as unfeeling as people think. I show sympathy where it's warranted. I

show hatred to those who deserve it. I just don't have emotions over the usual things, and to me that has its advantages. Why am I the only one who appreciates this?

"And while we're on the subject of emotions, would it kill you to laugh? In fact, I don't think I have *ever* heard you laugh."

I suppose I *should* try laughing sometime . . .

"And talking. Sometimes you're so quiet it's creepy."

. . . and talking, too. Both are very normal things. And with so many abnormal thoughts, I suppose it would behoove me to try "normal" more often. But what does that mean exactly—like Daisy and half the other teens at my school? No, "normal" is subjective, not objective. After all, I'm normal in *my* private world.

"What's creepy?" Victor says, swinging into the kitchen.

"Lane is. I told her she needs to laugh and talk more."

He pinches my cheek. "Don't listen to Daisy. You're fine just the way you are."

"Thanks."

Daisy gives a dramatic sigh. "Whatever."

"Whatever," he mimics, and Daisy giggles.

I used to make her giggle like that by arranging licorice into a hangman's noose. Sometimes I wonder if she remembers that.

Mom comes in behind me and grabs her mug of dark roast. "Did you all hear about the Masked Savior?" She laughs. "Nothing like a good vigilante."

Victor delivers a one-armed hug to me and a smooch to Mom, then rounds the island to Daisy. She willingly accepts his good-bye kiss.

Although Mom's never said so, I know it bothers her.

Mom pulls bacon from the fridge, as she does every weekend, and starts frying it up. Its deliciousness immediately fills the air. Mom has this way of cooking bacon, slow and on low heat. It takes forever but is so worth it.

As if on cue Justin shuffles downstairs. He pours himself a glass of chocolate milk and curls up on the couch to watch cartoons. "Did Dad already go golfing?"

"Just left." Mom turns to me. "You working today?"

I nod. "I'll head out after breakfast." I work nearly every Saturday as a vet tech.

Daisy's phone chimes with a text. She quickly checks it. "Mom, can I go to Samantha's later? She's having a few friends over to swim before her parents close the pool."

"Gosh, I'm surprised they still have it open." Mom glances at me. "Can you drop her on the way to work?"

This is the exact reason why I can't wait for Daisy to get her driver's license. "Sure."

Breakfast comes and goes, and I drop Daisy at Samantha's. *Few friends?* The place is packed with cars, and it's barely eleven in the morning.

"Don't tell Mom," Daisy says as she hops out.

I won't. I never do. Daisy's choices will catch up with her sooner or later.

Another few miles down the road and I pull into Patch and Paw Animal Hospital. I head straight for the boarders and Corn Chip, a beagle-schnauzer mix. He's here nearly every weekend. His mom travels a lot. Why have a pet if you're never around to love him, you know? I've always wanted a dog at home, but Mom doesn't like pets in the house. When I get my first place, I'm definitely getting a dog.

Corn Chip catches one look at me and does the whole-body-wiggle thing.

I love the little guy. He humanizes me. He is what makes me different from the profiles I obsess over. I have no urge to inflict pain on him or any other animal. Why would I? They're innocent. They only want love and a good rub. I do, however, have urges to inflict pain on those people who hurt animals. Big time.

I open the cage and let him out, along with a few others I know get along. As if I'm the pack leader, they follow me out the side door into the fenced yard.

I grab a few balls and give them a toss, and all four dogs take off, yipping and scrambling for the prized possession.

"Thought I'd find you out here."

Behind me stands Dr. Issa. At twenty-five he's the youngest veterinarian on staff. I've known him the two years I've worked here and met him back when he served as an intern.

Whereas my brother's smile tugs at my heart, Dr. Issa's shy, intelligent one massages the entire cardiac muscle. Tall, dark hair, brown eyes. Almost all the girls here have a crush on him that he never seems to notice.

Corn Chip runs over to him, and Dr. Issa gives him a total-body rub. "Doing surgery later. Want to assist?"

"Definitely." Dr. Issa always lets me assist in surgeries. I love watching the whole process. It's fascinating.

He smiles. "We'll scrub in at one."

"Okay."

"How'd your first few days at McLean High go?"

"Good."

Dr. Issa gives the ball a toss and all the dogs take off. "My brother's going there now. Maybe if you think of it, you can give him a hello?"

Welcoming new students is not really my thing, but this is Dr. Issa. "Is he a freshman?"

"No, junior. He used to go to a school in DC."

"Name?"

"Daniel Issa. I gave him your name too." He pauses. "I hope that's okay?"

This is so much more up Daisy's alley than mine, but again, this is Dr. Issa, so I give a little. "Sure. It's okay."

Later, during lunch, when I know everyone's either out of the building or in the break room, I grab the unused stolen

tranquilizer from my Wrangler and head to the storage closet. I slip it back onto the shelf in line with the other vials.

The door opens and Dr. Issa steps in. "Oh, hi, didn't know you were in here." He glances to the tranquilizer section. "What are you doing?"

*Putting stolen sedative back. Why do you ask?* I grab the Acepromazine that I just put up, turn to him, and give a standard lie. "Doing a research project for school."

Dr. Issa takes it from my hand and puts it back on the shelf. "Careful. You really shouldn't be handling that without gloves."

I ignore how close he suddenly is to me and focus on the conversation. "Good for horses. Phenothiazine derivative. Causes profound lethargy followed by immobility. Potential for cardiac effects. If given intravenously will take effect within fifteen minutes."

Dr. Issa's dark brows lift. "I don't know why I'm constantly surprised by your intellect."

It doesn't take a genius to research on the Internet. And it doesn't take a genius to know I can't use Acepromazine now. After this conversation, the sedative is officially connected to me.

"So what questions do you have, then?" he prompts.

I want to ask him what he knows about etorphine but don't want that traced to me too. "None, I guess."

I'll wander back in here later and see if there's any on the

shelves. However, since it's an elephant tranquilizer, I highly doubt there will be.

That'll be a black-market purchase.

Of course I have no clue how one goes about accessing the black market. I'm sure Reggie would know. Or could find out. The problem with that, though, entails letting Reggie into more of my life than I think either one of us is ready for. Reggie loves me like sisters should love each other, but sometimes I wonder if I reveal my true thoughts, I'll draw a line neither one of us is ready to cross.

Plus . . . I'm not entirely sure I want to kill my next victim. I'm glad I didn't kill the Weasel now. I'm glad I only made him suffer. Killing is so definitive. Years in jail leads to a more long-term type of justice.

But even though I'm not entirely sure I want to kill my next victim, I am entirely sure I *want* a next victim. Because the power it gives me, righting a wrong, the fright in the Weasel's eyes, the scared relief in the woman's . . . I think I've found my reason in this life.

# Chapter Six

THE NEXT DAY IS SUNDAY, AND MOM GETS called in on an emergency I'm sure involves a serial killer.

"If I'm not going to be back by dinner, I'll call," she says, and rushes out.

I eye her soft leather carryall that she never locks. I've looked through it many times. I've read reports, studied pictures, copied notes on some of the more interesting cases. Mom has no clue I do it. I can't help it. Daisy likes to watch reality TV in her spare time, and I like to dig through Mom's briefcase. It's who I am.

"Will you put some of that horseradish mustard on it?" Justin asks, pulling me from my thoughts.

"Sure." I go back to his turkey-and-sprouts sandwich. I know, what eight-year-old likes turkey and sprouts, right?



He and I both have aikido class today—something our parents made all three of us take, but only he and I continue.

I like aikido because even though I'm skinny, I've learned to blend and redirect the motions of an attacker.

I can easily control and take down a two-hundred-pound opponent and have done so (in class) on many occasions. The Weasel was my first practice in the real world. Although he'd been short and pudgy, I'd say he was at least one hundred eighty pounds—a challenger for sure.

Daisy flings open the front door. "Zach, this is Lane and Justin."

In walks a guy I assume goes to our high school.

"Zach's new," Daisy announces. "He's a junior."

Zach nods. "Hi."

Daisy tugs him along. "We're going to my room."

Zach looks unsure about this as she pulls him up the stairs.

"That's not allowed," Justin reminds her.

"Whatever," she yells back.

"You going to tell Mom and Dad?" he asks me.

I shake my head.

"Mind if I do?"

"Knock yourself out, kid."

My sister's a slut. It's common knowledge she's already had sex several times, and according to gossip she gives okay hand jobs but is excellent at fellatio.

I walked in on her having sex last year. She didn't miss a beat as she kept riding the guy and glanced over to me in the doorway.

She'll end up pregnant. Watch. Or with an STD. Sometimes I wonder whatever happened to the little sister I carried two blocks home after she wrecked on her new bike. Of course I found out Terrence, the kid three streets over, made her wreck, and I went back and took care of him later, but I digress. Let's just say Terrence never messed with my sister again.

Zach comes back down the stairs and straight into the kitchen, surprising both me and my brother. "Saw the sandwiches. Mind if I make one?"

My brother and I exchange a glance.

I slide the fixings over and Zach helps himself.

"So," he begins, spreading mayo on one slice of wheat bread. "I've seen you around school. You're in the GT program?"

I nod.

He puts cheese on top of the mayo and then two slices of tomato. "You work at Patch and Paw, right?"

I take a bite of my sandwich. "Yes."

"Mike's my older brother."

"Dr. Issa?" Just saying his name flutters my insides a little.

Zach puts cucumber on top of the tomato, avoids the turkey and sprouts, and takes a huge bite. "Mm."

"He said your name is Daniel."

Zach shoots me a slightly surprised look. “He told you about me?”

“He wanted me to be your friend.”

Zach laughs. “That sounds like Mike. Daniel’s my first name. Mostly just my family calls me that.”

My brother plucks a stray scrap of turkey from his plate and pops it into his mouth. “You a vegetarian?”

Zach nods.

Out of the corner of my eye I give him a solid look. Yes, I can now see the resemblance to Dr. Issa. Dark hair, dark, intelligent eyes, same boyish face.

Zach smiles, and I really see it then.

Daisy stomps down the stairs. “I thought you said you’d only be a second.”

Zach lifts his sandwich. “Got hungry.”

Justin laughs.

Daisy heaves a pouty sigh and heads back to her room.

I think I might like this Zach guy.

He turns to me. “My brother says you’re really smart.”

I’ve been in GT as long as I can remember. School comes easy for me. “I do okay.”

Zach shoves another bite in. “Where you going to college?”

“UVA, hopefully.”

“Medicine?” Zach whistles.

“Biology.”

“Mike went to Hopkins.”

“I know.”

He finishes off his sandwich and tosses his napkin into the garbage. “Later. Nice to meet you both.”

He lets himself out the front door, and Justin looks at me. “That was weird.”

Yes it was. Most guys Daisy brings home disappear into her room and don’t socialize with me and Justin. It’s almost like Zach came over *to* socialize with me and Justin.

Daisy stomps back down. She’s changed clothes to a skimpy tank and too-short mini. “Where’s Zach?”

“He left!” Justin brightly informs her.

“He what?!” She turns on me. “What’d you say to him?”

“Nothing.” *Why does she always assume I’ve done something?*

Daisy races out the front door. “Zach!”

“I like Zach,” Justin tells me.

“Me too.” His leaving will probably make Daisy want him even more.

I glance at the kitchen clock. “Let’s get our *hakamas* on. I don’t want to be late for aikido.”

Fifteen minutes later we’re heading out to the Wrangler, and Mom pulls in. “Heading to class?”

“You’re back earlier than you thought,” I observe.

She holds up her soft briefcase. “Brought the work home.”

My brother rats out our sister. “Daisy had a boy in her room.”

Mom sighs. “I’ll handle it.” She trudges toward the house, and I glance down at the briefcase, looking very puffy compared to when she left. Its lock is uncharacteristically pressed in. Luckily, I know where she keeps the key.

I’d rather skip aikido and rifle through her briefcase. And that’s saying something because aikido has got to be about the best thing ever.

But I’ll have to open the case tonight after everyone’s gone to bed.

# Chapter Seven

“WHAT ARE YOU DOING?” MY SISTER BUSTS ME that night.

Nonchalantly, I shuffle the pictures I’d taken from Mom’s case under my notepad. “Last-minute homework.”

“In Mom’s office?”

I nod to her desktop. “She’s got Excel.”

Daisy narrows her eyes like she suspects I’m lying.

I ignore her and go back to the Excel file I had launched in case this exact thing happened.

The thing about snooping around is that you have to do it in the open to be most effective. If I had closed and locked Mom’s office, if I had scrambled to cover things up, or if I had gotten real chatty, Daisy would be suspicious. Keeping things

out in the open allows me to fake honesty, fake normalcy.

My sister's the absolute last person I want having something on me.

"I got grounded," she tells me.

I nod. I know.

She sighs, and I hear more than see her scoot off. What the hell is she doing up at one in the morning anyway?

She gets something from the refrigerator, and then one of the stairs squeaks as she heads back up to her bedroom

I bring the pictures back out from under my notepad.

A female severed head stares back at me—brown eyes wide and blond hair matted to her head. Found in a swimming pool in Falls Church and identified as one Cynthia Hughes. Twenty-five years of age and a preschool teacher from a place just down the road.

The rest of the body is yet to be found.

According to the one and only report I've already read, the head was severed with a sharp knife. This case closely matches a decapitation that occurred this same time one year ago in Oregon, two years ago in Arizona, and three years ago in Tennessee.

"Closely matches" is the key phrase. There are some differences, but the report doesn't detail those.

I browse the document again—all the cases are unsolved and occurred exactly one year apart in the month of September. If it's the same killer, the FBI will find an arm next, then a

leg, followed by the other arm and leg. The hands and feet get delivered at the very end in a cooler to the local police station.

I recognize this. Last year the Oregon decapitation made national news, and I added it to my journal. Looks like Mr. Decapitator Serial Killer has made his way to Northern Virginia and Washington, DC. My life can't get any better. A serial killer right in my own area. How great is that? Like I have a front-row seat to the latest feature.

I scan the picture of the head and the report and then send it to my e-mail. I put everything back exactly how I found it.

I glance around Mom's office. Her briefcase had been very full. So where's the rest of it? My gaze lands on her triple-locked file cabinet. Probably in there. I could pick it, but with three locks, it'd take a while.

The stair squeaks again, and my temper flares at my idiot sister. Why is she still up? I grab my stuff, head from the office, and run right into Mom.

She blinks. "What are you doing?"

It's not like my family to prowl the house this late. "I was using your computer to finish some homework."

"Oh." She yawns. "Well, get to bed. You've got school tomorrow." She heads into her office. "And I've got a case that's keeping me up." With that, she closes the door.

I just bet she's got a case that's keeping her up.

*Mr. Decapitator, welcome to Washington, DC.*



# Chapter Eight

DAYS LATER THE DECAPITATED HEAD HAS made the news, and Mom is more than irritated at the press leak.

Although there has not been an official statement yet, reporters are already linking it to the other cases and stating that if it's the same killer, a handless arm will be next.

After school today I'll dive in and research the other killings. There have to be four parallel points for murders to be linked. Some killers know this and purposefully don't leave four to throw investigators off. Other killers definitely leave those four so everyone knows it's a serial case.

I'll be curious to see what's applicable in this situation.

At school, though, everyone is buzzing about something entirely different.

Lindsay, our senior class president, was killed over the weekend by a drunk driver. I'd always liked Lindsay. She'd been a popular one that was truly, sincerely nice. I'd always thought she'd be one of those people who would go on to do great things in the world. Her death puts things in perspective. Our lives really are fragile and can be forever extinguished with one single event.

It's a powerful thought to know I *could* have been that one single event in the Weasel's life and yet I chose to save him, when someone as nice as Lindsay has died. Did I off-balance the greater good? Did saving the Weasel in some cosmic way write Lindsay's death sentence? Logically I know the two events can't be related, but my mind still goes there.

"There are grief counselors on campus today if anyone wants to see one." My homeroom teacher interrupts my thoughts.

Several sniffing girls and a couple guys raise their hands to go.

While our homeroom teacher usually makes us remain quiet, today she's given us permission to talk about what happened. Around me voices buzz.

"Poor Lindsay . . ."

"And her family . . ."

"God, she was always so sweet to me. . . ."

"Yeah, she always smiled in the hall even though she didn't know me. . . ."

“I hope the man who did it gets life. . . .”

“No, didn’t you hear? It was a woman. . . .”

“They say she got off. Something about an alibi. . . .”

My ears perk up at this last part. The bell rings, and I head straight to the library for my TA job. Putting in for this gig was a calculated move. I knew it would give me a block of “me” time with the high-tech computer stations.

But being the good TA that I am, I go straight to the librarian first. “Mr. Bealles, anything you need me to do?”

He waves his hand as I know he will. “Nope. Do your homework.”

I park it in front of a computer, log in, and immediately begin researching. This is something else Reggie taught me. To the common user, school computers are firewalled. But going in a back door permits unencumbered access to the Web. The kids that know this use it for Facebook or porn. I use it to research.

Yes, Lindsay got hit by a red Mini Cooper registered to a Heather Anderson. She claims her car was stolen and that she hadn’t been driving. Her work associate corroborated her alibi, and she was released from police custody.

According to the report the driver of the stolen Mini ran from the crime scene and is still at large.

“Hi, Lane.”

I glance over my shoulder to see Zach standing right behind me. He smiles. “Or should I say Slim?”

“Lane’s fine.”

He nods to my computer screen. “My gut tells me that woman’s guilty.”

My gut tells me the same thing.

“Someone needs to make her pay for what she’s done.”

Yes, someone does. But what an odd thing for Zach to say. I’m usually the only one to think those things. Or perhaps others have the thoughts but never put voice to them.

He comes around to stand beside me, and I get a hint of his boy-scented bodywash. “You going to the memorial service?”

I shake my head. Funerals are not for me. “You?”

“No.” Zach leans his hip on the side of my computer desk. “I didn’t even know her.”

“True.” I log out of the computer and stand, more to put space between us than anything. I don’t care for people in my personal area. “See you later, then.”

“Lane?”

I turn to see him still casually propped on the desk. “Yes?”

“Would you like to go out with me sometime?”

My freshman year I got asked out by a boy in the science club. My sophomore year it had been this guy that lives across the street. My junior year, science club again. I said no to all three of them. Dating just isn’t something that interests me. Zach makes the fourth guy to ask me out, and I tell him what I told the other three. “No, thank you.”

“Why not? Is it because I’m a junior?”

“No,” I honestly tell him. “Aren’t you dating Daisy or something?”

“No.”

“Well, you should probably clarify that with her.”

He nods. “Okay. Then will you go out with me?”

Persistent. I’ll give him that much. “No.”

“Hm.” Zach pushes away from the desk. “Do you think I’m cute?”

I give him a good solid look. “Yes. You’re not like most guys.”

“How do you mean?”

“You’re blunt and well-spoken.”

“And most guys aren’t?”

I think through all the boys I hear talking around school. “No, I don’t consider a lot of them well-spoken.”

Zach silently studies me. “I’ll guess that you intimidate people.”

“What about me is intimidating?”

“You’re intelligent. Independent. And, clearly, you’re not here to impress anyone.”

I don’t have a response. He’s correct on all three accounts.

He takes a step toward me. “I’ll see you around, Lane.”

And with that he’s gone.

If he asks me out again, I might say yes. Dating is, after all, what normal teenagers are supposed to do at night, right?

I don't exactly do normal things in the evenings. Plus, I'm a senior and I've never been on a date. Quite frankly, Dr. Issa is the only male to have elicited any type of female response in me. Dr. Issa's twenty-five, though. Eight years between us may not be a big deal when you're older, but it's a big deal now.

Yes, if Zach asks me out again, I'll probably say yes. He's cute, friendly, not an idiot, and it's the normal thing to do.

## Chapter Nine

OVER THE NEXT WEEK I DO AS MUCH research as I can on the recently found severed head and suspected link to past killings. All I find are news articles, but I want the meat of the story. I want all the details reporters either don't have or brush over. It's in those details where I'll really get to know the serial killer, the Decapitator, as several reporters labeled him last year.

During this same week I do a little more research on the Heather Anderson drunk-driving case. In Northern Virginia, there are areas with red light cameras and areas without. Unfortunately, where Lindsay got hit and killed was in an area not covered by cameras. So Heather's stolen-car story cannot be corroborated one way or the other, hence the strength of the alibi.

Also during this same week I purposefully do not follow Heather. Not only does it heighten my own anticipation, it gives her time to get comfortable in her unindicted status. Because comfort leads to resuming normalcy, resuming normalcy leads to mistakes, and mistakes lead to her getting what she justly deserves.

On Tuesday night I follow her for the first time. She gets off work at six from a medical center where she's employed as a lab tech. Her Mini Cooper is still impounded, so in a rental car she stops by the grocery store and then heads home, where she stays for the rest of the night.

Same thing Wednesday and Thursday, and I begin to doubt my suspicions. Maybe her stolen-car story is true. On Friday she goes to happy hour with work friends. I park outside the restaurant/bar and write an entire ten-page essay for English class while I'm waiting for her to emerge.

At eleven p.m. she stumbles out arm in arm with her drunk work friends.

*Here we go.* I turn my dash-mounted camera on to record.

One of the coworkers climbs into a cab that's already waiting; the other lights up a cigarette and trips off down the sidewalk heading toward, I assume, the nearby apartment complex.

Heather fumbles with her key fob and finally gets behind the wheel. She swerves her way out of the parking lot and down the road. I crank my engine and slowly pull out. I knew I was right. I knew it.



Hovering in the right lane, she drives twenty miles *under* the speed limit, manages to brake at a yellow light, and runs a red light. I glance around, assure there are no cameras or cops, and gas my Jeep through the red light too.

She merges onto a highway, hangs in the right lane, swerving, overcorrecting, and gets honked at several times by passing cars. Then she exits, drives straight into and out of a shallow ditch, pulls in to a 7-Eleven convenience store, opens her door, and pukes. Gross.

She continues puking and I look away. Luckily, I'm not one of those people with a gag reflex. She wipes her mouth, and another mile down the road she turns in to a bar where some guy is waiting.

With a goofy, inebriated grin he staggers over and gets in.

They swing their way to a liquor store; Heather goes in and a few minutes later comes out with two black plastic bags heavy with bottles. I cannot believe the liquor store owner actually sold her more alcohol. He should be arrested just for that.

The two of them dive into the bags, crack open bottles, and continue drinking. It makes me sick just watching it. It's only been about a week since she ran Lindsay over, and she's so blasé about it. What, she has no conscience? She should have been scared straight into AA after what she did.

Across the street and down a couple of blocks sits a park.

Heather drives in the yellow turning lane the whole way, pulls straight into the park even though a sign says it's closed, crashes through a line of bushes, and comes to a stop on a soccer field. If this had been hours before, there'd still be families here. Heather would've plowed them right over. Just the thought of that disgusts me.

I watch as they both slowly pass out.

I hit the stop button and slip the tape out from the recorder. I'd like to go over and beat her up . . . or worse, but (a) she wouldn't feel it, and (b) this tape will do more long-term damage. Heather Anderson's officially busted, and while I'm not completely satisfied, while I'm not satiated, at least Lindsay and her family will get some justice for the tragedy in their lives.

*I'm not satiated.* . . . And I'm not sure when my next opportunity will come to be. With that thought lingering, I climb from my Jeep and stalk over to the car. I open the driver's door and stare down at Heather's pathetic, passed-out self. Lindsay had gone through the windshield. I'd say it's the least Heather deserves. But . . . I can't do that. It's taking things too far. I came for justice—not revenge.

The next morning I mail the tape unmarked to the cops with a *Sure she's innocent?* note inside. If the cops don't put her behind bars after this, I'll definitely hunt her down and make her pay. I *will* take things too far.

## KILLER INSTINCT

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“Did you hear that woman who killed Lindsay is in jail?” I hear at school on Monday. “Someone trailed her and sent a video in.”

“Maybe it was the Masked Savior,” a guy jokes.

I really do hate that name.