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‘A chilling story that delivers a cascade of demon twists by stealth. Leave your expectations aside and immerse yourself in *The Midnight King*. Once you do, I guarantee this book will not let you go without a fight. A sure-fire shocker’

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‘One of the best novels I’ve read in a long time. Incredibly dark (an understatement), atmospheric and utterly gripping’

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‘An absolutely brilliant read and dark as hell. A deadly game of cat and mouse but not the one you might expect. Sinister, sly and beautifully tense’

L.V. Matthews, author of *The Twins*

‘The best book I’ve read about a serial killer since *Red Dragon*. I will be thinking about it for a long time’

Gareth Brown, author of *The Book of Doors*

‘An insane ride through dark minds, a shocking serial killer thriller, laced with tension and expertly woven by a skilled storyteller’

Mari Hannah, author of *Without a Trace*

‘This has it all. Twists, turns and layers of darkness that deepen with every page. It’s beautiful and bleak at the same time, with such a fantastic tale at the heart of it all. Evocative of Thomas Harris. Stunning’

Chris Frost, author of *The Killer’s Christmas List*

‘Stunningly dark and utterly brutal, *The Midnight King* immerses the reader in the world of a serial killer and the family depending on him. As truth and fiction blur, the ripples of violence spread far beyond the killer’s victims, with devastating consequences.

A brilliant and unsettling read’

Heather Critchlow, author of *Unsolved*

‘Breathlessly compelling, blunt and brutal, *The Midnight King* confirms Ashkanani as a bright star in the world of serial killer thrillers’

Sam Holland, author of *The Echo Man*

‘A masterful book. Intricate, brooding and artful, utterly transporting. A diabolical recipe of pitch-black plot, viciously incisive character and absolute heartbreak. I loved it’

Kate Simants, author of *Freeze*

**THE
MIDNIGHT
KING**

THE MIDNIGHT KING

**TARIQ
ASHKANANI**



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For mum and dad

Author's Note

Many of you will find this book to be in bad taste.

In part, it is due to the violence. Murder is – by its very nature – a violent crime. I believe this to be true no matter how the act is performed. Loud, quiet, bludgeon or lethal injection. A murder is the ending of the most precious thing there is: a life.

In part, it is due to the victims. As with all crimes, there are surely degrees to murder, and so perhaps we should look to the murdered as much as the method. For if a killing is always violent, then it must be at its *most* violent when it is the killing of a child.

In part, it is due to the scale. During the fourteen-year period from August 1994 until May 2008, thirteen children were reported missing from Davidson County and the greater Nashville metropolitan area. Thirteen children who would later be discovered dead. Their bodies wrapped in black garbage bags, bound tightly with nylon rope, tied with the same constrictor knot. Each one of them left by a body of water. Each one of them strangled, their corpses showing clear evidence of having been bathed in bleach post-mortem. Some were found quick, but most were not. Most had rotted away to some degree by the time they were uncovered.

In part, it is due to who I am: Lucas Cole, aka Jack Cross. A man who has written an obscene number of objectively poor novels.

Novels that, to varying degrees, idolise vigilante justice, casual sexism and toxic masculinity. Perhaps it surprises you to know that I am quite familiar with these terms, perhaps it does not. I make no apologies for knowing what sort of novels my audience wants to read, and playing to it for maximum effect. I am a writer, that is my job.

But the main reason that many will struggle with this book is because the crimes are still relatively fresh, their impact still felt in the local community. Here, the name 'Edward Morrison' is akin to that of the bogeyman. It is a name spoken quietly and with some degree of trepidation, when it is spoken at all. Many prefer to use the moniker coined by the media: the 'Music City Monster'. Possibly this dehumanises him, I don't know.

What I do know is that Edward Morrison was convicted of the abduction of a ten-year-old boy and the first-degree murder of the boy's parents. While he was never formally prosecuted for killing the thirteen other children (and seven parents, who are often sadly overlooked), this is nothing unusual. To use an unfortunate phrase, it would likely have been overkill: as I type, Morrison now sits on death row, where – legal appeals and congressional interference aside – he awaits his own violent murder, at which point a line might finally be drawn under this unsightly story.

The final point that I wish to make from the outset is that while I have taken these crimes as a starting point, I did not set out to write a factual account of these child murders. There has been plenty written about the so-called Music City Monster already, and it was never my intention to add my work to that collection. My aim is – and always has been – to entertain. If you find this to be distasteful, then I would refer you to the start of my Author's Note.

Accordingly, this book is a work of fiction.

It is not a confession.

Lucas Cole

1

NATHAN

A hanging, in a place like this – it showed dedication.

The ceiling fan was no good. It was clearly broken: a blade missing, the whole thing suspended purely by exposed wiring.

The shower rail above the bath wouldn't work either. Too flimsy. Nathan wrapped his hands around it, and when he pulled gently he felt it flex. Cheap plastic screwed into crumbling drywall.

He spent a couple of minutes surveying the rest of the small, sad room. The results continued to disappoint.

Lightbulb fittings: too neat.

Door handles: too low.

Wardrobe rails: non-existent.

Of course there were other ways to kill yourself. Easier ways. Ways he'd seen on TV or in books. A toaster in the bathtub, a few boxes of pills. A high ledge. A handgun. A sharp knife and some warm water.

The motel was called The View. An ironic name, given where it was. Squeezed tight between an apartment block on one side and a thundering highway on the other. The only view Nathan had from his

window was another window, this one with the blinds closed. Permanently, maybe.

The man in the dirty shirt at the front desk had given him a funny look when he'd asked for this room. Tried to palm him off with another. Gotten antsy when Nathan had insisted.

'It's being cleaned,' the man had said.

'I can wait.'

The guy had started to say something, then shrugged and handed over the key. What did it matter, at the end of the day, that one week earlier a man had hanged himself in this room? To the owner behind the desk, the dead man was a stranger. A blot on his bottom line at best. People didn't like staying in motels where guests had died. Didn't like seeing housekeepers crying or squad cars in the parking lot. Suicides were bad for business. So if someone came around and asked to stay in the room for a night, you took their money and you kept quiet.

It was different for Nathan. For Nathan, he wasn't a stranger, this man, this dead man, this hanged man.

It was his father who had made the reservation, who had checked into this motel, who had validated his parking so he wouldn't receive a ticket. It was his father who had systematically checked the room before deciding that the best way to end his life was by looping his belt around the back of the bathroom door, who had decided to wait until he'd showered and dressed in smart jeans and a clean shirt, who had eaten a Snickers and drunk a whiskey and left the wrapper tucked neatly in the empty glass, perhaps all the while sitting at the window, perhaps all the while staring out at that dreadful view.

2

Nathan didn't spend long at the motel. He'd never intended to stay the night, not really. It was just some place he'd needed to see for himself. One last look at the room where it happened.

He spotted it as he left: the bathroom door. The edge of it chipped. Near the floor, the paint scraped away. By his father's shoes, perhaps.

'From one motel to another,' the cab driver said, laughing as he picked him up. 'What's the matter with this place? Bedbugs?'

Sitting quiet in the back, Nathan concentrated on his cell phone. A couple of messages from Verizon welcoming him to Nashville, a text from Kate. *Hope your flight was okay. Dinner at ours tomorrow night when you're rested?*

He thumbed through the remainder of his notifications before circling back, unsure how to respond. His sister clearly wasn't in any great rush to see him.

Flight was fine, he typed. *Dinner tomorrow sounds good.*

It wasn't like he was in much of a rush to see her, either.

It had started to rain. Light, though. Just a spatter of it on the glass. The cab driver was muttering something, gesticulating at another car. A dull ache was building inside Nathan's head. The wrong sounds being amplified. People leaning on their horns, the endless drone of rolling tyres. Exits off the I-40 for Lexington and

Atlanta. They entered a tunnel and the sudden change in pressure was like a shotgun blast.

He wondered if it was the same road his father had driven. Out here, to the motel on the edge of the city. Driving slow, maybe. Taking his time. To make sure his mind was made up, to savour the sights.

Or hell, maybe he hadn't planned on killing himself at all. Maybe hanging himself from a bathroom door had been some spur-of-the-moment thing. Truth was, Nathan had never really known what went on in his father's head.

He wondered then if coming here had been a mistake. To his father's house, to Nashville entirely. Acting the dutiful son, like he owed it to the man.

Isaac was waiting for him at his motel. His *actual* motel. A Holiday Inn next to the Opryland Resort. A clean lobby and a vanilla diffuser plugged into the wall. It even had a pool round back.

Nathan was confirming his reservation when he spotted him. The tall, broad-chested man dressed in jeans and a raincoat, rising from a chair in the corner of the room. It took Nathan a moment to place him. To navigate the seventeen years and find the man's face.

'Isaac? What on earth are you doing here?'

'Kate told me where you were staying. Thought you might appreciate a friendly face.' Isaac smiled sadly. 'I'm truly sorry to hear about your dad.'

'That's kind of you to say.'

'Listen, you fancy a drink? Be good to catch up a little. I promise I won't keep you.'

Nathan thought about saying no. Rifled through his reasons, that overwhelming first instinct to retreat. He thought about Kate, too wrapped up in her own bullshit to come visit her brother on his

first day back. It had been nice of Isaac to make the effort.

‘Sure,’ he said. ‘I could do with a drink.’

Music City Bar and Grill was a short walk away. They made small talk as they went, the awkwardness of so many years apart settling over them both. Even though it didn’t take them long, by the time they arrived Nathan was wondering if he shouldn’t have just gone to bed.

Inside, the bar was busy. A three-piece cover band doing the classics for the tourists. Kenny Rogers and Johnny Cash living on as they did every night in nearly every bar across the city.

They got a table near the back. About as far from the rabble as you could get in a place like this. Still, Nathan didn’t mind. The background buzz did a half-decent job of dulling the thoughts in his head. A couple of beers would only help it along.

‘It’s really good to see you again, man,’ Isaac said, tilting his glass. ‘I just wish, you know . . .’

‘Better circumstances?’

‘Yeah.’

Nathan nodded and took a long drink. The beer was ice cold. It ran an icy trail down his throat. ‘You said you spoke with Kate?’

‘Uh huh. I ran into her the other day.’

‘How was she?’

Isaac looked at him, his fingers playing with his beer glass. He still hadn’t taken a drink. ‘You haven’t spoken with her?’

‘Not for a while now.’

‘Oh. I didn’t know.’

Nathan shrugged. ‘You move three states away, you leave some people behind. It’s just how it is.’

‘But Kate’s family, man. You need to keep those connections alive.’

‘It’s complicated, Isaac.’

‘Every family’s complicated.’

‘Not like ours.’

Isaac let it go. He finally took a sip and Nathan saw him wince a little as he swallowed. A clamour at the bar pulled his attention as the band started up ‘Wagon Wheel’.

‘You think they ever get tired of playing the same stuff every night?’ Isaac asked.

‘Probably,’ Nathan said. ‘I sure got tired of listening.’

‘Tell me, how’s Minnesota?’

‘I’m in Sioux Falls now.’

‘Where’s that, North Dakota?’

‘South. And it’s fine. It’s . . . cold.’ Nathan drifted away for a moment before adding, ‘It’s cold and it’s humid and it’s beautiful.’

‘You ever think about moving back home?’

‘It is home,’ Nathan said, and lifted his beer for another drink. ‘This is just a vacation.’

The two men fell into another silence, only this time it wasn’t too awkward. Maybe it was the beer, or the music. Maybe it was this unexpected burst of normality on a day when Nathan had been bracing himself for the opposite. Sitting here, the past seventeen years seemed to fall away. He was in a bar but he was in a classroom, too. At the back, by the window, his attention drifting. A disconnect that had steadily grown within him all through middle school, fuelled by poisoned knowledge of how the world really was. He’d thrown barriers around himself as a result; Isaac had been one of the few people to try to push through. And no one had been more surprised than Nathan when he let Isaac in, even if only a little.

‘Yeah, well, I guess sticking around doesn’t always work out for folk,’ Isaac said, bringing Nathan back. ‘You remember Paul Colston? Had those really bad acne scars down one half of his face?’

‘Kid who flooded the toilets outside the cafeteria?’

‘The very same. When we finished high school, that guy was working part-time at Best Buy. You know what he’s doing now?’

Nathan shook his head.

‘He’s the fucking *manager* at Best Buy,’ Isaac said, grinning. ‘You get what I’m saying?’

‘That if I’d stayed, I too might have become the manager of an electrical retailer?’

‘Of *any* retailer!’ Isaac said. ‘Target, JCPenney, Sears . . .’

‘Bed Bath and Beyond.’

‘Oh, you should be so lucky.’

Isaac laughed, and Nathan found himself joining in. He went to take a drink, then stopped and shook his head. Isaac leaned forward, said, ‘What is it?’

‘I was just thinking earlier about school,’ Nathan said. ‘About how isolated I made myself. You really helped me get through some rough times. And now here we are, all these years later, and you’re doing it again.’

Isaac waved him away. ‘All part of the service,’ he said, and took another sip of his drink. His face twitched again as it went down.

‘You all right?’ Nathan asked.

‘I’m fine,’ Isaac said. ‘Heartburn.’

Nathan watched his friend and wondered if it was something more, but he let it be. ‘So what are you doing in Nashville these days yourself? I’m guessing you didn’t fly all the way out here from Baltimore just for my dad’s funeral.’

Isaac grunted. ‘I don’t work in Baltimore now. Moved back home about six months ago.’

‘Well aren’t you a regular Paul Colston. You still a detective?’

‘No.’

The band hit a key change and the bar went wild. Nathan grimaced and turned his head away slightly. ‘What’s after detective? Sergeant?’

‘I’m a PI,’ Isaac said. He gave a lopsided grin and pulled a business card from his wallet. *Isaac Holloway*, it read in sleek, embossed print. *Private Investigator*. ‘You need a background check on an unfaithful husband, you let me know.’

‘I’ll keep that in mind.’

‘Actually, I’ve been doing some work recently for Alison Bennett. Remember her?’

Nathan remembered. The three of them had been close growing up. Spending those long, hot Tennessee summers together. Climbing trees and splashing through rivers. Then, later, graduating to smoking weed and drinking in parks.

‘How is she?’

‘She’s a force of nature, man, same as she ever was. Got herself a law degree, runs her own firm down in Pulaski. Throws me a couple of cases every now and then. I’m still finding my feet a little. Although . . .’ Isaac trailed off, moved his barely touched beer to one side. ‘You hear about Chloe Xi?’

Nathan shook his head.

‘Eight-year-old girl, went missing last week while walking her dog after school.’

‘Missing?’

‘Yeah. Parents are losing it, as you can imagine. They think the police are dragging their feet, maybe on account of their daughter being a minority, who knows. Anyway, they want an extra pair of eyes on the case.’

Isaac was still talking, his hands gesturing as he described the initial meeting he’d had with the parents. But Nathan barely heard him. He couldn’t get past that word.

Missing.

A child was missing.

‘You okay?’

Nathan blinked. 'I'm fine. Think the travelling is catching up to me.'
'Course. Listen, I shouldn't have kept you. I'll let you settle in.
Keep the card, give me a call. We can catch up later in the week.'

'Sure, thanks.'

And then Nathan was rising, moving away from the table on unsteady legs, pushing his way through the crowd. The band was like a distant memory, its sound muffled and faint. Outside in the cool air, his hands trembled so bad it took three tries to get his cell phone from his pocket.

It was happening again.

No, it was *still* happening.

Chloe Xi. Eight years old.

Missing.

3

By the time the cab had pulled up to his father's old house, Nathan had read a handful of news stories about the missing girl. Chloe Xi had been taken from a public park a half-hour drive from her house in the early afternoon. A crowd of kids and their parents, and not one person had seen her vanish. She had been missing now for nine days.

She was a small, thin girl with jet black hair and a wide smile. The photo most of the outlets had gone with was of her in her school uniform: grey skirt and white shirt, with knee-high white socks and little black shoes. Her hair was tied up in bunches with a pair of red ribbons.

He'd tried not to think about his father's house. The whole way over here, he'd tried.

It was the dinners that really got to him, that had stayed with him all these years. The family gathered around the kitchen table. His father dishing up spaghetti or mashed potatoes to him and Kate, making inane comments about their school or the weather, all the while everyone pretending like this was normal, like the leftovers wouldn't be going into Tupperware boxes and left on the kitchen table, like their father wasn't going to take them down to the basement or drive them an hour outside the city to his cabin in the woods, to serve dinner all over again.

And now Nathan was back. Home again, seventeen years later. Through the front door and up the stairs, flicking light switches as he went. Moving fast, too fast to give himself time to think. Across the landing and into his father's bedroom. Throwing open the closet, tossing plain shirts and worn khakis, moving deeper into the musty darkness.

The shoebox was tucked away in the back.

It was called *The Midnight King*.

A collection of words, printed on sheets of crisp, white paper and bound together with screw posts. *A novel*, it read underneath, *by Lucas Cole*.

Of course he knew his father had been a writer. Crime fiction, mainly. Schlocky stuff, lots of big men who solved crimes with their fists and had six-packs despite drinking a half-bottle of whiskey every other night, who always got the girl and never bothered to call her back. Lucas had written dozens of the things. They were piled high on every shelf in the house.

His father had written under a pseudonym – 'Jack Cross'. A name that seemed to conjure up an author almost as strapped as the lead character. In reality, Lucas Cole couldn't have been more different: tall and weedy, with big glasses and a habit of licking his lips when he spoke. But power comes in different forms, in different shapes and sizes, and Nathan's body still bore the scars to prove it.

When Nathan was growing up, his father had spent much of his life tucked away in a grubby little office, typing out his hero fantasy sexist bullshit. The clack of a keyboard running late into the night. Nathan remembered standing on the other side of the door, sometimes with Kate, more often alone, listening to his father type.

Lucas Cole's success – and as much as Nathan hated to admit it,

the man *had* found success – came much later. Once Nathan had left home. The book deals and the bestseller lists. Turned out people had an appetite for that stuff after all.

But this . . . this was the first time he'd ever seen a manuscript with his father's real name on it. He wondered if it meant something. It felt like it was important, different from the rest. He flipped open the first page and read the Author's Note. His throat went dry.

As he put it to one side, the shoebox's true contents were revealed: a large collection of small items. Trinkets, mainly. Pieces of junk. Buttons and watch straps. A sock. A pair of glasses. Each of them with a plain, brown name tag, written in his father's neat hand.

Nathan gazed down at them all. They filled the box nearly to the brim. There were more here now, more than there had been when he'd left.

He reached down, his fingertips just about brushing the topmost items. Something screamed in him not to. The same voice that had screamed when Isaac had told him about the missing girl. That had *been* screaming, in fact, ever since. Through his internet searches, as he'd scrolled past that photo of Chloe Xi in her school uniform. Her black hair tied up in bunches, held there by red ribbons.

The same red ribbons that sat proudly on display now, on top of his father's collection.

4

He stuffed the manuscript back into the shoebox and half ran from the room. Taking the stairs two at a time, nearly falling when he reached the bottom, not bothering to lock up as he left. His father's station wagon sat outside, towed there from the motel he'd died in, the keys in a little plastic bag by the front door. Nathan used them now. Tossed the shoebox onto the back seat and tore away from Lucas Cole's house.

Burgess Falls was over an hour away. Less, maybe, this time of night. The manuscript's opening words stayed with him as he drove. Heavy in the car, a passenger riding alongside him. *It is not a confession*, his father had written, and maybe it wasn't but there was truth in there. Enough to keep the tremor running through Nathan's hands as they gripped the wheel, even now. Enough to send him eighty miles east in the dark.

Deep in his heart, he didn't really know what he'd find at the cabin, but he knew he had to look. Chloe Xi had been missing for nine days now – and unless his father's methods had changed in the last seventeen years, then the chances were she was already dead.

He broke the back-door window to get in, his fist balled up in his jacket. He wasn't worried about anyone hearing him. The cabin was

tucked away in a small clearing, the closest neighbour a half mile down a dirt track. By now it was late, near midnight and pitch black. The only sound came from the bare forest that surrounded the house. He could hear its thin branches rattling in the wind.

Inside, Nathan flicked on the kitchen light. A bare bulb so bright it made him squint. Like before, he didn't bother to stop and look around. It was just another one of his father's properties, full of nothing but memories he'd rather forget.

He moved quickly through the kitchen, to the door that led down to the cellar. Seventeen years but his arm still remembered, still jerked the handle upwards to dislodge the uneven frame. A rush of cool air and a strange, musky odour. His face felt hot. His back crawled with ants.

A metal chain hung to his left. He pulled it, setting off another bulb, this one in the ceiling below him. It lit up the room all wrong, threw shadows instead of light. The bottom of the stairs stayed in darkness.

'Hello?' he called.

Waited for a response.

Nothing.

Standing there, he was a man but he was also a boy. Ten years old. Knowing his swim shorts were in the dryer. Knowing he would have to go past the girl to get them. The thin girl, the girl with the sad eyes, the girl who mewled like a kitten left out in the cold.

His first step was a shotgun blast in the quiet. The stairs had always creaked but never like this. He paused, listened again for anything, finally getting a grip on himself and turning on his cell's torch. He swept the cellar as he descended. It took him thirty seconds to reach the bottom and by the time he did it was obvious no one was there. No one except the spiders, their webs strung up across the corners of the room.

Nathan trained his torch on the section of wall where his father had installed the anchor points. There was no sign of them now. He stepped close, stood where the thin mattress had once lain but of course that was gone, too. He ran his hand over the surface. It was smooth. Bending forward, he kept his palm flat on the wall until he felt them. The gentle bumps of spackling paste. The only trace of what had once been there.

When he turned to leave he glanced up the stairs to the kitchen above him. The door was ajar, that harsh light slicing through the gap. He imagined what it must have been like to live down here, if living was the right word. Staring up at that door in the darkness, both praying for the light and dreading its arrival. He imagined what he would feel – here, now – if that door was to suddenly close on him, or if it were to swing open wide. He wasn't sure what would be worse.

All he really knew for certain was that Chloe Xi wasn't here. She never had been. No one had, not for a long while.

5

ISAAC

Isaac waited at the bottom of the stairs, a paper folder on his lap half filled with blank pages and bravado.

It was the first time he'd stepped foot in a Nashville police station. Six months since he'd been in a station full stop, but it was like he'd never left. All these places felt the same. All of them filled with the same bullshit, the same little power struggles. The same budget constraints, too. Hermitage Precinct was no different. The only thing cheaper than the plastic seat he was wedged into was his own ill-fitting suit.

He'd lost weight since he'd worn it last. A whole notch on his belt. Even so, the pants didn't sit right. He wanted to squirm but he couldn't – he was on show, sitting under a bright light and a stern gaze; the receptionist had her eye on him. She'd pretty much just left it there ever since he'd sat down, which was – Isaac checked his watch – nearly thirty minutes ago.

He sent her a smile. 'Any update?'

'The detectives know you're here, sir.'

The woman had a nasal tone, like she was pinching her nose as she spoke. She used the word 'sir' as Isaac would an insult. A show of

force, a warning shot. He felt it glance off him harmlessly and land somewhere over by the water cooler.

He holstered his smile and flipped open the paper folder. Swapped one gaze for another, this one less severe but with a power of its own. Little Chloe Xi smiled up at him and he felt it in the pit of his stomach.

It was the same photo that had been doing the media circuit. Taken not long after last year's fall vacation was over, a few weeks before Thanksgiving. It wasn't an official school picture, but she was well-turned-out all the same. Her uniform freshly ironed, her white socks pulled up past her knees. Two red ribbons holding her black hair up in bunches, tied in large bows. Isaac looked at the photo and felt like he knew her – hard-working, studious, polite to her family. He also knew better than to trust an opinion based on a single photo, but that was his training. Some of the nastiest folks he'd met took the sweetest pictures.

Still, it had been a smart move by her family. Most people seeing the image – over dinner, maybe, or on the nightly news or on their cell phones before they went to sleep – they'd take one look at her and think exactly what they were supposed to.

Isaac flicked the photo over. Another couple of pictures were stacked behind it, all similar stuff: Chloe sitting at a dinner table, Chloe looking up from watching TV, Chloe with a border terrier at the beach up on Old Hickory. A lot of families took their dogs to Old Hickory. Most of them came back intact.

He moved to the copied police report, scanning it even though he could just about recite it from memory. He was halfway through when he finally heard footsteps coming down those stairs. Slow steps. Plodding. Isaac formed an image of a tired, out-of-shape detective in a crushed suit and looked up to see he wasn't far off the mark.

'Mr Holloway?'

It was said with resignation, like he'd been hoping Isaac might have

left. It told Isaac something about the man's character. That he was passive, that he didn't like confrontation. It told him he'd done his homework, too. He knew who Isaac was.

Isaac closed his file and untangled himself from his chair. His stomach started churning. He'd skipped breakfast, and was running on last night's half-eaten dinner. Baby back ribs at the Music City Bar and Grill after Nathan had left. He fought the urge to tug on his loose suit. Dug deep for that winning smile.

'I appreciate you seeing me, Detective . . .?'

'Copeland. Harry Copeland. And listen, just so we're clear here? My partner and I aren't exactly thrilled that the family have engaged a private detective in this case.'

'I know. The parents told me you'd advised against it.'

Copeland raised bushy eyebrows. 'It's nothing personal, Mr Holloway—'

'Please, Isaac.'

'All right. It's nothing personal, Isaac. It's what I always tell anyone who asks whether they should instruct a PI. It muddies the waters, makes me and my partner's job more difficult. I know you were a detective once, so I'm sure you'll understand.'

Isaac had been right about Copeland. The guy *had* done his homework.

He shrugged. 'I get it. And look, you know this family, you know they just want to feel like they're doing everything they can. Me being here is absolutely not a slight on your or your partner's ability to find the girl. I'm sure you both know exactly what you're doing.'

A flicker of hesitation. Copeland trying to work out whether or not he was being insulted. He decided to let it slide.

'Fine, so if we're finished clearing the air, I'm going to have to ask you to leave. We've a lot to get through.'

Isaac raised his folder. 'I've got a theory, if you'd like to hear it.'

Copeland didn't. He was already turning, shaking his big head. 'No offence, but how about you leave the detective work to the detectives?'

'Come on, I'll buy you a coffee. You and your partner. Twenty minutes, that's all.'

'Goodbye, Mr Holloway.'

The detective shuffled back up the stairs to his desk. Isaac waited until he'd gone from view before pulling at his suit jacket. He hadn't really expected much in the way of assistance from anyone here. Hell, was a time he'd treated desperate PIs in much the same way himself.

'Let's hear it, then,' came the nasally voice from behind him. The receptionist was standing with her hands on her hips, her face screwed up like she was sniffing shit.

'What?'

'Your theory. Let's hear it.'

Isaac glanced down at the file he was still clutching. Nothing but blank pages and bravado. He didn't have a theory, he didn't have anything. A last-ditch attempt to get some face time with the detectives. Copeland had seen right through him.

'You want to hear my theory?' Isaac asked. 'You get Detective Copeland to give me a call.'

He dropped a card on her desk. Wasn't fancy, just a name and cell number. No address – last thing he wanted was some prospective client swinging by and finding out that *2306 Brick Church Pike* was actually a Super 8 by Wyndham.

The receptionist grunted as he walked away. He'd been stupid to go to Copeland empty-handed. Stupid maybe to take this case on in the first place. Shit, just being in a police station again was making his guts burn.

Only it was too late to pull out now, wasn't it? And if it was weakness that got him involved in this, then he would need strength to get out. To choke back the acid that bubbled high in his chest.

He needed to work the case himself, alone, at least for a while. He needed to do it proper. Do it like he used to, like he was still a cop, no matter how his guts protested. He couldn't rightly expect Hermitage Precinct to trade with him on anything less.

The Nashville Public Library sat opposite the station, on the other side of a busy road. Isaac stared at it as he thought about returning to his hotel room. Thought about his back aching as he hunched over the narrow desk, papers spread across the double bed. He crossed the road.

6

Chloe Xi had gone missing on March third. That was ten days ago.

The last reported sighting of her was by a female jogger, but the statement was vague and the details unconfirmed. The woman had told NBC Channel 4 News that she'd seen someone matching Chloe's description wandering into a small patch of woodland by the camping ground. Said the kid had been calling something as she walked.

The family dog was a border terrier called Coco. She hadn't been seen since March third, either.

Isaac set himself up in a quiet corner of the Nashville Public Library. One of those big desks you're meant to share, only it was quiet today and he had the thing to himself. He wasn't leaving until he had enough to take back to Copeland. It was already nearing lunchtime, but that was all right. His day was wide open.

He chewed a Rolaid and read over his interview notes with the family. They'd contacted him when the first week had gone by and the police hadn't made any progress. The Xi's were nice people. Down to earth and genuine. Realistic. They'd have known the same stats that Isaac did: after the first three days, the chances of finding their daughter alive was slim to none. Memories faded, evidence was lost. It had rained once since March third, and it hadn't been a downpour but maybe it had been enough. Enough to degrade whatever trace of