

**NINE YEARS  
GONE**

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Stand-alone novels:

*Just Run*

Ash Rashid novels:

*The Abbey*  
*The Outsider*  
*By Any Means*

**NINE YEARS  
GONE**

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CHRIS CULVER

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**NINE YEARS  
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I had anticipated it being a horrible moment. I expected a dark ripple to pass through the room, or a ghostly voice to call out in a low, slow moan that only I could hear. None of that happened, of course; the actual event was much more anticlimactic. One moment, Dominique Girard's chest moved, and the next it didn't.

Prior to last night, prior to witnessing him die, I thought seeing Dominique's execution would so fundamentally and radically change me that I'd be able to demarcate my life into two distinct spheres, one before and one after. Instead I felt . . . relieved. Dominique Girard was finally dead, executed by the state of Missouri for a murder he didn't commit, a murder that didn't even happen. I hate to say it and I hate to believe it even more, but no one had ever been more deserving.

I shrugged my shoulders into my jacket for my evening walk and smiled at my niece. She grinned back at me, a gap-toothed smile that made the rest of the world disappear for the briefest of moments. Even though I saw her every day, I never got tired of that grin. She hadn't done enough of it in her short life, and I had made it one of my goals to bring it out as often as I could. I looked at

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my wife Katherine next. It was a Monday evening, her half-day off and the best day of the week as far as I was concerned. Before Ashley moved in with us, Katherine and I would spend the entire afternoon at home in bed on those days, usually not saying a word. We go out more often now, but I still look forward to Mondays when she's home. I think we all do.

I zipped my jacket up before helping Ashley with hers. It was a little before five on a chilly November evening, and the evening sun barely registered as an orange sliver in a cloudless pastel-blue sky. My wife slipped her hand into mine, causing an almost electric tingle to pass over my skin. We hadn't been married long, but we purposefully avoided overt displays of affection in front of our niece. Even something as tame as holding Katherine's hand in public carried the thrill of the forbidden. I winked at her and then put my free hand on my niece's upper back to prod her forward.

"Lay on, Macduff, and damned be him who first cries 'Hold, enough!'"

Ashley cocked her head to the side and then looked over her shoulder at me, her brow furrowed.

"Who's MacDuff?"

My wife stepped in before I could respond. "Uncle Steve is feeling Shakespearean. He wants you to go first."

"Why didn't he just say so?" she asked, shaking her head. I knew her well enough to figure that she was probably rolling her eyes, and that made me smile even wider. Simon, my golden retriever, led us from the house and onto the sidewalk. Ashley, Simon, and I walked those streets every evening, and we saw the same things every time. The staid but modern architecture of the bank at which I opened my first checking account, the old stone church where Katherine and I were married, the Italianate brick building out of which my father and grandfather practiced law. Nearly every major event of my life had occurred within the comforting confines of those streets,

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beneath the canopy of trees so old the city had passed ordinances to protect them. Webster Groves, our hometown, had become a part of us, and my family had become a part of it. We couldn't have left it behind even if we wanted to.

About ten minutes after we headed out, my cell phone buzzed. Katherine raised an eyebrow but didn't say anything, so I shook my head to let her know I didn't plan to answer. I had made enough phone calls lately; my family deserved some time alone. A short walk later, we reached Bristol Elementary School, and I took a seat on a bench overlooking the playground while Katherine and Ashley went to the equipment. My wife is a physician in the last year of a neonatology fellowship at the St. Louis Children's Hospital, so with her hours, I'm my niece's primary caregiver. As much as I enjoy my time with her, I know she misses her Aunt Katherine. Monday nights are their nights, and I was glad to see them laughing together on a teeter-totter.

My phone buzzed again. I knew what Katherine would say if I picked it up. *You don't need to give another interview. You've talked about him enough.* She'd be right, too. In the week before Dominique Girard's execution, I gave almost a dozen interviews and told so many lies I had to start writing them down to keep everything straight. As a professional novelist, I at least had practice with that. Since Katherine couldn't see me, I took my phone out and looked at the screen.

*Unknown caller.*

I tapped the ANSWER button.

"Hello?" I paused and waited for the caller to respond. "You there?"

"Yes, I'm here."

It was a woman's voice, one I knew well, but also one that shouldn't have been calling me.

Katherine caught my gaze across the playground. She furrowed her eyebrows into a shallow V-shape, pursed her

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lips, and shook her head just enough to let me know she disapproved of the interruption to our family time. Ashley continued to giggle, so I didn't think she saw the look. I held up a finger and mouthed that I'd only be a minute.

"Who is this, please?" I asked, refusing to acknowledge what my ears were telling me.

"I'm an old friend, and I have information you might be interested in. I'd like to meet you."

"My friends have names. Who is this?" I asked.

"For now, call me Holly Olson. It's important that I talk to you. I think you'll want to see me."

Somewhere, perhaps carried by the breeze, I heard the crack of a baseball bat striking a ball and the shouts of children, encouraging their friend.

"If this is who I think it is, you know how dangerous it is to call."

"I thought you would want to know that I'm okay."

I softened my voice. "I'm glad you're okay, but we still shouldn't be talking. I'm sorry, but I'm going to hang up."

She didn't respond, so I started to pull the phone from my ear, but stopped as she spoke words I didn't want to hear.

"If you know who this is, you know why I'm calling. I need to talk to you about Dominique Girard."

The cold fingers of a very black memory, one I wished I could forget, scratched at the back of my mind, and without conscious direction, my shoulders and body tensed up. "I don't know what there is for us to talk about."

"We killed my stepfather. I believe there's a lot to talk about."

Katherine and Ashley walked to the swings. Both waved at me, and I forced myself to smile and wave in return.

"We can't do this. I'm going to hang up now."

"It's important that I see you," she said. "I can meet you at your dad's old office in ten minutes. Or I can even

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stop by your house, if you'd like. I wouldn't mind seeing Katherine again."

The pit in my stomach grew. "You're in town?"

"Yeah. I'm on Manchester Road in Glendale."

That put her about five minutes out.

"Not at my house. Where do you want to meet?"

"Bread Co., on Lockwood Avenue. Do you know it?"

Even after nine years, Tess still got the St. Louis vernacular right. To the rest of the world, the St. Louis Bread Company—Bread Co. to the locals—became Panera Bread several years ago. Not in town, though. Clinging to the name of a local restaurant chain may seem silly, but St. Louis, for good or ill, values its past. It was one of the things I liked most about the area.

"Yeah, I know it."

"I'll be there at six."

I looked at my wife and niece, happily playing, not a care in the world. My wife is my best and closest friend, but she didn't know everything. She knew about my relationship with Tess, what she had meant to me, but I never told her what I had done for her, and I hoped to God that she'd never have to find out

"I'll see you there," I said.

"Good. I look forward to catching up."

Tess hung up before I did. I stayed still for a moment, and then slipped my phone in my pocket, my hands trembling.

From the day I met her in kindergarten to the day she left in our sophomore year of college, I planned to spend my life with Tess Gerard. Then I found something out that no one should ever discover about a loved one, and I had to make a choice. It was the hardest choice I've ever made, and one I've regretted having to make ever since. I gave her up and helped her escape her very wealthy, very powerful stepfather by framing him for murder. With some help from my Uncle Simon and two friends, it worked. Dominique is dead now, deservedly so for the

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things he's done, and while I didn't throw the switch that sent the lethal drugs into his system, I set the course of events into motion.

As punishment, the universe gave me everything I've ever wanted. I lost Tess, but over the course of several years I fell in love with and then married Katherine. For the first time since losing my old friend, I was happy. And that's the punishment. Every day, I wake up wondering if today is the day in which my past catches up to me, if today is the day I'll lose my wife, my niece, my friends. I had thought Dominique's death would end that anxiety, but one five-minute call reminded me of how much I still had to fear.

## 2

When she saw that I had hung up the phone, Katherine gave Ashley one last push on the swing and then began walking towards me. As soon as she was close enough, she put a hand flat on my chest. “You’re not going out tonight, are you?”

“Just for a little while,” I said, thinking of a white lie quickly. “A woman called claiming to have information about Dominique Girard. Derrick gave her my number, so he must think she has something.”

Derrick Frelander handled freelancers for the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, and he had funneled stories to me before. It wasn’t too much of a stretch.

“I wish you didn’t have to go out. I’ve got plans for the two of us after Ashley goes to bed.”

“I shouldn’t be long.”

Katherine nodded and looked at our niece. We hadn’t spent much time in the playground, but already the sun had begun to sink below the horizon, scattering orange and purple streaks across the sky. Winter days never seemed long enough for everything my family wanted to do.

Katherine called Ashley, and we began to walk home

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together with the sun setting behind us. My wife and I owned a comfortable but small Dutch Colonial home in a swanky end of town. The breeze blew through our wood window frames as freely as it would through an old barn, and the floors felt cold on chilly days because of our exposed crawlspace, but it was home in the best senses of that word.

When we reached the house, I noticed a blue and white cardboard package propping open the storm door. I knew at a glance that it was from my wife's favorite bakery, but I couldn't think of a reason why someone would send us anything.

"Did I miss somebody's birthday and not realize it?"

Katherine shot me her best faux-innocent look. "I don't know. Better take the cupcakes inside before a jealous neighbor sees them."

"We wouldn't want that," I said, bending to grab the box. I unlocked the front door and held it for my family.

"Hey, honey," said Katherine, helping my niece remove her jacket in the front hallway. "I need you to get started on your homework before dinner."

"But I want to see what's in the box."

Katherine's eyes darted to me and then back to my niece. "Uncle Steve will show you in a little while. Go do your homework."

She pursed her lips and then frowned. "Okay."

While my niece traipsed to the dining room table to do her homework, I leaned into my wife. "What's in the box?"

She snaked an arm through the crook of my elbow and winked. "Let's go upstairs and find out."

"Okay," I said, not quite sure what lay in store for me. We walked side-by-side up the stairs to our master bedroom, where, lying on a stack of pillows in the center of the bed, I found a brown teddy bear.

"Open the box," said Katherine, smiling. I cast my wife a curious look before using my keys to cut through the

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brown packing tape that held the box together. Inside, I found three pink and three blue cupcakes with little flags that read CONGRATULATIONS! I put my keys on the bed, my hands trembling once again, but for a completely different reason.

“Does this mean what I think it means?”

She stepped towards me and pushed the cupcakes and my keys toward the center of the bed. “Depends. Do you think it means we’re having sextuplets?”

The smile slipped off my face. “You’re kidding me, right?”

“Yes. But you’re still going to be a dad.”

As soon as she said the word “dad”, any thoughts I had of my phone call disappeared. My smile returned and then stretched into a grin that crossed my entire face. I wrapped my arms around Katherine’s waist and picked her up. She squealed in delight, and I kissed her long and hard before laying her back on the bed, her head beside the teddy bear. I probably would have done a lot more than just kiss her, but she put her hands on my chest and gently pushed me away before I could start throwing off her clothes.

“Let’s hold off on that until Ashley goes to sleep. I don’t want to be interrupted.”

I looked at the teddy bear and then at my wife. “I’m going to be a dad.”

She smiled and kissed me. “Yes, you are.”

I sat down on the bed and rested my forearm on the hand-me-down end table that customarily held whatever book I was reading. As I did that, reality caught up to me. “We need so much stuff. We’re going to have to get a crib, a changing table, bottles, strollers, car seats, diapers, and I don’t even know what else. We need to start shopping. We can go tonight after dinner.”

“We have plenty of time for that, and I’m exhausted,” said Katherine. “You go help Ashley with her homework. I’m going to take a nap.”

“Sure,” I said. “I love you.”

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“I love you, too.”

I hugged her once more and met Ashley downstairs. She looked up from her homework as I arrived.

“Why are you smiling?” she asked.

“Because I get to spend my evening with you.”

“Oh,” she said, nodding thoughtfully. “Do you want to do my homework?”

“No,” I said, kissing her forehead. “You’re on your own.”

Despite my telling her that she was on her own, Ashley and I spent the next half hour on her reading homework, but then we split one cupcake and took the dog outside to play for a few minutes. We started with monkey in the middle, but Simon and Ashley tired of that quickly. After that, I chased them both through piles of leaves in the backyard until Ashley fell, exhausted and giggling, on the grass. The kiddo went in at ten to six, which gave me just enough time to drive to Old Webster, the section of town that held my father’s office as well as the St. Louis Bread Company.

I ordered a cup of coffee and a pastry inside before exiting and sitting at one of the black metal tables out front. Generally speaking, I’m not a religious man, but I found myself praying that I was wrong, that the woman on the phone was somebody, anybody, but who I thought.

At six, right on time, a white Nissan parallel parked on the street beside the restaurant and a woman stepped out and waved at me. I started to say hello, but the word died on my lips before I could. She had blonde hair that fell in waves against her shoulders; smooth, tanned skin; and pale blue eyes that in high school had convinced me to learn how to play an acoustic guitar so I could sing dopey love songs. One look confirmed what I had feared.

She walked towards me and smiled, and I felt a thousand invisible spiders crawl on my skin.

“Do you recognize me?” she asked.

My breath caught in my throat before I could answer. I

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coughed to clear it. My heart thumped hard against my ribs. “We shouldn’t be meeting each other.”

She nodded toward the chair opposite me. “Can I sit down?”

“It would look out of place if you didn’t.”

She smoothed the wrinkles in her skirt, drawing my eyes to her hips and very shapely legs, before sitting.

“Do you recognize me?” she asked again.

A bead of sweat trickled from between my shoulder blades and down my back despite the low temperature. “You look like someone I once loved very dearly, but she’s gone now.”

“Are you sure?” she asked. I looked into her eyes, something I had done so often as a young man that they had stayed with me even in the nine years she’d been gone. For a brief moment, something dark stared back at me, something I had never seen before. And then it was gone, replaced by a dull melancholy that fed the guilt at the core of my soul.

I grabbed the wrapper from my pastry and my half-empty coffee cup. “I’m very sorry, but I have to go.”

“Please don’t.”

Her hesitant, hopeful smile stopped me flat.

“We shouldn’t be seen together,” I said. “Not here, at least.”

“You’re probably right.” She looked around quickly and then returned her gaze to me. “I’m staying at the Ritz-Carlton under the name Holly Olson. Give me a call sometime tomorrow when you’re free for an hour or two. I’d like to have an actual conversation.”

We stood up at the same time, and she walked around the table to give me a hug. Instinctively, I hugged her back.

“I’ll see you soon, sweetheart,” she said, whispering into my ear. “We have a lot to catch up on.”

“I guess we do,” I said.

She kissed my cheek and then sauntered down the sidewalk toward her car. While I stood there trying to

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collect myself, she drove away, leaving me flummoxed. When I finally composed myself well enough to walk, I went to the street where she had parked. Exhaust hung in the air, but she was gone, leaving a familiar hollow in my gut.

Last night, I walked with a clear conscience into the Potosi Correctional Facility before Dominique Girard's execution. No one expressed remorse for his impending death, no one stood outside those prison walls to protest his execution, and no family members or friends even visited him as he enjoyed his baked salmon and scalloped potatoes, the last meal he would ever consume.

I watched his last moments through a bulletproof window in a concrete bunker. He didn't thrash or fight or squirm or writhe in pain, even when the guards strapped him to a table and a physician inserted the IV that would channel the lethal cocktail to his heart. Dominique died quietly and with as much dignity as the situation allowed. The police never found Tess's body, not a single trace; despite that, the state killed him.

Cocooned in wealth and power most people can't imagine, I believe that Dominique thought himself to be above the law, or at least outside of its reach. My friends and I showed him otherwise. I used to think we did the right thing, but since watching him die, I've come to realize that his punishment wasn't my call to make. Even if it saved Tess's life, we shouldn't have done what we did. There are some mistakes you can't take back, though. You simply have to live with them and face the consequences.

## 3

I drove home and met Katherine in the kitchen. Neither my wife nor I had grown up with a mother who cooked, so we rarely did, either, which meant dinner typically consisted of whatever prepared meal Straubs, the local gourmet grocery store, had on offer. As I shut the back door, Katherine stepped away from the fridge carrying a plastic bag full of salad in one hand and a plastic container of dressing in the other. Water slicked her hair, and she wore a navy blue terrycloth robe over black silk pajamas.

“I think it’s time for someone to take a bath,” said Katherine, raising her eyebrows at Ashley.

“Can I use bubbles?” she asked.

I looked at Katherine for confirmation and then I knelt in front of Ashley. “Only if you sing.”

“Okay,” she said, already running toward the staircase. It was just new-parent jitters, but I asked her to sing when she took a bubble bath so I’d always know her head was still above water. Plus, it gave me the opportunity to sing silly songs with my niece. I liked that.

I put my wallet and keys in the basket beside our back door, and Katherine put the food on the counter and darted towards me. She kissed me with an open mouth and smiled.

“How was your meeting?”

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I should have told her the truth, that I had met her supposedly deceased sorority sister, a woman who, if she were spotted by the wrong person, could send me to prison for the rest of my life. Instead, I lied and justified it by saying I was protecting her. My wife deserved the truth, and one day, I knew I'd have to come clean. But not today, not when life is going so well.

"Waste of time," I said, looking down at the floor to avoid looking her in the eye. "All the person I met knew were rumors I've already heard."

She winked and then leaned close so that her breath was hot on my ear. She smelled like cinnamon.

"I know something that might cheer you up. I'm not wearing any panties," she whispered. She pulled back and winked at me but allowed me to keep my arms around her lower back. "I just thought you might like to know."

I wanted to react spontaneously and joyfully. I wanted to squeeze her tight and feel the weight of the day disappear. That wasn't going to happen, though, not with my mind elsewhere. I forced myself to focus on the beautiful woman in front of me and the news she had shared with me, and I felt some of the tightness in my chest dissipate and my shoulders relax.

"That's better," she said, smiling. I loved that smile.

"Hey, Ashley," I said, turning and shouting over my shoulder. "Aunt Katherine and I are awfully tired. I think when you're done with that bath, it'll be bedtime."

"No, it won't," shouted my niece, her voice distant and high. "I haven't even had dinner."

"You're terrible," whispered Katherine into my ear before biting it playfully. When she leaned her head back, she winked at me. "I think we can wait a little while. You're going to get laid tonight no matter what."

"Maybe you can wait."

Katherine kissed me gently on the lips before turning and sashaying her hips as she walked toward the fridge. "Ashley, don't listen to your Uncle Steve. Take as much

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time in the bath as you want.” She looked over her shoulder at me. “And can you get some plates? Let’s use special ones for a special occasion.”

I got the plates, and we had dinner together as a family. At half after eight, we put Ashley to bed and took turns reading her a chapter from *Charlotte’s Web*, her new favorite book, before hugging her goodnight. As I left the room, I turned on the fan beside her bed and met my wife in the spare bedroom, the one farthest from Ashley’s room.

I kissed Katherine on her lips and then on the soft skin of her neck and the hollow of her throat. We undressed each other slowly and made love as soundlessly as we could, like a pair of high school kids hoping not to wake their parents. Huddling together in the quiet stillness afterwards, I found my thoughts straying back to Tess Girard. Katherine stretched beside me, her warm, bare skin pressed against my side.

“You normally just fall asleep when we’re done,” she said, tracing her index finger along the contours of my shoulder. “You’re not looking for another round, are you?”

I’m sure she winked, but I couldn’t see it in the dark. I slipped my arm around her back. “I’m thinking about some things. About life and how things worked out in ways I never expected.”

“What do you mean?” she asked.

I looked up. The autumn leaves that still remained on the tree outside our window swayed in the breeze, causing patterns of shadow and moonlight to flicker across the taut skin of my wife’s back. “I never pictured my life turning out like this, but I wouldn’t change a thing. I don’t want to lose you.”

She kissed me lightly and playfully. “You’re sweet, but you don’t need to worry. You probably don’t remember this, but I drugged you a couple of days after our wedding and inserted a GPS beacon beneath the skin on your right scapula. You couldn’t escape me if you tried.”

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I squeezed her shoulder and smiled. "That's the most romantic thing anyone has ever done for me."

"I know," she said, nodding. "I've been watching from a distance for years."

"I'm glad that was you."

Katherine walked her fingers across my arm and then laid her head against my chest. I pulled her tight against my side.

"This is nice," she said.

"It is," I said, enjoying the moment. Once my wife's breath settled into an easy, slow rhythm, I swallowed back my nerves and asked the question I had wanted to ask all night. "Would you feel the same way about me if I did something wrong?"

Katherine removed her hand from my chest, rolled onto her belly, and propped herself up with her elbows. "Like what?"

"I don't know," I said, shrugging and staring at a water stain on the ceiling. "What if I robbed a bank?"

I looked over at her, and she smiled. "In this hypothetical scenario, did you remember to remove the dye packs so they wouldn't explode with the rest of the money?"

"Of course," I said, scoffing. "This isn't amateur hour."

She looked at me thoughtfully before nodding. "Then yes, I'd still love you."

"How about if I committed fraud?"

I could barely see her features in the dim light, but she screwed up her face. "I guess that depends on who you defrauded. If you cheated a little old lady, that might reflect badly on you."

That was a good point, I thought. "How about Donald Trump?"

She smiled. "In that case, we'd be just fine," she said, laying her head on my upper chest.

I took a breath. "How about if I killed somebody?"

Her eyelashes flicked across the skin of my shoulder as

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she blinked. “Why are we having this conversation?”

I looked down at her but could only see the top of her head. “I’m just trying to figure out the limits of our relationship and if you’d be a good partner in crime.”

“I like to think I’m a good partner.”

“You’re the best.”

She reached an arm across my waist. “I’m spectacular in bed, too.”

“I can’t deny that.”

We stayed silent for a moment, but then Katherine shifted and looked up at me. “You’re thinking about Dominique Girard, aren’t you?”

I didn’t have to lie, so I simply nodded. “Yes.”

“You did nothing wrong. Dominique murdered his daughter. If you hadn’t testified against him, he might have hurt other people. You did what you had to so you could protect people you cared about. His death isn’t your fault. Does that answer your question?”

I swallowed and nodded. “I think so,” I said, pushing back to sit upright against the headboard. Katherine stared up at me, a bemused smile on her face. I shrugged in an attempt to appear nonchalant. “I have one more question, I guess, and it’s not even really a question, but you mentioned something about a second round.”

“Yeah,” said Katherine, shifting so she was on top of me. The moonlight filtered through her hair as she transferred her weight to my hips. “I did say something about a second round.”

4

We stayed in that room the entire night and only slipped out when the sun started to peek through the blinds. Ashley would be up shortly, so I put on a robe and used the first-floor restroom while Katherine stepped into the shower. True to form, my niece met me downstairs at precisely seven in the morning, still wearing the Disney Princess nightgown she had worn to bed the night before. I sent her back upstairs for socks to keep her feet warm, and when she came down again, she went straight to the kitchen, where she poured cereal into a bowl as large as her head and tried using one of our serving spoons to slurp down the milk. I used a sponge to wipe the milk she had spilled onto the counter before getting her an appropriately sized spoon and escorting Simon to the backyard.

When I came back inside, I carried her bowl to the dining room and sat beside her at the table.

“Can you get me a napkin?”

“Sure thing, kiddo,” I said, reaching to the napkin dispenser on the center of the table. She wiped milk from her chin. “Did you sleep okay?”

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She seemed to think before answering. “Is your house haunted?”

“No,” I said, a smile beginning to form on my lips. “Why?”

“Because Mrs. Harmon read us a book about a haunted house on Halloween. If the house isn’t haunted, who was giggling last night?”

*Aunt Katherine.*

My smile disappeared, and I coughed to cover up my momentary pause and to give me time to think of a response. “It was pretty windy last night, so the trees must have rubbed against the roofline or your window. I’ll take a look today to see if anything needs to be trimmed.”

She narrowed her gaze at me and rested her spoon on the side of her bowl. “Why would trees giggle?”

“I don’t know, honey, but as soon as I find out, you’ll be the first person I tell.”

She nodded, but I’m pretty sure she thought I was teasing her. “Okay.”

I watched as she plowed sugary cereal into her mouth. As her temporary—hopefully permanent—guardian, I felt like I should have given her eggs or oatmeal, or at least something with better nutritional value than sugarcoated flakes of wheat. But she didn’t like healthy food—no one I’ve ever met really has—and we didn’t have time before school to go through the hassle of a full meal.

“Uncle Steve,” said Ashley, using a napkin to wipe a drop of milk from her chin. “When can I see my mom again?”

Katherine and I had talked about the question, but neither of us knew how to answer it. Almost four months ago, my sister, Rachel, dropped Ashley off at our house in the middle of the night and said she couldn’t handle her any more. Rachel isn’t a bad person, and I love her as much as anyone can love his sister but, between her drug use and untreated manic depression, she isn’t in any kind of shape to raise a daughter. Katherine and I had offered

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to adopt Ashley permanently and even sent Rachel the papers. All she had to do was sign them. For everyone's sake, I hoped she'd make the right decision, whatever that was.

I laid my spoon on the table. "I'm not sure, sweetheart. Besides, I kind of like you here. I think I might just keep you forever."

Ashley picked up her bowl and tilted it towards her lips to drink the remainder of the milk. Most of it made it into her mouth, but some trickled down her chin and onto her gown.

"I miss Mom, but I like it here, too. I don't want to go back home."

"You'll see your mom again. Don't worry about that. And, we're going to keep you as long as we can. If you're done with breakfast, why don't you go upstairs and get ready for school?"

She nodded before slipping off her chair and running upstairs. I took her empty bowl to the sink and went to the bathroom in our finished basement to get ready for the day. At a quarter to eight, I kissed Katherine goodbye and drove Ashley to school, the same private Catholic elementary school I had attended.

I hugged her goodbye on the sidewalk in front of the school, felt her bony, frail frame, and wished I had given her a better breakfast. Before I could tell her that I loved her and that I'd be there to pick her up, she fell into a group of identically dressed little girls walking toward the building. Ashley giggled and talked and smiled. Even though I dropped her off every morning, seeing her walk away still tugged at my heartstrings. I hoped she was truly happy, that her signs of contentedness and merriment weren't the product of my over-productive imagination; I think she was okay. Katherine and I were doing our best.

When the first bell rang and the rest of the students ran inside, I walked back to my car to drive home. Katherine had already left when I arrived, but Simon greeted me at

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the back door. Few things compare with the feeling of being wanted, and my dog gave me that feeling every time I came home. It was hard not to love that.

I scratched behind his ears before finding his leash and taking him along on the one-mile trek to my writing studio in my father's old law office. Leaves crinkled underfoot, and the acrid fall scent of decaying walnuts and wood smoke from last night's fires wafted on the breeze. The sun warmed the back of my neck, but late November grasped the rest of my body, chilling me through my jacket.

Growing up, I had two good friends with whom I spent most days. One of them, Isaac, spent his teenage years stealing cars and then his early twenties in prison. That finally straightened him out, and now he owns one of the largest custom car shops in St. Louis. My other friend, Vince, spent ten years in blue with the St. Louis Metropolitan Police Department before becoming a private detective at one of the largest criminal defense law firms in the region. I could use his help and advice now, so I called him up.

"What's up, buddy?" Vince asked, his voice gravelly but soft. He cleared his throat.

"Did I wake you up?"

"If I said yes, would that prevent you from calling me before ten again?"

"Probably not," I said, leading Simon to the right at the end of Crofton Avenue and onto Lockwood. The houses on the right side of the street were four, maybe even five thousand square feet and had been built for some of nineteenth and early twentieth century St. Louis's best attorneys, doctors, and businessmen. The homes on the left, while still charming, were smaller and seemed somehow diminished by their peers. "Would it make you feel better if I felt guilty?"

"Marginally," he said. "What's going on?"

I looked around me before speaking to ensure that no

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one was within listening range. A man picked up after his dog on the grass boulevard in the center of the street to my left, but he couldn't hear me.

"I got a call last night from a woman claiming to have information about Dominique Girard."

"What is that, the fourth this week?"

"This one is different. You sitting down?"

Vince hesitated. "Yeah. What's wrong?"

"It's Tess Girard. I met her at Bread Co. last night."

I counted to eight before Vince reacted. "You're sure it's her?"

"Positive," I said, reining in my dog so he wouldn't run into the street at a stop sign. Simon sat on my foot and grinned up at me, and I stroked his head absently before checking for traffic.

"How is she?"

"She looks good."

Vince sighed. "I'm glad. I always liked Tess." He paused. "We're going to have to tell Isaac."

"Eventually," I said, starting across the street. "But let's hold off until we have some more information. I don't want to give him reason to overreact."

"And he would overreact," said Vince. "What do you want to do?"

"I don't have a clue. Do we treat her like an old friend? Do we ignore her? I don't know."

"How do you feel about her?"

"She's a friend, I guess, but I'm married and I love my wife."

"What does she want?"

I slowed and then stopped and sat on a bench someone had placed along the sidewalk. A few leaves drifted to the ground around me as the wind blew. Simon sat on my foot and grinned at me again, and I petted the back of his head. His blatant attempt to get my attention used to annoy me, but now I find it to be one of his more endearing quirks.

"She said she wanted to talk to me about Dominique.

Beyond that, I don't know."

"As glad as I am to hear she's okay and as much as I'd like to see her, she needs to go. Talk to her and send her on her way."

I trusted Tess, and maybe a part of me even still loved her as a friend. But that cold look in her eyes, the one hidden behind her smile, unsettled me.

"I will, but I'd like you to look her up first, maybe find out where she's been."

"I don't know if I'm the best person for that. Aren't you tight with Gabe Fontaine from the second-district police station?"

I grunted. "Gabe's too smart. I don't want him putting too many pieces together."

"Fair point," said Vince. "What can you give me on her?"

"Not much," I said. "She said she's staying in the Ritz-Carlton under the name Holly Olson. That name ring any bells for you?"

"No."

"Me, neither, but it's what I've got. Run the name and see if she has a criminal record or list of aliases. I'll take it from there. I don't want her showing up at my house. It would scare Ashley, and I don't even know how Katherine would react."

Vince knew enough about my sister and her daughter to understand the situation. "How is Ashley?"

"She misses her mom and she has nightmares, but they're getting better. Simon's been sleeping beside her bed. He makes her feel safe."

Vince exhaled loudly. "Okay. I'll look up Holly Olson and see what there is to see."

Despite the chilly temperature, I was starting to sweat and I could feel my shirt sticking to my lower back. I fanned my corduroy jacket.

"Thank you. I'll owe you one."

"I'm sure this will blow over, but yes, you will owe me

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one. I'll take Cardinals tickets as payment. You plan to renew your season tickets next year, don't you?"

"You can have a couple of night games next season, but I'm keeping the afternoon ones."

"That sounds fair to me," said Vince.

I thanked him again before hanging up and walking the remaining three blocks to my dad's old office. At one time, Hale and Hale had been one of the more successful divorce practices in the county, which made sense with my father at the helm. Old Man Hale had a gift for divorce. He had likely caused half a dozen with his promiscuity, and he wasn't too bad at representing wealthy divorcees in court, either. Now that my dad was dead and I owned the building, I used the second floor as a writing studio and rented out the first floor to an ice cream parlor.

I unlocked the ground-level front door and took the stairs to my office, where I threw my keys and wallet on an oak desk on the left side of the room and then grabbed a rawhide for Simon from a box in the supply closet. After that, I turned on my laptop and started a pot of coffee. I didn't want to think about Tess or the mistakes of my past, so I did what I always try to do when I need to get my mind off something: I went to work.

As I had hoped, the events of the past few days disappeared as I set my mind to my newest novel. Unfortunately, reality pulled me back just as quickly, as my cell phone rang twenty minutes after I started writing. I pulled it out without looking at the caller ID.

"Vince?"

"No. It's me."

Tess. For some reason, my brain told me to slam the phone down and leave town, pretend nothing happened. Even without conscious direction, my mind began running through the scenarios, plotting ways this conversation could go wrong. I cleared my throat, glanced at my watch, and then switched the phone from one hand to the other.

"I'm sorry about our meeting earlier," I said. "I was a

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little out of sorts. It's just been so long since we've talked. A lot has happened. Dad died a couple of years back, and then Ashley moved in with us a few months ago. I'm married now, too . . ." I stopped talking, realizing that I was rambling.

"You have nothing to apologize for," said Tess. "But since you brought it up, do you have time for a date with an old friend? I'd love to catch up."

I nodded to myself, knowing that I owed her a meeting, even if it wasn't going to be a pleasant conversation.

"I'd like that, too," I said, hoping she wouldn't catch the lie.

She read off an address, which I wrote down on a scratch pad beside my phone.

"I'm not familiar with that street," I said. "Where is it?"

"It's a coffee shop in Arnold. People won't recognize us there."

"You don't think it'd be too risky to meet in public?" I asked.

"It is a risk, but I think it's worth it. You've got the address. I'll see you in half an hour. We have so much to talk about."