

NINE MAN'S MURDER

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ERIC KEITH

Ransom
Note Press

Ridgewood, NJ

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❧ I dedicate this book to my wife Marcia,
without whom I would not be possible.

THE PLAYERS

CARTER ANDERSON

Employee in his brother Damien's detective agency. Has lived his life in his brother's shadow. But he is about to step out.

REEVE ARGYLE

Son of poor Italian-American parents, he is a bodyguard hunted by a crime lord for a betrayal he did not commit. But is he the hunted or the hunter?

HATTER CATES

Best-selling author of violent supernatural thrillers and spokesman for the occult. Hatter believes the dead return to avenge their deaths. The question is: Do they have help?

JILL CONSTABLE

A home health-care nurse. Romantically involved with Bryan West fifteen years ago. The secret she shares with Amanda Farrell is one she is willing to die for. But is it one she is willing to kill for?

JONAS CRUZ

Formerly a business partner of Bryan West. Son of migrant farm workers. Has a secret to hide. To keep it buried, will others have to be buried with it?

AMANDA FARRELL

Prosecutor for the district attorney, building a case against the employer of her former lover, Reeve Argyle. To what lengths will she go to get a conviction? And to what lengths will she go to cover it up?

GIDEON LANE

A wheelchair-bound priest defrocked after a "misunderstanding," Gideon is searching for the culprit responsible for his condition. Do his religious beliefs include "an eye for an eye"?

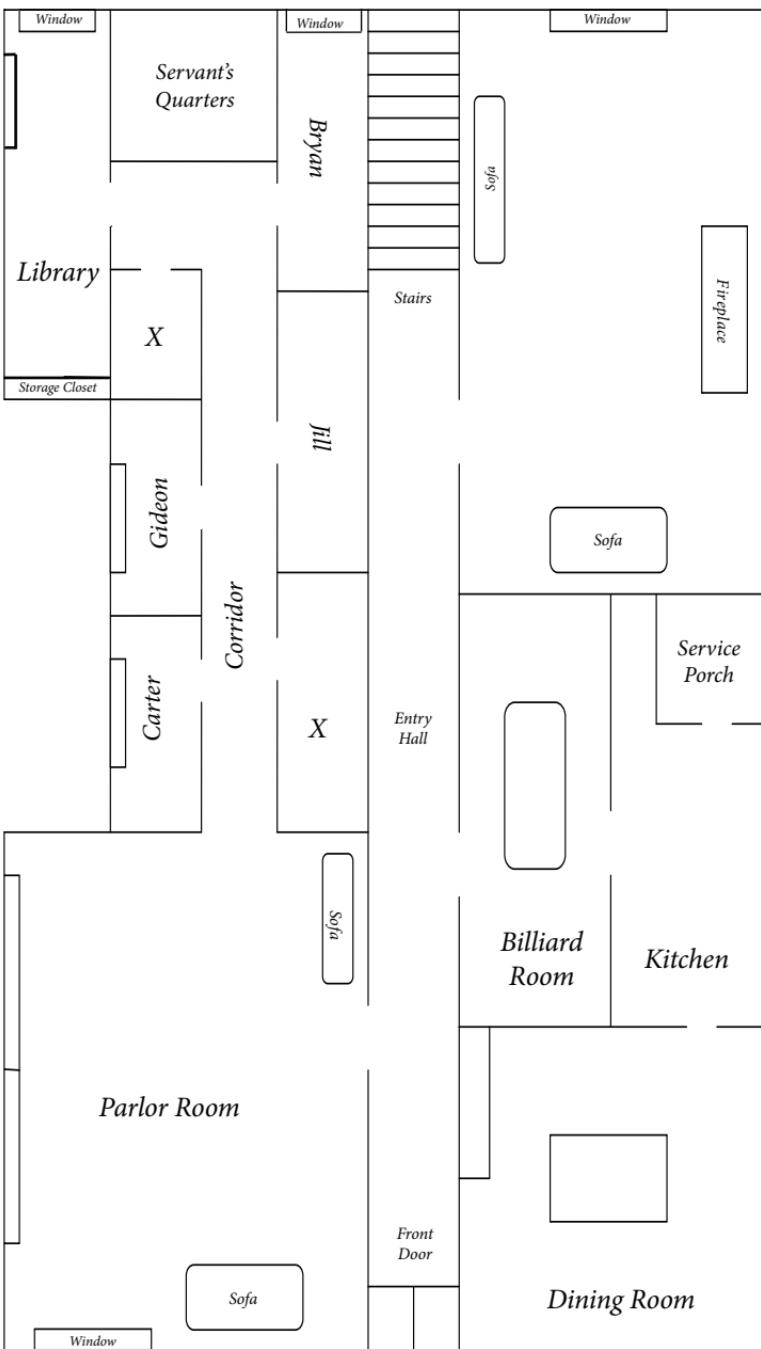
BENNETT NASH

A freelance smuggler on the run from the law. How far will he go to stay one step ahead?

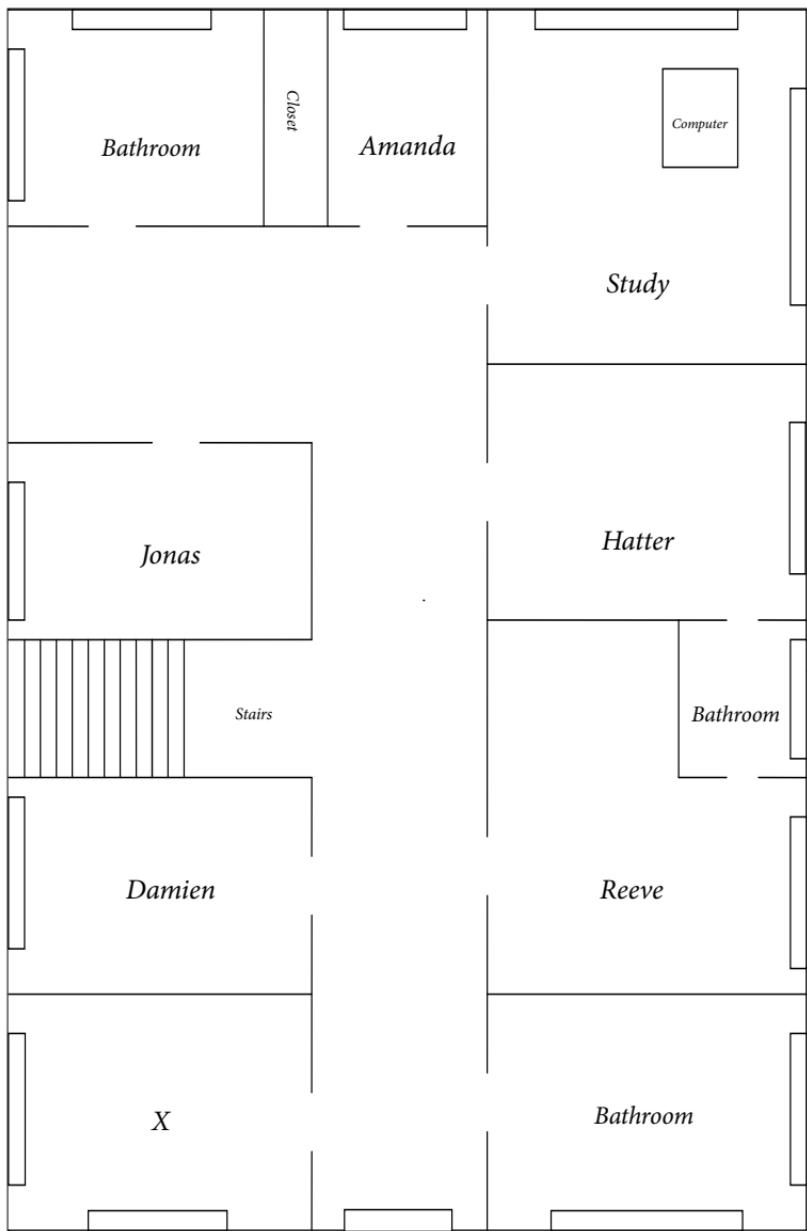
BRYAN WEST

Owner of a detective agency. Former business partner of Jonas Cruz. Romantically involved with Jill Constable fifteen years ago. On a crusade to avenge a family tragedy, and willing to bend the rules. But how far?

Moon's End



FLOOR PLANS



⇓
FIRST FLOOR

↑
SECOND FLOOR

X:
UNOCCUPIED

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THE VAN, FADED and rust-flecked, pulled up to the reunion party and stopped. Two men emerged. The driver, a fairly tall man with bland, clean-shaven features and a thin layer of short black hair, wore cowboy boots, a brown-checked shirt, and blue jeans. His companion was a much older man whose dull eyes were unlit by any sense of purpose. The driver spoke in a hoarse and raspy voice.

“You must be the reunion party.” His smile seemed as out of place as the guests felt in the deserted parking lot of the abandoned train station. “I’m Bill. And this is Max. Damien Anderson sent us to bring you all to Moon’s End.”

Something about Bill—not the muffled croak of his voice nor the way he scanned the parking lot with those intense blue eyes, as if

looking for someone—seemed peculiar to Bryan. Something hard to pinpoint, yet vaguely familiar ...

Bryan noticed Jill giving the truck driver a similar searching look.

"Have we met before?" she finally asked Bill.

Bill fidgeted. "I doubt it, lady," he said in his hoarse voice, withdrawing a cigarette from a packet and fumbling in his pockets. "Anyone got a light?"

Bryan struck a match for him as a dilapidated sedan pulled into the lot. From it emerged a man toting a suitcase and wearing the same type of gray ankle-length raincoat and rain hat worn by Hatter. Though roughly the same height and weight as Bill, the newcomer's similarity to him ended there. Inert brown eyes and an aquiline nose were set in a pale face beneath bushy eyebrows; a brown moustache with full brown beard garnished a face framed by long sideburns.

"This is Aaron," Bill explained, "caretaker at Moon's End." Aaron, maintaining a jittery silence, removed his hat and unbuttoned his raincoat, revealing wavy brown hair, brown boots, and an unzipped tan-colored down jacket covering the powder-blue work shirt and white overalls of a workman. "Don't expect him to say much," Bill added. "He's mute, can't utter a sound. He can hear and understand anything you say, but he's not the most brilliant conversationalist."

Bill took a head count. "Looks like we're all here. We really should try to beat the rain—"

But it was too late, for they all felt cold drops of Morse code tap a warning on their heads. Heavy rain shaken from clouds like leaves in fall drove the reunion party into the temporary shelter of the abandoned station.

"This will mean more snow at Moon's End," Bill predicted darkly.

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THE RIDE TO Moon's End was as dangerous as it was beautiful. The mountaintop slept beneath a blanket of fresh snow, trimmed with the silver lace of a treacherous winding road wet from the thickly dripping trees, for the snow here had given way to a long and heavy rain, scouring all but the sharp, pleasant scent of pine from the crisp and chilly air.

At length the road was rent by a cleft in the mountain stitched with one slender thread: a rickety wooden bridge spanning a deep ravine. The van jostled the waterlogged bridge as it crept across the chasm. More than one prayer was sent skyward as the passengers crossed, more than one sigh of relief heard upon their reaching the other side.

That side was a sparsely covered plateau, shrouded in snow, where the peak formed an isolated summit not more than one-half mile in any direction, linked to civilization solely by the bridge they had just

crossed. Up here you could scream forever and no one would hear you.

The only flaws in the unbroken monotony of the freshly fallen snow were small stands of narrow-trunked rain-drenched trees and, at the center of the plateau where the road ended, a two-story inn: the legendary Moon's End. This was the first time any of them, except Carter, had seen Damien's prize acquisition. The nearest neighbor was at the base of the mountain across the bridge and down twenty-six miles of winding road.

The guests swarmed the inn, drawn by its mystique: the old-world grandeur of the balcony's walnut balustrade, the exotic window shutters and intricately carved exterior trim. Built long ago to lodge anticipated hordes of visitors, its inaccessibility had been its death sentence. Damien, in search of a winter retreat, had bought it a timely reprieve.

Something about the scene troubled Jonas. Unless Damien had arrived by taxi, his car should have been visible. But the building that served as a garage, a freestanding structure several yards from the inn with its door gaping, was empty; and because the road ended at Moon's End, Jonas doubted a vehicle would be discovered behind the inn or garage.

Eager to escape the cold, the former classmates lugged their suitcases through the unlocked front double door of the inn. Inside they found the same attention to detail they'd seen on the exterior: ornate carvings on the banister of the staircase descending toward them, a western-style hanging lamp suspended above the table in the parlor room on their left. But no trace of Damien.

The guests removed their coats, grateful to be inside, where their words were not etched on the frosty air in plumes of condensing steam.

It was Hatter who made the first significant discovery: a typed sheet of paper on the parlor room table, assigning rooms. And a set of labeled room keys.

Strange, Jonas thought. Room assignments? Why wasn't Damien here to escort them to their rooms in person?

Gideon observed that the antique style of the lodge had not pre-

vented Damien from adding well-concealed electric wall heaters to Moon's End.

"The wood furnace in the basement stopped working," Carter explained. "Damien chose an updated heating system that wouldn't clash with the decor."

At length, the novelty of their surroundings could no longer distract them from the one unsettling issue.

"So where's Damien?"

"Outside?"

"There's nothing out there but snow and trees."

"Maybe he went home," Reeve suggested. "Perhaps this is all just a big joke."

Carter shook his head emphatically. "No. Damien always comes here for two weeks. The second week's not over yet."

Bill addressed Carter in his hoarse, guttural voice. "Your brother wanted me to tell you that if he wasn't here by supper, you should eat without him. There's plenty of food in the kitchen."

Enough for several days, in fact, the kitchen cabinets and refrigerator revealed.

"You're in Aaron's hands from here on," Bill concluded. "I'll be back to pick you up on Sunday. Say about noon."

With that, Bill returned with Max to the van and drove cautiously over the wooden bridge, which shuddered fearfully under the vehicle's weight. The van seemed to slow almost to a stop as it disappeared around a bend.

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“So now what?” Reeve asked in the parlor room, casting fitful glances at the brown wallpaper depicting the deserted wooden buildings of a Wild West ghost town.

“I knew there was something fishy about that invitation,” Hatter muttered. “Getting it at the last minute like that. Mine came just a day or two ago.”

“Mine too,” Jill said.

A general assent. They had all received invitations within the last two or three days.

“And isn’t it more than a bit odd to be told *not* to RSVP?” Amanda asked.

“Damien must have sent the invitations from Owen’s Reef, just before—or after—coming to Moon’s End,” Carter suggested. “No RSVP, because he wouldn’t have answered the phone, anyway.”

"I thought your brother came here to get *away* from everyone," Gideon objected.

"Well, there's nothing we can do about it now," Reeve said. "I'm going to my room." He consulted the room assignment chart. "Upstairs. Just past the staircase. Next to yours, Hatter."

Reeve chose a labeled room key from the table and studied it.

"Security keys," he observed. "Keys that can't be duplicated."

"The inn came with security locks," Carter explained. "The owners didn't want anyone duplicating the guests' room keys. Damien broke the master key in one of the locks and never bothered replacing it—not intending to entertain guests."

Suitcase in hand, Reeve lumbered toward the stairs. At the foot of the staircase, in the shadow of the bottom step, something on the floor arrested his progress.

"What is it?" Carter asked.

Reeve picked up the item and examined it. "A cigarette lighter."

"Damien must have dropped it," Jill suggested. "Guess he never gave up smoking."

"Yes he did," Carter replied, taking the lighter and studying it. "Years ago."

With a shrug, he turned to Aaron, who was casting restless glances at his wristwatch.

"Why don't you hold this until Damien arrives?" Carter placed the lighter in Aaron's outstretched left hand. Aaron dropped the cigarette lighter into the left front pocket of his white overalls.

After checking the room assignment chart, Amanda and Hatter followed Reeve toward the staircase. Gideon, glancing at the chart, guided his wheelchair toward the corridor leading off the parlor room to the downstairs bedrooms.

"I'd better go have a look around," Carter said. "Make sure everything's in order. With Damien gone, I guess that puts me charge."

Aaron peered one last time at the ornate timepiece on his right arm. A Rolex watch, Jonas noticed, inconsistent with Aaron's blue-collar garb. Furtively donning his jacket, Aaron stole a parting glance at the remaining guests—Bryan, Jill, and Jonas—before making a stealthy

departure out the front door of the inn. Jonas wondered briefly what business could be taking Aaron outside.

"Well, I guess I'll leave you two alone," Jonas said awkwardly, grabbing his room key and valise before departing.

Bryan shifted his weight uncomfortably once he and Jill were alone. "Look, Jill, I—"

Jill looked away and shivered. "It's cold in here."

"What do you want from me? What do you want me to do?"

"I want back what you took from me."

"Every time I try to fix something, it just breaks something else."

Jill looked down. "I'm sorry about your sister. I really am."

Bryan fumbled with the leather cord around his neck. "I got down on my knees and begged Prissy's forgiveness. She had no idea what I was talking about, of course."

Jill said nothing.

"Does the wrong choice really make you a bad person?" Bryan continued. "At least I tried. I've kept my distance from you all these years."

"You kept your distance even when we were together."

When Jill left with her luggage and room key, Bryan consulted the room assignment chart. He noted his assigned room. Downstairs. Next to Jill's.

How was he going to survive the weekend?

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IT WAS VERY odd about Damien. Where had he gone? Carter was not the only one who so wondered, as he discovered when Jonas joined him in the kitchen.

"Carter, level with me," Jonas said. "Do you have any idea where Damien is?"

"You know Damien." Would Jonas accept that as an answer? Why was he concerned? After all, Damien could simply have driven down to Owen's Reef for supplies. But all the supplies they'd need were already here. Of course, Jonas didn't know that. Perhaps he was thinking about that cigarette lighter Reeve had found. Perhaps he realized what it meant: that they had not been the only visitors here.

Why did Damien have to make everything so difficult? Even when they were young. Carter had always assumed his destiny lay in accounting, as had Dad's. Until a series of poor decisions drove Dad's firm into the ground. Dad fell apart, relying on Mom's support. But while Carter felt abandoned and orphaned, Damien simply stepped into Dad's shoes. Damien had, after all, taken after their mother; it was Carter who seemed to have inherited so many of Dad's traits.

Then Damien established the detective agency, adopting Carter, taking him under his wing. Blazing the trail for Carter: like brother, like ... No, that's not right.

None of them knew about Rodriguez. None would understand, if they did. To what does a man owe his loyalty? Family? His profession? Upholding justice, as Carter had sworn to do? Which one has the strongest claim?

The only answer to reach Carter's ears was a faint click, like the closing of the inn's front door. Peering from the kitchen through the

billiard room, Carter caught a glimpse of Aaron making his way down the entry hall toward the stairs. The caretaker had come in from outside. His tan down jacket and white overalls appeared ruffled. What could he have been doing out there?

Carter heard the sound of Aaron's footfalls echoing up the staircase.

REEVE WAS OPENING the door to his room when Amanda appeared at the top of the stairs. She stopped before him.

"Reeve, we need to talk."

Reeve did not look at her. "Isn't it a little late for that? Six years too late?"

"Look, I get why you're mad at me. I do. And I don't blame you. What I did was wrong."

"Which part? The affair, or just walking out without a word?"

"Maybe both. It was complicated. If I could just explain—"

"What's to explain? I'm a bodyguard for a thug, and you're a high-class attorney—"

"I work for the city. That's hardly high class."

"You were raised in Beverly Hills. I was raised in a slum. Guys like me don't end up with broads like you."

"It had nothing to do with that, and you know it."

"Really? Then what did it have to do with?"

Amanda had never been good at masking exasperation. "Reeve, please don't make this harder than it has to be."

"For who, Amanda? Me or you?"

Before Amanda could make things worse by replying, Reeve disappeared into his room. Once inside, he took the gun from his suitcase. The gun his father had given him. Good old Dad, hammering his faded green punching bag—one, two, one two—especially, Mom said, on days Reeve was not around.

Detective work was exactly the chance Reeve had needed to escape from Dad's world. It had been easy to prove himself smart enough to enter a detective school. He'd had friends who could forge a high

school diploma with no difficulty at all. Now he was a bodyguard for a powerful public figure, making better money than any of them.

Downstairs he had noticed a billiard table. Just what he needed to relax. He tossed the gun back into his suitcase, closed the lid, and opened the bedroom door.

Aaron appeared at the head of the staircase, out of breath. Now there was a bizarre one for you. Always avoiding your eyes, turning away nervously whenever you looked at him. For once, though, Aaron looked Reeve straight in the eye, unflinching. That was a first, this surprising newfound boldness.

Reeve descended the stairs and entered the billiard room. He was good at billiards. He considered himself good at many games.

BRYAN LAID THE bed-pillow over the gun. Strange to think of a gun as a symbol of innocence. Yet he still recalled the excitement of purchasing his first handgun. A .357 Magnum, like the one buried under his pillow now. Innocence buried by time.

An eight-year-old boy might have felt rivalry toward his four-year-old sister, but not Bryan. He had always felt protective of Prissy. Which was why Mom, a psychiatric social worker, had felt comfortable leaving Prissy alone with Bryan when the emergency call came in that morning. Dad was at work with no time to make other arrangements, and it would only be for an hour.

It was in every newspaper in Los Angeles. The four-year-old daughter of Nathaniel West, district attorney of Los Angeles running for mayor, kidnapped two months before the election. Though half the LAPD was assigned to the case, Mom also hired a private investigator. Paul Templar.

Four days later Prissy was found. At first she seemed unharmed. But there must have been a struggle, for her head had struck something, damaging the prefrontal cortex. She was never the same after that. And it had all been Bryan's fault. She had been his responsibility.

But that was only the beginning. Under a counter in the abandoned

tobacco shop where Prissy had been held hostage, police found Prissy's inhaler. Not only had the kidnappers known about Prissy's asthma, but they had also provided her medication. The police found this circumstance suggestive. They obtained a warrant to search the West family home. Bryan watched as they removed from a shoebox in Mom's closet a slice of the rope used to bind Prissy in the tobacco shop.

Every newspaper in the country carried the story. How Mom had staged the kidnapping of her own daughter two months before the election, to evoke sympathy for her husband. But with the scheme exposed, Bud Meynor, Dad's opponent, easily won.

Mom was acquitted; but Dad, never quite sure what to believe, could not bring himself to stay with her. The day he left was the last time Bryan ever saw him. Blaming Paul Templar for the loss of her husband and her daughter's cognitive impairment, Mom visited the detective with Dad's gun and came within an inch of blowing off his head. She died in prison two years later.

Dad, driven by guilt and shame deeper into the bottle, had miraculously remained sober enough to learn of his wife's fate. He followed her eighteen months later, with a drinking binge that culminated in a fatal car crash.

Four years after that, halfway through his seventeenth year, Bryan visited Paul Templar, for the sake of closure. Until Templar mentioned "the rope the police found in the shoebox in your mother's closet."

The media had indeed reported on the rope found in Mom's closet. But they had never mentioned the shoebox. The police had never released that detail. The only reason Bryan knew about it was that he had seen the police find it. And he had told no one.

So how did Paul Templar know about it?

That was when Bryan learned the truth. Bud Meynor's corrupt campaign manager, Marcus Bride, had orchestrated the kidnapping. And after Mom hired Paul Templar to find Prissy, Bride got to the private detective, offering him a huge payoff to obtain Prissy's inhaler and plant the rope in Mom's closet.

Unfortunately, Bryan could prove nothing. But if he could never see

Templar crushed under the wheels of Justice, there was still one thing Bryan could do.

He would become a private investigator. He would build up a clientele like Napoleon forging an empire, little by little, chipping away at the foundation of Templar's livelihood, until he drained the lifeblood from his rival's career. He would use any means at his disposal to crush his enemy.

Bryan smoothed the pillow covering his gun.

Any means at all.

XXX 18

JONAS HID THE silver revolver in the dresser drawer. Strange: In his younger days he had never liked guns; his greatest weapon had always been his wits. He had never even held a firearm before becoming partners with Bryan.

For it was not violence, but childhood stories, that had first lured Jonas to the field of private investigation. Knights in armor, to begin with, then hardboiled detectives living exciting lives—but more important, living by their wits. Much more appealing than languishing on a farm, a skinny (thinner than brother Pedro), weak (weaker even than Raul) laborer, *as impressed with rhinestones as with real diamonds*, Papa had always charged.

Jonas felt the need for fresh air. Down the stairs, through the entry hall, past the sound of someone playing billiards.

The air outside was crisp as chilled lettuce. Jonas was not alone. The final flakes of a recent snowfall were frosting Bryan's hair.

Despite the breakup of their partnership, Jonas bore Bryan no ill will. Even during their stormiest phase, he had never told Bryan what he had done eight years ago.

"Prissy would love it up here," Bryan said without turning to face Jonas. "I saw her yesterday. Twice a week, like clockwork. She can never forgive me. She doesn't even know I did anything wrong."

"Did you ever consider the possibility that she might be right?"

Bryan turned around, his expression blank as the snow. "I vowed I'd avenge my family. Paul Templar and I cannot both stay in business. It's him or me." Bryan's body seemed to wilt. "Yet the more I try to untangle everything, the more tangled things become."

Jonas decided to risk an argument. "Which is exactly what will happen if you go through with your plan."

"Damien violated his oath to uphold justice when he started cooperating with Antonio Capaldi."

"And if you turn him in, you're condemning his brother, too. Carter works for him, and could very well go down with Damien as an accomplice. Even though he knows nothing about Damien's connection to Capaldi."

"Look, we've been through this all before. There's no point in re-fighting old battles."

"You know I have to tell Carter about his brother. I have to warn him about what you plan to do. It's only fair."

Bryan shrugged but said nothing. Bryan was right. There was no point in discussing it. Jonas breathed in the bracing air, savoring the dismal beauty. The sky was dark and overcast; the sun had not shown itself all day.

"Lovely out here," Jonas observed.

"Actually," Bryan said, "I was thinking about how isolated it is. In a way, we are not so much Damien's guests, as his prisoners."



*T*HAT WENT WELL, Amanda thought dryly.

She understood Reeve's anger. He would be angrier yet if he knew the full story. It wasn't easy working for District Attorney Peyton. How he demanded that all your energies be channeled to your job. Particularly if you were a woman. And if you were a woman hampered by the "distractions" of a husband or family, you could kiss goodbye any chance of grasping the ladder's top rung. Her only chance of achieving her ambitions was to provide herself with her own break, by cracking a high-profile case. Hence her investigation of Antonio Capaldi.

For nearly eight years she had been accumulating evidence against the mob chieftain with the patience of a bird storing seeds for the winter, one grain at a time, sacrificing countless off-duty hours to the career-making crusade. And when, two years into the investigation, she discovered that Reeve Argyle—her former detective-school classmate—was Capaldi's most trusted bodyguard, she crossed a line that had separated enthusiasm from ethics.

Getting close to Reeve had not been simply a backstage pass to Capaldi's secrets. It had been a tool, to be sure, but a tool wielded by a vulnerable hand to repair a splintered heart. Jonas had never been aware of her feelings for him, blinded by eyes that could see only Jill. There had been as much consolation as cunning in Amanda's seduction of Reeve.

Reeve had seemed to have genuine feelings for her. If he had realized the type of information he was letting slip, or what Amanda would do with it over the next six years, what would he have done? What would he do now? A wounded animal will behave unpredictably, and some arrows can pierce two targets at once, ego and heart. A double wound like that would be fatal to any hope she might have of enlisting Reeve's aid now.

She emerged from her room to find Aaron standing in front of Reeve's room, poised, as if having just come from it. What would he be doing in there? Even if Aaron's presence would not make a visit to

Reeve's room awkward, the timing was probably not the best. There would be time enough, after things settled down, to confront Reeve. Plenty of time.



THINGS WERE WORKING out just as he had known they would. Hatter was not disappointed with his decision to come to Moon's End. He had known that something was going to happen, and the mysterious absence of Damien was a good start.

Hatter lifted his eyes to find Bryan and Jonas entering the parlor room. They must have come from outside, for he had heard the front door close.

"Keeping busy?" Jonas asked.

"Working on my new novel," Hatter replied.

"Are you the writer," Bryan asked, "or the ghost writer?"

Ghosts. Supernatural. Ha ha.

"I don't understand," Jonas said. "If you're so interested in the supernatural, why did you train as a detective?"

"I didn't always know what I wanted to do," Hatter replied.

Yet the seeds of his destiny had been planted in his youth, in the form of strange notions about the otherworldly and supernatural, the residue of bizarre science fiction stories by Hatter and his outcast teenage friends. These concepts earned their creators an unprecedented, if derisive, recognition by those schoolmates who had formerly paid them no heed whatever. But negative attention was better than none at all. Gradually time hardened controversial notions into a set of beliefs.

By the time Hatter graduated from Damien Anderson's detective training program, he had become so deeply rooted in the complex network of unorthodox beliefs he had helped to popularize, that to disentangle himself became decreasingly feasible. Their growth set the course of his life. Destiny deflected his path from private investigation toward a new goal: to champion, in fiction and on the lecture circuit, the cause of which he had suddenly found himself spokesman.

Hatter's entire adult career had been devoted to legitimizing all

forms of superstition, but over the years his true passion gravitated toward the existence of deceased spirits lingering in the material plane to resolve unresolved issues.

"I read about that psychic fair in L.A. two weeks ago," Jonas was saying. "You were one of the speakers."

"Yes," Hatter replied cautiously. "I spoke about the influence of earthbound spirits on material existence. You're well informed."

"It's my job to know things. The article dwelt at some length on the tragedy that transpired outside the convention center. Apparently police were chasing an escaped criminal in front of the convention center. They believed he was drawing a weapon. A hot-headed young officer fired on him, accidentally killing an innocent bystander in the crowd. The suspect got away."

Hatter shivered. He had heard about the shooting. He knew that the victim's spirit would not leave the earthly realm. It would haunt the material plane, seeking vengeance against all it held responsible for its death. But Hatter had been inside when the victim was shot. The spirit would probably go after the police officer who had fired the shot, perhaps the escaped criminal, and anyone else it felt had brought together the elements of its fate. Hatter had been only one of many speakers, although admittedly the keynote speaker. But surely he would not be singled out as the one who had drawn the victim to his destiny.

If he were, even the distance of hundreds of miles would not protect him from the ghostly hand of vengeance. But there was nothing to connect Hatter to a victim whose name he did not even know. He was safe.

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HATTER HAD SEEMED eager to leave the parlor room. Not long afterwards, Bryan and Jonas noticed Aaron furtively stalking the downstairs corridor, retreating from the cluster of bedroom doors and entering the parlor room. Though previously his custom to avert his eyes, this time he glanced briefly into theirs as he passed, challenging them with the riddle of an enigmatic smile; and, right hand opening the front door of the inn, he stepped outside, the second time he had done so since their arrival. Bryan and Jonas exchanged quizzical glances.

"I think I'll go to my room," Bryan said, stifling a yawn. "And rest."

But as Bryan disappeared into the downstairs corridor, Jonas, barely registering the clinking of billiard balls as he stood near the entry hall, was unconvinced. He could tell from his ex-partner's restlessness

that though Bryan was heading in the direction of his bedroom, he was not going there to sleep.

JILL LAY ON the bed face down, to stop the room from spinning. She had come here to sort out her feelings. Just looking at Bryan rekindled the heat, but was it the heat she had felt fifteen years ago, or the kind that consumes all affection?

With Bryan she had felt safe, protected. Even now she could still feel the beat of a heart swollen by desperate love, like waters swelling behind a dam, deep and enduring. If you love someone, you can never stop. But what if you can't forgive someone you can't stop loving?

What was she doing, wiping her tears on the pillowcase? If she had to go through with this, she would do so with dignity. With the aid of her compact mirror, she applied makeup below eyes that were sometimes warm lavender, sometimes cold cobalt, but always intense. She dragged a comb through her blonde hair, parted in the middle, recalling against her will Bryan's hand ruffling through it, with the encouraging praise of "Good girl."

On the end table beside the bed sat her bottle of clonazepam. She swallowed a pill, to calm her nerves. Slowly she unpacked. The walk-in clothes closet, thankfully, was spacious.

After Bryan, her love had drifted lost through the dark forest of her heart. Of course there had been no choice but to break up with him. His intentions may have been noble, but even the best intentions sometimes sprout toxic leaves. Perhaps she would tell Bryan about Jonas, to wound Bryan as he had wounded her. But once you set foot on the road to vengeance, she knew, there's no turning back. Was she really prepared to make that journey?

One thing she knew for sure. She wanted Imogen back. She wanted her daughter back.

WHEN GIDEON INVITED the knocker to enter the room, Bryan crept inside like a man entering a confession box. Clean-shaven boyish face, brown hair in bangs like a medieval monk's. His soft-spoken voice lacked its usual ironic edge.

"Gideon," Bryan began as he sat in the chair before the writing desk, "you're a priest . . ." Gideon didn't correct him. "How does one find redemption?"

"Well, Bryan," Gideon said, "first you have to sin."

Gideon knew what Bryan was referring to. Fifteen years ago, training at Anderson's, Bryan had shared his motives for becoming a detective: the kidnapping of his kid sister, the deaths of his parents.

"Sometimes redemption is seeing that you're not guilty," Gideon continued. "I think what you've been chasing all these years may not be redemption, but forgiveness."

"You're saying I should forgive myself?"

"No," Gideon said. "You should know there's nothing to forgive yourself for."

AMANDA STEPPED OUT of the shower and dried herself off. She slipped on a new dress and reached for her—

Where was her room key? She had placed it on the dresser. At least, she thought she had. She searched the room. Where could she have put it? Could someone—

She checked her bedroom door. Still locked. The window lock was pressed in, as well.

She must have set the key down somewhere without thinking. This reunion had her so preoccupied. How could she have—

The thought was lost to the shrill pierce of a chilling scream.

XXX 20

BRYAN WAS OUT of his room and down the corridor before Jonas could leave the parlor room.

“What was that?”

“I don’t know. It came from outside.”

Without further talk, the two men left the parlor room to investigate. In the entry hall they encountered Reeve emerging from the billiard room, followed by Carter.

Outside the front door, not even a ghost stirred in the barren plateau of snow and trees. A fresh snow had covered all but one set of footprints. Jonas tracked them, followed by his companions, around Moon’s End to the door of a stand-alone wooden shed several yards from the side of the inn. The men entered.

They took quick inventory of the shed’s contents. Propped against the wall to their left was a shovel; on the opposite wall hung an exten-

sion ladder. Crates and tools cluttered the shed. Behind a workbench stood Aaron, dissecting a wooden board with a saw in his right hand.

"Did you hear anything?" Jonas asked. Aaron shook his head. The mute caretaker's loud sawing had apparently muted the sound of the scream, as well. "Has anyone come in here? Did you see anyone?" Again Aaron shook his head.

A fruitless encounter. Departing the shed, the investigators circled the inn in vain pursuit of the source of the mysterious cry, completing the circuit with the discovery of Amanda, Hatter, and Jill standing in front of the inn, with Gideon just emerging behind them.

"Did you find anyone?" Amanda asked.

Jonas shook his head. No one.

"There's no place to go," Gideon observed. "There's nothing out here but trees, with trunks too narrow to hide behind."

"As if whoever—or whatever—was responsible just vanished into thin air," Hatter pointed out darkly.

IT WAS THE booming voice of Reeve Argyle, echoing down the staircase, that drew everyone from their rooms like an early dinner gong.

"Where is it?" Reeve shouted.

"Where is what?" Carter asked, stepping into the corridor.

"My gun," Reeve bellowed. "Somebody took it from my suitcase."

In the startled hush, Bryan and Jonas raced to their rooms, spurred by the same misgiving. Jonas was the first to return.

"Mine is missing, too."

Bryan's eyes, as he reappeared, told the same tale.

"Did anyone else bring a gun?" Carter inquired.

No one had. Or at least no one admitted to it.

"Someone took those guns," Gideon said, glancing at the faces around him. "The question is, who?"

"No," Jonas countered. "The question is ... why?"

XXX 21

JONAS SUMMED UP their plight with passionless efficiency. "A call for help that draws us all outside ... then, suddenly, our guns disappear. It can't be a coincidence."

"Someone lured us outside deliberately," Carter suggested, "so that he, or she, could steal our weapons while the inn was empty."

Reeve nodded. "The last time I saw my gun was before I left my room and went downstairs to the billiard room. That was a good forty minutes before we heard the scream."

"And I was handling my own gun at roughly the same time," Jonas corroborated. "Which confirms that the weapons were stolen sometime after that."

In the awkward silence that followed, the front door creaked open. Aaron entered the parlor room and seated himself in an empty chair.

"So when did the thief enter Moon's End and take the guns?" Bryan asked.

Jonas thought for a moment. "I was in the parlor room when the scream came, so I would have seen anyone who came through the front door. You have to pass the parlor room when you cross the entry hall. You joined me shortly thereafter, Bryan. We encountered Reeve in the empty hallway coming out of the billiard room."

"I came from the kitchen, through the billiard room, before you were out the door," Carter reminded them.

"There's a door in the kitchen that leads outside," Jonas observed.

"Yes, there is," Carter replied. "But forget it, if you're thinking I made that racket outside and then ducked back in through the kitchen door. To get to the bedrooms—and the guns—from there, I'd have to have gone through the billiard room. But Reeve was in the billiard room and would have seen me. Which means I would have had to wait for Reeve to leave the room. That wouldn't have left me enough time to grab the guns, upstairs and down, and join you three in the entry hall before you were out the door. Besides, you would have seen me leave the billiard room."

"Maybe the thief didn't enter the inn through the front door," Amanda suggested, "but through the kitchen door."

"Impossible," Carter said. "That door was locked."

So the thief had entered through the front door; and, as no one had come through that door between the scream and the time the four men left the inn, the intruder had to have entered sometime after that.

"But before I got outside," Jill added. "I was the first one out after you four left. No one could have gotten past me through the front door without me seeing them."

"So whoever got inside," Carter said, "did so between the time we left and the time Jill arrived."

"If someone had gone up—or down—the stairs once I came out of the parlor room," Gideon reasoned, "I would have seen him. Which means he had already been upstairs and come down by the time I entered the entry hall."

"Unless," Jonas argued, "he robbed the downstairs first, went upstairs before you got out, and never came back down."

"You mean he left the inn from upstairs?" Reeve asked.

"Through a window," Hatter suggested.

"That should be easy enough to verify." Bryan and Jonas slipped outside and returned a moment later.

"Four of us circled the inn after the scream," Jonas explained, "but we never got near the inn itself. And there are no footprints now beneath any of the windows—first or second floor. So the thief couldn't have left through a window."

"Which also means that he did not *enter* Moon's End from any of the windows," Bryan added. "He did indeed enter through the front door."

So the intruder had not robbed the downstairs first, then gone upstairs and left the inn through a window. That meant he had robbed the upstairs first, then downstairs—but would not have had time to beat Jill to the front door. And after that, he couldn't have left through the front door without being seen by Jill. Nor had he departed through a window. Which left only one possibility.

"The door to the kitchen," Bryan said. "I noticed some footprints outside by it—"

"They were ours," Jonas countered. "I tried opening that door, but it was locked, like you said, Carter."

"Damien keeps it locked and bolted," Carter explained. "I never unlocked it."

A quick check confirmed Carter's claim. Bryan found the bolt drawn across the inside of the kitchen door.

"But," Bryan asked, "if the intruder departed through the kitchen door after Carter left the kitchen, how did he rebolt it *from the outside?*"

The answer, of course, was that he could not have.

"Yet if he did not leave through the kitchen door—or the windows, or the front door before or after Jill reached it—then he couldn't have left the inn at all."

"Which means he's still here."

Three groups searched the inn. Amanda, Reeve, and Carter

searched upstairs. Bryan and Aaron inspected the billiard room, dining room, and kitchen. Jill, Hatter, Gideon, and Jonas checked the drawing room, parlor room, library, and downstairs bedrooms.

But, aside from the eight guests and Aaron, the inn was as empty as a politician's promise. Bryan and Aaron examined the kitchen door for signs of tampering but found none. Hatter and Jonas uncovered behind the staircase a door beyond which a flight of stairs descended to the basement. There they found a collection of cobwebs and a non-working furnace, but no window, door, or other way out of the basement.

And no intruder.

Most of the guests reassembled in the parlor room to report what they had, or had not, found.

"We've searched every inch of this place. No one's here."

"But he couldn't have gotten out," Reeve protested. "We've already determined that."

Hatter shook his head. "What will it take to convince you people?"

"Don't start that nonsense again, Hatter. This is not one of your ghost novels."

"How else can you explain it? Someone took the guns. He couldn't possibly have gotten out. Yet he—and the guns—*are not here*. What other explanation is there?"

"How about," Bryan suggested, "that the guns were stolen by one of—"

But he never had a chance to complete the remark, because of the chilling scream from upstairs. Not from a mysterious source this time, but from Amanda.

All except the wheelchair-bound Gideon hastened to the second floor. At the top of the staircase they encountered Carter emerging from one of the bedrooms, in pursuit of the same sound. Like bloodhounds they tracked it around the corner of the upstairs hallway to the quivering figure of Amanda, covering her mouth with both hands. To her right, a closet huddled in the shadow of a wall's recess, its door swung open like a mouth hungry for a meal—or, in this case, having just disgorged one.

Stretched across the floor at Amanda's feet lay what might have been her shadow—had it been facing the right way. But it cut across the hallway widthwise rather than lengthwise, as if defying the light.

Carter was the first to reach the corpse. He turned it over gently and recoiled at the sight he had uncovered.

Rising from a patch of shirt sparsely daubed with blood in the center of the man's body was the hilt of a deeply-buried knife.

"It's Damien," Jill gasped.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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