

**'... CLEAVE IS A MASTER OF DARK
AND COMPELLING THRILLERS' — BOOKLIST**

PAUL CLEAVE



Whatever it Takes



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ALSO BY PAUL CLEAVE

Killer Harvest

Trust No One

Five Minutes Alone

Joe Victim

The Laughterhouse

Collecting Cooper

Blood Men

Cemetery Lake

The Killing Hour

The Cleaner

*For my cousin, Katrina Cox — one of the strongest and
most positive people I've been lucky enough to know.*

One

“You’re going to kill him,” Drew says.

I rest my forehead against the wall and stare at the floor. I try to get my breathing under control. There’s a half-flattened cockroach down there, along with a cigarette butt tossed at the garbage bin that’s missed. There’s something in my mind that hurts. I pinch the bridge of my nose and squeeze my eyes shut and will the pain away, but it holds on tight. It’s like a splinter buried deep that’s gotten infected, and the only way to dull the pain is by punching the guy tied up in the chair. Which is what I do. I hit him so hard I hear something crack and I don’t know if it’s one of my fingers or his cheek. I’ve hit him so many times already my fingers hurt bad, but his face has to hurt more. His left eye is swollen and purple, his nose is broke and his bottom lip split and there’s plenty of blood and torn skin. But despite all that the son of a bitch still looks up at me with a grin, the kind of grin anybody would want to wipe off his face, only so far nothing has worked. The only thing I can wipe are my knuckles on my shirt, which is already plenty messy.

Drew puts a hand on my shoulder and I shrug it off.

“Don’t,” I tell him.

He puts his hand back on my shoulder and looks me right in the eye. Drew and me, we’ve been best friends since we were kids. Growing up, we chased girls across playgrounds and climbed trees and went fishing. When we were older we joined the police together and played the role of best man at the other’s wedding. If he doesn’t remove his hand in the next two seconds, I’m going to break it.

“This isn’t you, Noah. This isn’t the way we do things.”

He's right. This isn't me. Yet here we are. He takes his hand off my shoulder.

"Goddamn it, Noah, I can't let you beat him to death."

Drew has a look on his face that's a mixture of confusion and panic, mixed in with an overwhelming look of wanting to pretend this isn't happening. I feel the same way.

"You should leave."

"I . . ."

I take another swing at the guy in the chair before Drew can say whatever it is he thought he could say that would stop me. Blood and sweat mist the dry air and the punch echoes in the room. I can smell wood and blood and sweat. The guy spits a glob of blood on the floor and shakes his head. His smile comes back and I feel something in my stomach roll.

"My dad is going to put you in a box," he says. His name is Conrad, and the same way me and Drew grew up together, so did me and Conrad, only everything was opposite. We never hung out. Conrad isn't a hanging out kind of guy. He's a selfish son of a bitch. He's a bully without an ounce of decency in him. The kind of guy women warn their friends about and cross the road to avoid.

He's also the sheriff's son.

"You should be spending time thinking about your future, not mine," I tell him.

He spits again. "I told you already," he says. "I don't know where she is."

I pace the office. The windows are closed and the air isn't just hot, but sticky hot. My clothes are damp. They cling to my skin and stretch when I move. The wooden floors are worn smooth by the years of anxious foremen pacing them the same way I'm pacing them now, and they creak a little under my weight. Conrad is the current foreman. The furniture in here is so old everything could be a prototype. The first desk ever built, the first filing cabinet assembled — hell, even the computer is so big it looks like its first job was cracking the Enigma code. There's a TV bolted on the wall with a screen as round as a fishbowl. The ceiling is pitted with fly crap and the in-out trays on the desk have paperwork spilling out of them. My headache is starting to rage and the thing turning in my

stomach turns some more. I don't like where this is going. I wish there were a way to take it all back.

There isn't.

I have to carry on.

For the girl. Alyssa.

I stop pacing in front of him. "Where is she?"

"I want my lawyer," he says.

Drew steps between us. He puts his hand on my chest and the other is on the butt of his gun that's still holstered and I wonder whether he'd use it, whether he even knows if he would. I shouldn't have gotten him mixed up in this. "Let's have a word outside," he says.

I stare at him, unblinking. Then I relent. We head into the factory. I put my hands on the iron railing. A few lights are on, but they're not doing a great job, the vastness of the factory is sucking the enthusiasm out of them. I can only see twenty yards in front of me. There are rows of lumber stretching out into the dark, long beams running as straight as train tracks. The night is pressing hard up against the dusty windows. I lean against the railing so I can face Drew as he closes the door. I can see Conrad through the window, looking out at us.

Drew keeps his voice low when he says, "Even if he does have her, he's not going to talk."

I undo the top button of my shirt. There are streaks of blood on it. The air in here is thick. The factory's powered down for the night, which means no air conditioning.

"He will," I say, for Alyssa's sake, and for mine too. There's no going back from this. "He has to."

Drew shakes his head. "We can't keep beating on him. Especially when we don't know for a fact he has her."

"He has her," I say. "I know he has her."

"You don't. Not for a fact. You think he does, and you want to believe he does, because if you're wrong, then we've messed up here big time." He exhales loudly and looks up at the roof as if answers or escape are up there. "Ah, hell, Noah," he says. "Even if we're right we're still in a world of trouble. Even if he confesses right now he's going to walk away from this. You gotta know no attorney in the world would prosecute him after what we've done."

“We’ll deal with that later. Right now we have to find Alyssa. We’ve come this far. We can’t have done all this for nothing.”

“I wish I could say I let you talk me into this, but that would be naïve.”

“I can make him talk.”

He shakes his head. “We’re done. We have to take him in. We have to do this properly. Best we can hope for is we don’t end up in jail alongside of him.”

“If we take him in he’ll never talk. It’s like you said, nobody would prosecute him. We wouldn’t even be able to charge him. The only way we find her is if we keep doing what we’re doing. There’s no other way now.”

“We can’t keep doing this,” Drew says.

I nod. Then I shake my head. I exhale slowly and loudly as if my body is deflating. The headache stays. It pounds against the walls of my head. I pinch the top of my nose and close my eyes. “Jesus, Drew, I’ve messed up. I’ve really messed up.”

He puts a hand on my shoulder. “Maybe there’s a way we can fix it, but we need to call the sheriff. He ain’t gonna be happy, but . . .”

I slap one handcuff on his wrist and the other one onto the railing.

“What the hell, Noah?”

I take my gun out and point it at him. There’s no need for both of us to throw away our careers. *We* can’t keep doing this. But I can. “I’ll say it was my fault. I’ll say you tried to stop me.”

“Noah . . .”

“I’m going to need your gun and your keys.”

“Don’t do this, buddy.”

“Hand them over.”

“And if I don’t?”

I don’t answer him. I won’t shoot him, he knows that. He sighs. It’s hard seeing the disappointment in my best friend’s eyes. He takes his gun out and lowers it carefully, kicks it over, then tosses me his keys. I kick the gun over the edge of the landing and it hits the floor below but doesn’t go off. Guns don’t do that. I send the keys after it. I ask for his phone and he tosses it to me. I put it into my pocket.

“It can only go badly for you,” he says.

“I know.”

I head back into the office. I close the door. Conrad smiles at me. “Tick tock,” he says.

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

He spits on the floor where his blood is forming all sorts of patterns of the type a psychiatrist might find interesting. “It means there’s only so long you can keep this up before my dad gets here. You know what he’s going to do to you. I’d bet the farm he’s going to put you in the ground.”

“Tell me where she is.”

“You’re a broken record, man.”

“We found her headband.”

“What headband?”

“The one that fell off her when she was abducted. It has your fingerprints on it. That’s what put me on to you, Conrad.”

He doesn’t say anything.

“I took a look in your car out in the parking lot before we came up here. Her school bag is in the trunk.”

“You’re lying, and if you’re not lying it’s because you put it there.”

I stretch out my fingers. They need patching up. They need ice. They need splints.

“You going to hit me again?” he asks. “You always were a pussy, Noah. Why don’t—”

“I know the kind of guy you are, Conrad. And you *know* that I know.”

His laughter makes me cringe. “Finally, the truth as to why we’re really here. That missing kid has nothing to do with any of this,” he says. “We’re here because you’re still holding a grudge, even after all these years. You’re pathetic.”

I take my gun out and shove it into his stomach. His grin disappears. “Listen to me, Conrad. I know you took her. She’s seven years old. Just an innocent kid. Tell me where she is, and this all ends.” I push the gun in tighter. “You don’t tell me, this still ends, only in a much messier way. My partner out there, he wants me to stop, but he’s cuffed to the railing and can’t do anything to help you. There’s nobody else coming. Your whole tick-tock thing, that’s really about me shooting you if you don’t tell me where she is. Could be in the arm. Could be in the leg. Maybe I’ll shoot you in the dick. You really want a life where you only have a tube to piss out of and legs that don’t work?”

“You don’t have the balls,” he says.

I grab a pair of invoices from the in-out tray and ball them into his mouth. Even when I shoot him in the leg it takes his mind a second to catch up. He thrashes around and spits out the invoices and they’re bloody and wet and stick to the floor. Drew is yelling at me to stop, and on this side of the door Conrad is screaming and my ears are ringing from the shot and the thing in my stomach is turning and turning and the thing in my head is banging and banging. Blood is pouring out of Conrad’s leg to join all the other blood on the floor. I can see a butterfly. I can see a pair of women’s shoes. I can see a missing girl, and I can see death.

“Where is she?” I yell.

“Go to hell.”

I think of Alyssa, scared and alone and tied up somewhere. I know Alyssa. She’s had a rough few years, first losing her dad, then earlier this year losing her mom. She’s a tough kid fighting a mean world. She’s gone through so much I refuse to let her go through anything else. The ringing in my ears starts to subside. I can hear blood dripping on the floor. I can hear my own heartbeat.

I jam the gun into the wound. I feel sick. I can’t do this for much longer. I need him to tell me. I need this to stop. He screams. “I’m not kidding, Conrad, I swear to God, I’m not kidding.”

“Please, Noah, please, don’t, please don’t.”

“Where is she?”

“Wait,” he says, and he’s caught between hyperventilating and crying. “Just a second, just . . . just wait.”

I wait, giving him the chance to compose what needs composing. It won’t be an insult. It won’t be a denial.

“What if . . . what if I didn’t take her, but I know who did?”

Relief floods my body. I can work with that. “And how would you know that?”

“What if — I mean, Jesus, my leg . . . it hurts, man, it really hurts. I need an ambulance.”

“Where is she?”

“You’re crazy, you know that? You’re a psychopath.”

“Where is she?”

“What if . . .” His eyes roll and he looks pale. I shake him. He looks right at me. “I don’t feel so good.”

“Tell me where she is and I call an ambulance.”

“An ambulance,” he says, and he starts to pass out again.

I slap him.

“What?”

“Alyssa.”

“Yeah, Alyssa, Alyssa . . . I overheard a couple of guys, right? They were talking at the bar last night. What if I told you what they said?”

“If what they said finds her, then I don’t have to shoot you no more.”

“They were search and rescue guys,” he says, “from out of town, here looking for that hiker who got lost recently. I’ve never seen them before, I swear.”

Search and rescue guys. The town of Acacia Pines is surrounded by an endless sea of forests and lakes that out-of-towners get lost in. Locals refer to that vast wilderness as The Pines. Search and rescue refer to it as the Green Hole — black holes absorb light, but the Green Hole absorbs hikers and campers. We’ll send out search parties, and sometimes search parties will come in from other cities to help, and most of the time we’ll find the missing campers, but sometimes we don’t. “You didn’t think of picking up the phone and calling your dad? You figured you’d do nothing and let a seven-year-old girl you knew was missing stay missing?”

His head droops. I put my finger into the bullet wound and he screams and I take my finger back out and wipe it on my shirt.

“Why didn’t you tell somebody?”

He grits his teeth. “I didn’t want to get involved.”

I should shoot him anyway. Instead, I say, “Tell me what they said.”

He sniffs up another gob of blood and lets it fly into the puddle. “They said they were looking at selling her, that she was . . .” he says, and he grimaces as a wave of pain rips through him. “They said she was cute and ticked all the boxes. They were going to move her offshore in the next few days.”

“Doesn’t explain how her bag got into your car.”

“If you didn’t put it in there, then I don’t know how it got there.”

“And your fingerprints on her headband?”

His voice takes on a whiny quality and he says, “There’s a million ways that could have happened. Maybe I picked it up thinking it was something else. Maybe it’s been somewhere else other than on her. I don’t know. Maybe your tests are wrong. It’s your job to figure that shit out.”

“What about the ski mask I found in your glove compartment?”

He doesn’t say anything.

“You want to explain it to me?”

“It’s . . . it’s not what you think,” he says.

“Yeah? And what do I think?”

“It’s just a ski mask,” he says. “I wear it when I’m out hunting when it’s cold. That’s why shops sell them and why people buy them. Come on, Noah, I’m bleeding to death here.”

“Where is she, Conrad? You overheard them — where’d they say they had her?”

“I don’t know,” he says, and he’s crying now. “I swear I don’t know.”

I push my finger back into the wound. I fight the urge to gag. His body strains against the rope as he leans forward. His veins stick out and his face is as red as a face can get before something hemorrhages, usually in the eyes.

“Wait,” he says. I take my finger back out and I wait. “They mentioned the old Kelly place,” he says, and he’s blubbering tears and snot and it’s mixing with the blood and making a disgusting mess over his shirt.

“The Kelly place,” I say.

“The Kelly place,” he repeats.

I holster my gun and walk out of the office.

He yells out at me through the open door. “You’re dead, Noah. You hear me? You’re dead.”

“What the hell did you do to him?” Drew asks me.

I don’t answer him. I can’t. I hand Drew back his phone, head down the stairs and I don’t look back.

Two

Most of the trees in the few miles that surround the sawmill have been logged, regrown, and logged again. Various areas are in various states of regrowth, but the trees bordering the mill are young and fresh-looking and not much taller than me. The road out to the highway is a mile long and none of it straight. I take it quick. The air conditioning is running at full strength. The sawdust on my skin itches. I head south toward town. The nearest building to the sawmill is Earl's Gas Station, the forecourt and highway out front all lit up like a football field. The owner is one Earl Winters, and he calls us every month or two when somebody puts buckshot into those lights, and every month or two we get no closer to figuring out who's doing it. Could be one person. Could be lots of different people, since the lights are offensively bright. I blow past the gas station so fast I expect to see it dragging behind me, caught in my wake.

There are no lights on the highway. No signs of life. Out in this part of the country the world could have ended and unless somebody sent word to Acacia Pines none of us would know. The highway is the only road in and out of town. It cuts a swath through The Pines, where the ghosts of missing hikers are still out there walking in circles.

Every half-mile or so I pass ninety-degree turnoffs that lead to small farms and big farms and animal farms and vegetable farms. I pass barns painted red that during the day look like they're floating on seas of wheat, but at night look like black holes on the horizon. It's a ten-minute drive that I do in six. I take the turnoff to the Kelly farm. The large *For Sale* sign staked into the ground out front has faded as it baked and froze

over the last three years' worth of seasons. The road goes from asphalt to dirt and gravel and the back of the car fishtails and bits of stone flick up into the undercarriage. The house is on the other side of a set of oak trees that keep it hidden from the road. I drive around them and point the car at the front door and leave the lights on and get out. Plumes of dirt float up from the driveway and fog the air. The land out here is dry. Only stuff that grows is stinging nettle and gorse and patchy clumps of grass.

The house has lots of red wood and white trim, and an A-frame roof sharp enough to prick the sky. There's a shed with no front wall next to it, a car and tractor in there with eight flat tires between them, the walls lined with hay bales. I send the beam of my flashlight looping around the porch and over twisted floorboards. There are cobwebs as long as summer evenings over all of it. Something scuttles across the porch and disappears. The headlights from the car and moonlight reflect off the windows. The door is locked, but it's also old and neglected and doesn't put up a fight. I figure in all the years the Kellys lived here this door was probably always unlocked. It's that kind of town.

The house smells of dust and the air tastes of mold. The last time I was out here was three years ago when Jasmine Kelly called Drew from the other side of the country to say she hadn't heard from her folks in a week. I flick the light switch but there's no power. I follow the footprints in the dust. Floorboards creak under my weight. I can feel the heat coming up through the floor. Shadows move across walls as my flashlight lights everything up, and there are a lot of everythings — couches, a dining table, beds, kitchen utilities, a coffee table with magazines and a TV that can't be any older than five years. There are paintings and photographs on walls and shelves. It feels like the house is waiting for somebody to return. I look into the bedroom where three years ago Ed and Leah Kelly took handfuls of sleeping pills and didn't leave a note to say why. The farm was heavily in debt and their daughter used to say her dad thought the land was cursed because only the weeds knew how to grow.

I head to the basement. Basements are where men like Conrad Haggerty keep girls like Alyssa Stone. I open the door. It smells like something crawled out of the grave, died all over again, then crawled back in. I hold my breath and light up the steps. They groan as I move

down them. The walls are gray cinderblock. There are tools hanging on them. There's an old chest freezer big enough for a body, that I hope is empty. There are piles of blankets and an old dining suite with chairs stacked on top and boxes of junk beneath it. I can no longer hold my breath. The smell doesn't improve any. There's an old heater, a couple of bicycles, an old TV. There are shelves full of Christmas lights that could only be ready in time if the untangling started at Easter. The same dust that coated everything upstairs coats everything down here too, even the floor, but the floor also has footprints going back and forth across it.

I follow them.

I don't have to follow them for long.

If anybody grows up being allowed to believe in curses, then it's Alyssa. Her father gave his life to the sawmill in more ways than one. He started working there when he was sixteen, gave the place eighteen years of his life, then bled out on the factory floor after a spinning blade snapped, flew thirty feet through the air, and severed an artery in his leg. Alyssa was six months old. Three months ago a car accident took Alyssa's mother out of the world. Her uncle took her in after that. I can only pray that this is the last bad thing ever to happen to her.

Right now, Alyssa is trying her hardest to blend into the mixture of paint cans and old board games in the corner. She's shying away from my flashlight as if she's lived in the dark her entire life. She looks gaunt and scared and she has a black eye from where somebody hit her. She's looking out at me from behind black hair that is matted with grime and her face is streaked with tears. Looking at her makes me want to cry. It breaks my heart. I want to hug her and protect her and never let her go. I want to make the world okay for her, because so far for her the world has been a harrowing one. There's an iron shackle around her ankle with a padlock on it. A chain connects it to the wall, welded onto the shackle at one end and bolted on the other. Her ankle is scuffed and puffy and the thing that hasn't turned in my stomach in some time turns again. When I'm done here, I'm going to have another conversation with Conrad Haggerty.

"Alyssa," I say, "it's Deputy Harper." I point the flashlight at myself. Here I am. Deputy Noah Harper, all lit up in the basement of a dead couple's house on the final night of his career.

She tries to back away some more but there's nowhere to go. She stops moving. She stares at me and doesn't say anything. I can't tell if she recognizes me or not from the day her mother died.

"You're going to be okay." I sit the flashlight upright on the floor so the beam hits the ceiling. I keep my voice light. Nice and friendly. "It's going to be okay," I tell her again, because it *is* going to be okay. "He's not coming back."

She keeps staring at me. Her fingertips are bleeding from where she's tried to loosen the bolts from the wall.

"I'm going to find something to take this chain off you, okay? I bet I can find something among all these tools that'll get it off you right quick."

She says nothing.

"I'm taking you out of here, Alyssa, and back home to your uncle."

Three

I find a pair of bolt cutters on the wall, but the blades look like they were used to cut bricks before being left out in the rain for a winter. I focus on the other end of the chain. It's bolted to the wall next to the mattress Alyssa has been sleeping on. I find a socket set and get the right-size piece lined up with the first of the bolts holding the chain. My fingers are so sore from torturing Conrad Haggerty that I have to kick at the handle to get the first one to turn, but it does, and then I'm able to spin it free. I get no less resistance from the remaining three bolts.

I'm expecting her to run once the chain is loose from the wall, but she stays where she is. "Uncle Frank misses you, and he's worried about you. Everybody is worried about you. The man that did this to you, we arrested him. He can't hurt you anymore."

She has her arms folded and her knees pulled against her chest.

"It's time to go home, Alyssa. Now, you have a very important decision to make. I can either carry you, or you can walk with me. Which would you like to do?"

Slowly she puts out her hand. It's shaking. I reach out and take it and we stand up together. She doesn't go anywhere for a few moments, then she lets me lead her to the stairs. I carry the chain so she doesn't have to. It's heavy, and it feels grimy. We get to the top and the dust and the mold smell pretty good compared to the basement where Alyssa's toilet was a bucket. Outside we stand on the porch and Alyssa looks up at the sky and I look out over the fields and we both suck in some fresh air.

We reach the car. The dirt floating in the air earlier has settled. There's a warm breeze rippling across the paddocks, bending the blades

of grass toward us. The thing about small towns is they give you large skies. Right now, the view is spectacular, not a single star lost to light pollution. The big sky makes me feel small, and makes Alyssa seem even smaller. By becoming a monster I've given her a chance at a big life. I don't know what's next for each of us — whether she'll bounce back like she did after her mom died or if she'll want to hide from the world. Whether I'll end up in a jail cell next to Conrad Haggerty or if I'll be put in the ground by his father. Big skies, big questions.

I get Alyssa seated and put the chain on the floor and ask her if that's okay, or if it's pulling at her ankle, and she stares at me and says nothing. I strap the seatbelt across her. There are no sirens or lights in the distance. Maybe Drew didn't call. Maybe he couldn't get a signal. Maybe he did call but Conrad hasn't told them about the Kelly farm. Maybe Conrad bled out.

I pop the trunk and toss my bloody shirt in there. It leaves me with my uniform pants and a white t-shirt that looks clean enough. I get into the car and I flick the lever that sprays water over the windshield. The wipers cut arcs through the dirt, streaky at first, then finally clearing. We drive into town. Alyssa stares out the window. I dial back the air conditioning and crack open the window. I think about calling Alyssa's uncle. I think about calling Sheriff Haggerty. I think about calling my wife. In the end I call Dan Peterson, and ask him to meet me out front of the hospital in fifteen. I tell him to bring his work van. He says sure thing, but before he can ask why the signal cuts out. Out here where the lights don't reach the sky, cellphone reception comes and goes like the tide.

The farmhouses are closer to the road now and soon they're closer to each other too. Cellphone reception comes back. The paddocks fall away and make room for family houses on family-sized plots as we hit the edge of town. We drive over a bridge, giant metal trusses freshly painted red bolted together over a river forty feet wide and endlessly long, sweeping into town from the forest before sweeping back out. We hit Main Street. We pass stores and park benches and bars with plenty of neon and mercury. A quarter-mile up and a right will take us to the police station, and into the heart of Acacia Pines, population twenty thousand, but we go left instead, passing a cinema and a school and a

park before hitting Acacia Hospital.

The hospital is three stories of white brick with a flat roof lined with satellite dishes. Square windows without any light behind them look out over the parking lot where there are a dozen cars, most of them belonging to staff. The hospital has three ambulances parked by the main door, but right now one is missing. It's a small-town hospital with sixty beds. The surgeons and doctors can mend bones and insert stents and pacemakers and put you on dialysis, but they're not going to give you an organ transplant. I know that, because Drew got sick a few years ago and needed a new kidney and had to travel for it.

I park out front next to Dan Peterson's van. The back of it is dark with exhaust fumes. Somebody has written *I wish your wife was this dirty* with their finger through the dirt. He's leaning against the side with his hands in his pockets and his stomach overhanging his belt and a cigarette overhanging his lip. Peterson is the local jack-of-all-trades and five years past retirement age. The sawmill and the quarry beyond and all the farms may provide heartbeats to the town, but when Dan finally retires, the rest of us are going to have to figure out how to build birdfeeders and shingle roofs and dig graves at the cemetery.

I open the passenger door of my car. I help Alyssa turn to the side so her legs dangle outside. Dan stares at her, recognizing her from the news.

"You can pick the lock?" I ask him.

"In under a minute."

It takes him three.

"You want to tell me who had her?" he asks.

"It'll be in the news tomorrow," I tell him.

"Well, I'm glad she's back safe," he says, and he glances at my raw and puffy hands and gives me a casual salute before driving away.

I pile the chain onto the passenger seat and wipe my hands on my trousers, then I lead Alyssa into the hospital the same way I led her out of the Kelly house, with her little hand in mine. Doctors and nurses are waiting near the door. My guess is the missing ambulance is out getting Conrad. Alyssa has been in the news and they all recognize her, but they don't make a big deal out of it, not wanting to scare her.

A nurse in her forties, slim and pale with gray streaks in her hair,

comes over. Alyssa tightens her grip on my hand. The nurse gives me a slight nod, then smiles at Alyssa and crouches to get to her eye level. “How are you feeling, honey?” she asks. Alyssa hides behind my leg. “My name is Nurse Rosie, but you can call me Rose, if you like. How about we get you all cleaned up, huh?”

I look down at Alyssa. “You can go with her,” I tell her. “I’ll be out here to make sure everything goes okay.”

She waves her fingers to indicate she wants to tell me something. She lets go of my leg and I take a knee and she leans forward and cups her hand over my ear so she can whisper. “Is Uncle Frank mad at me?”

“Mad?”

“Mad I didn’t get away from the man. They tell us in school never to get into . . . into a car with . . . with strangers. I tried to fight him, I really did.”

“I know you did, Honey.”

“Did the man rob a bank?”

“Why do you think that?”

“He wore a mask like bank robbers do.”

The ski mask we found in Conrad’s car. It means he didn’t want her to be able to identify him. It means he was planning on letting her go at some point.

“He wasn’t a bank robber,” I say. “He was just a really bad man.”

“A really bad man,” she says. She wraps her arms around me and hugs me tight. I hug her back.

“Now go with Rose. She’ll clean you right up and we’ll get your uncle here. How’s that sound?”

She keeps hugging me. “Will the bad man come for me again?”

“No.”

“If he does, will you save me?”

“Of course. I’ll do whatever it takes.”

She pulls back so she can look at me. “Cross your heart?”

I cross my heart.

The nurse leads Alyssa to the bathroom. Another nurse comes over, this one in her mid-twenties, her blonde hair cut short and swept back, her glasses looking more cosmetic than medical. Her name is Victoria, and Victoria is my sister-in-law.

She puts her hand on my arm. “Jesus, Noah, where did you find her?”
“Locked up in the basement at the old Kelly place.”

Her glasses shift a little on her face as she frowns. Her jaw tightens.
“Who took her?”

“Conrad Haggerty.”

She says nothing for a few seconds. I suspect somewhere in her imagination she’s hunting down Conrad to do bad things to him. “That piece of trash,” she says, all the words coming out on an exhale. “You sure it was him?”

“I’m sure.”

“This is going to be bad,” she says.

I shake my head. “Bad doesn’t even begin to sum things up.”

Four

The parking lot lights up blue and red, first from the ambulance and then from the single patrol car that pulls in behind it. A ring of six-foot trees separates the parking lot from the road, and interlocking branches capture the light and don't reflect any back. I watch from the window of a doctor's office on the top floor as a pair of paramedics roll Conrad out from the back of the ambulance. They must have shot some painkillers into him because he looks in a better mood than when I left him. Drew spills out of one side of the patrol car and Sheriff Haggerty spills out the other. There isn't much of a physical difference between Sheriff Haggerty and his son, other than the quantity of wrinkles and the color of hair, and of course the sheriff's horseshoe mustache that, legend has it, was fully formed in the womb.

I stand at the window adjusting the ice pack on my hands. Victoria offered to x-ray them and clean them up, but I told her it could wait. There are posters on the wall of the human body, close-up drawings of shoulder joints and ankle joints and finger joints, the kinds of images that remind me how fragile we are. There's a fake skeleton in the corner and cupboards and drawers full of latex gloves and bandages and syringes. I can smell disinfectant. Sheriff Haggerty is yelling at somebody outside the main entrance but I can't see who. Then he hitches his thumbs into his belt and looks up at the window and finds me. We stare at each other for a few seconds before he follows his son into the hospital.

I wait for him.

He doesn't come.

I give it a little longer.

He still doesn't come.

After ten minutes I'm at the point where I just want this over.

I flinch when the door opens. It's not the sheriff. It's Maggie, my wife, and she's all sharp angles and anger. Her eyes are dark, her face red and tight, her dark hair tied into a fast and messy ponytail. She closes the door and I push myself away from the window. She focuses on my hands.

"So it's true," she says.

I step toward her and she puts her hand on my chest. The anger is coming off her in waves. She isn't here as my wife. She's here as a lawyer, and not my lawyer.

"So how bad is it?" I ask.

"Let's sit," she says.

We take the two chairs in front of the desk and sit with our knees almost touching. I adjust the ice pack. None of the swelling has disappeared.

She holds up a finger and she says, "You beat him."

"It was the only way."

She holds up a second finger. "And you shot him."

"He took her, Maggie."

A third finger goes up. "You handcuffed Drew and pulled a gun on him."

"He had her chained up like a rabid dog."

She holds up another finger, and she says, "And you planted evidence and framed him."

I fight the urge to jump up. "You're kidding, right? Is that what he's saying?"

"No, but he will. You said what you did was the only way, but it wasn't, Noah, not by a long shot. You could have brought him in. I could have made a deal with him. We could have gotten Alyssa back and put Conrad away for a long time."

"That's bullshit. His dad might not like him much, but he sure as hell would have given him a pass. You know that better than anybody."

She leans back as if slapped.

My hands are shaking. I tell myself to calm down. "Look, I'm sorry," I say. "I shouldn't have said that."

"Is that why you beat him so bad? Because of what happened when

we were kids?”

“Of course not,” I say, but I can’t claim what he did back then wasn’t on my mind when my fists were flying. Anyway, we weren’t kids — we were teenagers. She makes it sound like it was just childhood antics. “It’s like Newton’s third law — for every action there’s an equal and opposite reaction. It’s possible you *could* have gotten Alyssa back, like you say, but it’s equally possible you *couldn’t* have.”

“You should have trusted me,” she says. “You should have trusted Drew and Sheriff Haggerty, and trusted yourself too. You should have trusted the system, but instead you broke the law and—”

“I couldn’t risk not getting her back. I know him, Maggie. He wouldn’t have—”

She puts her hand up. “Let me finish, Noah.”

“Conrad would have let her die.”

“I asked you to let me finish.”

I get up. I walk back to the window and stare into the parking lot. Moths not much smaller than the palm of my hand slap at the streetlamps. The sky doesn’t have the same sparkle it had out at the Kelly farm, most of the stars hidden now behind the curtain of light coming from the town. “You’re right. I’m sorry.”

“We can’t prosecute him,” she says, and I don’t turn to face her because I can’t look at the disappointment in her face. “I know you think you did the right thing, and I understand why you think you had to do it, but what you did makes it impossible for us to get a conviction. You violated his rights, and now he’s going to walk. And the worst thing is the fact you couldn’t see that makes you — and it hurts to say this, it really does — it makes you a bad cop.”

I did see it, and seeing it and ignoring it makes me an even worse cop.

“He can come after you, legally. You tied him up and beat him and you shot him. There’ll be an endless line of lawyers eager to represent him. They’ll be calling from all across the country to take his case, and for the first day or two the media everywhere are going to love you, and then they’re going to hate you.”

I adjust the ice pack. My knuckles look like ball bearings that grew skin.

“You’ve messed up, Noah, and there’s nothing you can do to fix it.”

“I did what I had to do,” I say, and there’s no strength behind my words. No conviction. Not now, now that I know Conrad is going to walk free.

She shakes her head. “You did what you’ve been wanting to do to Conrad for the last ten years.”

“That had nothing to do with this.”

“I wish I could believe you. Despite what you think, we could have made a deal, found her safe, and Conrad would be going to jail and you’d be keeping your job.”

“His father would have made sure that didn’t happen.”

She stands up and moves behind the chair and puts her hands on the back of it. “Listen to yourself, Noah. Sheriff Haggerty isn’t the enemy here. He’s been good to you all these years. He would have done the right thing, but you let your anger cloud your judgment. You let the past take over.”

She’s right. “I’m sorry.”

“You know, despite everything, I don’t think you are.”

My headache is coming back. “So what happens now?”

“Now we figure out if we can keep you out of jail.”

I rub my temples. It doesn’t help. “That’s not what I meant.”

“No?”

“No. I mean what about us?”

She takes some of the strands that didn’t make it into the ponytail and tucks them behind her ear. Some of the anger slips from her features, replaced with sadness. “I wish you’d given that some thought earlier,” she says. She turns and a few paces later she’s at the door.

“Meaning?”

“Meaning you almost killed somebody, Noah. You tortured somebody, and I don’t see any remorse, I don’t see contrition, and given the chance to do it all over knowing the outcome you’d do the same damn thing.”

“Maggie . . .”

“What it means, Noah, is you’re not the person I married. I have to go.”

“Please don’t,” I say, but she’s already gone.

Five

Downstairs the surgeons are operating on Conrad and I'm told by a doctor they're confident he'll be okay. She tells me the bullet hit bone but missed vital arteries and I act like that was the point. Victoria x-rays my hands and tells me I have a couple of fractures in my right they can't do much about, other than taping my fingers together with a splint.

"Ice and painkillers are your friends for the next few days," she says.

"They'll heal up okay?"

"They will. For now, just think of them as spoils of war. How mad is Maggie?"

"About as mad as anybody can get."

"She'll be okay," she says.

"I don't think she will. How's Alyssa?"

"Banged up, but doing okay. She's a tough kid."

"They run a rape kit?" I ask, and my stomach tightens in anticipation of the answer.

She nods. "He didn't touch her. Whatever he was planning on doing, he didn't get to do it."

Her answer makes me feel better about the way tonight has played out. She leaves to get me some painkillers. I stare at the doorway wondering who will come in next, and that turns out to be Father Frank Davidson. He comes into the room looking taller than when I saw him earlier today, the good news of getting his niece back alive not only lifting him emotionally, but physically too. He hasn't shaved in days and his dark hair is going in all directions. He comes in with a big smile and his hand

extended. I figure this guy more than anybody must be truly committed to his faith, especially after what he's just gone through. Then again, he probably thinks God is why his niece came back to him in one piece, but I'm not sure how he'd equate that with her being taken in the first place. His hand crushes mine and I bite down on the pain and he doesn't notice the splint. Until yesterday the last time I spoke with him was to tell him a logging truck had rolled onto his sister's car.

"Thank you," he says. "Thank you, thank you, thank you."

"You're welcome."

"I couldn't have lost her," he says. "Not as well."

"I know."

He lets go my hand. "And you? How about you, Noah? Are you going to be okay? I heard what you did."

"I think you'll need to do some praying on my behalf, Father."

"What you did — that kind of thing weighs heavily on good men. It might not feel like it right now, but you'll question what you've done. I'm thankful you got my little girl back, I truly am. I just . . ." But whatever it is he wants to say he doesn't have the words. He fiddles with his clerical collar, trying to get it sitting right. He keeps looking at me and I keep looking at him, and then he shrugs. "I'll be here for you, Noah. Whatever happens."

He asks me to come and see him tomorrow. I smile and tell him I'm not in a place where I can make plans. He pats me on the shoulder, nods solemnly, and thanks me again for getting Alyssa back. He gets to the door at the same time Victoria is coming back through. She hands me a small plastic container full of painkillers.

"Only take them when you need them, and don't take them when you don't."

It's good advice, especially since we've both seen what can happen when people misuse them. I take two now.

"And Maggie, she'll come around," she says. "I know she's mad now, she just needs some time."

"I hope you're right."

"Sheriff Haggerty told me to let you know he's waiting out in the parking lot."

"Okay. Thanks," I say.

“You want me to come with you? Mightn’t hurt to have some witnesses in case he decides to shoot you.”

“I’ll be fine,” I say. “Maybe have the surgeons on standby, just in case?”

I slip the pills into my pocket and head out. Doctors and nurses turn to watch me as I go. It makes me feel like a condemned man walking the final piece of real estate between jail cell and noose. The main doors slide open and the night outside is just how I left it, warm and glowing from the parking lot lights and buzzing with energy. Sheriff Haggerty is leaning against his car with his arms folded and his big shoulders bursting at his shirt. I have no idea where Drew is. He’s either been fired or sent home or both.

“Noah,” he says, nodding in my direction, then his eyes flick to the hospital behind me, faces are pressed to the windows. Hopefully that means he won’t shoot me.

“Sheriff.”

“You shot my son.”

“I did.”

“You shouldn’t have done that.”

“Your son shouldn’t have kidnapped Alyssa Stone,” I say. “Your son shouldn’t have chained her to a basement wall to do whatever it was he was going to do.”

He shakes his head. “According to him he overheard those two guys in the bar and he gave you their location.”

“And you believe him?”

“He’s my son.”

It’s what I expected. Everything I did felt justified while I was doing it, and feels twice as justified right now. If I’d brought Conrad in for questioning, we’d never have gotten a word out of him. Alyssa would have died out there.

“There were no two guys in the bar,” I say, “and if there had been, he might have done himself a favor by coming to you earlier.”

He unfolds his arms and hitches his thumbs over his belt. “You know as well as I do Conrad doesn’t think much outside of himself. His neighbor’s house could burn down and he wouldn’t pull himself away from the TV to give a damn. I’m not saying it’s right, him not helping

that girl when he overheard those boys, I'm saying that's how he is. The thing that grates on my nerves the most, son, is that *you* know that's the way he is."

"He took her," I tell him. "If he hadn't, he'd have told me when I first questioned him about his story."

"You mean when you started torturing him."

"Look, let's pretend for one second he was telling me the truth. If so, then his sitting there taking everything I did to him makes him the dumbest guy in the world. He would have told me right away what he'd overheard. He wouldn't have waited till I shot him."

"He ain't dumb," Sheriff Haggerty says, "but he ain't bright either," he says, but surely he can't believe what he's trying to sell me. He knows anybody in their right mind would have given up those two search and rescue guys the moment I showed up.

"We found her bag in his truck."

"He says somebody else put it there."

"And his fingerprints are on her headband," I say.

"There's a thousand ways that could have happened."

"That's what he said."

He says nothing. I say nothing. We stare at each other for a few moments. Then I break the silence. "Come on, Sheriff, you know it didn't take a beating to fire up Conrad's memory."

"You should have brought him in."

"You wouldn't have been objective."

I see it coming, and he knows I see it coming, this big lumbering right hook that he winds into, but I don't try to avoid it. It catches me in the jaw and makes my teeth ring and numbs my entire face, and I drop to the ground.

"Don't get up," he says, and I don't. He stands over me, a light creating a halo effect around his head as he looks down. "Here's what's going to happen. You hurt my son and you shouldn't have. You crossed the line so goddamn far there's no coming back for you. I've always liked you, son. Back when I was throwing your dad into the drunk tank every second day, I was happy to help you out because you were a good kid who didn't deserve the father he got. I was proud of you when you entered law enforcement. Hell, you've been more like a son to me over

WHATEVER IT TAKES

the years than my own son. We have history, you and me, and right now that history is the only thing keeping me from throwing your ass in jail. You're going to hand me your badge and your gun and the keys to the car, then you're going to get the hell out of Dodge and you ain't ever going to come back. If I see your face in this town again, I swear to God I'm going to lock you up and leave you to rot."

Twelve Years Later

Six

It's a big-city bar with neon in the windows and big-screen TVs on the walls. There's a lot of blonde-colored wood around the bar, darker stuff on the walls, and a lot of character knocked and chipped and worn into all of it. There's a jukebox in the corner that doesn't play anything recorded either side of the seventies and a pool table that needs new felt after somebody spilled their drink on it a few weeks ago. We serve thirty different kinds of beer, thirty different kinds of wine, and spirits from all different countries. Friday nights we have a live band, Tuesday night is ladies' night, and Sunday night — so it seems — is armed robbery night. I've been working here for the last twelve years and have been part owner for the last ten, and in that time we've been robbed twice and the guy in front of me is amping to make that a third, and every time it's been a Sunday. His floppy hair is dirty and his face is covered in acne and he's skinny and jacked, and if the gun accidentally goes off it could hit me or maybe it could hit something a mile to my left.

"This isn't a bank," I tell him, and my hands are out to my sides in a nice peaceful gesture because I'm a peaceful gesture kind of guy. "Why don't you put the gun down and walk on out of here and we all go about putting this behind us?"

He looks left, then he looks right, and whatever he's looking for he doesn't see it. Or maybe he does. Pink Floyd is coming from the jukebox, the band singing about being comfortably numb, which sums up half of what I'm feeling.

"Just give me what you have."

"I have some advice," I tell him.

“I don’t want your advice.”

“It’s free. That and the peanuts, those are two things in here you don’t have to pay for, though if you’re going to have the peanuts it’s understood you’re going to have bought yourself a drink. We give away peanuts to everybody who doesn’t buy a drink, well, we’d end up not being able to afford peanuts anymore.”

He looks confused. He looks left and right again, and this time it’s only his eyes that move. The gun wavers a little.

I carry on. “And if we couldn’t afford peanuts, then we couldn’t afford a lot of other stuff too. You’d be wasting your time coming in here waving your gun around because there’d be nothing to steal.”

“Seriously? Dude? Seriously? Do you want to die?”

I shrug, as if it’s no big deal, but of course it’s a big deal. My heart is hammering but guys like this are like dogs — you show fear around them, they’ll use it against you. He’ll take the cash out of the till, then take my wallet, take wallets and phones and jewelry from everybody here, maybe take a hostage, maybe kill somebody. Of course guys like this are also unpredictable, so if you don’t show fear they’re equally likely to put you down for disrespecting them. The gun might be unloaded, or it might be he’s itching to shoot somebody today, or maybe it’s loaded and he thinks it isn’t. There’s no right or wrong. There just *is*.

I open the till. There are a dozen people in the bar, some of them watching and some unaware of what’s going on. Sunday-night crowds are generally low key. It’s why an hour ago I gave the other bartender the rest of the night off.

Pink Floyd ends and The Doors take over, playing something also recorded just in time to make the cut. The thing about small towns is I got used to dealing with small-town assholes — now living in a big city I have to deal with guys who asshole things up on a bigger scale. I rake out the cash and put it on the counter. There can’t be more than four hundred bucks. It’s not worth dying for. Then again, no amount is.

“The coins, man, the coins too,” he says.

“You catching the bus?”

“You want to catch a bullet?”

I scoop out the coins and put them on the bar and a couple roll off and land on the floor on my side and I go to bend down for them and he

tells me to stop, which is a real shame because there's a gun down there and it's why I let a couple of nickels roll off the bar.

"Put them in a bag."

"I don't have a bag," I tell him.

"Why not?"

"Do you have one?"

"No."

"Then don't give me a hard time for not having one. You're the one who had all this planned out, not me."

He grabs the notes and stuffs them into his pocket. "Give me your phone too."

"I don't have a phone."

"What?"

"I don't have a phone. Look, buddy, you've got what you came for, so how about you leave while things are still good?"

"Just . . . just give me your phone, your phone, man, just . . . just hand it over without all your grief about, about not owning one, because everybody has one."

"Not me," I say, and then, right on cue my phone rings. Of course it does. Why wouldn't it? "That's not mine."

He puts both hands on the gun to steady it. It rocks back and forth as he tries to draw a bead on my face. It's unnerving as hell. "I can shoot you and take it from you," he says.

I put the phone on the counter. It's still ringing. Caller ID says it's Maggie.

"You lied," he says.

"Please, I'm begging you, don't take my phone. I need it," I say, looking at the display. I haven't spoken to Maggie in ten years.

The door to the bar opens behind him and my robber for the evening spins and around and takes a shot, the bullet lodging into the doorframe between a man and a woman walking in. They stare in our direction looking at the gun, then the man dives to the floor and the woman turns and runs back outside. I grab at the shooter's arm but I'm not quick enough. He points the gun at my face.

"Don't," I tell him.

He pulls the trigger. The gun clicks and nothing happens, and he

looks at the gun then looks at his hand and tries to figure out what the problem is, and whatever answer he comes up with he doesn't share, because he grabs my phone off the counter and bolts for the door. I watch him go, unable to move, listening to the sound that gun made over and over inside my head, not just listening to it, but *feeling* it, the same way you feel a dentist drill you hear operating on another patient. I put both hands on the bar to keep myself from falling over. All the strength has drained out of my legs. He pulled the trigger. He tried to kill me. In another timeline right now another version of me is lying on the floor with a head that doesn't look like a head anymore.

"You okay?" A guy has come up to the bar, but I can barely hear him because my ears are ringing loudly. I can't answer him. The guy who dived for the floor a few moments ago gets up and dusts down his suit. He's completely pale. His color and look reflect my own. In that other timeline he's lying dead on the floor too.

"Hey, hey, man, you okay?"

I look at the man at the bar talking to me. Feeling comes back into my legs. I let go of the alternate timeline and focus on this one. "I'm fine," I tell him, my voice low.

"You don't look fine."

"I'm fine," I say, louder this time, then to prove just how fine I am, I say, "Drinks are on the house." I say it loud enough for everybody to hear. I'm expecting everybody to woohoo, but nobody does.

Suit Guy looks at me, and says, "Okay," either to this entire situation or to the free drinks. He looks confused. He jams a finger into his ear and waggles it back and forth as if he can pry out the ringing sound. I don't see him being a repeat customer. "Did that . . . did that just happen?"

"It did."

"I should . . . I should go find my girlfriend."

We talk with loud voices so we can be heard. "That sounds like a good idea," I tell him.

"I . . . I'm not so sure we'll come back," he says.

"I won't hold it against you."

He heads out in the direction his girlfriend went. I can see her across the street, standing in the doorway of a restaurant. She's on the phone, no doubt to the police. The guy who approached me asks again if I'm

okay. I tell him that I am. And I am. Now.

With the danger over and the police on the way, people go back to the business of drinking. Nobody leaves. Plenty of them have their cellphones out making calls. The ringing in my ears fades. I pour some beers as if what just happened is no big deal. I answer some questions about how scared / nervous / kickass I was, and then the police show up. They don't come in guns blazing which means they know the perp has long since gone. It's a pair of patrol officers, a guy and a woman, who look like they could be brother and sister. Not charismatic, but both nice enough, the kind of people you forget you ever met about fifteen minutes after they've gone. I offer them a drink and neither of them look tempted.

I go over the sequence of events. There isn't much to say. A guy came in, he pointed a gun, and he left with money that wasn't his. What did he look like? He was thin, wiry, ugly, he looked like he was high, he looked like an asshole, he looked like the kind of guy who'd say things like *meth is the breakfast of champions*. Could I be more specific? Yeah, he was *really* ugly. He *really* looked like an asshole. He was wearing blue jeans and a gray hoodie. Nothing more? No characteristics? How old was he? Did he have tattoos? Scars? I tell them everything happened so quickly and all I really saw was the gun. I tell them that the gun seemed like the biggest thing in the room. It had its own gravity. It was a black hole I couldn't see beyond.

What about the security cameras? I shake my head. I tell them they haven't worked in eighteen months. They tell me I should get them fixed. I tell them that's the plan. They interview others at the bar and ninety minutes later they leave, telling me they'll update me if they find anything.

I call final drinks and nobody complains because everybody is figuring I deserve an early night. Thirty minutes later I'm locking up the bar. In the office I watch the security footage I told the police I didn't have and get another good look at the guy. Then I fire up the computer and log in to my phone account and a minute later there's a blue dot on a map telling me where my phone is. It's a mile away from here. A fifteen-minute walk, maybe twenty. The dot isn't moving. I write down the address and grab the gun from under the counter and lock up the bar.

Seven

It's midnight when I get home. I live on the top floor of an apartment building that's six stories high, giving me a nice view out over the city. It's a nice place. It has two bedrooms and an open-plan kitchen flowing into the dining room and lounge. I used the money from the sale of our house back in Acacia Pines to invest in the bar ten years ago, and since then business has been good. There's a set of French doors that open onto a balcony, the one on the right with a cat door cut into it. My cat, Legolas, a rescue tabby who lost one of his back legs when he was a kitten, spends his days out there, jumping from the balcony onto the oak tree that reaches our floor, coming inside when he's hungry or tired or wants cuddles. He comes in now and follows me into the bathroom and watches me wash up.

"You hungry, Lego?"

He meows. Yes. He's hungry.

I fill his bowl and freshen up his water and sit down on the couch with a beer. I use a tea towel to wipe the blood off my cellphone. Then I have a drink and dial the number that reaches out over a thousand miles and takes me back twelve years to the last time I saw her. In the beginning we'd talk on the phone a little. Then she asked for a divorce. Then we sold the house. Then we stopped talking. In a way it was like she had died.

"Hello, Noah," she says.

The line is so clear it sounds like she's sitting next to me. I picture her on the couch we used to own in the house we used to own in the life we used to share. How have I let ten years go by without reaching out?

“Hey,” I say. “I hope I didn’t wake you.”

“I was still awake,” she says. “I’m glad you called. I . . . I wasn’t sure you would.”

“Your message sounded important.” I had listened to it outside the apartment complex where the man who’d stolen my phone lived. Maggie had asked me to call her back as soon as I could, day or night. “I mean . . . I would have called you back even if it hadn’t.”

“It’s good to hear your voice,” she says.

“It’s good to hear yours,” I say, and it is. It really is.

“I’ve often thought of calling you,” she says, and I know that this isn’t a social call. She’s ringing to tell me something. Somebody has died. Either her mom, or her dad, or maybe it’s Sheriff Haggerty, or Drew, or any one of a number of people I used to know. Maybe it’s all of them. Maybe a tornado came and swept everybody from my old life out to sea. “I’ve always hated the way things ended between us.”

“None of it was your fault,” I say, and it’s true. For years I blamed Conrad Haggerty. He was the reason I had to leave town, the reason my marriage fell apart, and it took time to admit the reason for those things wasn’t him, but me. It was never Maggie.

“Still . . . I’ve often thought of calling you to tell you how sorry I am about the way things turned out.”

“I’m sorry too.”

“Can you believe it’s been twelve years?” she asks.

“Feels like eleven.”

She laughs. It’s a little forced. Whatever is wrong, I want her to get to it on her own. I wonder if she’s been drinking. I hope so. I hope this is a melancholy call and nothing more. Legolas jumps up on the couch next to me and stretches out.

“I’m . . . I’m married,” she says.

My chest tightens. “I’m happy for you.”

“I have children too. A boy and a girl. Seven and five. My husband . . . his name is Stephen. You’d like him.”

“I’m sure I would,” I say, sure that I wouldn’t. Why would I?

“You?” she asks. “Are you with anybody? Do you have a family?”

“No,” I tell her, and I don’t elaborate because there’s nothing to elaborate on. I could tell her about my apartment, the nice view, the

three-legged cat I adopted from a shelter when I moved in here since the place already came with a cat door. I could tell her that I just put a dent in somebody's skull so I could get my phone back to hear the message she left me. I could tell her that the man I became twelve years ago didn't stick around — that it took a man trying to kill me in my bar to bring him back.

“Are you happy?”

“Yeah, I am,” I tell her, because I am. I've had a few relationships that have ended amicably. Every couple of years I try to visit another small corner of the world. I like my bar, my apartment, my cat. I like my life. “Really happy.”

“I'm sorry,” she says. “I'm sorry about the way everything went down. I'm sorry I didn't do more for you back then. I'm sorry . . . I'm sorry I didn't go with you.”

“It's okay,” I tell her. “It's all in the past.”

“I thought . . . I thought you were going to come back, you know? After a few weeks or so, or maybe a month. I thought everybody would cool off and things would go back to normal, even though I knew they couldn't.”

She'd made it clear before I left that she never wanted to see me again. I had no reason to come back. “Maggie, why are you calling me? It's great to hear from you, it really is, but there's a reason you're calling me now, and as much as I love the idea of catching up, something must have happened.”

“It's Alyssa,” she says. “Alyssa Stone.”

I'm back in the basement, walking down the stairs with my flashlight. I can smell the room and feel how warm the house is and I can see Alyssa huddled in the corner. I can see her swollen ankle, her black eye. My ex-wife isn't ringing me to give me good news. She's not ringing to tell me Alyssa graduated college or wrote a novel or won the lottery. I tighten my grip on the phone, take my feet off the coffee table and sit up straight. Legolas, who was dozing, can sense the change in atmosphere. He looks at me, concerned.

“She's missing,” she says. “She's been missing since Thursday, and I . . . I guess . . . I guess I thought you'd want to know. I . . . I guess . . . I don't know,” she says, only she does know, and I know too. I was the one who

WHATEVER IT TAKES

found Alyssa all those years ago because I was willing to do whatever it took. Maggie is reaching out to ask me if I'm willing to do it all over.

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