



Prologue

The night was warm, the moon full as a masked figure weaves his way through a dense woods of oak and spruce and pine trees. Dressed in black—tight jeans, tee shirt, socks, hiking boots, and a baseball cap pulled down to the bridge of his nose—he silently slips from one shadow to the next as he steps over pine cones and tree branches that litter the underbrush. He's carrying a backpack and swinging a can of gasoline as he stops to catch his breath and check on the time.

3:00 a.m.

Right on his schedule.

Through the trees, he could see the light above the backdoor of a modern split-level house a hundred yards in front of him. Cautiously, he continues down a short path, until he reaches the backyard with its flowering azaleas, Annabelle hydrangeas, and beds of tulips and roses. He pauses, looking up and down the block. Minutes go by. No sounds. No movement. No lights in the neighbors' windows. Grimacing, he creeps across the lawn, still swinging the can of gasoline, and at the back porch, he pauses again, catching his breath, before pulling off his backpack, unzipping the front flap, and removing a pair of Latex gloves and a razor-sharp utility knife. Starting at the top, he cuts a long incision down to the bottom of a screened

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door, repacks the utility knife, picks up the gasoline, and slips onto the porch. Turning on a penlight, he checks the floor plans he'd stolen from the town hall, scans from left to right then from right to left, until he locates the door leading to a small sitting room.

Quietly, he crosses the slate floor.

Jimmys the lock.

And enters the house.

The room is filled with overstuffed chairs, leather couches, floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, and newspapers scattered on tables. The man in black rechecks the floor plans, spots the long hallway, then moves from one room to the next, opening each door, peering inside, before quickly walking to the last door at the end of the hall. He opens the door, the master bedroom, and spots a young woman asleep in a four-poster bed, a beam of moonlight splashing across her body, illuminating her face and her long blond hair that's spilling onto her pillow.

He stares.

Longingly.

Then sighs deeply before pulling a syringe from his backpack and approaching her bed. She stirs momentarily, shifting onto her side and pulling a bed sheet up to her chin. He waits nervously until she stops moving, her breathing slow and steady, then reaches down to touch her, her eyes suddenly fluttering open. And before she can scream, he covers her mouth with his hand, strips down the sheet, and jabs the syringe into her arm. Then, as she struggles to break free, her eyes opening wide as she recognizes him, a powerful sedative discharges through her veins and her breathing becomes shallow before her body goes limp.

Now it's my turn to get even, he thinks. You could've been nice to me. You could've gone out with me. You could've been my friend. But no, you only laughed and made me feel worthless. So now you're going to pay the price. You're going to feel my pain. And you're going to join all the others.

Snapping out of his trance, he checks the time.

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3:30 a.m.

Ten more minutes to get out of the house.

He picks up the can of gasoline and begins to pour—onto her sheets and blankets, onto the floor around her bed, and up and down the walls in her room. Then he starts to cry. *This is your fault, not mine. We could've gone out together. Had a good time. Been happy, but instead, you made me feel like a fool.* Wiping tears from his cheeks, he rifles through his backpack and grabs the cigarette he's prepared with a dab of airplane glue on the filter, lights a match, and places it near the pool of gasoline at the foot of her bed.

The time.

3:40 a.m.

He has to get away from the house.

The cigarette will burn down to the filter and ignite the glue in seven minutes, and if he's timed the sedative just right, she'll be waking as the flames lick up the bedding and spread across her body. Grabbing the backpack and the empty gas can, he leaves her bedroom, hurries down the long hallway and into the kitchen where he turns on all the gas burners, before crossing the sitting room and exiting out the hole in the screen door on the back porch. Stopping briefly, he glances down the block. Still no lights. Still no movement. Still nobody watching.

Then he creeps through the backyard, reaches the path into the woods, and starts up the hill overlooking the house.

He checks the time.

Again.

3:45 a.m.

Not much longer.

Moving steadily, he claws his way uphill through the underbrush and arrives at a small patch of open grassland. Sweat pours down his face as excitement rages through his body. When he reaches a narrow rock ledge on the far side of the clearing, he takes a Nikon B500 digital camera from his backpack and focuses the telephoto lens on her bedroom window.

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3:49 a.m.

Still nothing.

The smoke, where is it? Where are the flames? Where is the fire? He begins to panic. *Come on. Come on. Come on. She'll wake up. She'll know. She'll call the police. She'll tell them who I am, what I did.* He is about to pack up and run, when a thin plume of smoke rises from the foot of her bed. *Yes. Yes. Yes. There it is. My fire. My glorious fire.*

He begins snapping pictures—*click, click, click*—as the first flames engulf the sheets and crawl across the floor igniting the curtains. He watches as she sits bolt upright and silently screams, her nightgown catching fire, her pillow in flames, thick smoke filling her room. More pictures—*click, click, click*—as she spills out of bed and rolls on the floor, her arms flailing, her legs kicking, before growing perfectly still as the fire silences her. *Now we are even. An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a life for a life as our Lord, sweet Jesus, commands.* He makes the sign of the cross as a massive explosion rocks the house—the gas from the burners doing their job—blowing out the windows, the flames dancing up the walls and igniting the roof.

Then he looks down the hill. The street is filling with her neighbors dressed in their bedclothes, huddling in small groups, helpless, as sirens begin wailing and fire trucks pull up to the house. Quickly, the man dressed in black packs up his camera, picks up the empty gas can, and makes his way through the woods, vanishing into the darkness of the night.



Chapter 1

Ethan Benson stepped off the bus at Ninety-Second Street and Madison Avenue as he did every day on his way home from work. He pulled up the collar of his camelhair overcoat, the late October evening cold and damp. Near fifty, he was a big man, standing six feet three and weighing close to two hundred pounds. He had a square prominent chin, unusually thick eyebrows, and a perfectly shaped patrician nose. His curly black hair was streaked with patches of gray, and his sparkling blue eyes were haunted by the memories of what was missing in his life. His iPhone pinged, and he pulled it from his pocket. It was Paul Lang, the executive producer of *The Weekly Reporter*, where Ethan worked as an award-winning producer. He stared at the screen, agitated. Whatever Paul wanted could wait till the morning. He shoved the phone back into his pocket and continued walking.

At Ninety-First Street, he crossed Madison Avenue and headed to his apartment halfway down the block toward Fifth Avenue. He'd lived in the same building his entire life in a spacious three-bedroom apartment with a study, a dining room, a large, sunken living room, and a big eat-in kitchen. Once warm and bright and the center of his life, it was now just an empty space. He lit a cigarette and looked up at the dark windows.

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He was lonely.

The neighborhood felt deserted. Most of the fancy boutiques and the overpriced restaurants were already closed for the night—even his supermarket on the corner. Was there any food in the apartment? Did it really matter?

He wasn't hungry—at least, not for food.

He turned, retraced his steps, and continued down Madison Avenue until he reached Eighty-Fourth Street, where he stopped, racked by indecision. He'd promised himself never to go back to that corner. Never. But it was the same promise that he made every day as he climbed out of bed, the same promise that melted away like a dream as soon as he got home from work and stared up at the shuttered windows of his apartment. He took a final hit on his cigarette, stubbed it out on the sidewalk, and walked into the bar.

The Emerald Inn was dark and smelled of stale beer as Ethan crossed the room, nodded to a couple of regulars, and sat down at a table in the corner. A small man in gold wire-rimmed eyeglasses, wearing a white apron and a soiled dishtowel draped over his arm placed a coaster on the table in front of him. "What'll it be tonight, Benson? Do I need to ask?"

"It's been a long day, Jeremy."

"It's always a long day for you, Benson," he said, wiping the sticky surface off the table.

"Johnny Walker Black straight up. Make it a double."

The bartender kept wiping the table, running the dishtowel in small circles. "I don't want any trouble tonight," he said, staring into Ethan's eyes. "Are you gonna behave yourself?"

"The guy got in my face, Jeremy. He was taunting me, pushing my buttons, saying things about me that weren't true. He had it coming."

"It's never your fault, Benson. It's always somebody else's."

"Just pour me a Scotch and stop lecturing me."

The bartender folded the dishtowel over his arm. "Just one. Then you go home."

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Ethan watched as he went back to the bar. *Man, why is my life such a mess?* He closed his eyes and thought about his wife, Sarah. She'd walked out on him over a year ago, taking their son, Luke, and moving a thousand miles away to Cleveland. She had started a new life, renting an apartment near her sister, getting a job as a legal assistant in some fancy law firm, and enrolling Luke in a private school that was costing him a fortune. She had filed a formal separation agreement and was now threatening to sue him for divorce and full custody of their son. *How had it come to this? Jesus, Ethan, it was your fault, not hers. All you had to do was stop drinking. But no, you love your Scotch. More than your wife and kid. You're a lush. A drunk. You got what was coming to you. You deserve to be alone.*

The bartender returned with the shot glass and placed it in front of him. Ethan stared at the Scotch then pushed it away, trying to resist the temptation. But the golden liquid was calling out to him, eating away at his soul. He grabbed the tumbler and drank, the Scotch spilling down his throat, warming his insides.

"Jeremy, another one." He slapped a fifty-dollar bill on the table. "And make it a double."

It was well after midnight when Ethan pushed through the door and into the lobby of his building. His gait was unsteady, his clothes disheveled, his breath reeking of alcohol. He stumbled past Winston the doorman, who spotted the tell-tale signs he was drunk. "Evenin', Mr. Benson. Can I help you to the elevators?"

"I'm fine, Winston, just fine," he said, slurring his words. "I can make it up to my apartment, no problem."

"I walked and fed Holly like you asked," he said, concern on his face. "She's all set for the night. You sure you're okay, Mr. Benson?"

Ethan waved him off.

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“I hate seeing you like this. You gotta lay off that stuff.”

Even the doorman knows I'm a drunk, he thought. Heading across the lobby without answering, he stopped at the mailroom. How many days had it been since he'd picked up the mail? Two? Three? Four? He couldn't remember, then laughed at how his life had fallen apart. He fumbled for the key, dropped it on the floor, and wavered, the room spinning as he picked it up and jammed it into the keyhole. The mailbox was overflowing with bills and magazines and one large manila envelope. He stuffed everything under his arm, walked to the elevators, and waited.

Tears filled his eyes. *I gotta lay off the Scotch. Or I'm gonna end up a dead man.*

He rode up to the ninth floor, then wobbled down to his apartment and pushed into the foyer. He threw the mail on a side table and dropped his overcoat on the floor as his Labrador retriever bounded out of Luke's bedroom. Kneeling, he stroked her. “You miss him too, don't you?”

He flipped on the lights and headed to the kitchen. There were dirty dishes in the sink and food on the table from the night before. Ignoring the mess, he filled Holly's bowl with water and searched the near-empty refrigerator, grabbing a piece of unwrapped cheese and a container of milk. “Well, I guess this is dinner. Not much else to eat tonight, huh, sweet girl?” He devoured the cheese and slurped down the milk, then left the empty container on the counter and headed to his bedroom.

Slowly, he peeled off his clothes and tossed them into the corner before sitting on the bed in his boxer shorts and peering around the room. Sarah had taken most of the furniture, the pictures of Luke, and the dreams of their lives together. The bedroom, once the epicenter of everything that was good, was now an empty shell, devoid of the memories he once cherished. He thought about calling and begging her to forgive him, to bring Luke and come home and give him another chance.

But deep down he knew that she no longer loved him. That their marriage was over.

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His drinking had pushed her away, forcing her to give up on him and their lives together. It had started during their first year of marriage after Sarah had become pregnant. Ethan had been working in an editing room at *The Weekly Reporter* crashing a story for air and had ignored her telephone calls, not realizing she had gone into labor and needed him to come home and take her to the hospital. When he'd finally walked through the door in the middle of the night, Sarah had already delivered a stillborn baby girl, and he had found her sitting on the floor of their living room cradling the dead baby in a pool of blood. He had hit the bottle shortly thereafter—unable to forgive himself for not answering her calls and blaming himself for killing their baby. His love affair with Scotch had mushroomed over the years, putting a wedge in their lives, leading her to take Luke and start a new life without him.

He climbed under the covers, physically exhausted, and tried to drift off. Fifteen minutes. Twenty. A half hour. Still awake, he turned on his side and checked the time: 2:00 a.m. He flipped on a table lamp, grabbed his bathrobe off the floor, and lit a cigarette, then made his way to the kitchen to brew a pot of coffee. Holly scampered out of Luke's bedroom and nuzzled his leg as he filled a large mug, grabbed the mail in the foyer, and headed down to his study. After turning on the desk lamp, he sat down in his red leather chair, booted up his computer, and checked his e-mail. There was a spate of stories from the assignment desk—Trump blaming the Democrats for stealing the election, the Russians sending more soldiers to Ukraine, the Fed raising interest rates to battle inflation. He scanned through the stories, then noticed a message from Paul Lang who wanted to see him first thing in the morning. *That won't be pleasant*, he thought. *It never is anymore.*

He reached for the coffee, hesitated, then grabbed a bottle of Black Label instead. As he sorted through the mail, he took a long pull on the Scotch, dumping the magazines on the floor and sifting through the bills—telephone, mortgage, credit

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cards, insurance, car payments, child support, private school. *Can't deal with this tonight. No way.* He pushed the pile to the corner of his desk, then picked up the manila envelope; his name was written in big block letters on the front. He checked the postmark: Longmeadow, Massachusetts. *Do I know anybody in Longmeadow?* He studied the return address. "Sophie Montgomery. 27 Utica Avenue." *Nope.*

He grabbed a letter opener and slit open the envelope. There was a short newspaper clipping with a yellow Post-it containing a telephone number but no message. Ethan stared at the number—413-272-9111—then placed the Post-it on his desk and glanced at the headline: "Dean of Students Killed in House Fire." After downing more Scotch, he read the story:

Jennifer Bosworth, the dean of students at the prestigious girls school, The Longmeadow Academy, was found dead last night after a fast-moving fire destroyed her home in the tony ninth district. The Longmeadow fire department arrived at the scene shortly after the fire started, but the home was totally engulfed in flames, and there was little authorities could do until the fire burned itself out. Bosworth's body, nearly unrecognizable, was found in her bedroom as firefighters sifted through the rubble. She was pronounced dead at the scene and transported to the coroner's office in nearby Springfield for an autopsy. The fire is under investigation, but the Longmeadow police say it's too early to tell how it started.

Students and faculty were stunned by the news of Bosworth's death. "She

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was loved by all of us,” said a distraught student, “and will be sorely missed.”

“She was fair and compassionate, a true leader, an inspiration for all of our young women,” said Frederick Brownstone, headmaster of the boarding school. “We will have counselors available for our students in the gymnasium all day Friday, and a candle light vigil will be held in Ms. Bosworth’s memory on Saturday evening.”

Ms. Bosworth was thirty-eight years old, and last night’s blaze was the fourth in a string of fires in Longmeadow, all resulting in the death of a homeowner.

Ethan reread the article, stared a moment at the yellow Post-it, then shoved it into his briefcase. Maybe he’d check out the story in the morning. Maybe not. He looked at his watch: 4:00 a.m. Numbed by the Scotch, he placed his head on his desk and closed his eyes. *Sarah. Sarah. Sarah.* He missed her. He missed Luke. He had to find a way to win them back. Then he closed his eyes and fell into a restless sleep, his dreams tormented by loneliness.