

CHAPTER ONE

1

Two days had passed since David Hawkins killed his wife and her lover. It was only the beginning of March, but the weather had been unseasonably warm and the stench in his apartment had become putrid. Even in the crack-infested nest of Eastside Indianapolis's Drake Commons Apartments that David and (until recently) his wife called home, it was only a matter of time before his neighbors would begin to take notice.

David sat on the couch and stared at the empty corner of his living room where his television—long since sold for a vial of crack-cocaine—once stood. “I gotta get them outta this house,” he said, completely unaware he had spoken aloud.

He arose from the couch and crossed the living room to the small hallway toward the back of the apartment. To the right was the bedroom, which was the obvious source of the sickly sweet aroma that permeated the home. Directly across from the bedroom was a tiny bathroom that consisted of a shallow, chipped, faux-marble basin, its rusty plumbing exposed, and a derelict toilet

encrusted with several months of dried shit, puke, and blood. Also, a shower stall stood empty with no curtain or door. The mirror above the sink, half-covered by a series of spider web cracks, left little space to reveal an image to anyone who might happen to stand in front of it.

David was just about to open the bedroom door when he felt his stomach rise from the smell beyond. He quickly about-faced and crashed through the bathroom door, making it to the sink just in time to splatter yesterday's helping of canned ravioli all over its stained, ivory surface.

When he was finished he looked into the mirror, his fractured image staring back at him. His long, stringy, sandy-colored hair was knotted and caked with two days of sweat. He could not be certain, but he thought he also saw traces of blood and brain tissue, either from his wife or from her scumbag fuck-buddy, matted throughout several strands of his hair. His gray eyes stared back at him, as soulless and empty as the space in the living room where his television once stood. The distorted image reflected in the broken mirror made David look twisted and deformed. His brow seemed enormous, as did his left eye socket, both of which protruded grotesquely from the rest of his features.

David spat once more into the sink and grabbed the day-old, half-drunk bottle of Miller High-Life from the corner of the sink. Ignoring the cigarette butt floating at the bottom of the bottle, he took a swig, swished it around in his mouth, and spat its contents into the sink.

He crossed the threshold of the bathroom, advancing toward the closed bedroom door, his footfalls heavy, bearing his stout six-foot-three-inch frame. David forced open the door and entered the room, glancing at the two bodies sharing the space within. Stephanie's naked form was sprawled on the bed, her head and shoulders leaning against the wall, holding her in a half-sitting position. Her once-blonde hair was now scarlet and blood-soaked. Her blue, sightless eyes stared at David accusingly; had he bothered to look back at them, beneath the dime-sized hole in the center of her forehead.

Her lover was in far worse shape than she was, his body lying on the floor at the foot of the bed, just three feet from the door. David knew who he was. He *should* know him; he had been selling his brand of crack and methamphetamine to David and Stephanie the past two and a half years now, for Christ's sake. Jack Farnsworth—Jackie Frost to his business associates—had taken the .45 hollow-point slug at point-blank range while pleading for his wasted life. The bullet had entered through the tear duct of his right eye, splitting his shaven head like a cantaloupe.

David stepped over Farnsworth's corpse and walked to the window at the rear of the bedroom, ignoring as best as he could the sickly perfume that enveloped him. He stared out at the scene beyond the dust and blood-speckled panes before him. From the vantage point of his second-story apartment's rear window, he could see the poorly built maintenance shack below, and the dark thicket of woods beyond.

"That'll have to do," he said. Neither Stephanie nor Jack responded. "Gotta wait till dark, though." He looked out at the

bright blue sky that bore no evidence of the torrential rain that was to come after the sun went down.

David turned around and walked out of the bedroom, pausing just long enough to spit on Frost's corpse along the way, and retired back to the couch to stare mindlessly at the empty corner of the living room where his television once stood, long since sold for a vial of crack-cocaine.

2

“Will you marry me?” Alex asked as they walked out of the movie theater into the cool, crisp darkness beyond.

Justine looked up at him, her sapphire eyes gleaming brightly beneath the glow of the sodium-vapor lights illuminating the parking lot. She smiled up at him, tears of joy falling softly over the curves of her cheeks. “Of course I’ll marry you, Mr. Van Huss.”

Alex smiled down at her and took her hand, admiring her beauty as though he had not seen her nearly every day since he moved into the house across the street from her twelve years ago, when he and Justine were only five years old. “I love you, Justine.” He slipped the ring on her finger. The small diamond set in its center produced a sparkle that could not begin to compete with the glimmer in her bright blue eyes.

“I love you, too, Alex. It’s beautiful,” she said, looking down at the ring.

They continued, hand in hand, across the parking lot. Under the fluorescent glare projected by the lamplights above, Justine's raven hair was a thick, silken shadow, dancing in candlelight.

Two and a half hours ago, the weather had seemed promising. The air was warm, the sunset spectacular, and only a hint of a cool breeze rustled through the budding trees on Eustis Drive, where both Alex and Justine had spent the majority of their lives growing up. Forsaking Alex's car, they had decided to walk.

Now, as they crossed Washington Street and headed east toward Mitthoeffer Road, they quickly regretted their decision. Though the sky was completely bereft of cloud cover when they left for the theater, it now glowed orange as the sodium-arc street lamps refracted their light off low-lying clouds. The wind had picked up considerably, and the smell of ozone filled the air around them. Without warning, the sky opened up and surrendered its burden relentlessly on the world beneath it.

"Shit!" Alex said, almost unheard above the cacophony of hard rain on asphalt. "We're gonna be *soaked!*"

"We're *already* soaked." Justine giggled. "We'll just have to run, that's all. Besides, this is kind of romantic, don't you think?"

Alex looked at her and grinned slyly, his blond hair suddenly a dark brown, plastered around the finely chiseled features of his face. "You just made me sit through *Dirty Dancing*, I've had just about enough romance for one day."

"You jerk," she laughed, slugging him playfully in the arm. "You loved it and you know it, you big softy. Don't think I didn't

see you start to tear up when Patrick Swayze grabbed her up from that table and said ‘Nobody puts Baby in a corner.’”

“Of *course* I looked like I was gonna cry. I was happy!”

“See? Told ya.”

“I was happy because I knew the movie just *had* to be over soon.”

“Oh, *whatever*,” she said, slugging him again, “Brat.”

Alex looked back over his shoulder, grabbed Justine by the wrist, and stopped them both. “You know, even if we run, this is going to take forever, and this rain isn’t letting up.”

“So? It’s not like we can do anything about it. C’mon, I’m getting cold.” She started to move toward Mitthoeffer Road.

Alex tugged on her wrist again and said, “Let’s go this way; I know a shortcut.”

“A shortcut? Where?”

“Over there,” he said, pointing toward a poorly-lit set of buildings about fifty feet west of where they stood. “Through those apartments. My brother and I used to play in the woods behind the apartment complex when we were little. The path through there comes out just over the hill, right at Michigan and Eustis.”

“Alex, we can’t cut through there. It’s *dangerous*! That place is *full* of drug dealers and God knows *what* else.”

“It’s pouring down rain. Who’s going to waste their time getting soaked just to screw with us? It’ll be fine, you’ll see.” Alex put his hand in hers and they quickly headed toward Drake Commons Apartments.

“Wait, Alex...” she gently pulled her hand away from his and stopped. “ I have a bad feeling about this. I really do. I mean, *anything* could happen in there, and no one would even know about it.”

“It’ll be all right, Justine. I *promise*.” Alex walked closer to her. “Do you honestly think I’d ever let anything happen to you? I *love* you, Justine. You’re my whole *world*.” He rubbed his nose against hers and kissed her softly on the lips. “C’mon. I’ll protect ya,” he said with a wink.

“Okay,” she said as she kissed him back.

They raced toward the darkness of the apartment complex, their hands locked, as the rain came down harder. Within seconds, they reached the unlit parking lot.

There were three two-story buildings, one on each side of them, and one directly ahead, beyond which lay the patch of woods and the path that would lead them both to the safety and comfort of their warm, dry homes. The three structures loomed above them and seemed to cast, impossibly, even darker shadows upon the cracked, caliginous macadam beneath their feet.

“I really don’t like this, Alex,” she said, trying to catch her breath as they ran toward the rear building in front of them.

“It’s fine, Justine. Look, there’s no one even *out* here.”

Alex was right. It was just the two of them, waterlogged, racing blindly through the torrential curtain of rain across the quickly flooding parking lot.

3

The exertion of dragging two trash-bag-shrouded corpses down a flight of concrete stairs, and one hundred and fifty feet to the thicket of woods beyond the marshy lawn behind his apartment building had generated enough sweat to drench him as it is. Now, having left his encumbrance in the center of the coppice, where he intended to bury them, he stood before the closed door of the ruined maintenance shed as the rain cascaded upon him, infuriating him even more than he already was. Difficult as it was to see beyond the sheets of the downpour even three feet in front of him, David inspected the padlock that secured the door of the shed from trespassers. As he expected, judging by the decay of Drake Commons' apartment buildings, he found the lock rusted. In fact, it looked as though the lock had not been opened in years.

David withdrew the bolt cutters he had tucked into the waistband of his jeans. The rusty padlock did not break so much as it *crumbled*, having given up on itself long ago.

He pulled open the white door, the lower right-hand corner, boarded over with simple plywood where rot had already set in due to water damage. Ducking his head, he stepped inside. He pulled a small flashlight from his back pocket and, wanting to draw

as little attention to himself as possible, shielded the lens with his hand before turning it on, allowing only what little light he needed to escape from between his fingers in order to see inside the shed.

A shovel leaned against the wall in the far right corner amongst the cobwebs and rusted tools, as unused and deteriorated as everything else in the shack. David grabbed the implement and shutting off his flashlight, left the tool shed without bothering to close the door behind him.

With the shovel slung over his left shoulder, David made his way back to the small path leading into the copse of trees before him to give Stephanie and Jackie a burial that was more proper than either one of them deserved.

When he reached the soon-to-be final resting place of his wife and her lover and discovered that the two of them had not decided to get up and elope after all, David impaled the muddy earth below with the head of the shovel. Inconvenience or not, the rain came to David's advantage in at least one regard; it wasn't going to take him half as long to bury these assholes as he thought it would.

Once the blacktop ended near the building at the North end of the complex, Justine and Alex could no longer run. The unkempt, ankle-high lawn was nearly a swamp even before the rain had begun, rapidly becoming a lake.

Aside from getting their feet stuck in the mud or spraining an ankle while stepping into a hidden, water-filled hole, there were other, more pressing dangers as well: garbage, both seen and unseen, was strewn about the flooded grass in various places. Barely visible to Justine and Alex in the gloom of night and rain were broken, discarded beer bottles and shredded aluminum cans, an old, dry rotted tire, and a shell of a window-unit air-conditioner. Among the litter that neither one of them could see were rusted nails and screws, filthy rags of ruined clothing (predominately men's underwear), used syringes, and spent condoms.

"We have to be careful, babe," Alex said, holding onto Justine's arm just above the elbow, keeping her close to him as they slowly walked amongst the slough terrain. "We're soaked already, so there's really no point in running any more anyway. We'll be home soon enough."

"I know. I'm just a little nervous," she said, keeping her eye on the ground in front of them as they progressed across the field, now like molasses in winter. "At least you were right about no one being outside to bother us. I'd have been scared to *death* if someone around here would have been outside."

"I *toldya* we'd be safe, so long as we don't break an ankle in all this muck."

"Not funny."

"Not *trying* to be. Like I said, *be careful*."

"I will."

As they made it far enough along to see the back of the apartment building, Justine glanced over at it. She shuddered, not due to the chill of the falling rain. Dead ivy crawled up along every inch of the building's surface, from foundation to gutter, like thousands of long, skeletal fingers reaching toward the sky. It seemed plausible that the deceased ivy was the mortar that held the building together.

“Hey, look at that,” Alex said, pointing at the small shack that stood about fifteen feet from the back of the apartment building, and twenty feet to the right of where he and Justine were standing.

Justine, reluctant to take her eyes off the ominous apartment building, as if expecting a rear door to burst open at any moment, a murderous, knife-wielding sociopath erupting in its wake, looked in the direction Alex was indicating. She shuddered again; the small ruined structure seemed to terrify her even more than the adjacent building.

“Kinda creepy, huh? And check it out, the door's open.” Alex started to move in the direction of the shed but Justine grabbed his hand.

“Leave it alone, Alex. Please?” Justine stared at him, pleading into his eyes with her own. “I don't like this. I just wanna get *home* and get *warm*.”

“All right, babe. Let's go.”

The two of them continued toward the thicket. They were now so accustomed to the rain that they hardly noticed it anymore. They were not going to get any wetter than they already were.

When they passed the dilapidated shed, they were less than ten feet away from the edge of the woods. Justine glanced behind her at the decaying structure and saw that the same fleshless fingers that crawled up along the backside of the apartment building and, seemingly along her own *spine*, occupied the north end of the maintenance shack as well. There was a small worktable built in to the back of the structure that even the ivy seemed loathed to touch. The table ran along three-quarters of the length of the shack, supported by two legs made of four-by-fours in front, its rear bolted into the backside of the building. The table appeared to be just as decrepit as the shack it had been built on to: It leaned drastically to the right, making it look as though it were severely warped when, in reality, it was not as far gone as one would think at a glance. The reason for the twisted appearance of the worktable was that its front right leg had sunk into the soft earth beneath it and, judging by its condition, this was not a recent occurrence. In fact, the *only* new addition to the area was the empty bottle of gin tipped over beneath the table.

They had reached the small path at the edge of the thicket and entered the woods, thankful for what little relief the canopy of trees above was able to provide them from the tenacious downpour. They were not ten feet into the coppice when the beam of a flashlight shined upon their faces, simultaneously surprising them and temporarily blinding them. Justine squealed and clamped her hands over her mouth to silence herself. Had she known the extent

of the coming danger to her and her fiancé, she would have kept on screaming—kept on screaming, grabbed Alex, and *ran* until her legs could not run anymore.

It became clear very quickly that the owner of the flashlight was rapidly approaching them. It was clearly a man – the sheer *size* of him was enough to see that. There was something in the man’s other outstretched hand as well. Justine was not quite sure what it was. She was too frightened to pay too much attention to detail. Alex, however, was certain it was a gun.

“Get the fuck *back!*” the man roared from where he stood, less than twenty feet away. Quickly, he started toward the two of them.

Justine and Alex walked backward just as fast as the gunman approached them, not taking their eyes off the man as they stepped out of the woods. Just seconds after they were out of the thicket and back into the marshy clearing, the man with the gun and flashlight stepped out from within the shroud of trees. He was not more than five feet from the two of them now.

Justine and Alex stopped suddenly, having backed into the table attached to the shed. When it became clear that they were stuck, the man halted, shut off the flashlight, and dropped it to the ground. The gun, however, was still pointed at the two of them.

“Where the fuck do *you* two think you’re goin’?” the gunman said, alternating his aim of the weapon from Alex to Justine, and then fixing it permanently on Alex once again.

“W—we were just heading up there,” Alex said, pointing in the direction of the woods. “Our houses are j—just over the hill.”

“Really?” he said, the smile on his face more like a leer, vaguely hidden beneath the stubble on his dirty, disheveled face. “And I’ll bet you two still live with *Mommy and Daddy*, am I right?”

“Y—yes, Sir.” Alex said.

Justine said nothing. She just held on to Alex’s arm with a death-grip and shivered, silent tears streaming down her face, masked by the steady flow of the rain that just then started to let up.

“Sir,” the man said. “I like that – guys like me only get called *sir* by people that don’t know me. By the way, what are *your* names?”

“I’m Alex, and this is my—”

“LET THE CUNT SPEAK FOR HERSELF!”

Justine gasped. She was crying so hard now that she started to hiccup.

“What’s your name, bitch?”

“Jus—Justine,” she sobbed.

“Well, ‘Just Justine’, I’m David.” David looked over at Alex and back to Justine. “So who’s this—*Alex*? Is *that right*?” Not waiting for a reply, he continued, “Who’s this *Alex* guy to you?”

“He’s my boyfriend. *Fiancé*, I mean, h-he just asked me to m-marry him a few m-minutes ago.” Justine could not look David in the eye, fixing her attention on the barrel of the gun aimed at Alex’s face instead.

“Is that right?” David sneered. “And I’ll bet you two think you’re going to live *happily ever after* and all that other horse shit, don’t ya?”

Justine and Alex said nothing. They just stood there trembling. Hoping and praying that David would just go on about his business and leave them to theirs.

“Well I got news for ya both.” With a rictus grin, he said, “Life ain’t got no happy endings. The fact that it *ends* proves that.” Looking at Alex with the gun trained on his face, David nodded in Justine’s direction and said, “Just Justine over there is goin’ to be nuttin’ but a cheatin’ whore, just like the rest of ’em. And *you*. *Sir*. You’re goin’ to find yerself doin’ exactly what I been doin’.”

Alex, unaware that he was doing so, wrapped an arm around Justine’s waist and brought her closer to him. He, too, was starting to cry, and was infuriated with himself for doing so. *Godammit*, he thought, *I’m supposed to be protecting her. I promised her I would. How am I going to be strong for her if I’m over here acting like a sniveling fucking baby?*

“But you know what, Alex?” David said, cocking the gun, “I’m gonna *save* you from all that shit.”

“P-please, Sir. *David*. I’ll give you anything you want. I d-don’t have much, but if you want it it’s yours.”

David laughed. “Boy, you ain’t got shit I could use. You know what they say, ‘*you can’t take it with you*’. So uh, say g’bye to that tasty little bitch you got there.” With that, David pulled the trigger.

The .45 slug struck home just above Alex’s left brow and disintegrated the back of his head. Alex flew back against the shed and slumped to a sitting position, what was left of his head lolled forward, his blood-soaked chin resting on his chest. The back wall of the shed was painted so thick with blood and brain matter that the rain had little to no effect removing it from its surface.

Justine screamed.

“SHUT UP!” David roared, turning the gun on her. “You *SHUT THE FUCK UP*, you little *whore!*”

Justine silenced herself immediately. *God, please let somebody come*, she thought.

David walked briskly to where Justine stood and grabbed her by the throat with his free hand. “Are you gonna be good?”

Justine nodded, tears flooding her cheeks more so than the rain ever could.

“Are you gonna *scream?*”

Justine shook her head, her sapphire eyes as big as saucers.

“Good girl,” he said, never releasing his grip from her throat, but loosening it just a little. “Now, get up on that table.”

Justine did as she was told, hoisting herself up onto the table behind her with her arms. The man continued to keep a firm grip on her throat, though she was no longer being denied air.

David dropped the gun on the ground beside his feet, still easily within reach should he need to use it, and began loosening his belt with his newly freed hand. “You know what I’m gonna do now?” he said, forcing her all the way back against the wall, tearing at the button of her jeans. “I’m gonna treat you like the slut you’re gonna turn out to be.”

Justine sobbed and tried to speak but, even though his grip on her neck no longer blocked airflow, it was *still* tight enough to make even the smallest whisper impossible to get out.

“I’m gonna give you sumthin’ that *limp-dick* over there sure as *fuck* couldn’t give ya.” David ripped Justine’s jeans from her body and dropped his own to his knees. He splayed her legs and tore her panties off as well.

Even as David’s sex slid into hers, and even though she tried, despite her promise, Justine could not scream. The insertion was excruciating, much worse than it would normally have been, because she was still a virgin, yet the screams would not come. With every thrust of David’s hips, his flesh rubbed her raw, as did the shingled, vine-covered exterior of the shed’s wall on the back of her neck and shoulders. It did not take long, but when David came, his semen filled her loins like agonizing, liquid fire.

Spent, David released his grip on the girl. She gasped for breath and sobbed, uncontrollably. “Now you know what it’s like to fuck a *real* man,” he said, pulling up his jeans.

Justine slid off the table and onto the ground, falling over on her side to find her head resting in Alex's lap, her face staring up into his. She never averted her gaze. She could no longer see the man that had raped her and murdered her fiancé. She had no idea where David was or what he was doing. At this point, she did not even care. Justine just lie there, staring up into that once-beautiful face that, not twenty minutes before, she had been prepared to look at every day for the rest of her life—the left half of which was now completely unrecognizable.

She lay there, gazing longingly at the ruined face of her beloved and, just before she heard the shot that killed her and her vision faded to black, she saw an image of herself swimming in Alex's blood.

