**One**

The man walked to the edge of the wood swinging a steel forged axe. Blood dripped from the blade and left a sticky trail in the dead brown leaves.

He whispered as he walked, hardly feeling the wind against his naked flesh or the snow between his toes, oblivious to the wolf that waited in the shadows, tongue lolling through the gap in its teeth.

“Freedom or life?” the man murmured. He waited for a rise in the wind. “Freedom *is* life.”

He stopped in front of a stand of trees, peering up through the branches at a dark blue sky. Night. His favorite time of day. That’s when he last saw his precious brother, Morgan, all those years ago. Calm blue eyes flickering as he lay on his back in a bed of leaves.

“I’m immortal.” Those were his last words.

Sometimes the man would hear things like the rune poems they used to sing, sometimes he liked to run naked through the trees feeling the leaves and branches slapping against his thighs, delighting in the pain. Delighting in the scars.

Delighting in the memory of his mother’s clear angelic voice singing the tributes to Odin.

Sometimes he heard the sound of a truck powering down the track in the morning. At first he thought it was Morgan reborn, until the memories came flooding back.

Dead. Morgan was *dead*.

Well, not quite.

If he listened hard enough he could hear a little boy’s laughter.

“No more games,” he said out loud. “It’s time for bed.”

He let the fiberglass handle slip through his hands, let the axe fall. *Thud.*

The sound reminded him of summer rain and the blur of voices that were once his family. He couldn’t remember their faces. It was so long ago. But they did have faces once, didn’t they?

Sometimes he thought he could see Morgan in the bathroom mirror or on the staircase. Sometimes he saw him running between the trees, turning suddenly and laughing. Morgan liked being chased. He liked being caught. He was only nine.

The man closed his eyes for a moment, hearing the hollow breeze in the pine trees and the young girl’s whispers rattling into the night. What luck for him that such a beautiful head had appeared in such a place. She was young. Too young. He would have searched the universe to snap her up, and tonight the pleasure was all his.

When Odin had all nine, Morgan would walk again. That was the promise.

The man had the seventh head but not the eighth and the ninth. That was the worst of it. Thinking about numbers made his brain hurt, as if his mind was a series of grooved tracks where one had somehow become scratched.

“Odin doesn’t need to know,” he whispered, trying to ground himself.

No, Odin didn’t need to know about the mistake. Everyone makes mistakes. One head’s just as good as another.

Yes, he was good at keeping secrets. He was good at almost anything. Defense was his greatest gift. He’d always defended his brother from the bullies in the playground and he demanded the same in return. And now here he was, alone in the woods in a dark moonlit world.

He was dreaming more and more, and that bothered him. Dreams of pine trees and frozen lakes, dreams of sledges and laughing children. Dreams of going home, things he couldn’t have. To replay childhood memories over and over again in the hope that the ending would somehow change.

He wasn’t sad. Not all the time.

When he took life, it was only to resurrect that which was cruelly taken from him. It was a power he secretly loathed, as if someone had thrown a switch that could never be turned off.

There were no witnesses, no first-hand accounts. That was the beauty of it.

No one to tell him to take deep breaths as they tied him to the bed. No one to flip the switch that released all the barbiturates, the paralytic, and whatever else they pumped into a prisoner’s veins. That was his dream, his longing.

It would stop then. All of it.

He would take his last breath and become immortal. Just like his brother. The battle of good against evil was almost finished. He’d done the right thing.

Only, not in the right way.

**TWO**

Detective David Temeke parked his 1962 Hotchkiss round the back of the Northwest Area Command building where, hopefully, Unit Commander Hackett wouldn’t see it. He had been teased enough about the rattling exhaust and the squeaky horn, but the thing still flew like a phantom. At least in his mind.

He tensed as he turned off the ignition, thinking about his latest case. Former homicide detective, Jack Reynolds, was found dead in his car last Wednesday night with a decapitated cat on the passenger seat. What a bummer, and three weeks before Christmas.

There was a note attached to its back leg with the words *until the ninth hour* written in perfect cursive. Temeke’s jaw tightened just thinking about it. No bastard was going to leave a bloody feline in his car.

There had been other victims of this deranged serial killer. A seventeen-year-old senior at Cibola High. Patti Lucero. It was all over the news and highway billboards and if they didn’t hurry up and find her, there would be candlelight vigils in every town.

Temeke zipped up his jacket and looked up at a gray brick building dedicated to two fallen cops. It was recently built, light and bright, holding an Impact Team of three detectives, one unit sergeant and eight additional teams of sworn officers and admin staff. Very lucky boys and girls, some of whom were still in their beds snoring like chainsaws. It was five-thirty in the morning.

He shivered as he walked toward the front door, rasping a match on the wall to light a cigarette. Two long hard drags later and he noticed a patrol wagon parked nearby with a crime-stopper sticker on the rear window. It was a picture of Bullet, the friendly coyote wearing a Kevlar vest. The heading read *Be alert! Crimes hurt*. Kids liked Bullet. If they were lost or in trouble they could always find a safe-house with the familiar sticker on the front door.

Temeke ran a hand over his bald head. It was powdered with a light dusting of snow, the first flakes of December. The passenger window was heavily tinted and the rubber seal in the door was cracked and peeling. Somehow the wagon no longer looked like the model of security the public was led to believe.

He dropped the remains of his cigarette on the ground and watched it sizzle in a pile of gray slush before the faint orange glow died altogether. He couldn’t believe he’d been relegated to Northwest Area Command, all because he couldn’t get along with the nine detectives and two sergeants assigned to the Homicide Unit. Eight, now Jack was dead. The Chief of Police wasn’t partial to Temeke’s crude humor or his tendency to cut corners and he was beginning to feel like he was being put out to grass.

The doors of the building swung open and Lt. Luis Alvarez, his brother-in-law, burst forth like a big gut from a tight shirt. He was the only friend Temeke had.

“Blimey Luis, got enough gel on that hair?” Each bristle stood to attention with beads of pomade glistening in the sun.

Luis grinned and pointed back at the lobby. “Stinks of bleach in there. Fergus has been mooning Sarge through the window. Left a nasty stain on the glass.”

Temeke remembered the vagrant, all covered in dirt and flashing more of his credentials through an open fly. He leaned towards the window and screwed up his face. “Looks like two puffy clouds with a crack down the middle. And that crack, my friend, was packed with a bit of Aunt Nora two weeks ago.”

Luis shook his head. “Hackett’s mourning Detective Reynolds. Hardly ate the burrito I brought him.”

Temeke tried to picture the scene. “When you found Jack what did you see?”

“I found his car under the bridge on exit 230 to San Mateo. He was hunched over the steering wheel, driver’s window open. There was a gunshot wound to his temple.”

Temeke couldn’t understand why Jack Reynolds would have stopped under the bridge in the first place. Unless he was picking someone up. Someone he knew.

“Just after the murder of the Williams kid, I took a phone call from a young woman. She claimed to have been shot near the Shelby ranch,” Luis said, looking around the parking lot. “She said the little one had been killed. Said it was a mistake. Phone went dead after that. We found Morgan Eriksen. He was disoriented, drugged like he didn’t know what had happened. Trouble was, he had the victim’s blood all over him.”

“Stroke of luck he was sitting there waiting for you.”

Luis grinned. “Lunch? Fat Jacks?”

Temeke shrugged. “Depends what Hackett’s got up his sleeve. It’s the 9th Hour. Every hour.”

Luis bounced down the steps and along the sidewalk towards his parked car, hand tugging at his ear lobe. “I’ve been thinking. The victim was a lot younger than the others. All child and no makeup. Unless he was some kind of pedo, I think he took the wrong one. She wasn’t tagged like the others.”

Temeke knew Luis’ mind had that uncanny way of unraveling faster than a wind-up toy. The victims in their case ranged from fourteen to eighteen; each had been found wearing a silver earing engraved with a number. The Williams girl was only nine and all she had were two diamond studs in her ears. “We don’t know he wasn’t a pedophile. We only have their heads.”

“Who was she with when she was taken?”

Temeke walloped his forehead with a palm. “Her sister. Her fourteen-year-old sister.”

“It’s just a thought,” Luis said, standing beside his car. “But we think he took the wrong girl.”

Cursing loudly, Temeke waved goodbye and stomped into the lobby. The door slammed shut behind him and he stood there for a moment, agonizing on how they were going to keep that bit of news from leaking to the press.

He stiffened suddenly and lifted his chin. “Hello… that’s not bleach,” he said, catching the scent of perfume before a draft snatched away even the faintest whisper of it.

*Hispanic,* he decided. One hundred and twenty-five pounds of muscle and shiny brown skin. Malin Santiago, the squad’s newest recruit. He craned his neck towards the stairs. Too many cigarettes had put a stop to leaping up two flights of them and he decided to use the elevator.

Commander Hackett hogged it whenever he could, insisting the stairs were his. Hackett was his preferred name and he was a bad-tempered old sod at the best of times.

Temeke punched the button and heard a familiar grinding sound from somewhere up there in that dusty shaft. One of these days he would see a blur of faces in that tiny window as the thing zipped downward before crashing to the ground floor. Life was always a gamble.

He was met with the smell of burning rubber as the elevator clawed up one floor, stopping on the second. The walls had a new line of graffiti he hadn’t seen before. The first line read, *Jesus Saves* and underneath someone had written *Pink Car Edition Hot Wheels*.

It reminded him of his childhood. Life in Brixton, London, had never been easy. He had been beaten up twice for having immigrant parents and a school uniform. There was gang graffiti under bridges and the constant reek of death in the public toilets. That’s where the gangs beat you up. That’s where they left you to die. And that’s where bodies frequently turned up. In the lavatories. Where gangs had been peeing all over the evidence since eight o’clock the night before.

England was a wet green place he’d never forget. Too damn cold to go back and there was no family left to speak of now his parents were dead. He moved to New Mexico ten years ago. Better food, better climate. Until the summer months when the heat made the sweat drip between your buttocks.

He was jolted back to the present as the elevator reached the second floor. Hackett stood in the corridor tapping his wrist and hugging a buff file under one arm. “Anything wrong with the stairs?” he asked.

“Stairs? What stairs?” Temeke saw the roll of the eyes and grinned. “Am I late?”

It was his day off and he was already working a double shift. He’d had no sleep last night and if it hadn’t been for those pesky teenagers bumping and grinding in his driveway to a round of *Let’s Play House* by Elvis Presley, he might have got a lot more.

“You’re always late.” Hackett peered at his watch and sneezed. “Twenty-two minutes late if you must know. And I’ve got an allergy in case you were wondering.”

Temeke was wondering. If it was flu he would have told Hackett to push off. Worse than Hackett’s whittering was the frightening fact that he hadn’t been able to see Luis Alvarez for lunch in nearly two weeks. Come to think of it, he hadn’t seen much of his wife either.

“You know why you’re here?” Hackett said.

“No one told me. No one ever does.”

“I expect you saw the paddy wagon.” Hackett combed a thatch of gray hair through his fingers. “They brought Eriksen here this morning. Looks like he wants coffee and a chat. With *you*.”

“Me? Why me?”

“He knows you took that phone call last Friday afternoon from his delectable girlfriend. I think he’d like to know where she is.”

“I’d like to know where she is. Said she was in a house surrounded by trees. Said she was chained to a bed. Then the line went dead. Now why would a nice young girl chain herself to a bed?”

“If I were you, I’d call the psychic. He’s bound to know something.”

“How much are we paying him, sir? Because according to him, the Duke City Police Department is full of murderers and we lucky detectives are too dumb to see it.”

Hackett pursed his lips and sniffed. “We pinged the location of the number she used. Came up stolen. Trouble is, they keep changing.”

“So tell me, if Morgan Eriksen’s inside, whose holding his girlfriend?”

Hackett walked down the corridor alongside Temeke, one hand in his pocket. “She called Lt. Alvarez two weeks ago, told him about the barn, about the Williams girl. She hung up before he could get anything else out of her. Whoever this man is, he calls himself The 9th Hour Killer.”

“And the public thinks it’s Morgan Eriksen.”

Hackett barely nodded, face reddening. “I won’t let DCPD go down for this one, Temeke. We’ve got to find the real killer before the police look like a bunch of idiots. And it won’t be the first time.”

“Probably got a little truncheon, sir.”

“Night stick, Temeke, *night stick*. And it may have escaped our killer’s notice but these nine hours are turning into a few days.”

“Gives us a bit more time then.”

Hackett patted a large belly which gaped through the missing button on his shirt. “This might come as a complete surprise, but you’re not exactly the flavor of the month downtown. That’s why they sent you up here. The Chief’s not ready to get rid of you yet. I’m embarrassed to tell Judge Matthews you’ve been picked for the case. But the fact is, no one else wants it. Not when there’s a cop killer out there.”

“Very commendable, sir.”

“Sarge said you were chatting up his daughter yesterday.”

“Becky’s just a kid. She squeezed my butt when I was leaning over the water fountain. Took the handcuffs right out of my belt and tied herself up. It’s true, sir. Wriggled out all by herself. Double-jointed she told me.”

“Listen, I don’t care about her joints. Keep your fingerprints out of the system.” Hackett sneezed and wiped his nose on a square of toilet paper. “You’ve got a new partner. Malin Santiago. Speaks Norwegian like a native. I want you both out in the field.”

“Trying to get rid of me?”

“To make things easier, Sergeant Moran will locate the witnesses, download any surveillance footage and manage the database. How’s your wife?”

The question took Temeke by surprise. Hackett hardly ever asked officers about their spouses. “Complaining. Said the fairy on the Christmas tree’s packed on a few pounds since last year.”

Hackett stopped in front of a black and white poster of a young woman, seventeen years old with pale blue eyes. “Patti Lucero. Missing for over a week,” he said, sucking in air and shaking his head. “Listen, I know you’re pushing forty and fed up but this could be our lucky break. Eriksen won’t speak to me. He won’t speak to Homicide. See if he knows who did it.”

“Maybe he doesn’t know.”

“Of course he knows.”

“I hope you’re right. I wouldn’t want you making a prat of yourself in front of the judge, sir.”

“You’ll have a few good men,” Hackett said, sighing. “You and your partner are the few good men. No need to meet with the usual squad members and you needn’t worry about their investigative plans. I’ve got it covered. This case is top priority. Why? Because it’s getting out of hand. Every month a girl goes missing, gets a nice silver earring, and the public are starting to panic.”

Temeke nodded. “Witness interviews, search warrants, reports?”

“Like I said, I want you both out in the field. But if you don’t mind keeping me updated, I’d be grateful.” Hackett lowered his voice. “There’s been a few complaints about Darryl Williams, you know, the father of the nine-year-old. Neighbors heard some gun shots last night. I hope nobody told him the killer made a mistake. A father could go over the top if he found out his youngest daughter was mistaken for the eldest. And I don’t want him using that gun on the killer.”

Temeke shrugged. “Not before he’s answered a few questions that is.”

“I want you to take him this.” Hackett handed him a small red notebook. “Let him know she would have wanted him to have it.”

“And he’s going to be okay with the fact that the field investigators didn’t find it all those weeks ago when they were clearing for evidence. He’s going to be okay with the fact that a dog found it instead.”

“Dogs are just as intelligent as man. Only a little more thorough I should say. Eriksen leaves for the Pen this morning. If you guys hit it off, better pin Highway 14 in your GPS. You’ve got three hours before he leaves.” Hackett handed over the buff file and jerked a thumb towards the end of the corridor. “Interview room 3, last on the left.”

“Is his face in the papers yet? Because if not I’d like to keep it that way.”

“Your case, your choice.”

Temeke had hoped he’d seen the last of dead bodies for a while, only recently they were becoming as common as weed. It was the faces he couldn’t stand. Granted, the eyes were closed unless you found one in a back alley all pale and staring. Drunks and the elderly who had seen something of life were bad enough, but it was the kids that tore him apart.

 He nodded at an agent and stared through the security glass at the man sitting at the table. Blond hair braided in a rope from the forehead to the nape of the neck. There was the hint of a tattoo above one ear, barely visible behind the stubble.

Two officers peered through the glass. Captain Fowler, straight-faced and coldly efficient, whose humor never rose higher than sarcasm, and officer Jarvis, fleshy and a little overweight, jaw working over a wad of gum.

“Morgan Eriksen,” Fowler said, folding arms corded with muscle. “Half Norwegian. Apparently. Can’t see why he’d want to talk to you.”

“Has he been read his rights?” Temeke asked.

“Yeah, only he’s too frozen to speak.”

“Frozen with fear, amusement? What?”

Fowler shrugged and shook his head. “Who knows.”

“Lucky he’s hobbled at the ankle and wrists, sir.” Jarvis chimed in, jabbing a pudgy finger at the window and winking a pale blue eye. “There’s no way he can escape. But he could spit.”

Temeke felt the nudge at his elbow, saw Fowler’s thin lips making a beeline for his ear. “Really gets under your skin, doesn’t he?”