

## CHAPTER 1

My nose started bleeding the black stuff just after one o'clock, right in the middle of my whiskey break. Bad timing. I'd had six shots and I intended to drink two more before running back to work—and I sure as hell wanted to smell every hint of every underlying note in the poisoned drink that was destroying my brain cells. I intended to please as many senses as possible during the process of erasing myself from this existence.

Save for me and the bartender, The Sweet Spot was empty. No surprise. Who the hell else would spend their lunch break in a bar tucked away in a Falls Church alley between streets clogged with nightclubs? A naturally tanned man in his early twenties decked out in a tight short-sleeve top and even tighter running capris wouldn't raise Gerry's eyebrows. He'd seen crazier attire at all hours, which was one of the reasons why I'd come. The other: He had two doubles waiting for me on the bar. This was my usual spot at my usual time. I'd strolled in and nodded a greeting; he'd just turned a shoulder, as if he didn't want to acknowledge my presence. Couldn't blame him. I shouldn't be here. Not because it was the middle of a workday, but because the bar was about a twenty- to twenty-five-minute drive from where I worked.

It had taken me about 4.4 seconds to run here, give or take a fraction. From Arlington to Falls Church. Could've done it in less time but, at this time of day on the route I took, I had to

keep looking in multiple directions and readjusting to make sure I didn't collide with anything. The nosebleeds were routine. Correction—they were *becoming* routine. I never used to get them at all. But after every short sprint in the past two weeks, I got a bleed. Never red or even dark red. Always black. Like tar.

Gerry tossed a towel over his shoulder at me, again without looking. It fell limply on my head like a faulty parachute. Not a clean landing—but then again it was hardly a clean towel. Originally white, it now looked like zebra skin. I wasn't fussy; my handkerchief looked worse.

I cleaned up as best as I could, had one more shot, tossed some bills next to the empty glasses, then—once outside—shot off. No change. No goodbye.

The polyester-spandex blend fabric felt great against my skin. When running at *hyper*, my clothes felt as if they *were* my skin. It had taken a long time to figure out the most comfortable attire in which to take my sprints, even longer to find quality shoes. Hell, it'd taken a long time for me to just come to grips with what I can do. After a year, I still haven't figured out why, though I'm sure it had something to do with that damned graduation day. Serves me right for going to a small and privately funded “experimental” college.

In the two weeks between graduation and my first day on my first job, things got fuzzy. My vision got blurrier. I started having a million thoughts at once. My body shook like I'd been injected with half a gallon of espresso. I'd tried to set up an appointment with any number of doctors, but the soonest anyone could see me was six weeks down the road. Having no insurance at the time helped a bunch; it was also the reason I didn't bother with the ER. Northern Virginia hospitals were notorious for rolling insuranceless chumps out of the building and dumping them in the parking lot—or so I'd heard. One day, though, I just couldn't take it anymore. The shakes

got so bad and the thoughts so obstreperous that, in order to release some energy and clear my head, I felt I had no choice but to set out for a jog.

I stepped out of my Arlington studio and checked my watch before pounding my sneakers on the pavement. The next ten seconds were a blur—then suddenly I found myself standing in Alexandria’s Waterfront Park, about ten miles from where I lived. I checked my watch after my vision cleared to find that only ten seconds had passed. My head was clear, my vision was crisp, and—far from wheezing or even breathing hard—my body felt like I imagined it would feel after an hour’s worth of Zen meditation.

I had no idea what had happened. Today, a year later, I’m still clueless. But I’m still running.

I stopped in the empty alley a block away from my office and walked the rest of the way—into the lobby, up ten flights of stairs, and into the locker room. I’d always found it funny that the law firm had a locker room but no workout room. Rumor was one of the partners decided at the last minute they didn’t want to pay for the equipment, so people just ended up using it to shower and freshen up. I peeled out of my running gear, shrugged on my business-casual wear—a light pink shirt and brown dress pants—and took my time getting back to my desk.

No need for a shower, though I did need to clean my nose again. Funny thing about running: I never got sweaty. And near as I could tell, the people and things I passed never felt so much as a breeze. Damned funny.

My word-processing station wasn’t the office’s biggest disaster site, but it was the most notorious. It couldn’t be helped. The work came in quickly, and since my cubicle wasn’t much bigger than a British telephone booth, the documents and requests seemed to pile up like snow in

a blizzard. Given that overtime pay had been nixed, I wasn't about to stay one second later than I needed to just to tidy up or get through nonurgent requests, but I continued to prove myself the firm's best all-around processor anyway. I had better things to do, and I wasn't being paid to be a neat freak.

"Took you long enough." Ricky Adebayo, my sometime cite-checking partner and oftentime pain in the ass, said from the station adjacent to mine. A portly, late twentysomething with a beard as natty as the hair on my scalp, he seemed always to have an appetite. He could only take his lunch break after me, so he got miffed when I took too long. Today, however, I had not.

"I got back with twenty minutes to spare," I said as I sat down. "You can take your usual seventy-five minutes and, for once, not have to lie about it. Go have a porterhouse."

"Not hungry today." Ricky stood up and stretched. "Was just going to take a walk around the park. We're not going to have many more seventy-degree days this year. And you know what that means in the hottie department." He winked—though it wasn't necessary. "Bare legs and tight shirts."

I sighed and lowered my eyes toward the tallest pile on the desk. The document on top was twenty-five pages. It needed to be read closely for sense. I could get through it in less than two minutes, assuming no more than three corrections per page.

"Speaking of departments . . ." Ricky said. "Human Resources is looking for you."

I looked at him. He was smirking, as usual. As the better practical joker—Jaysen Ko—was still finishing up his vacation in the Catskills, maybe Ricky was trying to wear the temporary crown as king comedian—but I couldn't figure out the punch line here. Hell, with Jaysen, I

usually couldn't until it was too late. This time I just decided not to react until I heard from a third party.

“Have fun being skeevy. I hope it satiates and shuts you up till tomorrow.”

Ricky coughed a laugh and left the area. I turned my attention back to my work. Before I could even read the first word, my phone rang. I winced at the name on the screen as I picked it up.

“You're finally back?” the voice asked.

First Ricky, now Ms. Kriebel. Was my watch off? I checked my computer's clock. I hadn't been gone more than thirty minutes. All support staff got forty-five for lunch, but I wasn't about to argue with the head of HR.

“Back,” I said. “Is there an issue with my time records again?”

“We need to see you. Could you come down to the office?”

Fantastic.

“Be right down.”

I glanced toward the office of my department supervisor, McCarthy. Glass walls, glass desk, crystal decorations, and all sorts of translucent doodads and knickknacks—there was nothing in there for her to hide behind. She just wasn't in. Could've taken a long lunch or—more likely, more *cowardly*—could've just not wanted to deal with whatever this issue was and kicked the ticking bomb into another office. The office of someone more specialized and senior. Being called down to Human Resources was like being called to the principal's office. I was more familiar with the latter experience, having only been called down to HR twice before. Once when there was a problem with how I was recording my time, another when I'd arrived at the office late—no one had seemed to care about the five feet of snow that had fallen that morning.

“Sit down, Mr. Naughtier.”

I didn't correct her pronunciation of my surname from *NAH*-tea-er to Nah-tea-*AIR*. After a year of it not taking, why bother? She wasn't even looking at me.

Ms. Kriebel wasn't sitting at her overly ornate executive desk; she was standing by the window, peering through the blinds, probably taking a gander at the black cars and darker vans on the avenue below that, as of the past few weeks, seemed to be perpetually threading the streets in the downtown Arlington area; Pentagon stuff, I'd figured. Kriebel was a bird's-nest blonde with the perpetually tortured expression of one who was slowly chewing on lemon skin and pretending to gradually learn to like it. I assumed she didn't want me sitting on her imported leather couch, so I took the most uncomfortable seat in the room.

“Is there a problem?”

She glanced at me, then peered through the blinds once more before walking to her desk.

“A few attorneys have some concerns about your recent work.” She sat in her mocha high-back swivel chair and made a show of opening the seven-inch-thick three-ring binder on the desk in front of her. “Specifically,” she droned, “about some of the things you've been writing in the margins of the documents you're supposed to be proofreading.”

“They're just notes,” I said. “I've always done that. If something's unclear or totally ungrammatical I write suggestions for making it clearer, more to the point.”

“Like ‘Plug the logorrhea, stupid’? Or ‘Go back to third grade, dummy, and pay some damn attention this time’?”

I straightened up. “Uh, I don't ever recall writing—”

Kriebel snapped open the binder rings—a sharp sound that effectively cut off my words—and removed a few pages. She held them out to me. “Your handwriting?”

I stood, took them, and examined the scribbles. “Appears to be . . .”

She removed a thicker stack of papers from the binder, this time with more celerity, and thrust them at me. “And how about these?”

Sweaty palms and twitchy fingers made flipping through them a challenge, but I reviewed pages of what appeared to be Arabic, or Sanskrit, or maybe even alien script. I nodded, since it was my handwriting, but I *didn't* recall ever writing it. Nor did I have any idea what it meant.

“I don't understand this,” was all I could say.

My eyes wandered, noticed four more heavy black binders on her desk. Did they all have to do with me? I sat back down, my eyes falling on the scrolled details of the desk's corner and legs. I pondered whether my drinking was catching up with me. But that just couldn't be it. I never got drunk, not even tipsy.

Kriebel seemed to regard me for a long time. I lifted my gaze to find her blue eyes giving me the icy treatment, as if it would make me crack and confess to an ulterior plot to sabotage the firm by scribbling insults and gibberish on a few documents.

After a while, she said, “You know, under normal circumstances, such behavior would trigger immediate termination. But since so many of the attorneys speak so highly of your work—these few instances excepted—I'd like to offer you an alternative. Something that may help correct this behavior.”

“Okay.” I assumed she was going to test me for drugs. I hoped she'd wait a few hours for me to piss the whiskey out of my system. “What did you have in mind?”

She stood. “Follow me.”

I did as instructed, not wanting to ask any more questions. My nervousness would make my words shaky and imply I was guilty of something even more serious than what they already knew.

I followed her down a narrow hall, a solid wall of framed *Smithsonian Magazine* covers on one side and restrooms, a kitchen area, and the entrance to a quiet room on the other. We rounded a corner and began down a shorter passage, entering a section of the building I'd never had a need to visit before. We stopped in front of what I assumed was a partner's office. After all, only they, Kriebel, and the office manager had corner offices.

I looked at the nameplate next to the door: Karen Torres. Name sounded vaguely familiar, but it wasn't someone I'd worked for before.

I didn't move as Kriebel stepped into the doorway and poked her head in, looking into every space and corner I couldn't see. Finally, she turned to look at me. "You should go in and have a seat. She's probably in the restroom—but she won't mind you waiting in here."

Without a clear smile, frown, or another word, Kriebel stepped around me and turned back the way we'd come. I heaved my shoulders before stepping through the doorway. I moved fully into the office, but I didn't sit down. My eyes roved over the stylish L-shaped desk, cushy chairs, even cushier sofa, and then over all the framed documents on the walls. I didn't see any diplomas or certificates having to do with the legal profession—only psychology. Not liking the flavor of any of this, I turned to leave. A voluptuous woman stood in the doorway, blocking my exit.

Both our mouths hung open, so I couldn't tell which of us gasped louder when our eyes met. Her expression was anything but reserved. Her eyes seemed wide enough to view an entire ocean; her lips stretched far enough apart to gulp it all down. Her shoulder-length auburn hair



with highlights that made it look like brownish fire, tupelo honey skin, and gray eyes behind hot pink cat-eye glasses were all more than enough to explain the expression on *my* face, which she seemed to be studying. I lowered my eyes slightly to get a load of the hot pink nail polish and formed the thought that they, along with her glasses, contrasted with her rather conservative tan pantsuit. Without heels, she would be about a head shorter than me, maybe five foot five, five six. This vision of beauty, I presumed, was Karen Torres, Nutcase Cracker.

Her jaw finally loosened enough for her to breathe out a few coherent words. “I don’t believe this.” I supposed that was a traditional greeting for some.

I just happened to be in the perfect mood to reciprocate. “Neither do I. Just because of a few inappropriate notes, people here think I’m *crazy*?”

She shook her head as if someone had just told her her house had burned down. “I saw the name in the file, but I didn’t believe it was you. But the face is the same . . .”

She still hadn’t moved a step since laying eyes on me, so I stepped forward, studying her face more closely. The eyes . . . Something about those gold-flecked, gray eyes.

“We’ve met, right?”

She slowly nodded. “Back in seventh grade. Before you committed suicide.”

## CHAPTER 2

I don't know why I did it, but I asked the shrink out for a drink after work. I don't know why she accepted. Maybe she needed it even more than I did.

The awkward ten-minute session at work hadn't been much use. After her comment about my alleged suicide and her subsequent stammering and slack-jawed gaping, I'd only reassured her that the mistakes wouldn't happen again before getting up and returning to my desk. She called me later and stuttered something unintelligible. That's when I asked her out.

We went to a relatively quiet dive I knew just off Wilson Boulevard. Close enough to the office for her to remain in her comfort zone, but far enough away that it was unlikely any nosy coworkers—i.e., *any* of them—would see us. I got a booth for added assurance.

It was only after her first dirty margarita that she calmed down enough to utter a coherent sentence.

“I read your file.”

“You said that earlier.”

“No, earlier I'd only had time to look at the name on it. Kriebel only dropped off the file an hour before you came in.”

I shrugged. “Okay, so you read it.”

“And confirmed you are who you are.”

“Yeah. Well, I could’ve told you I am who I am.” And they thought *I* was the one with mental problems?

“You’re Sevin. Sevin-Octaven Naughtier.”

“Just ‘Sevin’ will do. I don’t much acknowledge ‘Octaven’ anymore.”

“At the office, they call you ‘Blinky.’”

I sighed. “One of the partners started it. Kind of a joke about how well I do my job. And speaking of jobs . . . what the hell does a law firm need with a psychologist?”

“It’s not uncommon. A lot of schools in the area have them. Governmental offices and private companies, too.”

“As common as janitors, huh?” After four double shots, the suppressed wiseass in me was surfacing.

She cocked her head. “Yeah. We’re drawn to those with the most *mental* garbage.”

I nudged my inner wiseass to stay down and keep quiet.

“So, uh, *how* exactly do we know each other?”

“Junior high,” she said. “Seventh grade.”

“We were in classes together?” She certainly wasn’t a friend. It wouldn’t take any fingers to count the number of female friends I had back then.

“Not exactly. But I noticed you in the halls.”

“Oh? Falling on my face or punching someone in theirs?” I had quite the unique status that year, constant klutz and small-time bully. Probably explained the number of female friends. And male ones, for that matter.

“You did stick out,” Karen said. “That’s another reason why the tragedy was so *vivid*. At least in my mind. My family moved around a lot, so I was only at the school for a few months, but I remember the news. It was big locally. There was even a school assembly to pay respects. Lots of tears.”

I snorted. “I’ll bet.”

“And confusion.”

“*That* I believe.”

“I mean, there always is when someone takes his own life. And when your mother did the same a week later—”

I leaned back, held up my hands as if she were offering doo-doo on a stick. “Uh-uh, hold it. My mom died in a car accident right before I went to college. Believe me, she and I were both alive and kicking—sometimes each other—all through high school.”

Karen looked at her glass and shook her head as if I’d told a joke with a weak punch line. “She left behind a note detailing how she’d abused you but still couldn’t stand the loss of her only child.”

“Thunk wrong again, shrink. I had—*have* a sister. Don’t know where she is right now, but I damn sure am not an only child. Might’ve had a better upbringing if I had been.”

“Or worse.” She finished off her second drink then tapped the glass. “Some onlyborn are spoiled; others get blamed for every calamity in the world.”

“Well, I am taking responsibility for the calamity of your glass being empty.” As mine soon would be.

I signaled the bartender. Unlike Gerry, this one was cheerfully attentive. In Gerry’s case, I was sure familiarity bred contempt. Or maybe he was just a grouch by nature. To be a

successful bartender for a happy-hour crowd, however, one had to put on a happy face, even if the place wasn't packed.

Karen leaned back. "I think I've had enough."

"Suit yourself." I threw more sign language the bartender's way: Nothing for the lady, one more bourbon double shot for me, and bring the bill.

"Do you mind if I ask you something?" she asked.

"Why should I start now?" I downed the rest of my current drink. "Shoot."

She nodded at my empty glass. "How can you afford to spend so much on that stuff?"

"What stuff?" I glanced down at my hand, still gripping the glass. "Drinks? I'm having a night out."

"From what I've read, you have quite a few of them per week. 'Blinky' my butt. They should call you 'Whiskey.' Or 'Hopscotch.'"

I rubbed the back of my neck, not sure how to respond. I had questions, sure, but running them out loud seemed like a bad idea. What exactly was in the file she'd been given? Was someone keeping tabs on me? Following me? *Why?*

I tried to play it off. "I enjoy the nightlife, when I can get out and live it. From time to time, I work off hours."

"With no overtime?"

"Some partners are very appreciative when I work off-schedule and do a good job."

Her lips contorted into a frown.

I felt my cheeks flush. "I mean *proofreading*. Editing. Word processing. That's *it*. Since there's no overtime pay, they don't mind slipping me a few bucks out of their own fat wallets, especially if I'm reading something important."

“I see . . .”

As soon as I saw my drink land in front of me, I downed it in a finger’s snap. “Shall we call it a night?” I pulled out my own slim wallet, hinting at the correct answer.

Karen steadily looked to her right, scanning the thinning crowd before inexplicably leaning in to whisper, “Don’t, uh, take this the wrong way. Do you mind if I come home with you?”

There were at least three ways I could’ve taken that, all of them wrong. But maybe it was all the double-oaked Woodlands Preserves coursing through my system that caused me to quash my suspicions, soften my temperament, and say, “I’ll catch us a cab.”