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THE SECRETS WE HIDE

KARIN
SLAUGHTER



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PROLOGUE

Allison Vickery threw clothes into the open suitcase on her bed: underwear, bras, shirts, jeans. She didn't give herself time to think about what she was taking. She had to keep moving forward, ignore the voice in her head that said she could wait another minute, another hour, another day. They could buy whatever else they needed on the road. There were hundreds of shady motels between North Falls and Atlanta, but she had to get out of the state. Florida, maybe. Alabama or Mississippi, possibly. Skirt up to Arkansas, Oklahoma, maybe disappear into the vastness of Texas. She would keep under the radar. Pay cash. Use the fake IDs. Make sure she was constantly moving forward, never looking back. Every time they thought they'd caught up with her, she'd be on to the next place, then the next place, and then a month would've passed and she'd be home free.

They would be home free.

She checked her watch. No more delays. They had to leave now. She went into her bathroom. Tears filled her eyes. Her mind started to race—not with things she needed to pack, but all that she was leaving behind. Everyone she loved. The friends she could always count on. The neighbors who'd always checked to make sure she was okay. The other moms, the other cops, the countless people she cherished. Allison had given so much of herself to so many, but she'd always gotten more than she deserved in return.

Was she really going to leave them all behind?

She abandoned the bathroom. Walked down the hall to the guest room. Went to the window, looked out into the street that

had been her home for so many years. The gorgeous fall flowers in the yards. The neatly trimmed grass. The gentle sway of the trees that had stood through ice storms and flooding and once, a long time ago, a tornado that had levelled several houses and a farm.

Allison looked down at her own yard. Mandy had abandoned her bike on the front lawn. They would get her a new one in another town once they had settled. Once they were safe. That was the only thing that mattered right now. Keeping Mandy safe. Allison had to stop making stupid mistakes. Like leaving the damn trunk open and her other suitcase in the driveway. Anybody passing by would know they were going somewhere. She had to stop letting fear and anxiety overtake rational decisions.

Was it rational? Could she really leave?

She bit her lip hard enough to taste blood. She used the pain to focus her thinking. There was no more time for second-guessing. She let her instinct take over.

Check the perimeter. Secure the area.

She studied the neighboring houses. Johna Patel's Subaru. Lynne Emory's Honda. Darla Bell's Camry. Window shades and curtains all open to the afternoon sun. No strangers lurking on the sidewalks. Nothing looked out of place, but that was hardly a comfort. Everything Allison knew as a cop, every corner she saw around, every move she anticipated, would be mirrored on the other side.

Loud music boomed out of a Hyundai as the young man from two streets over barreled past the house. Ginny Saddler's grown son was just as reckless as his alcoholic mother. He was going to end up killing somebody one day.

Allison walked down the hallway, grabbed Mandy's textbooks off her desk. There was no reason her daughter couldn't study on the road. They would have to leave all their electronics here—phones, laptops, tablets. Mandy would be livid, but she wasn't unreasonable. She knew that these things could be tracked. She would know that their lives would be in jeopardy if they were found.

Wouldn't she?

Allison shook her head. No more letting herself get caught

up in questions she had already answered. She would deal with Mandy's anger later. She grabbed a backpack, shoved in the textbooks and headed back into the hallway. Allison bypassed the back stairs that led to the den and took the curved grand staircase so she could make sure the deadbolt on the front door was locked. Her foot was coming off the last tread when she saw the gun.

Her gun.

Glock 19 with a fifteen-round magazine and one in the chamber. Allison had carried the backup weapon since before Mandy was born. She kept it tucked inside a Crown Royal bag in her purse, but the purple velvet bag was on the floor and the gun was aimed at her chest.

There was no time to talk, to plead, to reason, to de-escalate.

She saw the tip of the muzzle flash. Heard the crack of the bullet splitting the air. Felt the shock of what was happening. A decade on patrol pulling over speeders with expired license plates. Another decade of clearing warehouses full of drug dealers. Searching stash houses. Raiding shooting galleries. Every single time she'd entered the unknown, she had expected to catch a bullet. But not now. Not in her own home.

Not from someone she loved.

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**FORTY-SIX MINUTES
BEFORE THE SHOOTING**

CHAPTER ONE

Emmy Clifton watched in silence as her mother's casket was lowered into the ground. Her vision turned shaky. There was a sudden tightness in her chest. She couldn't take a full, deep breath. The electronic motor *tick-tick-ticked* like the second hand on a stopwatch counting down the passage of time. She struggled against the feeling of wrongness in her body. A current of low-level anxiety. A niggling fear that she had missed something important, said something wrong, done something stupid, and it was too late to fix any of it.

She tried to take another breath, but grief snatched the air from her lungs.

Her mother was finally gone. Myrna Joy Clifton had outlived her husband by exactly six weeks. Theirs had not been a great love story, but they had respected each other, supported each other, brought four children into the world, buried one of them before he reached the age of eighteen, denied the existence of another one for over forty years, and helped raise a beautiful grandson into an impressive young man.

Now their entire lives with all their contradictions and complications had been reduced to two caskets laid side by side in two separate holes carved into the side of a hill.

Gerald's headstone had only been placed four days ago.

Husband. Father. Friend.

Emmy looked down at the memorial pamphlet that had been passed out at the church. Her hands were so sweaty that the ink had gone fuzzy, which was the type of metaphor her mother would've appreciated. Father Nate Trask had known Myrna for

over half a century, but he had eulogized her in a way that Myrna herself would've called excessive and untruthful. She had not been a warm woman. She had not loved many people. She had been a steady presence. An unbending ally. The calm in a storm. A wife, mother, grandmother, teacher, intractable, irritating, funny, kind, surprisingly tolerant, often sympathetic, and never, ever without an opinion.

What Emmy wouldn't do now to hear her mother declare that it was silly for hundreds of people to watch a dead body sink into the ground on an unseasonably scorching Saturday afternoon. Myrna had hated idleness almost as much as she'd hated public displays of affection. Even in the last moments of her life, she had been eager to get things over with. The way she'd gasped for breath hadn't sounded strained so much as exasperated, as if to ask, *Why on earth am I still here?*

Not that she'd understood where *here* was. The death of Emmy's father had been a sharp, sudden cleaving, but the passing of her mother had been one of slow deprivations. For seven excruciating years, Alzheimer's had stolen the essence of Myrna Clifton like a sadistic thief, first snatching the location of petty trinkets—car keys, reading glasses, half-finished books—then grabbing larger, more precious items such as her sharp wit, her keen observations, her love of literature, her disgust with politics, and her phosphorescent rage over the decline of English grammar.

Emmy heard the sickening *thud* of the casket reaching its resting place.

Father Nate asked them to bow their heads. Emmy stared out at the tall oaks clustered in the corner of the North Falls Cemetery, which was packed with almost as many Cliftons above ground as below. She was surrounded by cousins, aunts, great aunts, and distant relatives she knew by sight if not by name. Then there were the Coleman cousins from up north with their spoon faces and heavy clothes because the temperature was in the fifties when they'd flown out of Maryland last night and it was brushing up against seventy when they'd walked out of the North Falls Church of the Redeemer just before noon.

Emmy's son shifted beside her. Cole's head was down, his jaw clenched. He was twenty-three years old, but he had cried

more in the last few weeks than he ever had as a child. She watched Jude lean her shoulder against his, shoring him up. Emmy felt a flash of irritation with a quick chaser of gratitude, which neatly summed up her feelings about her newly returned older sister.

Tommy seemed less conflicted, but it was hard to say with her brother. He was standing on the other side of the grave with the miserable look of a man who was being held at gunpoint. More than any of them, he shared Myrna's discomfort with open expressions of grief. His wife Celia was by his side, gray roots shining through the part in her hair. She winked when Emmy caught her eye. They both knew that Myrna had never approved of her daughter-in-law, which would've been a problem if Celia had actually cared about Myrna's approval.

"Tommy?" Father Nate gestured for Tommy to speak.

Tommy wasn't going to speak. He slowly bent down to scoop up a handful of dirt. Instead of dropping it onto the casket, he held his fist to his chest and bowed his head. Emmy couldn't remember the last time she'd seen her brother without a hat. What was left of his graying hair ringed the bald top of his head like the tonsure on a Franciscan monk. She was shocked to see the crepe of skin sag against the cuff of his button up shirt, the deep wrinkles and discolorations that reminded her of their father's worn hands. The proof of her brother's ageing made her heart tremble in her chest.

Jude had been long gone and Tommy was already in his second year of college when Emmy was born—she had been what her family called a surprise baby, as if no one could quite figure out how it had happened. And now, Tommy had retired from teaching a few weeks ago. He still hadn't figured out what to do with his days. A bike accident had banged up his knee. A wrong move on the pickleball court had resulted in a sprained ankle. He was going to be in a boot for the next two months. Emmy could tell it was wearing on him. Obviously, she had always known her brother was much older, but this was the first time in her life she'd ever thought of him as old.

"All right." Tommy nodded his head once, then turned, then started limping toward the woods with the dirt still clutched to

his chest. Celia didn't follow. She had spent the entirety of her marriage giving various Cliftons their space.

Father Nate pivoted quickly. "Emmy?"

The request lodged a shard of glass in her throat. Delivering her father's eulogy had nearly cut Emmy in two. Her mind raced for something to say about her mother—something positive and deep and meaningful—but then Jude stepped forward and let loose.

"In all my days are trances, and all my nightly dreams are where thy dark eye glances, and there thy footstep gleams—in what ethereal dances, by what eternal streams."

There were murmurs of confusion, but a faint smile played across Cole's lips. He'd grown up hearing his grandmother quote Edgar Allan Poe. Jude had chosen the perfect lines for Myrna's send-off. She gave Emmy a bittersweet smile. Emmy struggled to return it.

Irritation. Gratitude.

Father Nate offered a mumbled "amen" as he closed his Bible, and that was the end of it.

The crowd started to mingle, most of them sticking to the shade of a maple tree's blazing red canopy that would be gone in a few weeks. Emmy saw friends from school and around town, but she lacked the ability to engage. Her cousin Taybee anxiously gripped together her hands, silently conveying her panicked thoughts. People needed to get moving. There was a spread waiting back at her farm—pies cooling on racks, meat in the smokers, cornbread to be eaten, potato salad to be judged.

Emmy turned to console her son, but Jude had already taken him aside. Her hand was resting on his arm. Cole was nodding. They practically had their own language now.

"Help me up." Aunt Millie's gnarled old fingers clutched at Emmy's leg. At ninety-four, Millie was the oldest living Clifton, an honor which seemed more dubious by the day. Her skin felt like a sock sliding over bones as Emmy lifted her from the folding chair.

"The Colemans are all here, but only the Verona branch came from the Wilders, and I suppose the Gilchrights were too high-and-mighty to attend. Good riddance."

Emmy looked around as Millie pointed out the rest, but only to appease her aunt. Spotting representatives from the leading families of North Falls at her mother's graveside was among the things she cared about the least. There were mostly Cliftons here, though some were related by blood and some were not, which was how Taybee had ended up hyphenating her married name to Clifton-Clifton. There were poor Cliftons and rich Cliftons. City Cliftons and Farming Cliftons. Cliftons were on the school board and at the prosecutor's office or, as with Emmy and Cole, at the Clifton County Sheriff's Department.

She was acting sheriff now, at least until the election either made it official or gave it to Brett Temple, a man who was Emmy's subordinate in every way. Her father had served as sheriff for sixty-three years. As deputy chief, Emmy had basically been running the squad before he'd died, but she hadn't realized until Gerald was gone that there were other parts of the job that he'd never told her about. The glad-handing around election time. The horse trading. The way you had to look the other way on one thing so that people would look the other way on another.

She wasn't sure she had the stomach for it.

"Is that Ace?" Aunt Millie's voice raked up in horror. "He has some nerve showing up here."

The relief of Millie stomping away was cancelled out by Uncle Penley approaching. As with most of the men on his side of the family, he was pinheaded and bottom-heavy, his body genetically engineered to withstand a drunken golf cart accident.

"Sad day." Penley fished a worn leather-clad flask out of his jacket pocket. She caught the familiar whiff of Old Rip before he took a long pull. "She loved you."

Emmy nodded, because she had never doubted it.

"We're a little over a month away from the election." Penley gave her a meaningful look. "You're gonna have to bring some energy during the debate with Brett next week. Folks gotta feel like you're not just coasting on your last name. We both know it's what your daddy wanted."

Emmy let her silence linger until Penley gave up and walked away. The more people reminded her that Gerald had wanted her to take his job as sheriff, the less she wanted to do it. The

only reason she was running at all was so that Brett wouldn't win. She'd be damned if she would answer to that jackass. And she'd be doubly damned if Cole had to. Her son had only been with the sheriff's department for five years. If anyone was going to teach him how to be a deputy, it was Emmy.

"How you holdin' up, lady?" Taybee looped her arm through Emmy's, then patted her hand three times in quick succession. "Poor Kaitlynn's sorry she can't make it, but she's about to pop. I told her the baby's gonna have to call me Tay-Tay 'cause I'm too young to be a granny."

Emmy had somehow forgotten that Taybee's daughter was a week from her due date. Myrna had loved babies.

"I'll tell you what," Taybee said, "losing my mama and daddy when I was young didn't make my life any easier, but I was lucky to have Myrna in my corner. Did you see Cousin Ace showed up? I hope he's not here to make a fuss."

The barrage of information was too much to process. Emmy looked for Cole again. He was talking to Celia. Jude was being dragged away by Aunt Millie. She watched the old woman motion for Jude to lean down to share a confidence. Emmy found it strange that Millie turned tight-lipped when anyone asked her about Jude. There was clearly a history between them that neither was inclined to share. Cliftons loved gossip so long as it wasn't about them.

"Good Lord God, this heat is something else." Taybee fanned her hand in front of her face. Her eyes darted around, desperate for someone who could hold a conversation. "Doesn't feel a bit like fall."

Emmy forced a noise from her throat that sounded like agreement. Taybee had never been good with silences. She smoothed back her blond hair, which hadn't moved since she'd rushed Alpha Delta Pi at the University of Georgia thirty years ago. She looked so well put together that Emmy shuddered to think of the contrast.

Taybee gave Emmy's arm another three pats. "We should get this thing moving back to the farm. Why don't I start shooing people down the hill?"

"Yep."

Emmy figured she could lead by example and started toward the zigzagging sidewalk to the parking lot. She had no memory of making this same trek on the day they'd buried her father. Law enforcement officers from the tri-state area had covered the cemetery in a sea of uniforms. The governor had attended. A sitting United States senator. Local politicians. News reporters. Emmy had felt like an imposter wearing her father's sheriff's star. Her dress uniform had been so starched she might as well have worn a cardboard box.

Now, she felt wobbly in the high heels she'd borrowed from a cousin. The label on the dress she'd bought at the outlet store yesterday morning specified hand-wash only, but she'd tossed it into the machine last night and hoped for the best. The best had not happened. Her hip bones felt chafed from the scratchy polyester blend. Every time her arms moved, the zipper bit into the back of her neck like a stinging wasp.

"Em?"

Her ex-husband was wearing a navy suit with a stained blue tie and black cowboy boots, the same outfit he'd worn to her father's funeral, and the same suit that had been hanging in the closet when she'd left him twelve years ago. Jonah Lang's smile had the slippery ease of a man who was stoned out of his mind.

Emmy looked for his truck in the parking lot. "Did you drive here?"

"I showed up for our son like I always do." He left out the fact that he was three hours late. "I don't know why, but Cole loved the old bitch."

Emmy bit her tongue.

"You cleaned up nice." Jonah took her in, head to toe. "Good to see you dressing like a woman for a change."

Emmy tasted blood on her tongue. The horrible part was that she knew he meant it as a compliment. Even worse, for almost the entirety of their marriage, she would've seen it that way, too. "Cole's back up the hill."

She continued the trudge toward the parking lot. The feeling of wrongness flowed back into her body. She was missing something. Doing something wrong. Forgetting something important. Jonah wasn't the reason, but he certainly hadn't helped.

Emmy had just buried her mother. Her father was dead. Her prodigal sister had wooed away her son. Her brother had ghosted his own mother's funeral. Her sister-in-law looked ready to pop some champagne. Her ex couldn't go five minutes without getting high. She was forty-two years old, and she was sleeping in her childhood bedroom with her son down the hall and her sister on the couch, and she was worried about losing her job to a man who thought his Y chromosome made him more qualified than the woman who was already doing the work.

She took a detour from the parking lot and walked toward the stand of oaks in the corner of the cemetery. Emmy had caught a flash of strawberry-blond hair during the service, but she wasn't sure until she rounded the bend that the sun hadn't been playing tricks.

Hannah Collier was sitting on the ground with her back against a tree. She was dressed in black but had wisely chosen Nikes instead of heels. A wadded-up tissue was in her hand. Her eyes were bloodshot from crying.

She saw Emmy and laughed. "Fucking Myrna. She finally found a way to make you wear a dress."

Emmy laughed, too. Then she sat on the ground across from Hannah. She let out a long, slow breath. Her shoulders relaxed. Her heart stopped shaking. Some of the wrongness began to seep from her body.

She had met Hannah the first day of kindergarten. They had become instant best friends, grown up together, practically lived at each other's houses. Hannah had been the first person to hold Cole. Emmy had been the first to hold Davey, Hannah's son. Then Emmy had made a huge mistake and years later Hannah had made a huge mistake of her own, and now they were both sitting on either side of a rift that neither of them knew how to heal.

Hannah asked, "I wonder who Father Nate was talking about? She sounded like such a gentle creature."

Emmy laughed again. "I was trying to remember which book you accidentally dropped in the bathtub that time."

"*The Great Gatsby*. Myrna threw her sandal at my head when she found out." Hannah touched her fingers to her scalp, though

Myrna's aim had been off. "Remember when you scratched her car with your bike?"

"I remember when *you* scratched her car and told her I did it."

Hannah shrugged. Water under the bridge. "Where's Big Dyl?"

Emmy was about to say it was complicated, but the explanation for why her eight-year relationship with Dylan Alvarez had fizzled was actually very simple. "I pushed him away when Myrna started to spiral. I tried to go back, but he couldn't trust me to stay. So that's the end of it."

Hannah looked surprised—not by the reason, but by the candor. "I hooked up with a guy I met in the self-help section at the bookstore."

Emmy grinned, because that was the most Hannah of Hannah stories.

"I dunno, Em. I was lying in bed after, and all I could think about was how much nicer it would've been if I didn't have to listen to him breathe."

"Men do like to breathe."

"His skin radiated heat. It was like sleeping next to a space heater."

Emmy raised an eyebrow. "You sure that was him?"

"Don't talk to me about perimenopause." Hannah fanned her face like the mere mention had brought on a hot flash. "I thought you had to wait until you were fifty, but Aunt Barb told me Mama was two years younger than me when it hit her. How old was Myrna when it started?"

Emmy shrugged, because by the time she'd thought to ask, Myrna couldn't remember.

"Jude's at least sixty. She's gotta be on the other side of it. You should talk to her."

Emmy shook her head. "She has a *tone*."

"My next-door neighbor had a *tone*. Gave her chlamydia."

"I think that was your neighbor's piano teacher."

"Oh," Hannah said. "That makes more sense."

Emmy smiled when Hannah smiled. She let herself enjoy the ease between them before the awkwardness started to tear at the edges. There was a reason Hannah hadn't been at Myrna's