

Prologue

The apartment lights failed to switch on.

Rather than question this unusual development, the reporter pushed his way through the door with dark thoughts about building management, which was a foolish move for a man with powerful enemies. Headlights from a passing car illuminated a sparsely furnished room that revealed the impersonal hand of IKEA and nothing else.

A few steps inside, thick hands yanked his windbreaker down past his shoulders, effectively pinning his arms to his side. As the first man held him, his stocky partner delivered a backhand across the mouth that clarified the intent of the visit, and the reporter, past the initial shock, resisted the urge to fight back.

"Think you could spare the nose?" he asked. "I'm awfully fond—"

The second blow caught him squarely in the eye, and the momentum sent him to the floor. The reporter stifled his cry and reflexively curled into a fetal position.

A few minutes later, the beating stopped, and the stocky man crouched and tapped the reporter's face in an oddly friendly manner.

"You might want to leave town, Evan," he said.

The reporter coughed in response.

The stocky man stood with a sigh and stepped out

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the front door, held open by his lanky partner. Lights from the parking lot exposed navy-blue uniforms and black shoes, shined to spotless perfection.

"Hey," the reporter croaked.

The two men turned back.

"Thanks."

The stocky man nodded once and left.

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Chapter One

Fifty miles west of the Chicago city limits, nestled between stretches of farmland, the town of Settlers Ridge lay sleeping. The residents had hours before adjusted their thermometers to a responsible and cost-effective sixty-five degrees, lined up their morning medications, and retired their teeth to waiting glasses of water. The exception occurred at 54 Mycroft Lane, where a lone man stood before the ornately carved front door of a Victorian home and fumed at the key in his hand.

He was a handsome man by any standard; his forty-two years hung on his tall, lean frame like an afterthought, and a faded scar above his left eye added a roguish edge. His chestnut brown hair, appealingly mussed, complimented chameleon eyes that were mildly grey when he was pleased and steel when he was not. He carried a few mementos of his final night in Los Angeles—courtesy of the LAPD. He sported a darkening bruise under his left eye, a cut on his upper lip, and he

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gently rubbed at a spot on his ribs to reassure himself that they weren't broken.

His name was Evan Miller, and he was unprepared for the chill of an Illinois October. He pulled his windbreaker tightly across his chest and, arms folded for warmth, used the toe of his tennis shoe to lift the edge of the doormat with cautious optimism. There wasn't a spare key.

In his hand, he held two envelopes. The first had been the previous home of the key in his hand. Written in precise, neat script were the words *Flora's house*. Though the house was now his, Evan didn't begrudge the realtor her mistake. He would always think of the white two-story as his late aunt's home, his one childhood refuge from his abusive father. He grimaced at the coincidence—forty-two-years-old and he was still using her home as an escape from men with violent intentions.

The second envelope, blank on the outside and sealed, he had found wrapped around the doorknob with a rubber band. He assumed it was junk mail and shoved both envelopes into his jacket pocket. Then, gripping the key in the manner of a gambler intent on impressing his luck on a pair of dice, he had one more go at the lock, jiggling the knob until the door rattled in its frame. He stepped back and glared at his foe with distaste.

"Welcome home, Evan," he mumbled.

Throughout his varied career as a crime reporter, he had picked up plenty of useful skills from unsavory contacts. For instance, he could read upside down. Though not a trick one would pull out at parties, it had

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served him well when the subject on the other side of the desk was in a rare mood to keep confidences. He could determine a person's date of birth from his or her social security number. That came in useful once; it caused an alderman to resign his position after his bedmate turned out to be more mature in habits than years. Considering the extra-curricular activities of his sources, it surprised him that he had never learned to pick a lock.

His movements as he crossed the porch reflected a man of purpose and rigid control, though inside Evan cringed at the dull echo of his footsteps. He felt like a teenager caught out past curfew, a reminder that the immediate neighborhood resembled a geriatric ward. He thought about tiptoeing but reminded himself that he was a grown man with every right to be outside after ten.

An investigation of the front windows revealed a decal from a local security company that cheerfully listed the terrors awaiting anyone so foolish as to jimmy the windows open. Evan doubted that the alarm system existed as anything other than a threat. The realtor hadn't mentioned one or supplied him with a code, but then she hadn't left him the correct key, either.

He swore under his breath and stepped off the porch to survey his surroundings, kicking at the leaves that covered the steps and sidewalk. Weeds shot out from cracks in the cement, and scattered twigs and branches littered the lawn. His aunt had taken great pains to maintain her home when she was alive, and this evidence of her recent passing settled over the house like a mournful shroud. Once again, he wondered at his

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decision to return to Settlers Ridge.

Long forgotten, rural smells assailed his nose—smoky residue from a nearby chimney, rotting leaves, and what he thought might be cow. The country silence left him uneasy.

A balcony lined the second story of the house, duplicating the porch below. He wasn't confident that he could make the climb up, but the thought of spending another night sleeping in his car spurred him on. He balanced on the step railing and hoisted himself up, grabbing at the pickets until he found solid footing at the edge of the roof. He winced when the gate caught his injured ribs, and he flipped over the railing and landed hard on his back.

His only view as he recovered his wind was the late sky directly above. Moonlight broke through heavy cloud cover. Evan couldn't remember the last time he had witnessed a night sky that hadn't been gleefully contrived by electronics and imagination at the local planetarium. Back in Los Angeles, the moon took one look at the light pollution and headed for friendlier skies. He stared until the cold wood penetrated his jacket.

He was not surprised to find the balcony doors locked as well as the surrounding windows. While he tried to come up with a plan, he leaned against the railing and looked out over Settlers Ridge, the second last place on earth he wanted to be.

Across the street, behind the row of residences lining Mycroft Lane, the land drifted up into a peaked hill—the alleged ridge of Settlers Ridge. At the top, a sprawling

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Tudor home twinkled with security lights; the brightest came from a brilliant floodlight that illuminated a traditionally painted barn fifty yards behind the house. In the near absolute darkness of the lower neighborhood, the effect was of a secular star of Bethlehem, beaming over the homeowners with benevolent care.

Robinson Ranch. The quasi-monarchy of Settlers Ridge. Invitations to fund-raisers and charity balls inevitably included Betty and Seamus Robinson. His late Aunt Flora had referred to them as the Local Gentry.

He twisted his ankle on the drop to the ground, having overestimated both the distance and his dexterity. When the shooting pain subsided enough to suffer his weight, Evan moved to the sidewalk, intent on finding a way into the backyard. Perspiration brought on by his exertions ran down his neck. A warm bed now took second place to a hot shower. He was determined to get inside his new home.

His remaining options included a walk around the block to an alley that would give him access to the garage. The door might not be locked, but his fortune so far told him it would be, and he didn't think his ankle would agree to the journey anyway.

The homeowner to the right had barricaded his yard behind a gigantic hedge of lilac bushes that drooped forward and hungrily reached over the edge of Evan's property. The branches stretched out—skeletal fingers that threatened to grab at passers-by. The effect was both aesthetically pleasing and intimidating, like placing a bloodthirsty Rottweiler at the gate and then teaching it to

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smile.

The neighbor to the right was more familiar. Evan recognized the wall of hap-hazardously placed stones as the same barrier erected by the surly old man who owned the property when Evan was a boy. Gus Wientrob. The divider was Gus's personal Berlin wall, erected to keep the greedy, capitalist children from rifling the tiny apple orchard behind his house. On Evan's visits, he and his contemporaries viewed the wall as a challenge, and Evan remembered scaling the stones with ease. But that was too many years ago, and lacking the confidence of youth, he decided to try the lilac bushes first.

He spun at a sudden scraping on the sidewalk and held his breath as he studied the landscape. The instinct to run was strong, but he forced himself to remain motionless, searching the shadows. Settlers Ridge was a long way from Los Angeles, but the reasons behind his hurried departure of the latter included a small group of powerful and angry men who felt that Evan had crossed them, probably because he had. The LAPD had no jurisdiction here, but that didn't mean that individual members couldn't find ways to carry their grudge past the Illinois border.

Evan cursed softly at his edginess, a recent addition to his already complex emotional state. He refused to spend the rest of his life jumping every time a car backfired. He squared his shoulders and limped purposefully through the neighbor's yard, prodding and searching the tangled branches until he came upon a triangular gap in the hedge at ground level. He dropped

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into a squat and inched his way into his backyard. When he was almost through, he pushed with more enthusiasm than necessary and pitched forward onto a stone walkway.

“Dammit!”

He rubbed his right knee and felt the ground, assuming from the level of pain inflicted that he would find a boulder. Maybe a rusty, jagged rake. His fingers met with a small, square object, and he held it up for inspection.

It was a cigarette lighter. In the moonlight, he could make out the cursive initials DD. He pocketed his find and stood.

The moon disappeared again behind a drift of clouds, and his first step forward sent him careening over a small, prickly shrub. He remembered with dismay that his aunt had had unconventional tastes; a landscape of neatly placed fauna would not have pleased her. The yard would likely be a minefield of scattered pots and ugly garden trolls. He also knew from sporadic correspondence that she had installed a swimming pool. With Flora, this could mean anything from an Olympic-sized arena to a tin bucket and a rubber duck. He inched forward in the dark with wary steps until his footing found firm ground, and he knew he had reached the patio. As he approached the house, a blinding light lit up the backyard next door.

“Who’s out there?” cried a man's voice.

Evan was about to step forward and explain, had actually raised a hand in greeting, when he stopped. His arrival was unexpected. It was after midnight. He suspected that any attempt to communicate his presence

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would result in the appearance of the local police. His hand reflexively touched the bruise under his eye. The police were the last people that Evan Miller wanted to meet.

He pressed himself into the shadow of the wall and waited. He took advantage of the peripheral light bleeding into his backyard to glance to his right and inspect the back door.

Doors. Where there used to be a swinging screen door, there now stood a set of French doors. He could see the glint of metal leverages wedged under the knobs—an old fashioned but effective defense against intruders. There was no way into the house.

Five minutes later the security light flipped off, and he cautiously retraced his steps through the hedge.

Back on the street, he shot a dejected look at his faded blue Toyota Corolla—home for the last thirty-six hours. He climbed in, adjusted the seat into a reclining position, and hugged his light jacket to him. He considered running the engine long enough to warm the interior, but the gas indicator had registered empty on his arrival. He wasn't confident that he could make it to a gas station in the morning.

The interior reeked of stale cigarette smoke, and he had to move more than one empty food container before he found a reasonably comfortable position.

His last thought before he fell asleep was that nothing good had ever come to him in Settlers Ridge. He was about to find that this still held true.