

CHAPTER ONE

*My strength is as the strength of ten,
Because my heart is pure.*
—Alfred, Lord Tennyson, *Sir Galahad*

A YEAR IS A LONG TIME, but not long enough.

He needs Catherine. He knows she needs him.

FBI Special Investigator Dr. Catherine Powers is all he has ever needed.

It is as good a day as any for an epiphany.

He watches her red hair shimmer in the sun, adjusting the binoculars' focus as she opens the front door on the gray Cape Cod clapboard cottage she calls home. She has on exercise wear, having just returned from the gym. He wants to smell her, to taste her just like that. Even at this distance, he picks up her slight smell—lavender and sweat.

Pulling out the mail from its box, she is holding the envelope now.

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He feels an adrenaline spark rush through him. His pulse quickens ever so slightly. She turns on her heels, envelope in hand. She has no idea he is back.

She will know soon enough.



When Cat touches the large yellow manila envelope, she shivers. She doesn't know why. It is eighty-five degrees. Maybe information on a new case, but why have they sent it here? To her home? She takes the strange envelope inside into the kitchen. She turns it over with her left hand, opens it, and slides the contents out onto the white and gray marble kitchen counter. Again, a shiver.

Every time she looks at the scar that runs from her index finger to her thumb, she thinks of him. It angers her. He almost ended her career. She will not let him consume her thoughts today.

She sees a golden lock of hair fall out first. The same color as Joey's hair.

Cat gasps. The air around her feels like quicksand. She can feel her heart pounding in her chest. A strange buzzing in her ears. It is as if time is standing still, taunting her as she looks at the hair. She knows it is Joey's hair. She knows what this means.

Who would be sending this?

She already knows the answer in her gut.

She looks inside the envelope; there is a large 8-by-11 black-and-white photograph. Pulling it out, she looks at it. It is Joey restrained in the back of an SUV, his eyes wide with fear. Cat gasps again. Around her, the air feels heavy. She cannot get enough of it in her lungs. The buzzing in her head gets louder. She steadies herself with one hand on the countertop.

"Oh my God." Her right hand comes up to cover her mouth.

She is shaking harder now. A sound in her head like a hornet's nest. Buzzing. Loud. Getting louder.

Seeing another envelope inside, she dares not touch it with her bare hands. Hurrying, she grabs yellow plastic gloves from behind

her kitchen sink and puts them on. Her breathing is ragged now. She feels her blood surging. When she pulls out the second envelope, she hears Joey laughing outside with Max, his chocolate Labrador. The dog that has become his closest friend. The two are inseparable. They are playing in the pool.

“Don’t come in here now, baby” is all she can think to yell.

“Okay, Mom,” he shouts back over the dog’s playful barks.

She takes a kitchen knife and holds it under hot running water until the blade is hot. Careful not to cut it, she runs the knife’s hot blade under the envelope’s seam, opening it. Inside, she sees a folded white single 8-by-11 sheet of paper—and on it, the following in red block letters:

I AM THE LUCKIEST MAN ALIVE.
 I WILL SEE YOU SOON, MY DEAR.
 YOU HAVE NEVER BEEN FAR FROM MY THOUGHTS.
 THROUGH THIS LAST YEAR, YOU HAVE BEEN WITH ME.
 ENCLOSED IS A MEMENTO FROM MY TIME WITH JOEY.
 ERIC

“What kind of joke is this?” Cat says.

But she knows it is no joke.

He is back.

Eric is back.



Instincts take over. Immediately, she is on her cell phone calling Dr. Marsh, the father of BURNING MAN’s first victim.

He picks up on the third ring.

Cat identifies herself and asks if he has received a manila envelope recently.

When he says yes, she responds, “Don’t open it. Take it to the Irvine PD. Take it to McGregor.”

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“But why?” Dr. Marsh asks.

“Because it’s from *him*.”

“What?” Dr. Marsh’s voice quickens. His breathing increases its pace.

“It is from *him*.”

There is silence.

“Okay” is all Dr. Marsh can muster. She can hear him breathing hard into the receiver.

“Get in your car and take it to McGregor. Tell him to handle it like evidence and not to open it until I get there. I am taking a flight out as soon as I can.”

Cat hangs up, hearing Joey and Max together outside.

Knowing Joey has no idea.

Eric is back.

CHAPTER TWO

*He either fears his fate too much,
Or his deserts are small,
That puts it not unto the touch
To win or lose it all.*

—James Graham, *My Dear and Only Love*

THIS IS NOT THE WAY THINGS are supposed to be.

Cat has squared Joey away at a neighbor's house, along with Max. Neither knows what is going on. She tells Joey that something has come up for Mommy's work and she has to leave right away. He cries alligator tears, as usual; Max licking them off his face. Cat's elderly neighbors, Russell and Maggie, love Joey and Max. They understand what Cat does for a living and the fact that she could be back in two days or two months. Joey adds a youthful spark to their lives, and in return they treat him like the grandson they never had. Thank God for good neighbors.

On the plane to John Wayne Airport in Orange County, California, she smiles at the thought of it.

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Then her smile is gone.

She thinks about how much Eric cost her. Joey is no longer a sweet naive child. He is guarded, especially around strangers. His grades have fallen. He is happiest when he is with Max. Perhaps that is because with Max, Joey feels safe. This past year has affected her too. She no longer takes people at their word. Now she needs to independently verify everything, even more than she did before.

Eric had changed both of them.

Following the attack by Eric, Cat spent weeks in surgery and physical therapy with Dr. Hanks in L.A., one of the best hand surgeons in the country. He reconstructed her shattered left hand so that she has about 70 percent use back. Her recovery is painful. But more than the physical pain, she knows she is emotionally scarred.

Because of Eric. Because of what he did to her and her son.

Because of what he took from them.

A certain innocence stolen away. Never to return.

Like Joey, she now finds it hard to trust anyone. Like Joey, she doubts herself at times. She doubts her own judgment sometimes. She doubts she can tell good from evil anymore. A gut instinct she always had to do that—now she doubts it. She doubts she can do her job. She doubts so many things that she once took as a certainty.

And now this.

She orders a double Bloody Mary even though it is ten o'clock in the morning. The flight attendant hardly blinks.

Nerves are getting the better of her.

She takes a sip and leans her head back, closing her eyes.

In the darkness, all she can see is Eric's face.

His cold eyes shining in the darkness. He is waiting for her.

She opens her eyes, takes another sip from the drink, trying to calm herself.

She closes her eyes again.

Now all she can see is Joey in the black-and-white photo—terror taking him over.



McGregor is waiting at the airport. He smiles when he sees her.

Cat's heart skips a beat when she sees him, though she is not sure why. Maybe a result of all they have been through together. Maybe something more.

Cat packs light so they go straight to his car. Always dependable, McGregor has been busy calling the other parents of Eric's victims. Each one reports the same thing. They have all received envelopes in the last few days. Some remain unopened.

Others made the mistake of opening them.

Not believing what they were seeing.

Consuelo, Kim, and all the others—their death masks captured in black and white. Each envelope containing a lock of hair. The families don't know what to think. One of the girls' mothers is hospitalized for trauma.

Cat knows that they will ask her questions she cannot answer.

Why is he back?

Is he going to come after them?

What is he thinking?

Why now?

Why like this?

Are they safe?

Why is he doing this?

She cannot answer.

She does not know the answers yet.

For now, she only knows Eric is out there. He is waiting and watching. Enjoying imposing his will and his terror on these families and on Cat.



Cat sends each envelope to the FBI's Forensic Labs at Quantico. Following diligent work of latent print specialists, she learns that

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they can pull nothing. No fingerprints, partial or full. No DNA. No saliva. No evidence. Nothing.

If the envelopes have been sent by Eric, and Cat has no doubt that they all are, he's been careful. Probably wearing latex gloves and other protection to prevent any evidence transfer.

Ever Eric.

Ever careful.

Ever planning.

Ever cunning.

Cat hates him for it.

CHAPTER THREE

*Fire is the test of gold,
adversity the test of strong men.*
—Seneca, *On Providence*

DAVID WORKS THREE DAYS ON AND four days off. A perfect schedule. As a fire captain, he can choose which three days he wants to work. He always works all three “on days” together, so that he has time to do what he wants.

He wants, and likes, fire.

Even as a child, he had this fascination. More so than most little boys. He went beyond burning ants with magnifying glasses held up to a bright sun. By age five, those kinds of games felt juvenile. He was too smart for that kid stuff. He had taken to starting random brush fires by age seven—watching and laughing as they burned themselves out. By age twelve, he was into burning other things, things that were alive. He found himself fascinated by how they moved and what noises they made as they burned. To him, the fire itself was a fascinating creature. He longed to control it, to capture its essence. To make it his own.

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His parents, of course, had no idea. They were caught up in their own lives. After a few years of being around them, he knew that neither of them would ever amount to anything significant in their pitiful lives. His mother would always be a domineering, angry woman. His father, the dominated one. Unable to stand up for himself. Unable to intercede when she let her hands fly hard against David's face, leaving his ears ringing. Unable to do, or be, much of anything.

Pitiful and weak.

David would never be like that.

Getting into the fire academy was a piece of cake. David kept his body fit and his mind nimble. Combined with his love of fire, David was fearless where others were cautious. No doubt the academy would accept him. Where others failed, David thrived. At the academy, David was enthralled with teaching moments involving fire. With each practice rescue, he grew quicker and more nimble. He enjoyed his dominance over the others. Some of them hated him for it. He didn't care.

He was a loner. That was how he had always been. Their feelings meant nothing to him.

These qualities won him top honors in his graduating class. The same qualities served to move him up the ranks quickly. At age thirty, he is the youngest fire captain in Anaheim. Some of the old guys resented him, but it didn't matter to him.

This is his life to live. Not theirs.

He knows just what he wants from it.

He knows how far to take it.

Now will be his time. Like none before.

These past years, California has been parched. No rain in the "rainy season." And today, hot Santa Ana winds blow fast off the hills in Steven's Canyon. He looks down from a ridge near the 91 Freeway that heads out to Riverside and on to Palm Desert, seeing nice coral and beige and pink stucco houses backed up neatly

against a parched hillside. It is brown, no visible vegetation. Perfect kindling medium.

What a nice day for a little fire.

Above him, the crystal blue sky is patterned with just a few white clouds. A stiff wind is whipping from the south. Monsoonal moisture from the north of Mexico will evaporate before it gets to sunny Southern California. His brown curls tousle in his top-down Mustang convertible as he places his hands on the black leather-wrapped steering wheel. It is hot to his touch but he doesn't mind. He turns over the ignition, hears the Mustang's powerful engine come to life. He puts the car in gear as he feels the hot sun and wind beat down on his face. The sun's heat feels good on his skin. He smells the dry dust that the car whips up. He hears brush, dirt, and rocks meet the Mustang's chassis as the car rockets down toward the freeway. As he drives, he closes his eyes for a second. He can see the fire. See the firestorm to come. The vision of fire, raw and unchallenged, excites him.

Yes, this is a perfect day for a fire.



Cat has her hands full. McGregor looks like he is barely surviving, drinking his third Starbucks latte this morning. His eyes wear dark rings.

On a big white board, all the victims' photos are back up from the evidence room. Each girl looks down at Cat, just as they had a year earlier. For each one, Cat, once again, has no answers. Only questions.

Where had Eric gone?

Cat does not know.

They had staked out his home, La Blanca, for a while, but Eric never went back. Eventually the big white house went into foreclosure and sold. Whoever bought it probably had no idea of what had happened there. And probably got a hell of a deal.

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Eric never returned to Hoag Hospital, as Cat expected he never would. He abandoned his black Cadillac Escalade.

It was as if he vanished into thin air.

He simply disappeared for a year.

And now he is back.

For what purpose?

Does he want to terrorize these families some more?

Is that his game?

Does he want to prove to them that he is invincible?

Is this an ego trip for him?

Is his desire driven by logic or pure depravity?

Is he looking for a reaction?

Is he seeking fame, or is something else driving him?

What does he have to prove?

He's already gotten away with the perfect crime.

Why come back and risk getting caught?

Questions come to Cat in rapid succession, each one more difficult to answer than the last.

How can she answer them?

She is sane; Eric is not.

Cat pulls out her notes from interviews a year ago, skims them, trying to find some clue. Who would he have gone to for help? She can think of no one.

When she calls to Illinois, criminally insane Carl Stearborne is still locked up. He has never been set free. His calls are closely monitored and recorded. Nothing suspicious. Nothing from Eric. So he cannot be the one who helped Eric.

There has to be someone else.

Someone on the outside whom Eric sees as a trusted friend. Someone with the financial resources to help him and to keep his identity quiet. Someone who can help Eric reinvent himself. When she closes her eyes, Cat has no idea who that "someone" might be.