

## CHAPTER 3

1:00 a.m. Monday, 29th October

After a bitter-cold drive into town in the open patrol car, Herrick was forcefully pulled out and roughly pushed up the stairs of Mill Willow Sheriff's Department. Herrick struggled to keep the placid smile from his lips, there was a strange sense of salvation in being arrested. Monarch shoved him up the steps while keeping a firm hold of the restraints tightly secured behind his back. Herrick didn't mind and kept a reserved smile for the holding cell that waited for him. As he climbed the station steps, he stole glances at the surrounding area. The street lights scarcely offered any clarity or detail. He could only just make out the municipal building on the other side of the long public green. It was a handsome structure of composite brick and stone painted in a clear eggshell white. Other than the basic outlines of what he assumed were storefronts and offices, it was all guesswork to try and figure out what lay around him on the dark cloudy night.

"Eyes front, asshole," Monarch grumbled, shoving Herrick forward.

As Herrick arrived at the top of the steps and waited for the door to open, Monarch shoved him further forward with a firm push, using his hefty weight to open the door. Without the use of his hands, Herrick's face was the first to hit the frosted-glass doors. As Herrick staggered in, trying to find his footing, the officer behind the reception desk instantly lifted his head to the chime of the door's bell. Lowering his lips from his Styrofoam coffee cup mid-sip, the officer

looked annoyed at the sudden intrusion. The inside of the sheriff's department was like any typical administrative office. It was large and open-plan, scattered with old oaken desks. Each surface was littered with a mess of paper, folders, and binders, like that of the DMV or a newsroom. Tasteless seasonal Halloween decorations were strung oddly over the walls and workstations. Thin cobwebs, rubber bats, and black- and-orange paper chains of demonic-looking faces hung across the room. With the new introduction of bright incandescent light, Herrick panicked and instinctively looked down at his sodden clothes. But to his surprise and subsequent relief, he saw no blood. His damp clothes were covered in a mixture of only dirt, sweat, and rain. *It's a miracle.*

"Who's this?" the officer behind the reception desk asked, rising slowly from his swivel chair and maintaining an exaggerated look of bewilderment.

"I'm the captain of this station," Monarch responded with equal disorientation. "Who the hell are you?"

"Not you," the officer replied, tipping his head toward Herrick. "Who's he?"

"A drifter. One without papers or a driver's license," Monarch replied sternly. "And now, I'll ask again, officer. Who the hell are you?"

"Sergeant Guy Gallagher, Hartford Sheriff's Department." He introduced himself routinely. "I've been sent here to help out with the Wilkes case."

"What Wilkes case?" Monarch asked in shock.

"The kid they found dead in the cabin a few hours ago, up at the bluff," Sergeant Gallagher replied, between absentminded chews of his peppermint gum. He held out his transfer papers. "I've been sent to relieve you boys down here."

“Do I look relieved, sergeant?” Monarch dryly replied. “Not in the slightest. Why wasn’t I told about this?”

“I don’t know.” Gallagher shrugged. “Ask your sheriff. He sent for me.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Herrick caught sight of Monarch’s embarrassment.

“We don’t need any help,” Monarch replied.

Herrick flicked his head back and forth in amusement, like a spectator watching a tennis rally.

“Look, just process this piece-of-shit vagrant.” Monarch shoved Herrick toward the reception desk. “I’m done with him.” “What’s your name, pilgrim?” Gallagher asked with a labored breath, picking up his pencil and pad.

“Doesn’t have any ID on him and refused to give me a name,” Monarch interjected, making his way to the coffee machine. “Good luck with that.”

“Kurt Herrick.” Herrick cheerfully answered the sergeant, throwing a spiteful smile at Monarch. “I did try and tell you.”

“Detective Herrick? From New York City?” Gallagher asked in shock.

Monarch stopped in his tracks and craned his neck to face Herrick. His eyes scanned up and down, from his muddied shoes, creased black suit, right the way to his disfigured and unshaven face.

“Sheriff Gavi said you wouldn’t be in till the morning.” Gallagher smirked. “What are you doing here now?”

“Early, I guess,” Herrick hesitantly answered. “What’s this all about?”

“Yes, sergeant, what are you talking about?” Monarch cut in aggressively, power-walking behind the reception desk to Gallagher’s side.

“You pretty much know as much as me now fellas,” Gallagher replied, taking turns looking between the two pensive men. “My commander in Hartford told me tonight to come down here and help with some case involving some teen found dead by the oceanfront. Said I was being teamed up with some detective from New York.”

Silence fell over the room.

“What’s he doing in handcuffs?” Gallagher asked, taking a curious peek over at Herrick’s broad shoulders to his wrists, cuffed behind his back.

“He smashed my patrol car to pieces,” Monarch exaggerated.

Gallagher looked at Herrick, shocked. “You smashed his window?”

“And my side mirror.”

“I slipped and fell.” Herrick shrugged his shoulders.

“Well, mistakes will happen and these are the sheriff’s orders.” Gallagher tried to reason with Monarch. “I don’t think he’d like the idea of meeting the lead investigator on this homicide case in a holding cell after a little accident.”

Struggling to process the new information, Monarch tried desperately to take control of the situation with diminishing authority. “I’m sorry, sergeant, but no ID means no special treatment. This guy could be anyone. Maybe he stole this Herrick guy’s wallet.”

“Well, I might be a violent vagrant, but how do you know whose wallet it is if there’s no ID?” Herrick countered. “No proof of theft must surely mean no persecution.”

Herrick could almost hear Monarch faintly growling at his provoking question.

“I have a welcome letter from your sheriff. It’s in my jacket pocket.”

Monarch looked blindsided.

“You didn’t check there when you frisked me,” said Herrick. Lieutenant Monarch made his way around the counter and dug haphaz-

ardly into each of Herrick's pockets until he pulled out the crumpled envelope. He scanned through the short message before looking up with a scoff.

"This doesn't prove anything."

"Well . . ." Gallagher searched for the right words. His confidence visibly diminished. "I guess it doesn't. You got any picture ID to prove who you say you are?"

Herrick silently shook his head with a casual shrug. Hopeful for a quick resolution from the barrage of questions. *Just throw me in the damn holding cell already.*

"A passport or driver's license?"

"What did I just say," Herrick grumbled. "You wanna throw me in the cell? Then throw in the goddamn—"

"*Hey!*" Gallagher snapped, his voice carrying through the empty station. "Watch your mouth. Now, we don't know exactly who you are." The atmosphere between the three men turned cold. "For all we know, maybe you are some drifter. Maybe you did steal this detective's wallet."

Monarch fixed an accusatory frown on Herrick like a supercilious father to his mischievous child.

"Who are you?" Monarch glared at Herrick.

"Why don't we take him downstairs and find out? Have some fun. And find out who this sorry son-of-a-bitch really is in the process." Gallagher suggested.

Cold energy suddenly charged the room. Herrick's heart thumped hard in his chest. His fists instinctively tightened as he searched the area for any makeshift weapons he could use.

The sergeant's face was calm and expressionless.

"Although . . ." Gallagher broke the tense silence, pulling free a small photograph paperclipped to the top of his olive-green case file.

Gallagher slapped the small 2x2 picture aggressively on the countertop, causing Herrick and Monarch to step back in shock. Gallagher's eyes filled with rage and his brow arched into a mean grimace. "We do have his picture on file."

Monarch looked down at the picture of Herrick in disbelief. "Sorry, detective," Gallagher's smile widened from ear to ear. "We had to show you some of that Nutmeg State hospitality. Ain't that right, Cap." Gallagher leaned over the countertop and playfully slapped Monarch's arm with the back of his hand, causing him to flinch. "I'll take him back to the hotel. Keep him out of trouble," said Gallagher. "If that's all right with you, city boy."

"Sure," Herrick absentmindedly agreed, slipping the small photo off the counter and staring into his own much younger, innocent eyes. The profile picture was taken shortly after his graduation from the Boston police academy seven years ago. It displayed Herrick in full ceremonial uniform with a confident, conservative smile. This version of Herrick was like someone from a dream.

*A different life. A fresh face. No chasing dragons.*

"Detective." Gallagher's voice brought him back to the room. "You okay, detective?"

As the clarity of his situation slowly came back into focus, Herrick nodded his head in absentminded agreement, with the same rhythmic motion as one of those Japanese waving-arm cat statutes displayed in sushi joints, while he thought of his next plan of action. He knew that if he was going to make the most of his escape from New York, then he had to get this suspicious lieutenant off his back and play his part.

"Actually, I'd rather you brief me on the homicide. You seem to be the only one around here who knows what the hell is going on in this town."

“Sounds good to me.” Gallagher scooped up the olive case file and made his way around the reception desk. “Okay if you watch the station, L.T.?” Gallagher asked Monarch.

Monarch’s festering envy of being locked out of his case within seconds was clearly displayed in his brooding grimace and the deep lines furrowed across his forehead. He replied sullenly, “That’s Captain, sergeant.”

“Sorry, sir. Your badge says different,” Gallagher replied.

Herrick smiled to himself, grateful for his new and much more friendly escort. Gallagher cleared his throat and beckoned Monarch with his head to unlock Herrick’s handcuffs. “Do you mind?”

Monarch swallowed a hard gulp and begrudgingly released Herrick’s shackled hands. Herrick shook out his arms and rubbed his wrists, making squeezing motions with his fingers until the blood filled back into them.

“Is there anywhere open for coffee?” Herrick asked Gallagher as they made their way to the exit.

“I don’t know.” Gallagher shrugged his shoulders. “It’s my first time in this town. We could have a look around on our way to the crime scene. I’d like to get an early start on this thing.”

“I agree,” Herrick replied, keeping up the charade of the by-the-book detective. *Another goddamn alias.*

As Gallagher stepped back out into the frigid night, Herrick lingered at the open door, glancing back over to the lieutenant. Monarch seemed to pay no attention to the men’s departure. Instead, he stood behind the reception desk, frantically rifling through the sergeant’s transfer papers and manically skimming the sheriff’s welcome letter. Herrick didn’t feel any pangs of guilt. Challenging smug authorities and violently preserving his reputation had become an instinctive habit for him over the past two years. As Herrick searched his soul

further, the realization dawned on him that the aggressive vandalism, cruel taunts, and joy he took with his small victory over Monarch weren't necessarily malicious or unwarranted. It was the fact that he, a stranger drifting through a small town, wasn't questioned once by the lieutenant over his whereabouts tonight. The very night a young man had been discovered dead.