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THE NAKED EYE

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&

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For Sherry Kappler Cooley

Who took as much love and joy from life as she brought into it.

We miss you every day.

**THE
NAKED
EYE**

CHAPTER 1

SHE WAS FLOATING. FLOATING IN a pool of blood.

No, now it had become a river of blood.

What in the hell . . . ?

Of course.

This was a dream. The same horrible nightmare that had haunted her for months. Why hadn't she realized it before?

Because the terror was real, and she was always afraid the nightmare was real, too. Colby was a demon. Couldn't a demon make a nightmare come true?

She was back at the gully in Coachella Valley, the place where she had beaten him. Yet here he was, night after night. He crouched on a rock at the gully's end, waiting for the blood river to carry her to him.

No!

Colby laughed and raised his two large knives. "Here we are. Just me and you, Kendra. The way it was meant to be."

He swung his blades at her.

Darkness. Darkness. Dark—

* * *

GOT ONE FOR YOU.

Kendra Michaels jerked wide-awake at the jangle she'd programmed to signal the text messages on her phone.

Damn.

She threw her legs over the edge of the bed and studied the message header. It was from Martin Stokes, a San Diego Police Department homicide detective. He'd included an address and a few details.

She took a few minutes to steady her breathing, trying to gain control. She was still trembling from her nightmare, and her face was covered with sweat. She'd be okay in a minute. Every night the nightmare came, and every night she survived it.

Just as I survived you, Colby.

I won't let you drag me back to that time, and someday I'll fight off this damn nightmare.

But here in her hands, a real-life nightmare beckoned. She didn't have to go, of course; a glance at the crime-scene photos and a reading of the case file would probably tell her everything she needed to know.

Probably.

Who in the hell was she kidding? She knew she was going.

No matter how horrific the scene was, it couldn't compare with the beast still taunting her in her dreams.

A quick shower and she'd be out of here. She reached for her jeans and headed for the bathroom.

She stopped short as she glanced in the vanity mirror. She reached up and touched one of the dark circles beneath her eyes.

Those nightmares again. There was no strength in that face at this moment. She appeared delicate, breakable.

She was *not* breakable. She was the one who had broken Colby that night in the gully four years ago.

Colby had been her first case as an FBI consultant, and she had been

so horrified at the brutality of his kills that she had become obsessed with catching him. The cat-and-mouse search had culminated with her almost dying in that gully and Colby's going to the hospital with a fractured skull. He had found that defeat intolerable. His ego couldn't bear the thought that she had triumphed and sent him to prison. She had become the focus of his hatred and obsession, and he had let her know; he had been a dark shadow behind her all those years he had spent on death row.

You're out there waiting, aren't you, Colby?

I can feel it.

So wait, you bastard. And when you get bored, come after me.

I'm waiting for you, too.

And I'm not standing still.

She turned and jumped into the shower.

"I DIDN'T THINK YOU WERE going to show." Detective Stokes lifted the police tape for Kendra to duck under and join him in the driveway of the one-story craftsman home. Four squad cars were parked on the street, flashers pounding the house with out-of-sync strobes of red and blue light. The scene was crawling with uniformed officers, detectives, and forensics experts.

Kendra shrugged. "What else would I have to do at three-thirty in the morning?"

"I could think of lots of things. Especially since you don't *have* to be here."

What did he know? She felt the familiar chill. "I do have to be here."

She'd tried to suppress the shudder, but Stokes's narrowed stare told her the effort was unsuccessful. "Sure, but you should be thanking Detective Kael. He's the one who beat it into my brain that I should contact you if I encountered any killings of a serial or ritualistic nature. He thinks you're the real deal."

Did that mean Stokes did not? She gazed at him appraisingly. Thirtysomething, receding brown hair, pleasant enough features. No sign of belligerence or cynicism. “Kael is a good man.”

“He’s a rotten softball player, but other than that . . .” He motioned for her to follow him up the driveway. “But I trust him most of the time. I was actually glad when I had an excuse to call you on this case.” He grimaced. “I’m very curious. But you know I’ve heard so many incredible things about you that it’s hard to separate the truth from the bullshit.”

She half smiled. “Bank on the bullshit.”

“I don’t think so. Tell me, were you really blind for the first twenty years of your life?”

“Yes.”

“Completely blind?”

“Yep. I’d never seen a thing in my life.”

“That’s amazing. Kael says you got your sight from some kind of stem-cell surgery.”

She nodded. “In England. They did a lot of the early work in corneal-regeneration techniques.”

“I’ve always heard that blind people developed their other senses to compensate. And that’s how you pick up on stuff most other people don’t.”

She wished he’d just drop it. Patience. At least, he was pleasant enough, and she might need him to notify her again if he ran across one of the target murders. “I guess so. But I don’t think my senses of hearing, smell, taste, or touch are better than anyone else’s. I just had to use them to make my way in the world.”

“Yeah. And afterward you used your eyes, too.” He smiled. “You don’t remember me, but I was at the Van Buren crime scene a few years ago. It wasn’t my case, but I was curious as hell about you. So I just stayed in the background and watched.”

“Really? I hope you were entertained.”

“Did I say the wrong thing? I didn’t mean—I was impressed. You cracked that case by reading the lips of a suspect when he was talking on the phone to his wife. It was amazing . . . and surprising. It made me want to go out and learn it myself.”

“Did you do it?”

“No, it was like a lot of things in my life. It just somehow slipped away as time passed.” He paused. “But I think I should let you know, Kael isn’t the only one who thinks you’re the real deal. I do, too, Dr. Michaels.”

He was sincere. Sincerity deserved politeness as well as patience. “Thank you. I appreciate your calling me. I hope you’ll think of me again when something like this comes up.”

“You can bet on it.” They had reached the front door. “Let’s hold up here for a second.” Stokes held up his hand as he looked inside the open front door. “The photographer’s doing his thing.”

“Sure.”

Stokes crossed his arms in front of him. “I think this is going to be one of those cases when you’ll have to concentrate on being pretty sharp about things you see.”

“Whatever.” She was feeling the tension start. She didn’t like standing out here waiting. “I never take things for granted. Things I see aren’t just details to me. They’re *gifts*. They’re part of the world that was closed off to me for so long. I guess I just want to take in everything.”

“I’m afraid you’ll get more than you bargained for in there.” He shook his head. “It’s not a pretty scene.”

She just wanted to get to it, dammit. Kendra glanced at the driveway next door, where another detective was talking to a distraught-looking bald man in sweatpants and a Padres T-shirt.

“That’s the husband?”

“Yeah. He fell asleep watching TV upstairs in bed. A little before two, he came downstairs and found his wife’s body in the kitchen. It’s a mess.”

“He has no clue who could have done this?”

“No. His wife was an elementary-school teacher, no enemies that he knows of.”

“Maybe *he* has the enemies. What does he do?”

“Residential mortgage manager at a bank.” Stokes glanced back inside. “All clear.”

Kendra followed him through a small living room, carpeted with a thick burnt-orange rug that probably wasn't even in style when laid fifteen years before. She scanned the room. Photographs, vacation souvenirs, and two watercolor prints probably purchased from a cruise-ship auction.

Through a doorway on the far wall, she heard at least half a dozen pairs of footsteps. No, she self-corrected, more like eight.

Stokes motioned her through the doorway. Kendra walked through and nodded her greeting at the seven men and one woman working the crime scene. She recognized most of them from other recent investigations. They'd become much more at ease with her now that they knew she wasn't interested in grabbing credit from them.

That's never what this was about.

Two forensics men were crouched in front of the open refrigerator. Upon seeing Kendra, they stood and moved away to reveal what had brought them all there: Thirty-five-year-old Marissa Kohler, lying in a pool of her own blood.

Kendra had seen many murder victims over the years, many at much more gruesome scenes than this one, but it still hit her like a kick in the stomach. She hoped she'd never become too callous to not feel that horror. This woman had probably just gone through the motions on her last day on Earth, with nary an idea that it would all soon come to a horrific end.

Detach. Focus.

Time to see if *he* did this. The monster.

Kendra crouched next to the corpse, trying to avoid the splatter

trails on the tile floor. Dressed in sleeper shorts and a long T-shirt, the victim was lying in front of the open refrigerator as if attacked while getting a midnight snack. Her hands were near her face, suggesting a defensive position even after falling. A pair of round spectacles rested on the floor about five feet away. Obviously, the victim's glasses, confirmed by the distinctive mark on her nose that matched the spectacles' arched bridge.

Stokes pointed toward the open back door, which was splintered as if kicked open with a fierce kick. "Point of entry over there. No curtains on the back windows, so the killer could have spotted her in here."

"Maybe." Kendra leaned over and examined the victim's wounds. The woman's throat had been opened in five horizontal gashes, plus over a dozen punctures to the torso.

Who did this to you, Marissa? Could it really have been . . . him?

Show me. Give me something. Anything . . .

Her eyes flicked from Marissa's face to the back door.

Of course.

Kendra stood up and brushed herself off. "Thank you all. I'm sorry for disturbing you." She turned and walked out of the room.

Stokes ran after her. "Wait. That's it?"

"Yes."

He grabbed her arm. "You didn't find out anything?"

"Yes, I found out what I needed to know."

He gazed at her in frustration. "Well, are you gonna let me in on it?"

"Of course." But she might not have notified him until the next day. She just wanted to get out of here right now. She stopped in the living room and looked back through the doorway. "This isn't the work of a serial killer. Certainly not the one I'm looking for."

"Then whose work is it?"

"Her husband's."

Stokes lowered his voice. "What?"

“That scene in the kitchen was staged. Check upstairs. She was killed there.”

“How do you figure that?”

“The smell of blood is wafting down that staircase. Sickly sweet and more than a bit metallic. Plus a useless attempt to cover it up with a half a can of Lysol Powder Fresh.”

He sniffed the air. “I smell the Lysol . . .”

“I’m sure you smell the blood, too. You just don’t realize it. Send your forensics team up there with Luminol. The victim also has faint rug burns on the back of her heels. She was dragged down the stairs, posed, and maybe even stabbed a few more times postmortem. It looks like there are punctures without much bleeding.”

“And the door?”

“He knew enough to go outside and kick it in to give the appearance of forced entry. But he obviously didn’t go any farther outside than the patio. The ground in the yard is a muddy mess, but there are no footprints out there.”

“Are you sure? It’s dark.”

“The porch lights give at least fifteen feet of visibility. Trust me, no one approached the house from the yard. And I spotted a tiny shard of orange rubber on the splintered door frame.”

He stared at her. “Orange rubber.”

She nodded. “Surely you noticed the obnoxious orange rubber soles of the athletic shoes her husband is wearing?”

“Holy shit,” Stokes whispered.

“I’m done,” she said wearily. “Good night, Detective. I’m sure you’ll have no trouble taking it from here.”

Stokes didn’t answer as he dashed out the door.

Kendra left the house and walked slowly down the driveway. She was in no hurry to get home. She was disappointed and tired, but there might be only nightmares when she got back to sleep.

She cast a glance back at Stokes as he approached the husband, who

was still playing the part of the bereaved widower. The guy was an amateur; he'd undoubtedly left many more clues behind, and the cops would have their case against him sewn up in a matter of hours.

"Finished already?" A familiar voice called out mockingly to her from the street.

She let out an exasperated sigh. "Adam Lynch . . . Seriously?"

"Hey, I don't like your tone. You're hurting my feelings here."

She turned back and saw Lynch leaning against her car. While everyone else on the scene was middle-of-the-night bedraggled, Lynch's every dark hair was in place. Probably just the way he rolled out of bed, the bastard. He wore jeans, a pullover sweater, loafers, and a sexy, high-wattage smile that seemed terribly out of place at a grim murder scene. But then, everything about Lynch was high wattage. He was a paid freelance operative who worked for any agency or nation who could afford his services. Those services were both deadly and innovative, as Kendra had found in the past year. But there had been times when she was grateful for both his skill and that cool intelligence when cases had thrown them together. And other times when she had only been wary of how Lynch managed to stir her emotions when she knew how dangerous that could be. It had become a complex relationship that bound them together, and she never knew from one minute to the next how she would feel toward Lynch.

"Feelings?" she said. "Why would I think you actually have feelings?"

"You got me there." He checked his watch. "By the way, you wrapped up this case in about two and a half minutes. That's a new record, isn't it?"

"I didn't come here to wrap up the case."

His smile faded. "I know that, Kendra. I hear you've been visiting a lot of murder scenes lately."

"Not because I enjoy it."

"I know that, too."

She let the silence hang between them. "He'll be back, Lynch. We both know it."

"It's been four months."

"Colby's methodical. He's had years to plan his next move. What's another few months to him?" She was speaking only the truth. Colby was very patient. He was a serial killer who had murdered at least twenty people in various terrible ways before he and Kendra had come together that night in the gully. He had taken his time with all his victims and made sure their deaths were agonizing. "He's driven. He has to kill. He just has to do it his way."

Lynch's gaze slid away from her. "You've got a point."

"You don't believe me, do you?"

"I didn't say that."

"You don't need to. It's obvious you don't believe Colby is really still alive."

"If you believe it, I believe it."

She slammed her palms onto her car hood. "That's one of the most patronizing things anyone has ever said to me. And believe me, when I was blind, I heard a lot of patronizing things."

His gaze shifted back to her. "I mean it, Kendra," he said quietly. "I do trust your judgment."

"Even if the California Department of Corrections doesn't."

"Colby was their prisoner, and it was their responsibility to put him to death. For them to admit that they might have botched it and let a convicted serial killer escape, well, that's asking a lot."

"The prison's attending physician and his wife were found dead less than forty-eight hours later. I can't believe they still think that was a coincidence."

"It appeared to be an accident. And even you couldn't find any evidence to prove otherwise."

Kendra nodded. "Colby and his partner were too smart to leave behind any evidence. The doctor administered a drug to slow Colby's

heart and pronounced him dead in front of a roomful of witnesses, and a rented hearse drove him right out of the main gates of San Quentin State Prison.”

“If you could offer any proof of this, I guarantee you that a lot of people would listen.

“I tried.” Her fists clenched in frustration. “No one cared.”

“I cared, Kendra.”

“To a point.”

“You weren’t able to get anywhere with the cremation service?”

“No. A body with the correct paperwork was delivered to them that night. The crematorium didn’t fingerprint the body or do anything to confirm the corpse’s identity. The system doesn’t account for the fact that there are monsters out there who can drive to skid row and easily come out with a dead body no one will miss.”

“Again, still no proof.”

“Even you have to admit that there was enough to follow up on. Colby’s partner, Myatt, had that medication they called the zombie drug in his possession, and he had the prison physician’s name in his notebook. Before he died, he as much as told me Colby was still alive.”

“He could have been taunting you. He had a history of that.”

“That’s what the FBI thinks.” She shook her head wearily. “I thought you were on my side.”

“I am. That’s why I’m out here at four in the morning.”

“So the FBI sent you to tell me to stop making waves and lay off—”

“No. For God’s sake, I’m not the FBI’s errand boy.”

“Funny you should say that, when you’re the go-to errand boy for any government agency that decides to pay your fee. Who is it this week? FBI, CIA, NSA?”

“None. This is all about you, Kendra.”

“Is it?” She stared at him for a long moment. She’d gotten to know Lynch well during the course of their two previous cases together. So well that she’d found herself confused about how much was sexual

attraction and how much was the stimulation of working with a tough, intelligent partner who managed to strike a rare note in her mind and soul. In this moment, she was feeling a little of both but principally she was aware of a new vibe from him. He was . . . truly concerned. Concerned about her. The surge of warmth she felt at the realization made her smile. “You didn’t look this worried even when you thought a killer was stalking me.”

“This may be worse. Colby has gotten under your skin. In your head. Are you still having the dreams?”

She looked away and didn’t answer. He was the only one she’d told about her nightmares. He’d been there for her in those moments of weakness following Colby’s supposed execution, when the nightmares had started.

“You’ve been having that dream for months . . . He pulls you back to that gully night after night. But it shouldn’t be a nightmare. That’s the night you caught the bastard. That’s where you beat him, Kendra. Literally, I wish you’d killed him with that rock instead of fracturing his skull.”

“I thought prison was the best place for him. I was wrong.”

“Come back to my house. You’ll feel safe there.”

“I can’t hide out in your suburban fortress for the rest of my life, Lynch. And if you remember, that’s where those awful dreams began.”

“Maybe that’s where they can end.”

“Besides, your Asian, bikini-model girlfriend might not like me hanging around.”

“Ashley is almost never in town these days. Her career has taken off. She actually wants to meet you.”

“I might say that she just wants to size up the competition, but women that beautiful don’t really have competition.”

Lynch stepped closer to her. “You’re every bit as beautiful as she is, Kendra.”

She looked up at him. His sudden closeness was disturbingly intimate.

Too disturbing, she admitted to herself. Damn him.

She made herself look away. “Now I know you’re patronizing me. I don’t have all that many fashion designers jetting me off to the French Riviera for photo shoots.” She smiled. “I’ve seen her picture in a few magazines lately. Ashley has branched out from swimsuits to cocktail dresses and athletic wear.”

“Enough about her,” he said roughly. “You’re the one I’m worried about.”

“Don’t be.”

“Then stop this.”

“Stop what?”

He waved his arm toward the crime scene. “This. Dropping everything and running at the first sign of a bloody corpse. There was a time that the cops and the FBI had to beg you to come help them out on their cases. Now they can’t keep you away.”

“I assure you that they make me feel very welcome,” she said wryly.

“You know what I mean.”

“You’re damn right, I do.” She stared him in the eye. “It’s because I know Colby will be back. He *needs* to kill. It’s part of who he is. He can hide for only so long. When he resurfaces, I need to be there.”

“And you will be. But for now, just let the cops and the FBI do their job. They’re good at it. They have labs, worldwide databases, and lots of manpower. Trust them.”

“How can I? When they don’t even believe he’s alive? They’re not even looking for him.”

“He may not even be in the country. You can visit every crime scene in the state, but it won’t mean anything if he’s killing people in Budapest.”

Kendra leaned wearily against her car. “I know. I’ve been spending a lot of time combing the Web for any sign of him.”

Lynch shook his head. “You need to take a step back. Please. This isn’t good for you. God, you look tired.”

“It’s almost 4 A.M. Of course I look tired. You’re the freak here for looking so damned chipper.”

He slipped his hands into his pockets and shrugged. “Let’s go to breakfast. Ever been to Brian’s 24?”

She laughed. “I’m going to bed.”

“That’s even better.” His smile was both intimate and mischievous. “Whatever you want, Kendra.”

“By myself. In my own place.”

“Okay, fine.” He nodded toward the detectives, who were putting the husband in the backseat of a squad car. “But the next time you feel compelled to barge in on someone else’s murder scene, give me a call.”

“Why? So you can stop me?”

“I know better than that. So I can go with you. Which is a hell of a lot better than trailing after you.” He turned and moved away. “Think about it. I always thought we made a pretty good team . . .”

THE SKY HAD BEGUN TO LIGHTEN BY the time Kendra made it back to her condo near the Gaslamp District. She was already wound up by the double punch of the crime scene and Lynch’s unexpected appearance, but the sunlight’s psychological effect would soon make it even more difficult for her to get any sleep. The first year she’d had her sight, she’d covered her bedroom windows with aluminum foil to keep the daylight from poking around her curtains and nudging her awake. She had moved beyond that, but once awake, it was still tough for her to go to sleep once it was light outside.

Might be time to invest in blackout curtains, or at least a jumbo roll of aluminum foil.

It would be more difficult to put Lynch out of her mind. How in the hell did he know she’d be there?

Of course he knew. He was Adam Lynch, and he had connections everywhere.

A light flashed on the phone in her living room, indicating a message had been received while she was gone. Between three thirty and four thirty in the morning. Probably someone from the crime scene she had just left. Or possibly her mother, who was presently at a conference in Amsterdam and frequently forgot to take into account the time difference.

She picked up the phone and checked the caller ID: Olancha Police Department.

Another murder scene? Olancha was over two hundred miles away; she hadn't cast her net that wide. She tried to remember if she even knew anyone on the force there.

No, she was sure she didn't.

And if there was an active scene, they had to know there was no way she could get there quickly. So why call in the middle of the night?

Kendra retrieved the voice mail, and there was only a brief message asking her to call Sergeant Hank Filardi at the Olancha PD at her earliest convenience.

She stared at the cordless phone in her hand.

No.

Lynch was right. She needed to step back. Whatever it was, it could wait a few hours while she tried to salvage what was left of this night.

She put down the phone.

Todos Santos, Mexico

VICTOR CHILDRESS

He stared at the name on the ID card he had just purchased. Victor Childress. Not a name he would have chosen for himself, but it would do.

He pocketed the passport and turned toward the pounding surf. He couldn't see the waves crashing on the dark beach though he could

hear them. He took a deep breath. It should have been refreshing, but it wasn't. It was like inhaling salt and dirt.

He couldn't wait to leave this place.

Less than an hour from San Diego, yet a world away. A shit hole, to be sure, but it suited his purposes. No one knew him here, and no one would even think of looking for him. And after all those years in that prison, he needed the time to recharge his batteries and make preparations for his return.

It was time. Years of planning had finally led to this moment.

At his feet, a chunky Mexican man struggled to catch his breath as he rolled in a puddle of his own blood. The man's lungs had collapsed, and he would survive only another minute or so.

He pocketed his knife and took another look at the forged California driver's license, and then at the other items he'd been furnished. All the documents he'd ordered were superb. He slipped them into his pocket. The dying man had done magnificent work, but he couldn't be allowed to live. Things had progressed too far to be derailed by an overtalkative tradesman.

He stepped over the dying man and walked across the warm sand. The wind suddenly kicked up, as if heralding the start of his journey.

He felt a surge of exhilaration. It was all coming together.

The waiting was over.

Eric Colby smiled. "This is it, Kendra," he whispered. "Can you feel it? You will soon. This will be our masterpiece . . ."