

## Chapter 1

ANOTHER NEW YEAR'S Eve, and Nona Taylor's prayer remained unanswered. Still. The digital clock on the microwave read 6:20. Five hours and forty minutes until midnight. Five hours and forty minutes until she begged God—again—to grant her one, her only, request.

The slow, pulsing ache behind her right eye required an immediate caffeine fix. Nona's gaze trailed toward her coffee station but jerked to a stop on the bill for her car affixed to the fridge by a Los Angeles Lakers magnet. The paper screamed "past due" in an all-caps, red-lettered font. Not possible to do her private investigation work without transportation, and the mountain bike propped in her guest bedroom's corner wouldn't cut it. Her gut clinched. Clipped behind the car bill were overdue notices for health insurance and townhome association fees, waiting like silent time bombs to annihilate the rest of her meager funds.

She scowled at her shepherd Lab mix, who lay sprawled on the floor, and snapped her fingers twice to get the dog's attention. "Move, Lady." Lady snorted, not ceding any ground. The throbbing behind Nona's eye intensified. One short yip from her Yorkie-poo, Bruiser, drew Lady out of the kitchen, giving Nona room to maneuver. Bruiser, the tips of whose ears didn't even reach Nona's knees, stood alert as a sentinel in the doorway. Lady outweighed ever-bossy Bruiser by sixty pounds, but Bruiser acted as though he descended directly from wolf stock. He gave Nona a yip as well.

Nona pursed her lips and filled her coffee cup to the brim with Italian roast. The smoky aroma wafted upward, and the first sip heated her mouth but did nothing to thaw the coldness in her heart. She downed the last few drops of her brew and placed the mug in the sink. Fully caffeinated, she walked to the front door of her townhome, averted her gaze from the

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full-length mirror in the foyer, and stooped to tighten the laces on her cross-trainers. Three clicks of her tongue called Bruiser, who skittered across the wood floor. She reached out and snagged his outdoor gear, squatted to his level, and worked him into his doggy jacket and step-in harness. He wagged his rump and gave a sharp bark, summoning Lady, who lumbered into the room so Nona could strap her into her control harness.

A pat on the head earned Nona a poke in the ear by Lady's cold, moist nose, and a lick.

Nona turned and nuzzled Lady. "I needed that." She blinked away the sting behind her eyes.

After confirming that her driver's and private investigator's licenses, along with her firearm permit, were inside the front pocket of her concealed carry leggings, she double-checked the manual safety on her Ruger MAX-9.

A windbreaker hung from the door handle of the coat closet. She donned the jacket, zipped it up, and yanked the scrunchie off her wrist. With a grunt, she wrestled her mass of thick dark-golden curls into a bun at the base of her neck and yanked a baseball cap low on her head.

The door to the downstairs guest bedroom opened on a swoosh. Her brother, Lemar, stood barefoot in the doorway, wearing a vintage Run-DMC T-shirt and athletic shorts. He scratched at the two-day stubble sprouting on his dark-tan face. He'd grown out the scruff for a potential acting role in a techno-thriller.

"I see a few gray hairs in that weed patch you're calling a goatee, bro." Four years her senior, Lemar didn't look a day over twenty-five, even though he'd celebrated his thirty-third birthday a few weeks prior.

"I see you're wearing your ninja costume." Lemar gave a soft smile. "Working a case?"

Anonymity was the goal of the black tights, black shoes, and black hat. Keeping a low profile was second nature in her line of work. "Nope. Taking the dogs out."

"I can walk them if you want to get some miles in or shoot some hoops."

On any other day, she'd jump at the offer to get in some time on the basketball court or take a run. She turned her head to the side, blinking a few times. "Not today."

“You going to be okay?” His gentle voice was almost a whisper.

Warmth generated by her brother’s care tried to work its way into the numb space in the center of her chest. With his primary base in New York, Lemar flip-flopped between coasts, auditioning for roles, working gigs, and taking acting classes. She’d given him a key to her place years ago and told him he could crash anytime. His work was steady but low paying. He couldn’t afford two apartments. But the arrangement worked well for both of them. He got a free place to live, and she got occasional company exactly when it seemed she needed it. Always protective and encouraging, he did whatever he could to arrange his schedule to spend the last days of December with her—he knew what it meant. She appreciated his efforts and his unconditional love, but no one possessed the strength to lift the boulder of guilt and shame that crushed her.

She drew in a long breath and pushed out a tight smile. “Yeah, I’ll be okay.”

Bruiser scratched with desperation on the front door’s brass plate. The sound clawed at her strained nerves. Grabbing the leashes off their hooks, she drew in a long breath.

“When you get back from walking the dogs, pick up some takeout from California Pizza Kitchen. I’ll treat.” He gave a gentle smile, but the shadowing around her brother’s eyes showed this ten-year anniversary of their family’s loss saddened him as well.

“Sure.” Nona tried to match his expression but gave up. She stooped and snapped a leash on each dog’s harness, opened the door, and treaded out on legs weighed down with grief. Hoping to clear her head. Dreading the hours leading up to the stroke of midnight.

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As desperate as Bruiser had been to get out, he and Lady took their time smelling random sidewalk litter and pawing at flowers on the median strip as they walked down the street of her live-work-play community tucked away in Old Town Pasadena. Darkness shrouded the shops’ interiors, but uplighting showcased the merchandise immediately behind the glass. She

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stopped in front of Papier's Fine Pens & Stationery while Lady watered a square of grass at the edge of the walkway. Punctuating the Christmas display in the window were signs that read *Bonne Année* and 50% Off.

Her smartwatch vibrated, and she glanced down. Ken Fuller? Surely he wasn't trying to convince her to go out with him again. Last week, he'd asked her to some cheesy ball drop celebration. Since his company was her biggest—actually, her only—client right now, she'd let him down gently. Apparently, she'd cloaked her rejection in too many niceties. Besides, there was no way to tell him her plan was to ring in the New Year at a church's Watch Night service, like she had for the last ten years. At Watch Night, the church members thanked God for the blessings of the past year and committed the year to come into his hands. Nona would sit in the sanctuary feeling like a weed hiding among the wheat, hoping this was the year God would finally forgive her.

Bruiser strained his leash, urging Nona to continue their outing.

She double-checked her surroundings. Too exposed. She gave the dogs' leashes a gentle tug, shuffled backward into a storefront alcove, and faced the street.

"Sit." Nona clicked her tongue and pointed at Bruiser. She removed her phone from her pocket, and Bruiser showed Nona his backside. At least Lady obeyed and took a seat. "Ken. What's up?"

"I'm stuck at the office until later this evening, cleaning up a few things to close out the fiscal year." The flicks and flutters of rustling papers cut into the call. "Then, you know, off to that party." Ken gave an awkward chuckle.

She sighed inwardly and searched for yet another way to reject his offer without risking her bread and butter. She never revealed to Ken, or anyone else besides family, the significance that Watch Night held for her. "Well, Ken, like I said before—"

"Um, Nona." A muffled cough echoed from Ken's side of the line.

Ken was normally an overtalker, but now he was fumbling to put a sentence together. An itchy sensation crept up her neck and spread over her scalp.

"There's no easy way to put this. And I hate to do this on New Year's Eve, but the company is bringing all security and investigations in-house. Cost-saving measures. I've had to remove you from the books, Nona. Tonight."

She could not formulate words. The blood in her temples resumed pounding like a hammer striking an anvil.

"Nona, did you hear what I said?"

Her stack of bills. Now this. Tonight, of all nights. She held back a groan and forced her mouth to compose a sentence. "I understand."

"I'm really sorry. We'll get a check out to cover your last invoice as soon as possible. Sorry again for having to do this tonight. Um, happy New Year."

The phone cut off on Ken's end. Anger wrestled with anxiety and shame, jostling for dominance in the battle of emotions. She checked her watch. Couldn't justify putting off getting ready for church any longer. She turned to head back home, but her dogs resisted, still enjoying the fresh air. "Come. Now," she barked at them, her voice louder than necessary. Always the empath, Lady nuzzled Nona's fingers with her nose. Nona propelled herself back home, every step taken with compulsion and dread.

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Impending financial disaster hung over Nona's head like a wrecking ball poised to smash a table set with fine china. But as she stood in front of her closet, she willed herself to shove the monetary crisis aside to focus on choosing an outfit to camouflage the emotional mess she was inside—something that masked the pain and guilt she still felt after ten years. Something that covered the dread, laced with thin hope, that pressed and kneaded her heart, squeezing and twisting.

Her minimalist wardrobe contained few acceptable outfit choices. Most people would be at church to celebrate and would dress accordingly. She opted to make do with some dark-wash jeans and a maroon V-neck. She slipped her feet into some half boots and exited the closet, each step across the room made with legs that felt encircled by ankle weights. Tugging off the scrunchie, she raked her fingers through her hair, then gave her head a few shakes to bring some semblance of order back to her curls.

Nona eyed the mirrored jewelry box in front of her, perched on top of her bedroom dresser in silent judgment—daring her to work up the courage to open it.

After a calming breath, she reached forward and slid a finger over the lid

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and down to the pewter-colored closure that sealed in the memories. The small latch gave way, and she lifted the top. A porcelain ballerina emerged. Eternally on pointe, arms in first position, the figurine made a slow twirl as the melancholy notes of “Clair de lune” plinked out.

Her gaze fell to one of the two items inside.

A pristine photograph sat tucked on the underside of the lid. The darkness of the music box’s interior had preserved the exquisite sun-kissed face she hadn’t seen in person in a decade, the amber eyes and the perfect lips of Tyson Foster, the betrayer. She kept the picture to bear witness against herself. A reminder of exactly how far she’d fallen. How far she could fall again if she failed to keep every emotional defense fortified.

She shifted her attention to search for the second item. It lay undisturbed where she’d placed it last New Year’s Day. She took a moment to steel herself. This would be the tenth year she repeated her ritual.

She lifted the slender gold chain from the box, but the attached charm remained behind like an anchor, revealing itself only when she pulled the entire necklace free.

A delicate, cursive letter *N* emerged. *N* for her sister, Nikki, not for Nona.

Nona’s fingers shook as she pushed her hair aside and fastened her sister’s necklace around her own neck. Her scarlet letter. Her mark of Cain. She wouldn’t even make it to the Watch Night service if she started thinking about everything now. The raging argument she’d had with Nikki. The spiteful words inflamed with jealousy that she’d hurled and could never take back. Everything in Nona’s life spiraled downward from that moment, that New Year’s Eve. She needed to barricade the emotions within herself and get to church. Then she could pour it all out. Nona strode to the front door and grabbed the brown leather jacket hanging in the coat closet.

She stared down at the *N* nestled on her chest, but then forced her eyes upward to peer into the hallway mirror she’d been avoiding all day. She squeezed her eyes shut and tried to blank out her mind. Maybe this year, if she prayed hard enough, if she was sincere enough, God might forgive her, and the constricting bands of guilt choking out any semblance of peace might fall away.

She forced her lids open and locked on the face staring back. The same ebony eyes as her sister, Nikki. Every feature an exact duplicate of Nikki's face. Identical twins distinguished only by a small mole on Nona's cheek. Same lips, same cheekbones, same nose.

And the eyes of Nikki's killer.

## Chapter 2

WHAT A PATHETIC little church. What a stupid time to hold a service.

Ten o'clock on New Year's Eve, and the meeting didn't start for another hour. Zeke Steele's target sat wedged between a Quicky Mart and a hookah bar in a strip mall in the Crenshaw area of Los Angeles. Even if he believed the stuff being spouted inside that building, he'd never heard of a Watch Night service. A ridiculous waste of time on a night made for booze and partying.

Movement near the church's entrance caught Zeke's attention. He lifted the night vision goggles to his eyes. An old man held a key, which he used to unfasten the padlock securing the chains around the sliding metal gate in front of the building. The man pushed the gate back from the left and right sides of the door, fiddled with another lock, and entered. Probably the minister, Hosea Grant. This shoestring operation couldn't have any other staff.

Ancient fluorescent lighting sparked to life inside, and a sign awoke. Mount Zion Missionary Baptist Church blazed out in flickering red neon.

Zeke had scoured the internet for intel on the church's hours, pictures of the interior, and personnel stats. The church's Facebook page featured an old posting about a Labor Day potluck. They had posted nothing else until right before Christmas, when a grainy announcement about tonight's service appeared.

His phone vibrated in the cupholder of his rental car. He seized the device and jabbed the red End button, sending Councilman Gavin Callo-way's call straight to voicemail. Micromanager. The notification badge now showed three new messages. The councilman didn't trust Zeke to do the job he was paid to do.



Zeke snorted. "Don't trust you either, Calloway." His derisive words pushed from between his lips along with a cloud of cigarette smoke.

Hard to imagine that this bent-over pastor of a hole-in-the-wall, inner-city church stood to inherit land worth millions from the estate of old Millie Carter and didn't even know it. Zeke shook his head and chuckled. The lawyer he'd scratched up to help him run this scheme called it a "laughing heir" case. The beneficiary was a relation so distant from the decedent in the family tree that instead of mourning the decedent's death, he'd laugh all the way to the bank to cash in the windfall.

Zeke tossed the still-lit butt into his half-empty coffee sitting on the dash. This was his last late-night stakeout. No more shaking down businesses and bribing contractors to line Calloway's pockets. If Zeke played his cards right, he could fund his own operation.

The clattering of his burner phone once again snagged his attention, and he swore. After snatching it up, he stabbed the Talk button with his finger. "Listen, Calloway, I'm tired of—"

"It's me, Zeke. Baby, it's me." The shrill voice of his girlfriend, Kitty, cut through his tirade.

Clamping his forehead between his index finger and thumb, he gave a squeeze. "Hey, darlin'. I'm on stakeout. What's up?"

"I'm missing you, is all," Kitty drawled.

A phlegmy cough rattled out of Zeke, and he fished around his breast pocket to find another smoke. It had taken his otherwise ditzy girlfriend only seventy-two hours to track the old pastor down after Calloway had turned over what little information he'd had. She loved those genealogy detective TV shows. A week later and here he was, two thousand miles from Alabama, sitting in a cramped Kia, staking out an old man who didn't know he was set to hit the jackpot. Kitty was probably calling him to keep tabs on him, same as Calloway, but she only knew what Zeke wanted her to know. Like his bootlegging granddaddy taught him, never trust a woman.

He readjusted himself in his seat. "That's sweet. Don't forget, when I get back, I'll get you that mink coat you've been going on about."

"I'd rather have a ring." Her voice trilled up hopefully.

"Sure, baby. Whatever you want." He choked back his snort. She wasn't getting a fur or a ring.

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Kitty sighed. Silence ticked over the line for a beat. "Saw Big Zeke today."

At the mention of his father's nickname, heat flamed inside Zeke. He reached for his coffee cup, then clunked it down in disgust, remembering the extinguished butt he'd tossed in. "Where'd you see him?" He kept his voice neutral, but there were only a couple of places Kitty could have seen his daddy. When Zeke Sr. crawled out of his hole at night, he was either holding court at the bar—sloppy drunk and spinning lies about his glory days of college football—or staggering down the street trying to make it back to crash with his woman of the month.

"Saw him coming out of one of his usual places. You know your daddy."

Sure did. Revulsion at having to live in Big Zeke's shadow fueled the desperation inside him to make this con game work. The physical blows stopped years ago, but now it was a nasty word, a request for a handout, or both from his daddy. Zeke couldn't wait to disappear from his old life and his old man. And with the money he had coming, he would. He'd move into a sweet high-rise apartment in Vegas.

The plan was simple. Zeke would sucker Pastor Grant into selling the property to Calloway for a low five-figure amount. He'd given the codger a fake ninety-day deadline to ratchet up the pressure. Then Calloway would keep Leisure Zone Holdings dangling on the line and eventually sell to them for the millions the land was worth. With both the old pastor and Leisure Zone in the dark about each other, there'd be a six-figure windfall for Zeke and Calloway.

Burnt Water wasn't big enough for two Zekes, and Calloway sickened him. Zeke couldn't wait to put his hometown in his rearview mirror for good. "Gotta go, darlin'." He pressed End and worked to calm the boiling sludge in his gut. Once he lifted the binoculars back to his eyes, he pursed his lips and made a low wolf whistle. "What have we here, sports fans?"

A slim woman in a leather jacket tried the front door of the church, peered inside, and held up her phone. She turned to face the street. What a looker. She had a wild head of honey-colored curls framing her face. He let out a little growl. What was this she-cat doing at a church at this hour? She put the cell phone to her ear. The pastor let her in after a second.

So the old saint had a pretty young thing on the side. Figured. What man of the cloth wanted his dirty laundry about girlfriends aired to his

congregation? This low-level gospel pusher didn't deserve to inherit millions of dollars' worth of land.

Zeke mentally added *blackmail* to his list of things to do. He'd get the preacher to trust him to handle all the arrangements to secure the inheritance. Next, Zeke would have the man sign away his rights, so the parcels would automatically flip to him and Calloway. Then Zeke would bleed the man dry, taking every penny the pastor had in exchange for keeping his mouth shut about the she-cat. A double take.

A chuckle slipped out. Didn't know where the idea had come from to take this shakedown for a percentage like an ambulance-chasing attorney instead of charging Calloway his normal hourly rate. It chafed Zeke's hide that Calloway claimed a bigger share of the proceeds, but the dirtbag had insisted that since he had pieced together all the necessary tracts of land and had manipulated the zoning commission votes to build the entertainment complex, he deserved the bigger cut.

No matter. With the property, Zeke's 25 percent take of seven figures would be ample seed money to set up shop down in Vegas, earning him the respect he deserved. He was done living under the thumb of any man, Calloway or his daddy. Zeke cycled through all the things he planned to do and buy. He'd drop Kitty for a high-class girlfriend. He'd get a Cadillac SUV, veneers, a twenty-footer to take out on Lake Mead. It made him smile thinking about it. Finally, everyone would take him seriously.

Zeke figured a week—two tops—out in LA to get the old pastor to sign on the dotted line. Zeke would be rolling in the dough a few months after that. He took a drag, reclined his seat a few inches more, and hoped the ridiculous New Year's church service wouldn't last too long.

"You're doing this, Steele. All the way." He glanced at the flickering neon cross on the storefront, flipped down the visor, and stared hard at his reflection in the mirror. He'd show Calloway and Big Zeke. His granddaddy had the right idea. He always said, "*If you really want it, do what you gotta do to get it.*" Zeke gave a nod, sealing his promise to himself. The bigger the money, the bigger the risk. If somebody had to die for him to cash in, so be it.

## Chapter 3

NONA PLOPPED INTO the guest chair in Pastor Grant's office. She watched the pastor while he shuffled around, trying to find some papers. In the years since she'd known him, his stature had diminished. Perhaps the effects of carrying other people's most painful burdens—like hers. But his movements remained sure. A ring of short white Afro hair circled a shiny brown bald spot dead center on the back of his head.

She'd left his voicemail message in her inbox for several days before guilt and the red notification badge on her iPhone made her cave and listen to his plea to come early to talk to him about an urgent personal matter. Pastor Grant called from time to time to check on her, but this whole thing better not be a ruse to have some sort of heart-to-heart. He knew better than to ask her to attend service any time other than her annual Watch Night pilgrimage.

As Pastor Grant bustled about, she took in the bookcases jam-packed with books. The spines on some said *Commentary*, while others had the names of the apostles on them. She recognized Billy Graham on another. Who didn't know him? All the books bore evidence of frequent usage. She shook her head, forcing herself to turn off her inclination to catalog and mentally record information. Hazard of the trade.

"Found it." He waved a manila packet in the air, sat on his seat, and slid the envelope across the desk toward her. "Tell me what to make of this."

She noted the return address: Javit, Blatt & Steele, Birmingham, Alabama. She slid several papers from inside.

We are an heir hunting firm and specialize in locating people who are unaware of their potential inheritance. This is to notify you we

believe you are one of the legal heirs to the estate of an individual who died in Alabama. Because of the expense involved in locating and representing heirs, the law does not require us to disclose the name of the decedent or the potential amount of any inheritance until after you have entered into a retainer agreement with our firm. Time is of the essence. If you do not file notice with the court within ninety days to secure your claim as a beneficiary, any inheritance to which you may be entitled will escheat to the State. Please contact our office immediately to secure your valuable claim.

"I've done some skip tracing but never any heir hunting. Have you considered hiring an attorney?" She flipped the papers over. On the back were blank lines for Pastor Grant to enter his identifying information.

The old preacher took off his glasses, ran a hand over his face, and resettled the spectacles. "I don't have an attorney, plus I want someone I can trust. Don't want to give out my personal information, birth records, driver's license, to any ole body. I didn't want to call them, because this may be one of those identity scammer things to steal my money." Wrinkles of worry creased his brow. "I can't pay you now, but I can give you a percentage out of any inheritance. After paying off a few bills, I'm going to give the rest to the church."

Her thoughts flashed to the past-due notices on her fridge. This thing might eat up more time than she could spare. She needed a paying job immediately, and she needed to search starting on Monday. On the other hand, if this law firm was legit and there actually was an inheritance, it could be quite substantial. She bit the inside of her cheek and reexamined the front of the letter carefully. Hesitation and the urge to help wrestled in her brain.

Pastor Grant gave a small cough, and she looked up. His filmy eyes regarded her with kindness.

She sighed and ran the mental calculus one more time. She wasn't a member of his church and only attended once a year, but he had officiated Nikki's memorial and done some grief counseling with her family. He always sought her out, year after year, on Watch Night to offer a kind word and to tell her he never stopped praying for her and her family. Over the years, even in their brief interactions, he'd somehow created a safe place in

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his sanctuary for her. One without judgment. Sure, she could sink a ton of time into this all for nothing, but how could she not help someone who had always been so nice to her?

She shook off her indecision. "Tell you what. I can do some preliminary investigation and see what I turn up. If this firm seems legit or I'm able to uncover information that shows you are an heir of an estate in Alabama, we'll decide what to do from there."

Voices carried into the pastor's study.

"Oh dear." Pastor Grant peeked at his watch. "I need to pray and get ready to preach."

Humming and singing drifted into the room.

"I hear the deacons are starting up with devotions." He stood. "Let me make a copy of these papers so you can take them with you." Pastor Grant moved to an ancient Xerox machine in the corner and ran the pages through.

She stood by the door, ready to leave.

Pastor Grant handed her the papers and squeezed her shoulder with his hand. "Thank you, Nona. I can't tell you how much this means to me."

"You're welcome. See you in service."

She exited into the small hallway. Resignation and sadness slid over her. For the few moments in his office, she'd been clinical, weighing pros and cons, but now the guilt and shame that drove her to seek absolution during this night's service reached out with their dead fingers and squeezed her heart in their cold, unforgiving grip. New Year's Eve, ten years ago, she'd started everything by hurling at her sister venomous words designed to inflict maximum emotional damage.

*"Tyson told me he loves me, not you. I'm the one he wants, not you. You know what? I wish I never had a sister."*

Hot recrimination mortified her. Tyson was cheating on Nikki—with Nona—and fool that she was, Nona had desperately hoped Tyson would dump Nikki and pick her. She had crushed Nikki with those hateful and untrue words, and her sister had fled, leaving behind the smack of the slamming front door and the grinding of their car's engine. The last glimpse Nona ever had of her twin alive was of Nikki's retreating back. Nona could never forgive herself for her wicked treatment of her sister, and neither would God.