

THE
BEST
POSSIBLE
ANGLE

A NOVEL

BY
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PROLOGUE

Thursday, November 28, 2013

Minneapolis, Minnesota

Det. Blake VanDrunen was in no mood to see another cadaver. His head was not in it. In fact, he was sure he had left both it and his heart in Santorini, Greece. The vacation had been a last-ditch effort to save his marriage. However, during lunch one afternoon, after his second bite of the Spanakopita, his wife announced that she resented him and didn't want to be married anymore. It was the last sort of memory he wanted etched in his mind. Now, the only thing he had to show from the trip was a burned, leathery tan that made his green eyes stand out.

It was not the first time in all his years on the force that VanDrunen felt like being somewhere else, but it was the first time he wanted to be back on the island of Santorini, flinging himself into the Aegean Sea.

"Earth to Blake?" a female voice said, bringing the detective out of his despondency.

The voice belonged to his partner, Det. Leticia Ramirez. Thank goodness she was there to keep him focused. He took the shoe covers and latex gloves she handed him. Seeing that hers were already on, he quickly covered his own.

The responding officers, Finney and Wright, were inside the apartment, in a corner re-checking what they already wrote down.

“What do we got?” VanDrunen asked.

“Deceased black female. Late twenties-early thirties. We’ve secured and canvased the premises, and spoke to some of the other tenants,” Wright said.

“Landlord’s mother discovered the body,” Finney said.

Both detectives moved further into the living room. Their eyes were filled with an exuberant curiosity that asked the location of the body.

“In the bedroom,” Wright said, beckoning them in with a closed together index and middle fingers.

“How bad is it?” Ramirez asked.

“It’s bad,” Finney said.

“Let’s do it,” Ramirez said, taking the lead. She made it three paces into the bedroom before stopping dead in her tracks, causing VanDrunen to collide with her backside.

VanDrunen lurched forward as though he had been kicked in the gut. He could feel that morning’s jelly donuts move in his stomach, bubbling upward. He closed his eyes and swallowed hard, thinking of anything to keep from throwing up.

Between the two detectives, they had twenty-five years in homicide (him fifteen years, and her ten). They were seasoned professionals, used to seeing the very worst mankind inflicts upon one another.

It took a few moments for them to push through their visceral disgust and get down to why they were there.

“Whoever did this had a real issue with the victim,” Ramirez said, staring at the body that was lying on the bed.

“That’s an understatement.”

Both detectives noticed the message written in the victim’s blood, an odd and sinister proclamation scrawled out on the wall. It underscored the spectacular mess found on the bed.

“The nigger wanted a cunt,” the message began almost boastfully, “So I gave it one . . .”

ONE

October 11, 2013

Hollywood Hills-Los Angeles

The cast of the soon-to-be released movie, *It Is What It Is*, gathered poolside behind the Spanish-stucco mansion, home to Hollywood's answer for working African-American actors: publicist and leading agent, Brenda Vaughn.

Amy Winehouse played in the background as Brenda watched her revelers from the balcony. Being mildly drunk was nothing new, in fact, it was part of her charm. Everyone knew she was a lush with the Midas touch for turning a modicum of talent into stardom.

Brenda paid for her astounding success with hard work and two failed marriages. And for that, the people frolicking by the pool owed their relevance in the industry to her. None of them could judge her; many had vices of their own. At close glance, they were a beautiful, emotionally vapid bunch; chemical dependency fueled their neurotic, insecure egos.

Brenda's glazed focus settled upon her client, toothsome Kendrick Black, and his girlfriend Sabathany Morris. Kendrick was a six-two, sculpted hunk of chocolate brown, with mesmeric eyes and inviting full lips, framed by a razor-cut goatee.

Sabathany ran her fingers through sleek, ombre hair, luxuriating every strand of it. With dark, brown skinned-

perfection and a long slender neck, she stood model ready at five-ten.

Brenda could not deny how good they looked together. With any luck, her company, Living Color Agency, would turn them into Hollywood royalty.

The couple was off by themselves, their fiery energy noticed by more than a few. As Kendrick spoke to Sabathany, his hands flailed angrily.

Brenda waddled her ample physique down to the pool. Armed with her eighth vodka sour in hand, she intended to douse the squabbling duo's flame, which threatened the celebratory vibe of her get-together.

"Do you mind if I have a few words with this fabulous man?" Brenda asked, approaching the couple.

Sabathany's heavily lashed eyes warmed to a twinkle. "Only if you promise to return him to me," she said, thankful to be saved from an argument she was not winning. With a wink to Brenda, she played along and kissed Kendrick on the cheek before flipping her hair over her shoulder and slinking away.

"She's cute. Everything all right with you two?" Brenda asked.

"We're fine. Just a little disagreement." Kendrick's voice was rich and deep—a movie star's voice.

"Are you ready for this press thing?"

"Not looking forward to the travel."

"I've spent a lot of money building you up. Whatever headspace you need to get into, I advise you to do so."

"You don't need to remind me." Kendrick wanted to say more, but stopped there.

"And?"

"I'm just wishing I could've spent the entire summer promoting this film. Now everything seems so thrown together and last minute."

“The public’s attention span is like that,” Brenda said, snapping her fingers. “It’s better to promote closer to the premier date because it’ll still be fresh on people’s minds when the movie opens on Thanksgiving.”

Kendrick sighed. He felt swept up into a vortex of mismanaged time.

“Where are you booked again?”

Kendrick scratched his head, wondering why she did not know. Brenda had told her staff she wanted to handle Kendrick’s itinerary herself. “I think I’m in Chicago, Atlanta, Miami, New York and then wrapping up back here in L.A. To be honest, I have to look at it again.”

“Doesn’t sound too bad.”

“Yeah, I guess I should be okay. But first I’ve got to get through an early Thanksgiving dinner with my family this Sunday.”

“When are you heading back to Minnesota?”

“Tomorrow. Sabathany’s pouting because I told her she can’t go.”

“You don’t think meeting your family would make her happy?”

“We’re not there yet,” he responded, hearing the defensiveness in his own voice.

Brenda blinked at the sharpness of his tone, and took a step back.

“I’m sorry. That wasn’t called for.”

Brenda’s smile brightened her flushed face. “No, no. I get it. Any improvement with your dad?”

Kendrick snickered. “He still blames me for Alvin’s death. What do you think?”

Brenda thought for two beats. “You’ll be fine.”

Kendrick nodded his agreement. “I’m just grateful to have a career to take my mind off things. I owe you so much for taking a chance on me.”

“Well, I’ve got a lot invested in you, and I know you have talent. I expect to see a huge return on my investment. You just wait, when that movie comes out, your comet is going to be on fire!”

Kendrick visualized his future.

“I know it’s none of my business, but I hope you get all that drama straightened out between you and Sabathany. You don’t need relationship woes clogging your mind when you’re promoting a film.”

“Yes, Brenda. We’re fine,” Kendrick said with a playful eye roll.

Brenda shrugged good naturedly, then held her hands up, palms out. “Okay, if you say so. But just in case things don’t work out with that one, know there are millions of women lining up to take her place.”

Kendrick averted his eyes, embarrassed by Brenda’s stroke to his ego. Shifting from foot to foot, he said, “I doubt it.”

Brenda squinted with glee. Kendrick did not even understand his own appeal. She liked that.

October 13, 2013,

Kendrick Black had been living in Los Angeles for the last five years. Unable to shake feeling like a stranger in a strange land, he lacked roots, but knew he did not want to plant them in Hollywood. Kendrick found L.A. relationships to be mostly transactional, and despite exquisite surfaces, the people in and around show business were not very deep.

However, there was always something pulling him back to Minnesota, something unashamedly authentic and non-threatening. There he was the big fish in the small pond. In L.A., he was one of many fishes fighting for the next gig or all important contact, but he remained unsure whether he had the stomach for it.

Of course, he could do without his family's dysfunction. There was no glamor in repressed emotions and passive-aggressiveness. The only reason he agreed to return home was because everyone reworked their schedules, and his mother insisted.

When Kendrick appeared at his parents' doorstep, he was already in a horrible mood. Brenda had worked in a last minute press opportunity with a local Minneapolis news station. She told him the entire segment would be devoted to how a hometown guy made it to Hollywood, and his upcoming movie. Instead, Kendrick took second billing to Becca Larson, a local nineteen-year-old YouTube makeup artist blogger who had amassed two million subscribers to her channel. Becca shrewdly ate into his allotted time, leaving his segment with five minutes. The newbie on-air personality, Natalie Watts, never bothered to take control of the interview. When Kendrick complained afterwards, she said, "Look, you've probably outgrown Minneapolis anyway. You've got a huge Hollywood machine behind you, so I'm sure there'll be more opportunities to talk about yourself. Let the underdog have a nibble."

Kendrick knocked on his parents' door with heavy hands. Dread settled at the bottom of his stomach.

"Well, look who's here," Wallace Black said, upon opening the door. "To what do we owe the pleasure?"

"Hello, Dad," Kendrick said, like a teenager too cool for his parent.

"Is this what they've been teaching you in California? How to be ashamed of your family." He eyed the brown paper bag in his son's hand.

Kendrick flashed his Hollywood smile, an attempt to hide his contempt. He extended the package toward his father, a peace offering of sorts—an ornate bottle of Remy Martin Louis XIII, the only gesture of class his father appreciated. Kendrick remembered his father only drank the brown liquor for his

“nerves.” Wallace accepted the package, his eyes hard like the calluses on his hands.

“Leave him be, Wallace,” Kendrick’s mother, Diane, said. She gently nudged Wallace from the door. “It’s so good to see you!”

“It’s good to see you guys, too.”

“Is it really?” Wallace asked.

Kendrick tossed his father a dismissive glance. “Enjoy the cognac, Dad.”

He looked at his mother again, noticing the weight gain since the last time he saw her. There were even a few more wrinkles on her face. Though she wore them regally, Wallace was probably the cause of each one. Diane still went all out, dressing in her all-purpose black dress with the tiny pink and yellow flowers. She was not an attractive woman. Rather, she was sturdy and jolly. Though Diane did acquiesce to her wifely duty, the couple had only “made love” a total of five times during their marriage, each time resulting in the conception of their five children. Diane was wearing the perfume Kendrick sent her from one of those expensive boutiques on Rodeo Drive. Just a dab was enough to rev Wallace into a two to five-minute search for sexual gratification.

All that remained of Wallace’s youth could be found in his glimmering eyes. His graying beard looked like thick soot smeared about his face. He had grown from a thin rail of a man into a husky-framed one whose belly shook when he spoke. This special occasion to welcome home his son for the pre-holiday was not enough to inspire any effort on his part to dress up; rather, he had settled into denim overalls and a tan shirt.

The house used to feel big when Kendrick was a child, now it was cramped. The old Zenith box TV set sat dejected in a corner, having been replaced by a new flat screen that appeared out of place amongst all the mahogany and antiquity.

In the den, Kendrick's sister Arlene breastfed her newborn. She looked up, smiling broadly. She wanted to stand, but caught herself before dropping the baby.

"Hey, sis!"

"When did your flight get in?" Arlene repositioned the blanket to ensure her breast was covered.

"Last night."

"Was it good?"

"A little bumpy for no good reason. Other than that, yeah, it was good."

"You look well."

"So do you. What is this, kid number three?"

"Yep."

"How do you feel?"

"I love it. Carl said he wants a dozen more. I told him only if he has them himself."

Kendrick and his sister laughed. Then, his face became serious. Kendrick's voice fell to a whisper. "Have you talked to Paris?"

"I just saw her the other day. She came over with some gifts for the baby."

"Is she doing okay?"

"You know she's not. Having to sneak around Daddy's back just to make time with the rest of us. You should call her."

"I was planning to. She's got the same number as before?"

Arlene nodded.

"Looking sharp there," Alex, another of Kendrick's brothers said, coming from behind and offering a hand shake.

Kendrick accepted the shake, noting how clammy Alex's hand felt, which was fitting considering that Kendrick always thought there was something slimy about him. Though he loved his brother, he did not like him, and suspected the feeling was mutual. "What's going on, man?"

"You in and out this time?" Alex asked.

“Yeah. My publicist has me scheduled to do some last minute promotion for *It Is What It Is*.”

“When does that come out?” Arlene chimed in.

“Thanksgiving.”

Pam, Alex’s wife, appeared suddenly. “Why, hello there, Mr. Hollywood,” she said with a singing joy. They fell into a warm embrace.

“How are you doing, Pam?” Kendrick asked, while simultaneously thinking she was too good for Alex.

“I’m too blessed to be stressed.” Pam turned her attention toward Arlene’s two boys, rough-housing on the floor.

Kendrick observed a fading black eye, and the heavy plum-colored eyeshadow Pam applied to hide it. He disliked his father, but could at least say he never saw him lay a hand on his mother. Kendrick had no idea where Alex learned to beat women. Every female who got involved with his brother left with a story of abuse as a parting gift. Although the two had no children, Kendrick was not sure Pam would ever leave.

“Okay, dinner’s ready,” Diane announced.

Suddenly, the dining room filled with adults and children. Kendrick remembered the family eating through numerous holidays and special occasions in this room. There was a time when the room felt majestic, with his father sitting proudly at its helm. Now, Wallace marked his territory with bitterness, like a cat spraying piss.

“Kendrick, would you say grace?” Diane requested.

Kendrick waited until every set of eyes were closed and all heads were bowed. “Dear Lord, we stand in the light of gratitude. We’re so thankful to have this chance to fellowship as a family. I ask that You bless this food we’re about to receive, that it will serve as nourishment for our bodies. I ask that You be with those who are without, and that You’ll open our hearts to help them. In Christ’s name I pray. Amen.” Kendrick opened his eyes to find his father staring at him.

Wallace watched as the food was passed around the table. Once everyone filled their plate he asked, “Say, Kenny, you’ve been out in California for what, about five years now?”

“That’s right,” Kendrick said, noting the belligerence in his father’s eyes.

“And you mean to tell me that after five whole years, people *still* don’t know who you are?”

“Wallace, please,” Diane said through clenched teeth.

“I’m just saying. Most of the boy’s roles have been low-budget, straight to DVD movies. And we all know those DVDs will collect dust before anybody watches them.”

“Perhaps you ought to check my IMDb page. I’ve got way more film credits than you think. And don’t forget the sitcoms I co-starred in.”

Wallace cackled. “Yeah, but all those shows got cancelled.”

Kendrick took a deep breath. “This time is going to be different,” he said, fighting to stay calm.

Wallace continued to stare at his son. He grabbed a piece of white bread and spread a dollop of margarine over it. “It had better be, or else you’re gonna wind up on your knees sucking off some film executive for your next great role.”

“That won’t happen. And you know what? I get that my line of work doesn’t mean a hill of beans to you, but I’m proud of what I’ve accomplished. Just wait until my movie comes out, then you’ll see.”

Wallace’s eyes glowed with delight. “Oh, I see. So now you’re Mister Important because you’ve got your lil’ flick coming out. Guess that means we all need to be kissing your ass, right?”

“You know that’s not what I meant.”

“Ain’t it? All right then, let me ask you this. What’s it like to inconvenience your entire family by making us celebrate Thanksgiving a whole month early? It must be nice getting everybody to rearrange their lives just to accommodate you.”

“Wallace.” Diane’s eyes plead with her husband.

“No, Mom, it’s okay. I think Dad has something he’d like to get off his chest.” Kendrick turned his full attention toward his father. “For your information, I don’t have to be here. I could be somewhere promoting my film, but I thought I owed it to the family to be here. Mom practically begged me.”

“Like I said, you must be expecting us to kiss your ass or something.”

“Wallace, I asked him to come early. This was the only time he had available to be with family. Now, if you’re going to be mad with someone, be mad at me.”

The unfazed children continued to eat as the adults squirmed uncomfortably. Wallace pounded the table with his fists, startling everyone. Kernels of food flew about; dribbles of red punch stained the table cloth.

“You say your little prayer like nothing’s changed. What do I have to be thankful for, huh? I got one dead son because of you, and another child that may as well be dead! Then here you come, like some hot shot because you moved off to La La Land! What does any of that even matter? You ruined this family when you screwed your brother Alvin out of his chance to get into the NFL!”

“You still want to blame me for Alvin’s choices? Go ahead, but his downward spiral isn’t my fault, Dad. I can’t believe that you’ll stand behind the child who became a junkie and threw his life away, but won’t speak to Paris because you think she’s a disappointment.”

“First off, don’t utter that name in this house! Secondly, you’re the one who told on Alvin. You told those folks that he raped that girl!”

“Because he did!”

“You don’t know that! And even if he did, who are you to sell your brother up the river? And now he’s gone—took his

own life because he didn't know how to live without football. You took his dream from him, and I'll never forgive you for it."

This was the confrontation Kendrick needed, one long overdue. With the revelation of his father's true feelings, Kendrick was free to abandon the pretense of a mere dislike existing between them. He harbored a deep-seated loathing in his gut. Kendrick eyed the carving fork and knife protruding from the ham, deciding both were suitable for puncturing the perfect size hole into his father's throat. He imagined a deep red gushing forth, spraying his family as they applauded the deed. A malevolent smile crept across Kendrick's face, and for the first time he was unashamed of wanting his father's worthless life to bleed out.

Kendrick's glee was partnered with a tingling in his face, followed by a flowing heat that spread broadly across his skin. He had reached his limit. Time to leave before a fantasy of murder turned into reality. With nothing else to say, Kendrick left the dining room.

"Where do you think you're going?" Wallace's voice followed Kendrick out of the room.

"Sweetheart, come on back and sit down with your family," Diane urged her son, pulling at his arm. "I was up late last night cooking all your favorites. Barely got any sleep."

"Mama, I refuse to sit at the table of a man who doesn't respect me."

"Let Mr. Uppity go, Diane!" There was an unsettling delight in Wallace's words.

"Shut up, Wallace!" She turned to her son, who to her was the exemplar of perfection. She had no idea that his inner monologue ran so dark where his father was concerned. "Honey, you know we haven't seen you in Lord knows how long. You can't go now. You just got here."

"I didn't force the drugs into Alvin's veins. Dad can't keep blaming me for what ain't even my fault!"

"I know, honey. I know." Her words had a sing-song appeasement to them. She managed to get him back into the dining room. Everyone waited in silence; some had lost their appetites, though Wallace ate spiritedly, unbothered by the tension clouding the room. Diane pulled a seat out for Kendrick. "That's right, sit down right here."

Kendrick did not sit, instead he reached across the table for the bottle of Remy Martin, which glistened like citrine on the candlelit table. However, the theme song to *The A-team* interrupted his movement.

"I have to take this. It's better if I go outside." Kendrick left the expensive cognac, grabbed his coat from the back of the chair, and walked away before his mother protested.

"Remind me to plant a great big kiss on you when I get back to L.A.," he said into the phone. Now that he was away from his family, he chuckled openly.

"I take it I called at a good time," Brenda said.

"Yeah, you just don't know." The cold air filling his lungs felt good. "What's up?"

"Got some good news. The people at *Live! With Kelly and Michael* want you to co-host with Kelly Ripa. Michael Strahan is out sick."

"You're kidding!"

"I'm serious. Got the call a few minutes ago."

"Whoa, this is big."

"Are you kidding me? It's huge!"

"But, what if they don't like me? Michael already has an established fan base."

"You're not out to steal his gig. You're just warming his chair for a day or two. Think of all the publicity we can get for *It Is What It Is*. The universe threw this one into your lap. America is about to fall in love with Kendrick Black."

Kendrick's dimples chilled when he smiled. "Wow! That would be an honor. I frickin' love Michael Strahan!"

“If you nail it, think of the doors this’ll open.”

“Yeah, but I’m not sure I can sit and be Mr. Charming for an entire hour. What if I suck?”

“Oh please! You’re about the most charming man I know. Imagine all of the soaked panties in the audience,” Brenda said.

Kendrick moved down the porch and across the stoned path which led to the metal gate. He threw back the latch with a gloved finger and walked through the gate, closing it behind him. He deactivated the car alarm, unlocking the door. He was sure his family got the hint that he was not coming back. He would call his mother later. Kendrick climbed into the 2013 black Escalade and started the ignition with the phone tucked between his ear and shoulder.

Kendrick sped off down the block, thrilled that he was going to be swapping jokes with Kelly Rippa Monday morning. Unfortunately, in his excitement, he did not see the young girl dressed in cotton candy pink cut between two parked cars, though he did hear the heavy thump of the impact.

“Oh, no! God, no!” Kendrick Black screamed, breaking at the red light. Panic entered his body with the same potency of snake venom entering the bloodstream. With closed fists, he pounded the dashboard and steering wheel, accidentally hitting the horn, causing it to toot like an unintended breaking of wind.

“What’s going on?” Brenda asked.

Kendrick tried to gather his wits. “Some asshole just tried to cut me off. I really need to pay attention to the road. I’ll call you back.” Kendrick ended the call and glanced through the rearview mirror. “I should just turn around and go back,” he said to himself.

The light turned green. In a frantic, swift movement, Kendrick checked to see if anyone had witnessed the accident, but saw no one.

“Just go back,” he whispered. He gripped the steering wheel as his foot squeezed the gas pedal. The Escalade eased forward. Through the rearview window the little girl shrank into the distance. His eyes teared, his heart thumped loudly in his chest. Thoughts raced, overlapping in a way that made no sense.

After an hour of aimless driving, he pulled into an alley which led to an abandoned warehouse. Kendrick parked behind three dumpsters.

Alone and out of view, Kendrick closed his eyes, visualizing the girl’s rolling body coming to a contorted stop. He saw her lying there, twisted with a snapped neck. Crushed, dried leaves were matted into her side ponytail, and blood turned her once pink jogging suit crimson. Worst of the mental images, he pictured her eyes open, arrested of their innocence, staring out at nothing. He knew she was someone’s child. He imagined the parents losing their minds when notified.

“That’s somebody’s baby,” Kendrick repeated to himself as though it was an affirmation. An overwhelming impulse to cry came upon him. As he sobbed, tears spurt from his eyes like blood from a wound. His dry tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth.

“I’m not a monster. I should just turn myself in,” he said into the dark interior of the vehicle. He took out his cell phone and speed-dialed a number.

“Hey, it’s me. I think I’m going to hell for what I just did.”