

THE DEAD TELL NO TALES. UNTIL THEY DO.

HER SISTER'S DEATH

K.L. MURPHY

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Books

Content Warning:

This novel touches upon suicide and may be disturbing to some readers.

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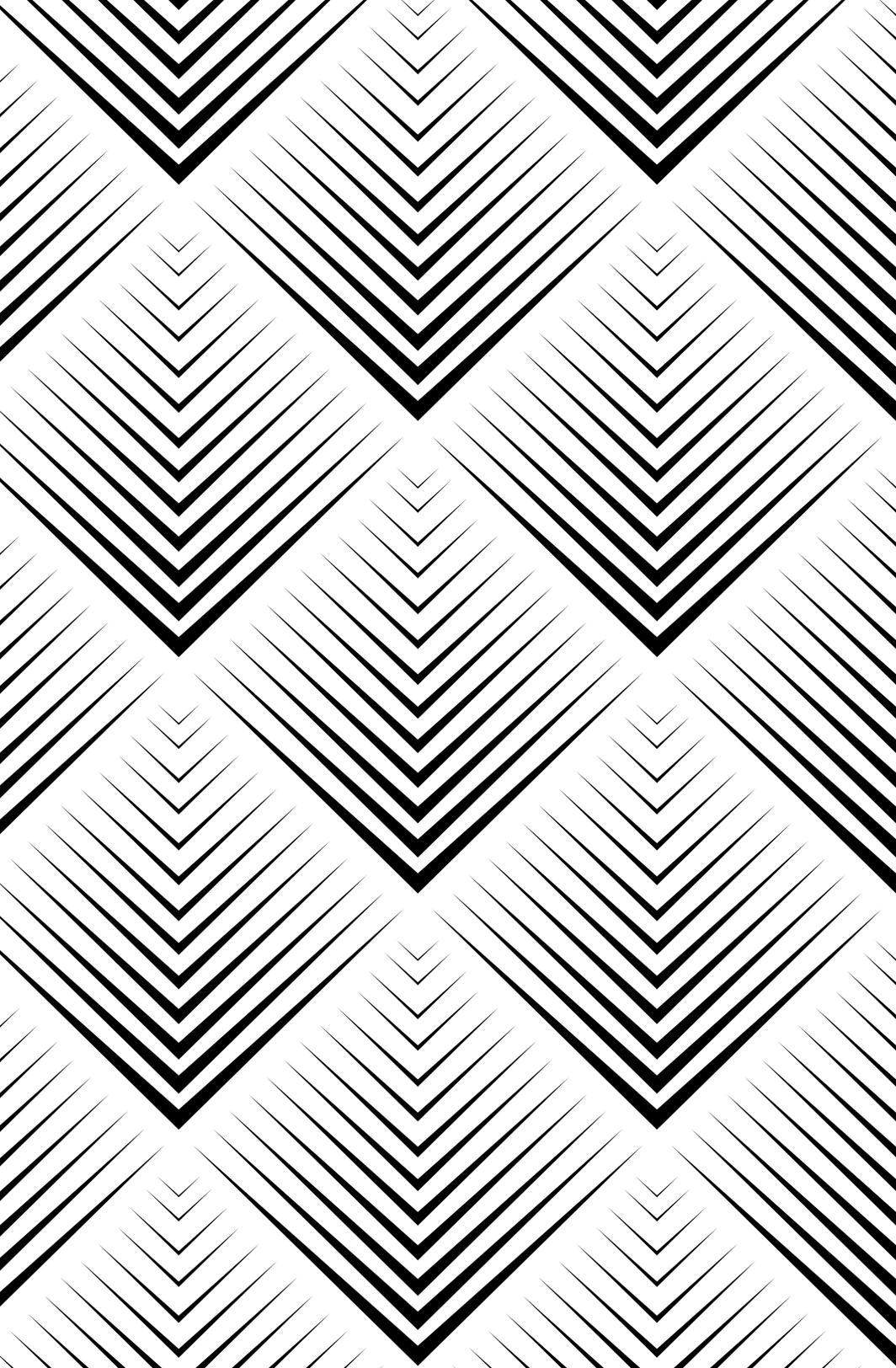
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FOR DAVID, ALWAYS



P R E S E N T D A Y

CHAPTER

1

VAL

Monday, 9:17 a.m.

Once, when I was nine or maybe ten, I spent weeks researching a three-paragraph paper on polar bears. I don't remember much about the report or polar bears, but that assignment marked the beginning of my lifelong love affair with research. As I got older, I came to believe that if I did the research, I could solve any problem. It didn't matter what it was. School. Work. Relationships. In college, when I suspected a boyfriend was about to give me the brush-off, I researched what to say before he could break up with me. Surprisingly, there are dozens of pages about this stuff. Even more surprising, some of it actually works. We stayed together another couple of months, until I realized I was better off without him. He never saw it coming.

When I got married, I researched everything from whether or not we were compatible (we were) to our average life expectancy based on our medical histories (only two years different). Some couples swear they're soul mates or some other crap, but I considered myself a little more practical than that. I wanted the facts before I walked down the aisle. The thing is, research doesn't tell you that your perfect-on-paper husband is going to

prefer the ditzzy receptionist on the third floor before you've hit your five-year anniversary. It also doesn't tell you that your initial anger will turn into something close to relief, or that all that perfection was too much work and maybe the whole soul-mate thing isn't as crazy as it sounds. If you doubt me, look it up.

My love of research isn't as odd as one might think. My father is a retired history professor, and my mother is a bibliophile. It doesn't matter the genre. She usually has three or more books going at once. She also gets two major newspapers every day and a half dozen magazines each month. Some people collect cute little china creatures or rare coins or something. My mother collects words. When I decided to become a journalist, both my parents were overjoyed.

"It's perfect," my father said. "We need more people to record what's going on in the world. How can we expect to learn if we don't recognize that everything that happens impacts our future?" I fought the urge to roll my eyes. I knew what was coming, but how many times can a person hear about the rise and fall of Caesar? The man was stabbed to death, and it isn't as though anyone learned their lesson. Ask Napoleon. Or Hitler. My dad was right about one thing though. History can't help but repeat itself.

"Honey," my mother interrupted. "Val will only write about important topics. You know very well she is a young lady of principle." Again, I wanted to roll my eyes.

Of course, for all their worldliness, neither of my parents understands how the world of journalism works. You don't walk into a newsroom as an inexperienced reporter and declare you will be writing about the environment, or the European financial market, or the latest domestic policy. The newspaper business is not so different from any other—even right down to the way technology is forcing it to go digital. Either way, the newbies are given the jobs no one else wants.

Naturally, I was assigned to obituaries.

After a year, I got moved to covering the local city council meetings, but the truth was, I missed the death notices. I couldn't stop myself from

wondering how each of the people died. Some were obvious. When the obituary asks you to donate to the cancer society or the heart association, you don't have to think too hard to figure it out. Also, people like to add that the deceased "fought a brave battle with (fill in the blank)." I've no doubt those people were brave, but they weren't the ones that interested me. It was the ones that seemed to die unexpectedly and under unusual circumstances. I started looking them up for more information. The murder victims held particular fascination for me. From there, it was only a short hop to my true interest: crime reporting.

The job isn't for everyone. Crime scenes are not pretty. Have you ever rushed out at three in the morning to a nightclub shooting? Or sat through a murder trial, forced to view photo after photo of a brutally beaten young mother plastered across a giant screen?

My sister once told me I must have a twisted soul to do what I do. Maybe. I find myself wondering about the killer, curious about what makes them do it. That sniper—the one that picked off the poor folks as they came out of the state fair—that was my story. Even now, I still can't get my head around that guy's motives.

So, I research and research, trying to get things right as well as find some measure of understanding. It doesn't always work, but knowing as much as I can is its own kind of answer.

Asking questions has always worked for me. It's the way I do my job. It's the way I've solved every problem in my life. Until now. Not that I'm not trying. I'm at the library. I'm in my favorite corner in the cushy chair with the view of the pond. I don't know how long I've been here.

How many hours.

My laptop is on, the screen filled with text and pictures. Flicking through the tabs, I swallow the bile that reminds me I have no answer. I've asked the question in every way I can think of, but for the first time in my life, Google is no help.

Why did my sister—my gorgeous sister with her two beautiful children and everything to live for—kill herself? Why?

Sylvia has been dead for four days now. Actually, I don't know how long she's been dead. I've been told there's a backlog at the ME's office. Apparently, suicides are not high priority when you live in a city with one of the country's highest murder rates. I don't care what the cause of death is. I want the truth.

While we wait for the official autopsy, I find myself reevaluating what I do know.

Her body was discovered on Thursday at the Franklin, a Do not Disturb sign hanging from the door of her room. The hotel claims my sister called the front desk after only one day and asked not to be disturbed unless the sign was removed. This little detail could not have been more surprising. My sister doesn't have trouble sleeping. Sylvia went to bed at ten every night and was up like clockwork by six sharp. I have hundreds of texts to prove it. Even when her children were babies with sleep schedules that would kill most people, she somehow managed to stick to her routine. Vacations with her were pure torture.

"Val, get up. The sun is shining. Let's go for a walk on the beach."

I'd open one eye to find her standing in the doorway. She'd be dressed in black nylon shorts and neon sneakers, bouncing up and down on her toes.

"We can walk. I promise I won't run."

Tossing my pillow at her, I'd groan and pull the covers over my head.

"You can't sleep the day away, Val."

She'd cross the room in two strides and rip back the sheets.

"Get up."

In spite of my night-owl tendencies, I'd crawl out of bed. Sylvia had a way of making me feel like if I didn't join her, I'd be missing out on something extraordinary. The thing is, she was usually right. Sure, a sunrise is a sunrise, but a sunrise with Sylvia was color and laughter and tenderness and love. She had that way about her. She loved mornings.

I tried to explain Sylvia to the police officer, to tell him that hanging a sleeping sign past six in the morning, much less all day, was not only odd

behavior but also downright suspicious. He did his best not to dismiss me outright, but I knew he didn't get it.

"Sleeping too much can be a sign of depression," he said.

"She wasn't depressed."

"She hung a sign, ma'am. It's been verified by the manager." He stopped short of telling me that putting out that stupid sign wasn't atypical of someone planning to do what she did.

Whatever that's supposed to mean.

The screen in front of me blurs, and I rub my burning eyes. There are suicide statistics for women of a certain age, women with children, women in general. My fingers slap the keys. I change the question, desperate for an answer, any answer.

A shadow falls across the screen when a man takes the chair across from me, a newspaper under his arm. My throat tightens, and I press my lips together. He settles in, stretching his legs. The paper crackles as he opens it and snaps when he straightens the pages.

"Do you mind?"

He lowers the paper, his brows drawn together. "Mind what?"

"This is a library. It's supposed to be quiet in here."

He angles his head. "Are you always this touchy or is it just me?"

"It's you." I don't know why I say that. I don't even know why I'm acting like a brat, but I can't help myself.

Silence fills the space between us as he appears to digest what I've said. "Perhaps you'd like me to leave?"

"That would be nice."

He blinks, the paper falling from his hand. I'm not sure which of us is more surprised by my answer. I seem to have no control over my thoughts or my mouth. The man has done nothing but crinkle a newspaper, but I have an overwhelming need to lash out. He looks around, and for a moment, I feel bad.

The man gets to his feet, the paper jammed under his arm. "Look, lady, I'll move to another spot, but that's because I don't want to sit here and have

my morning ruined by some kook who thinks the public library is her own personal living room.” He points a finger at me. “You’ve got a problem.”

I feel the sting, the well of tears before he’s even turned his back. They flood my eyes and pour down over my cheeks. Worse, my mouth opens, and I sob, great, loud, obnoxious sobs.

I cover my face with my hands and sink lower into the chair, my body folding in on itself.

My laptop slips to the floor, and I somehow cry harder.

“Is she all right?” a woman asks, her voice high and tight.

The annoying man answers. “She’ll be fine in a minute.”

“Are you sure?” Her gaze darts between us, and her hands flutter over me like wings, nearing but never touching. I recognize her from the reference desk. “People are staring. This is a library, you know.”

I want to laugh, but it gets caught in my throat, and comes out like a bark. Her little kitten heels skitter back. I don’t blame her.

Who wouldn’t want to get away from the woman making strange animal noises?

“Do you have a private conference room?” the man asks. The woman points the way, and large hands lift me to my feet. “Can you get her laptop and her bag, please?”

The hands turn into an arm around my shoulders. He steers me toward a small room at the rear of the library. My sobs morph into hiccups.

The woman places my bag and computer on a small round table. “I’ll make sure no one bothers you here.” She slinks out, pulling the door shut.

The man sets his paper down and pulls out a chair for me. I don’t know how many minutes pass before I’m able to stop crying, before I’m able to speak.

“Are you okay now?” I can’t look at him. His voice is kind, far kinder than I deserve. He pushes something across the table. “Here’s my handkerchief.” He gets to his feet. “I’m going to see if I can find you some water.”

The door clicks behind him, and I’m alone. My sister, my best friend, is gone, and I’m alone.

“Do you want to talk about it?” the man asks, setting a bottle of water and a package of crackers on the table.

Sniffing, I twist the damp, wadded up handkerchief into a ball. I want to tell him that no, I don't want to talk about it, that I don't even know him, but the words slip out anyway. “My sister died,” I say.

“Oh.” He folds his hands together. “I'm sorry. Recently?”

“Four days.”

He pushes the crackers he's brought across the table. “You should try to eat something.”

I try to remember when I last ate. Yesterday? The day before? One of my neighbors did bring me a casserole with some kind of brown meat and orangey red sauce. It may have had noodles, but I can't be sure. I do remember watching the glob of whatever it was slide out of the aluminum pan and down the disposal. I think I ate half a bagel at some point. My stomach churns, then rumbles. The man doesn't wait for me to decide. He opens the packet and pushes it closer. For some reason I can't explain, I want to prove I'm more polite than I seemed earlier. I take the crackers and eat.

He gestures at the bottle. “Drink.”

I do. The truth is, I'm too numb to do anything else. It's been four days since my parents phoned me. Up to now, I've taken the news like any other story I've been assigned. I've filed it away, stored it at the back of my mind as something I need to analyze and figure out before it can be processed. I've buried myself in articles and anecdotes and medical pages, reading anything and everything to try and understand. On some level, I recognize my behavior isn't entirely normal. My parents broke down, huddled together on the sofa, as though conjoined in their grief. I couldn't have slipped between them even if I wanted to. Sylvia's husband—I guess that's what we're still calling him—appeared equally stricken. Not even the sight of her children, their faces pale and blank, cracked the shell I erected, the wall I built to deny the reality of her death.

“Aunt Val,” Merry asked. “Mommy’s coming back, right? She’s just passed, right? That’s what Daddy said.” She paused, a single tear trailing over her pink cheek. “What’s ‘passed?’”

Merry is the youngest, only five. Miles is ten—going on twenty if you ask me—which turned out to be a good thing in that moment. Miles took his sister by the hand. “Come on, Merry. Dad wants us in the back.” I let out a breath. Crisis averted.

My sister has been gone four days, and I haven’t shed a tear. Until today.

The man across the table clears his throat. “Are you feeling any better?”

“No, I’m not feeling better. My sister is still dead.” God, I’m a bitch. I expect him to stand up and leave or at least point out what an ass I’m being when he’s gone out of his way to be nice, but he does neither.

“Yes, I suppose she is. Death is kind of permanent.”

I jerk back in my chair. “Is that supposed to be funny?”

Unlike me, he does apologize. “I’m sorry. That didn’t come out right. I never did have the best bedside manner for the job.”

I take a closer look at the man. “Are you a doctor?”

He half laughs. “Hardly. Detective. Former, I mean. I never quite got the hang of talking to the victims’ families without putting my foot in my mouth. Seems I’ve done it again.”

My curiosity gets the best of me. He’s not much older than I am. Mid-forties. Maybe younger. Definitely too young for retirement. “Former detective? What do you do now?”

“I run a security firm.” He lifts his shoulders. “It’s different, has its advantages.”

The way he says it, I know he misses the job. I understand.

“I write for the *Baltimorean*. Mostly homicides,” I say.

“That’s a good paper. I’ve probably read your work then.”

Crumpling the empty cracker wrapper, I say, “I’m sorry I dumped on you out there.”

He shrugs again. “It’s okay. You had a good reason.”

I can’t think of anything to say to that.

“How did she die, if you don’t mind my asking?”

The question hits me hard. What I mind is that my sister is gone. My hands ball into fists. The heater in the room hums, but otherwise, it’s quiet. “They say she died by suicide.”

The man doesn’t miss a beat. “But you don’t believe it.” He watches me, his body still.

My heart pounds in my chest and I reach into my mind, searching for any information I’ve found that contradicts what I’ve been told. I’ve learned that almost fifty thousand people a year die by suicide in the United States. Strangely, a number of those people choose to do it in hotels. Maybe it’s the anonymity. Maybe it’s to spare the families. There are plenty of theories, but unfortunately, one can’t really ask the departed about that. Still, the reasoning is sound enough. For four days, I’ve read until I can’t see, and my head has dropped from exhaustion. I know that suicide can be triggered by traumatic events or chronic depression. It can be triggered by life upheaval or can be drug induced, or it can happen for any number of reasons that even close family and friends don’t know about until after—if ever. I know all this, and yet, I can’t accept it.

Sylvia was found in a hotel room she had no reason to be in. An empty pill bottle was found on the nightstand next to her. She checked in alone. Nothing in the room had been disturbed. Nothing appeared to have been taken. For all these reasons, the police made a preliminary determination that the cause of death was suicide, the final ruling to be made after the ME’s report. I know all this. My parents and Sylvia’s husband took every word of this at face value. But I can’t. Sylvia is not a statistic, and I know something they don’t.

“No. I don’t believe it.” I say, meeting his steady gaze with my own.

He doesn’t react. He doesn’t tell me I’m crazy. He doesn’t say “I’m sorry” again. Nothing. I’m disappointed, though I can’t imagine why. He’s a stranger to me. Still, I press my shoulder blades against the back of the chair, waiting. I figure it out then. Former detective. I’ve been around enough cops to know how it works. It’s like a tribe with them. You don’t criticize another

officer. You don't question anyone's toughness or loyalty to the job. You don't question a ruling that a case doesn't warrant an investigation, much less that it isn't even a case. So, I sit and wait. I will not be the first to argue. It doesn't matter that he's retired and left the job. He's still one of them. In fact, the more I think about it, I can't understand why he's still sitting there. I've been rude to the man. I've completely broken down in front of him like some helpless idiot. And now, I've suggested the cause of death that everyone—and I mean everyone—says is true is not the truth at all.

He gets up, shoves his hands in his pockets.

This is it. He's done with me now. In less than one minute he'll be gone and, suddenly, I don't want him to leave. I break the silence.

"I'm Val Ritter."

"Terry Martin."

I turn the name over in my brain. It's familiar in a vague way. "Terry the former detective."

"Uh-huh." He shifts his weight from one foot to the other. "Look, I'm sorry about your sister. You've lost someone you love, and the idea that she might have taken her own life is doubly distressing."

"I'm way past distressed. I'm angry."

"Is it possible that you're directing that anger toward the ones that ruled her death a suicide instead of at your . . ." His words fall away.

"My sister?"

"Yes."

"I might be if I thought she did this." I cross my arms over my chest. "But I don't. This idea, this thing they're saying makes no sense at all."

Terry the former detective's voice is low, soothing. "Why?"

My arms drop again. I'm tempted to tell him everything I know, which admittedly isn't much, but I hold back. This man is a stranger. Sure, he's been nice, and every time I've expected him to walk out the door, he's done the opposite. But that doesn't mean I can trust him.

"I'm sorry if my question seems insensitive," he says. His voice is soft, comforting in a neutral way, and I can picture him in an interrogation. He

would be the good cop. “No matter how shocking the, uh, idea might be, I have a feeling you have your reasons. You were close—you and your sister?”

“We were.” I sit there, twisting the handkerchief in my fingers. The heater makes a revving noise, drops back to a steady hum. “We talked all the time, and I can tell you she wasn’t depressed. That’s what they kept saying. ‘She must have been depressed.’ I know people hide things, but she was never good at hiding her emotions from me. If anything, she’d been happier than ever.” I give a slow shake of my head. “They tried to tell me about the other suicide and about the pills and the sign on the door and—” I stop. I hear myself rambling and force myself to take a breath. “If something had been wrong, I would have known.”

Terry the former detective doesn’t react, doesn’t move. He keeps his mouth shut, but I know. He doesn’t believe me, same as all the others. I can tell. There is no head bob or leading question. He thinks I’m in denial and that I will eventually accept the truth. He doesn’t know me at all.

The minutes pass, and I drink the water. I realize I feel better. It’s time to leave. “I should be going.” I hold up the crumpled rag in my hand. “Sorry I did such a number on your handkerchief. I can clean it, send it to you later.”

He waves off the suggestion. “Keep it.”

I gather my items and apologize again. “Sorry you had to witness my meltdown out there.”

“It happens.”

I’m headed out the door, my hand on the knob, when he breaks protocol.

“What did you mean by ‘the other suicide’?”

CHAPTER

2

TERRY

Monday, 10:02 a.m.

The woman—Val, I remind myself—hesitates. I can see she’s wary, worried I don’t believe her. I don’t know that I do, but I am curious. “What did you mean? There was another suicide?”

“A month ago, maybe a little longer, a woman killed herself in the same hotel. She jumped off the roof, which apparently was no easy task since there were all kinds of doors to go through to get up there. Of course, what happened to her was horrible, but it has nothing to do with my sister. I don’t know why they’re acting like it does.”

My jaw tightens. “Which hotel?”

“The Franklin.”

I look past her and think maybe I should be surprised, but nothing about that hotel surprises me. “The Franklin,” I say, echoing her words.

The Franklin is one of Baltimore’s oldest hotels. Built in 1918, it’s fifteen stories high with marble columns and archways at the entrance. Along with the Belvedere, before it became condos, and the Lord Baltimore, the Franklin is a destination, a swanky place that’s attracted film stars and

politicians for decades. Somewhere along the line, it fell into disrepair and the famous guests went elsewhere. For a brief time, the management offered rooms for short-term rentals, desperate to keep the hotel from plunging further into the red. Twenty years ago, the hotel was sold to an investment group. They declared the hotel historic, sunk tens of millions of dollars into it, and reopened it in grand style. The governor and the mayor cut the big red ribbon. Baseball stars from the Orioles and a well-known director were photographed at the official gala. It was a big to-do for the city at the time. Since then, it's remained popular—one of the five-star hotels downtown, which, of course, means that a night there doesn't come cheap. That's the press release version.

But there's another one. Lesser known.

Val is calm now, watching me, and I catch a glimpse of the reporter. "Do you know it?" she asks.

"Yeah, I know it." Stories have circulated about the hotel through the years. Some are decades old while others have been encouraged by the hotel itself. Ghost tours are popular these days, and the Franklin tour is no exception. "It has a history. For a while, it was called the Mad Motel."

She flinches. "What?"

"According to my grandfather, people seemed to die there. Most deaths occurred right after the Depression, victims of the stock market crash, but not all. There was one guy that killed his whole family right before he killed himself. They said he lost his mind. That was the first time it was called the Mad Motel, though there were other stories."

"What are you saying?"

I see the flush on her cheeks and know my words have upset her in a way I didn't intend. I do my best to smooth it over. "Nothing. I didn't mean anything. I've never been a fan of the name myself, but there were some guys around the department that used it."

The anger that colored her cheeks a moment earlier fades, eclipsed by something else I recognize. Curiosity. "Why would they use such a terrible name?"

It's a valid question, and I give the only explanation I can. "The first time I heard it on the job was about fifteen years ago. An assault at the Franklin. I didn't catch the case, but I remember a man almost beat his wife to death. He would have, if someone in the next room hadn't called the police."

She doesn't blink, doesn't raise a hand to her mouth. Just waits.

"Before that day, the guy was a typical accountant. Kind of nerdy. Mild-mannered. Went to work. Went home to his family. Nothing out of the ordinary. Then they fly into Baltimore for their nephew's wedding, stay at the Franklin. As they were dressing, he loses it. He hits her with the lamp, punches her, throws her up against the wall. When the police arrived, they had to pry him off of her. They rushed her to the hospital. She ended up with broken ribs, a concussion, a whole bunch of other stuff"

"And the husband?"

"That's what was so strange. According to the officers on the scene, as soon as they pulled him off, he stopped all of it. He cried, begged to be allowed to go with her to the hospital. When they took him downtown, he swore he didn't know what had come over him. That he'd never hit anyone in his life, and he couldn't even recall being angry with her. They kept him in jail until she woke up. Oddly, she corroborated his story. She said he didn't have a violent bone in his body before that day."

Val's forehead wrinkles. "I don't remember ever reading about that case. What happened?"

"He was charged in spite of his wife's insistence that she didn't want that. When he went to trial, his lawyer put him on the stand. That's when I heard his story." I pause and run my hand over my face, scratching at my chin. "He told the jury that while he was putting on his tux jacket, a cold breeze blew in. He said he checked the room, but the windows were closed, and it was winter, so the heat was on. Then according to him, this cold air got into his body, in his hands and his feet and then his mind. He said when his wife came out of the bathroom, he didn't recognize her, that she was someone else, something else."

"Something else? What does that mean?"

“He described a monster with sharp teeth and claws. His attorney even had a drawing done by a sketch artist. She held it up for the jury, but the man wouldn’t look at it. Refused. He claimed he panicked, grabbed the lamp, and swung, but the monster kept coming. He said the monster howled—that was probably his wife screaming—and came at him again. That must have been when the guest in the other room called the police.” I pause again. Even as I say it, I know how it sounds. “So, he tells this story at trial, and everyone looks around at each other thinking this guy is crazy. But his wife is in the audience and nodding like it’s true. The prosecutor goes after him, but he doesn’t back down. He admits he attacked someone, but he swears he didn’t knowingly hurt his wife. He breaks down on the stand, and it’s basically bedlam in the courtroom.”

Memories of that day flood my mind. I sat in the back of the packed courtroom, watching the melee. It was hard to know what to think. Was the man delusional? A sociopath? Or was he telling the truth? Fortunately, Val doesn’t ask my opinion, and I tell her the rest.

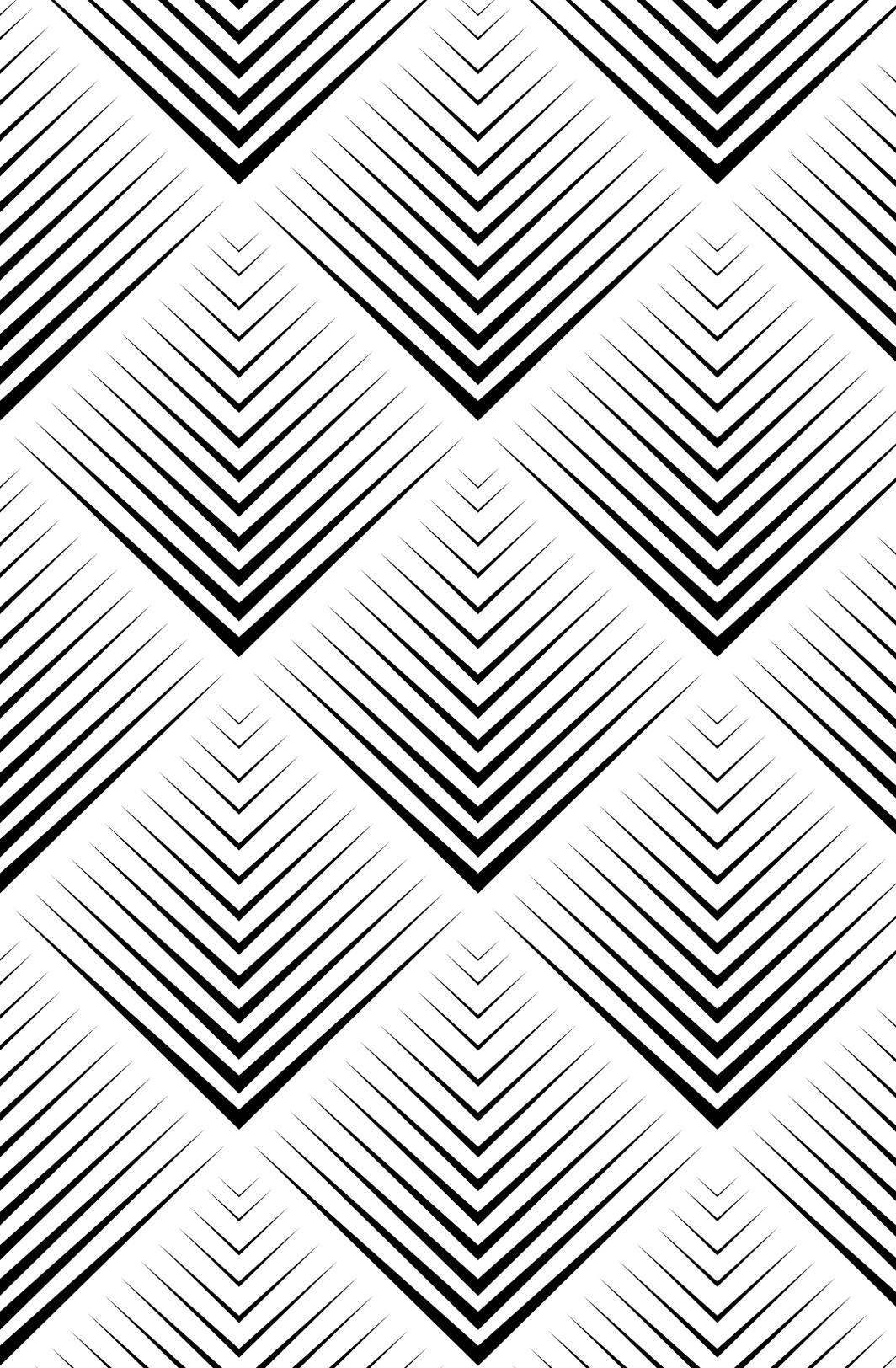
“The prosecutor decided to cut his losses,” I say. “He let the man plead to a lesser charge and get some mental help.”

“That’s all?”

“Yep. The man did three months in a mental health facility, then went back to Omaha and his wife. End of story.”

“So that’s why the Franklin is called the Mad Motel?”

“It’s one of the reasons. But like I said, the place has a history.” Newspaper articles and pictures and evidence files flit through my mind. Many of the images are gruesome. Others just sad. Although the library is warm, I’m cold under my jacket. My voice drops to a whisper, the memories too close for comfort. “A history of death.”



**If you have thoughts of suicide or self-harm,
or if you have been affected by suicide, contact:**

National Suicide Prevention Hotline:

1-800-273-8255

Suicide Prevention Resource Center:

<https://www.sprc.org/>

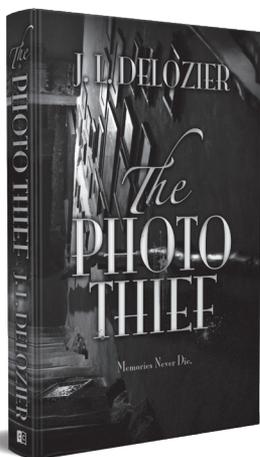
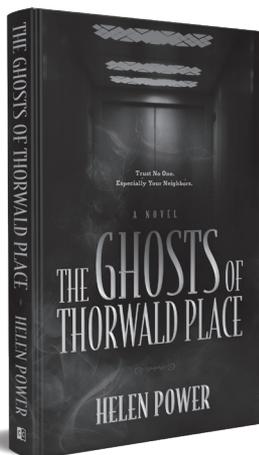
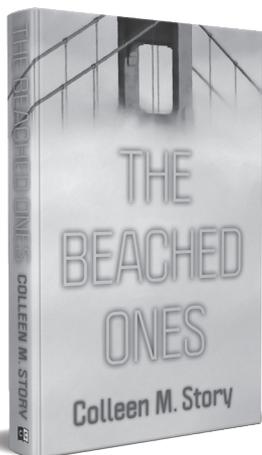
American Foundation for Suicide Prevention:

<https://afsp.org/>

International Suicide Hotlines:

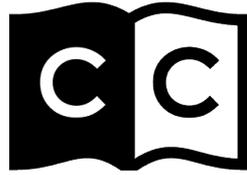
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SHE WANTED THE TRUTH. SHE SHOULD HAVE KNOWN BETTER.

When her sister is found dead in a Baltimore hotel room, reporter Val Ritter's world is turned upside down. An empty pill bottle at the scene leads the police to believe the cause of death is suicide. With little more than her own conviction, Val teams up with Terry Martin, a retired detective who has his own personal interest in the case, to prove them wrong.

Tracing her last days takes them down an unforeseen path into the hotel's dark and sordid history. In 1921, a guest on the brink of womanhood, is getting ready to marry an eligible older man. What seems like a comfortable match soon takes a dark turn. Determined to uncover the truth behind her sister's death, Val stumbles upon a connection to the woman in 1921 and the detective who knows more than he should about her sister, the hotel, and its sinister secrets.

*"There's something unnerving about watching
the last hours of someone's life play out on a screen."*


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