

Chapter 1

Gangstalking is real. I'm not crazy.

I jot my clock-out time on the paper in the back after my shift at Hamish's and make my way through the stifling, steamy kitchen. The smell of burnt grease and generic spices still hangs in the air. Soggy bread and a lukewarm ground turkey patty is my take-home dinner. A present for getting through another shift. Too damn tired to chop up one more tomato or onion, so the house sauce we advertise is all I slather on the bread. Sauce is a generous word for this slop. Hamish always declares proudly to customers that it's his secret recipe.

Of course it's a secret; no one would want to ask what he adds to give that mixed mayo and ketchup its mediocre tang.

No one ever accuses Hamish of selling pretentious fare. It's cheap, though. Cheap enough to feed the college students that wander through the diner after a night of drinking or pulling an all-nighter before a big exam. The students are fine with me. The customers that make me sad are the ones who clearly have no other option for dinner. The tired geriatrics, still wearing their Wal-Mart greeters' vests as they scarf down an oily, quick meal before their evening shift that covers the medications Medicare doesn't touch. The women in their mid-twenties with baby-food-stained shirts and harried expressions, picking up some chicken salad for dinner before they dart off to their second job. Hamish's doesn't cater to those who have other options for sustenance.

Speaking of, I think as Madeline comes toward me in that timid shuffle of hers. Her dirt-smudged face and skeletal hands are so white they're almost translucent in the soft light spilling from the door as I open it to head home. Her coarse gray hair isn't the healthy, shiny silver of those who get regular baths and good nutrition. It's dull and looks like it would be around her head in a frizzy halo if it weren't so matted.

"Max? My Max, did you bring me something?"

Cursing inwardly, I realize I had absentmindedly dumped the oil-soaked french fries that had been left over after close. The only other food I'm allowed to bring home is the sandwich or burger of my own. Boss can't afford to let me eat a full meal. Hamish operates his restaurant on a razor thin profit margin, to his constant dismay. In his mind, the good ol' American food and classic diner ambiance should have business booming. It's everyone else's fault, I'm sure.

"Sorry, Maddy," I say. "I forgot the fries. But I made you a turkey burger."

I can skip a meal. She looks as though doing the same would finish her right off.

"You're a good boy, Max. Your mama raised you right," she says. Her shockingly blue eyes brim with tears as they always do when I give her food. One droplet tracks down the saggy skin to the edge of her cold-sore-lined mouth.

Once, I tried to convince her to sign up for Medicare. Imagine my shock when I found out that she was only fifty-one years old and didn't qualify. Medicaid is an option, of sorts, but she won't show up for appointments no matter how much I cajole her. Disability is a no-go as well. Not only is it extremely difficult to get approved for mental health issues—she was relatively physically healthy, though undernourished—she wouldn't show up for those appointments, either. Unless you're committing crimes, no one cares if you have somewhere to live or not. No one is going to help some sad little crazy lady wandering around talking about an invisible dog.

"They've been bored tonight, Max," she says as I hand her my pitiful burger. My stomach moans and whines in protest, but it makes me smile to see her dig in eagerly.

"Sorry to disappoint you," I say into the dark. No answer. There never is. They will never make a sound unless they want to rattle me. They exist—unlike Maddy's dog—but they're almost as invisible.

I'm too tired to chat, and Maddy is making the humming sounds that precede nonsensical stories filled with random words that don't make any sense to anyone who isn't inside her poor, mixed-up head. I try to bid Maddy farewell, but she grabs the frayed cuff of my acid-washed denim jacket before I can walk off.

"Max, the dog sees that the moon is coming to an end," she tells me. Her face is deadly serious, and those startling blue eyes stare right into my soul. The effect is ruined by the watery mix of house sauce and burger juice running down her chin.

Taking her hand gently, I work my sleeve loose from her grip.

"I know, but I need to get some sleep before we can tackle that one."

She doesn't reply, and this time as I walk away, she doesn't try to stop me. I leave the cracked windows and peeling paint of Hamish's diner behind and head on home.

Popping an earbud in one ear, I turn on music to drown out the apprehension that always follows me through the dark. To distract me from whatever else is following.

The first stalker dashes across the lawn as I cross MLK Boulevard to cut through the Elmwood Cemetery. A lot of people think cemeteries are creepy. Not me. What I find creepy is the figure I see duck behind a weather-worn tombstone when I glance behind me. Greene, the name on the stone is. So, Miss Greene I will call her.

Miss Greene doesn't seem to know I saw her, so I just continue on. There's nothing I can do about them anyway. I've tried.

I usually only ever see them out of the corner of my eye. Tricky bastards, they are. I used to try to hunt them down. Yell or scream. But all it got me was looking foolish. In a couple cases, I ended up having some awkward conversations with the police. Even a couple nights in jail, though they always dropped the charges. I've never managed to see any of them up close.

The walk through the cemetery seems to take longer than usual tonight. Like I said, I'm not usually creeped out by cemeteries, but Miss

Greene has rattled me. I pass by one of the angel statues and a Doctor Who episode crosses my mind. Don't Blink, where menacing angel statues turn to life and follow you when you aren't looking at them. Scariest than any horror movie I've ever watched.

I know it's just television, and just a statue, but I can barely make myself keep walking past that damn statue until it's behind me. Staring at me. Sliding through the grass silently towards me?

I can't stand it. Spinning around again, I see... nothing. The angel hasn't moved. Miss Greene is nowhere to be seen. The cemetery is bathed in bright moonlight, and though the dark normally doesn't bother me, I'm relieved for the illumination tonight. I already knew they found me again. But it's always unnerving to be followed in a cemetery.

With one more scan of the field behind me, gravestones standing white and gray over green grass, I continue on.

The little home I'm renting a room in is in West End on Cleburn, just a quick walk from Elmwood. West End is what people call a bad neighborhood, but I don't see it like that. Bad is a name rich people give neighborhoods they can't make much money from. Sure, urban blight is a thing here. Condemned apartment complexes are home to the less savory elements of the city. Sometimes people use the neighborhood as a dump, literally.

But the neighborhood still has its charm at times. It's lined with humble houses and beat up cars, but you can still find children playing street hockey. You can still hear laughter from backyard barbecues and mamas calling their babies home for supper.

Most people rent in this area, but some, like my current landlords, own their homes and make their lives here permanently. The people are friendly if you aren't of a certain sort. No one would be able to tell you exactly what that certain sort is, but it has a lot to do with how much someone thinks of themselves. You come across as too high and mighty, thinking you're better than the people who live in these little houses and work honest jobs, you probably won't find much welcome in West End.

Luckily, that isn't me. My father may have been old money, but my mother was always trailer park trash. I'm no better than anyone else.

I relax as the house comes into view, the streetlamps casting a faint light on the cheery yellow of faded paint. The porch is encased in white lattice, and the potted flowers are in full bloom of pinks, purples, and reds through the windows. A small porch swing completes the urban, small neighborhood in Alabama look. The tension bleeds from my body as I walk up the squeaky front steps and gently jiggle the key into the lock.

Beatrice and Horace Winslow, my landlords and the owners of this cozy home, are sleeping, like normal people. Being up at this ungodly hour is nothing I would have chosen if I'd had the choice, but given the circumstances, the late shift is my best bet. The crowds during the day are too much. I need to be able to spot the stalkers. I may not be able to stop them, but I'll go insane if I can't tell them apart from an innocent person.

The front door opens directly into the family room, and I step out of my shoes as soon as I get inside. The soles are almost worn through, and they need new laces, but they will have to do until I can save more of my pennies. After kicking them aside, I glance around the living room for my nightly check of my surroundings.

Nothing out of the ordinary. Beatrice's current book is next to her overstuffed armchair on her dinner tray. She is always forgetting to put the dinner tray back in the closet where it belongs, as Horace likes to grumble. Horace's recliner is next. His jacket is thrown across the back of it, flannel and smelling of good tobacco. The rest of the room is normal. Nothing out of the ordinary. The colorful yellow and orange couch has too many throw pillows and plush blankets, all thrown about as if they went through a mild whirlwind. If the stalkers really want to throw me off, they'd straighten up the lovable mess in here.

Then I see it. The third photograph on the left of the wall, above the television, is askew. As cluttered and lived-in as this house is, the con-

struction worker in Horace would never allow him to let the walls display anything that isn't level.

I carefully lift the picture off the wall and look for a listening device, or mini-camera, or anything else the stalkers may be able to use to spy on me further. Or even worse, something that could be radiating something at me. Burrowing into my brain while I sleep. Poisoning me or my thoughts. The members of the gangstalking support forum have no shortage of tales about the things that have been done to them.

Nothing is behind or attached to the picture. I'm too late. They must have done it while I was sleeping the day before and I didn't notice before heading to work. They do that a lot. Thankfully, they couldn't have heard anything sensitive. I carefully replace the picture and make sure it's straight. I still can't believe Horace didn't notice it before I did.

I should leave now. I should hop the next bus to the destination I've prepared for my next identity.

But I'm not ready to leave Birmingham, as dangerous as it has now become. I'll have to deal with this for a while longer. It's been a long road, and this couple and this house are comfortable. Even working at Hamish's isn't that bad. It's just a pity I can't afford to skip his food.

It's not safe, but I just can't bear to run quite yet.

Chapter 2

I go through my usual routine in my bedroom. It used to be their son's, and still has his posters on the wall. Metal bands, mostly. Old stuff like Judas Priest and Black Sabbath. He hadn't been the type of teen who put up scantily clad models, apparently. Or, more likely, Beatrice wasn't the type of mother who allowed it.

Nothing is out of the ordinary in my bedroom. I go through the rigmarole of checking my strings. Before work I always carefully tie or lay almost invisible threads of string in strategic places around the room. Gives me a heads up if one of them was in here messing around while I'm gone. I put them in between the pages of my novels. Tie them between the doorknob and the bed. Places like that.

None are snapped or out of place today. That didn't mean for sure that they hadn't been in my room, but it means I will have enough peace of mind to sleep tonight.

I pull my clothes off, throw on some cut-off sweatpants as pajama bottoms, and climb into bed. My laptop is waiting for me, just how I left it. Locked in my briefcase, a code only I know that I change every month.

Using a secure browser and a VPN to log on to the internet, I get to the forums for a daily update.

There is a sub on Reddit that covers gangstalking issues, but I never post there. Why anyone would is beyond me. If they're after you, why make it easier on them by posting on a public website?

You wouldn't name a secret website to vent about the activities of gangstalkers anything obvious, so the URL is flowersofappalachia.com. The front page is what you'd see if the website were truly about flowers. Pictures of maypops and grass of Parnassus, golden aster and tiger lilies. The whole public site is like that. So beautiful for a site with such a grim purpose.

With the username of MaximusMeridius, I imagine myself as a gladiator. Though I'm painfully aware that there's nothing impressive about

my skinny self. If I were a gladiator, I certainly wouldn't be on this website. The beasts I'm facing would be slain already. Maximus wouldn't take a decade to overcome this shit.

I'm using the name Max for my current identity, which is my own private joke. They'll find me eventually, no matter what I do. All I can hope for is a bit of a break and to amuse myself.

GeorgiaLove is online. Thank goodness. She's been one of my saving graces for the last couple years since she came to the forum. She's understanding and listens to me type for hours about the terror of seeing them out of the corner of my eye and feeling their gaze on my back as I walk down the street. She understands me, and I don't know if I'd be able to keep living if she weren't there for me.

Whenever I see that username, I get some strange type of feeling in my belly, the feeling of a bubble bursting or a pill dissolving. Whatever tension I'd been holding there is beginning to melt away.

A private chat bubble pops up.

GeorgiaLove: *MM, how're you doing?*

I opened the daily thread but pause before delving into it. We posted our findings daily, ostensibly for research and documentation. I think the real reason is that we are scared, and we just want to see if we all made it through another day.

MaximusMeridius: *Here. I'm so relieved you're here. They followed me in the cemetery tonight.*

GeorgiaLove: *You're sure? Cemeteries are scary enough. Maybe you just got freaked out.*

MaximusMeridius: *I saw one out of the corner of my eye. She ducked behind a gravestone. Shit, Georgia, I like this place. I don't want to run.*

GeorgiaLove: *I get it, MM. But I've been thinking about it again, lately.*

MaximusMeridius: *????*

GeorgiaLove: *Have you thought about just going home?*

I shift to get comfortable in the bed as I try not to overreact to her words. I love talking to her, but I hate it when she gets on these kicks of trying to convince me to head back to where I'd come from. She's understanding and supportive, but she doesn't seem to realize that her situation is much different than mine. She's learned to tolerate and ignore the stalking to the best of her abilities. She tells me it's better that way, that she gets to still have a life.

I don't have that luxury. Not with the family situation I have going on back in Oregon.

MaximusMeridius: *I can't do it.*

Not only do I have to protect my loved ones by avoiding going home, but I also don't believe I could psychologically deal with the constant stalking. I'd either end it, or they would, eventually. I'd end up like Zeus1776. He made a post telling us he was committing suicide a few months ago, and he never logged into the forum again. We still haven't decided whether it was truly suicide or if the stalkers finally took him out, but it didn't matter anyway. Dead is dead. No second chances.

GeorgiaLove: *Just think about it, MM. I know you're scared, but think about how wonderful it would be to see everyone.*

MaximusMeridius: *Please don't say that Georgia. I'll figure something out.*

I have nothing more to say on the matter. We need each other. It's too much when Georgia tries to push me into doing something I know I can't do. I need her support, but sometimes she goes too far.

My laptop is already overheating, filling my lap with an uncomfortable warmth. It does okay for being ridiculously out of date at six years old, but at this point, it's only a matter of time before it's essentially unusable. I break into a cold sweat at the prospect of not being able to get on the forum safely. Not being able to research new locations and find cheap rooms from people who don't require paperwork and background checks. Not being able to find those hole-in-the-wall businesses that I can bet will pay me under the table and won't ask for my social securi-

ty number. Not being able to check in and make sure Georgia made it through another night and pour out my heart to her.

I make my comment on the daily thread. Alive, only mild disturbances today. Brain feels a bit fuzzy, resulting in me dumping poor Mad-dy's soggy french fries. Possible interference from some transmitter, or maybe I was just tired. Possibly had a break in, but no evidence found of bugging. I'd have to search more thoroughly tomorrow but I was too exhausted tonight.

I make a few more comments and read through the daily updates. Broken007 is fine, a quiet day for her too. GallantSteed is having a rough time. Came home to find all his kitchen cupboards open and food rearranged in the refrigerator. TylerDurdensGhost is the worst off. He'd been driving home from visiting someone, on the road for about 20 minutes. They were flashing brights at him. Every car. He turned off his lights to try to keep under their radar, but they kept coming.

I click on a link that ActionWarranted posted about his new theories on eugenics and gangstalking. He believes we're being targeted for our genes. Like we're special, and the government is keeping tabs on us and taking us for experimentation.

I hope that theory doesn't hold true. If it is true, my family may become a target as well. And leaving the way I did will do no good after all.

Browsing the other threads consumes me for a while, until my eyes start to close of their own volition.

MaximusMeridius: *Georgia? I gotta get some sleep. You gonna be ok?*

GeorgiaLove: *Yeah, sure. Ttyl.*

Not exactly an enthusiastic affirmation, but it will have to do until I can log back in this afternoon, after I finally get a little sleep. I only have one more task remaining until I can crawl into bed.

Under my mattress is my most recent burner phone that I picked up at the corner store last week. It's now two a.m. in Oregon, and my mother should be awake. She likes to get up at an obscene hour, sit and drink her coffee, and scroll Facebook before she heads off to her four a.m. shift

at the nursing home. Punching in the number I know by heart; my heart starts speeding up with every ring. By the time the call is answered I'm flushed with heat and anxiety.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Mom," I say softly.

"Zach? Where are you now?"

"It's not important. How're you?"

"Same as always. I'm working myself to the bone, and my son won't even come home to see me."

I close my eyes and take a deep breath. Childhood memories threaten to overwhelm me, but I put them aside for now. No point.

"I love you. How's Penny?"

"I'm not talking about that."

"Please just tell me if she's okay."

A deep sigh came from the other end of the line, as if I'd asked her to do some impossible, time-consuming task instead of requesting a simple update on the love of my life.

"Everyone is fine, Zach. You could come home. Get some help and have a life."

"Mom, just—" I take a deep breath and stop myself from continuing down that road. It's the same conversation every single week. No matter what I try to discuss, she's brings it back to the same thing.

"When you going to end this foolishness, Zach?"

"You know I can't."

"You know how embarrassing this is for me? When people at the store ask me how my boy is and I gotta tell them he's on the run from nothing?"

"It's not nothing."

"I'll give you five dollars if you can show me someone who's ever seen these people you say are after you."

"That's not how it works."

“My friend’s son is a fancy psychiatrist. She said she’d set you up. Get you fixed. Meds and such.”

“I’m not crazy.”

“Who said crazy? You just need those meds to get these ideas outta your head.”

“It’s not in my head. I gotta go.”

“Sure, can’t even stand talking to your mother for more than a minute.”

“I’ll talk to you later, Mom.”

I press the red button and stare down at the screen of the little phone. Only my mother can make a plea for her kid to get help sound like an imposition on herself. She’s always been like that. Kids aren’t in the cards for me, but I can’t imagine ever treating a child like my mother treats me. If my life had gone differently, maybe I would have been a father. Maybe I would have had a child with Penny.

I have no photos of Penny, but I don’t need one to remember her face. Penny isn’t the most beautiful woman in most people’s opinions, but no one has ever struck me dumb like she did. All delicate frame and a dimpled smile with those perfect teeth. Tiny and sweet, she fit into my arms like she was made for me. I miss the feel of her, the smell of her. I miss her every day.

Fuck these stalkers for taking Penny away from me. If they just killed me, it would be less painful than this constant slow burn. Less painful than knowing that she’s out there, tucked up in that same two-bedroom house we bought cheap from a foreclosure and fixed up ourselves. My entire life has been stolen by these people.

Dwelling doesn’t help. Nothing really does, but dwelling least of all.

I put the phone under the mattress after turning it off. It’ll be destroyed tomorrow, and I’ll buy a new one for the call next week.

Pulling my bed covers over my head, I pray that my dreams are filled with Penny, and not Miss Greene and her friends.

