

ALLEN
ESKENS

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suspenseful."*

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THE
LIFE
WE
BURY

A Novel

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*I dedicate this novel to my wife, Joely,
my most trusted advisor and best friend.
I also dedicate this novel to my daughter, Mikayla,
for her constant inspiration
and to my parents, Pat and Bill Eskens,
for their many lessons in life.*

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CHAPTER 1

I remember being pestered by a sense of dread as I walked to my car that day, pressed down by a wave of foreboding that swirled around my head and broke against the evening in small ripples. There are people in this world who would call that kind of feeling a premonition, a warning from some internal third eye that can see around the curve of time. I've never been one to buy into such things. But I will confess that there have been times when I think back to that day and wonder: if the fates had truly whispered in my ear—if I had known how that drive would change so many things—would I have taken a safer path? Would I turn left where before I had turned right? Or would I still travel the path that led me to Carl Iverson?

My Minnesota Twins were scheduled to play the Cleveland Indians that cool September evening in a game to crown the central-division champion. Soon the lights of Target Field would flood the western horizon of Minneapolis, shooting up into the night like rays of glory, but I would not be there to see it. Just one more thing I couldn't afford on my college-student budget. Instead, I would be working the door at Molly's Pub, stealing glances at the game on the television above the bar as I inspected driver's licenses and tamped down drunken arguments—not my career of choice, but it paid the rent.

Oddly enough, my high-school guidance counselor never mentioned the word “college” in any of our meetings. Maybe she could smell the funk of hopelessness that clung to my second-hand clothing. Maybe she had heard that I started working at a dive bar called the Piedmont Club the day after I turned eighteen. Or—and this is where I'd place my bet—maybe she knew who my mother was and figured that no one can change the sound of an echo. Regardless, I didn't blame her for not seeing me as college material. Truth is, I felt more comfortable in the dingy of a bar than I did in the marbled halls of academia, where I stumbled along as though I wore my shoes on the wrong feet.

I jumped into my car that day—a twenty-year-old, rusted Honda Accord—dropped it into gear and headed south from campus, merging with a

stream of rush-hour traffic on I-35 and listening to Alicia Keys on blown Japanese speakers. As I hit the Crosstown, I reached over to the passenger seat and fumbled through my backpack, eventually finding the piece of paper with the address of the old folks' home. "Don't call it an old folks' home," I mumbled to myself. "It's a retirement village or senior center or something like that."

I navigated the confusing streets of suburban Richfield, eventually finding the sign at the entrance to Hillview Manor, my destination. The name ceded to that place had to be some kind of a prank. It viewed no hills and lacked the slightest hint of grandeur suggested by the word "manor." The view from the front was of a busy four-lane boulevard, and the back of the building faced the butt end of a rickety, old apartment complex. The bad name, however, may have been the cheeriest thing about Hillview Manor, with its gray brick walls streaked green with moss, its raggedy shrubs run amok, and its mold, the color of oxidized copper, encasing the soft wood of every window sash. The place squatted on its foundation like a football tackle and seemed equally formidable.

As I stepped into the lobby, a wave of stale air, laden with the pungent aroma of antiseptic cream and urine, flicked at my nose, causing my eyes to water. An old woman wearing a crooked wig sat in a wheelchair, staring past me as if expecting some long-ago suitor to emerge from the parking lot and sweep her away. She smiled as I passed, but not at me. I didn't exist in her world, no more than the ghosts of her memory existed in mine.

I paused before approaching the reception desk, listening one last time to those second thoughts that had been whispering in my ear, petulant thoughts that told me to drop that English class before it was too late and replace it with something more sensible like geology or history. A month earlier, I'd left my home in Austin, Minnesota, sneaking off like a boy running away to join a circus. No arguments with my mother, no chance for her to try and change my mind. I just packed a bag, told my younger brother that I was leaving, and left a note for my mom. By the time I made it to the registrar's office at the university, all the decent English classes had been filled, so I signed up for a biography class, one that would force me to interview a complete stranger. Deep down I knew that the clammy sweat that pimples my temples as I loitered in the lobby came from that homework assignment, an assignment I had avoided starting for far too long. I just knew the assignment was going to suck.

The receptionist at Hillview, a square-faced woman with strong cheeks, tight hair, and deep set eyes that gave her the appearance of a gulag matron, leaned over the countertop and asked, “Can I help you?”

“Yes,” I said. “I mean, I hope so. Is your manager here?”

“We don't allow solicitations,” she said, her face becoming brittle as she narrowed her focus on me.

“Solicitations?” I gave her a forced chuckle and held out my hands in an imploring gesture. “Ma’am,” I said. “I couldn't sell fire to a caveman.”

“Well, you're not a resident here, and you're no visitor, and you sure don't work here. So, what's left?”

“My name's Joe Talbert. I'm a student at the University of Minnesota.”

“And?”

I glanced at her name tag. “And...Janet...I'd like to talk to your manager about a project I have to do.”

“We don't have a manager,” Janet said through her squint. “We have a director, Mrs. Lorngren.”

“I'm sorry,” I said, trying to maintain my pleasant façade. “Can I talk to your director?”

“Mrs. Lorngren's a very busy lady, and it's suppertime—”

“It'll only take a minute.”

“Why don't you run your project by me, and I'll decide if it's worth disturbing Mrs. Lorngren.”

“It's an assignment I'm doing for school,” I said, “for my English class. I have to interview an old person—I mean an elderly person and write a biography about them. You know, tell about the struggles and forks in the road that made them who they are.”

“You're a writer?” Janet looked me up and down as if my appearance might answer that question. I straightened up to the full extent of my five-foot, ten-inch height. I was twenty-one years old and had accepted that I was as tall as I was ever going to be—thank you Joe Talbert Senior, wherever the hell you are. And while it was true that I worked as a bouncer, I wasn't the big meat you normally see at the door of a bar; in fact, as bouncers go, I was on the puny side.

“No,” I said. “Not a writer, just a student.”

“And they're making you write a whole book for school?”

“No. It's a mix of writing and outline.” I said with a smile. “Some of the chapters have to be written out, like the beginning and the ending and any

important turning points. But mostly, it'll be a summary. It's a pretty big project.”

Janet wrinkled her pug nose and shook her head. Then, apparently persuaded that I had nothing to sell, she picked up the phone and spoke in a lowered voice. Soon a woman in a green suit approached from a hallway beyond the reception desk and took up a position next to Janet.

“I'm Director Lorngren,” the woman announced, her head held erect and steady as if she were balancing a tea cup on it. “Can I help you?”

“I hope so.” I took a deep breath and ran through it all again.

Mrs. Lorngren chewed over my explanation with a puzzled look on her face and then said, “Why did you come here? Don't you have a parent or grandparent you can interview?”

“I don't have any relatives nearby,” I said.

That was a lie. My mother and my brother lived two hours south of the Twin Cities, but even a brief visit to my mom's place could be like a walk through a thistle patch. I never met my father and had no idea if he still stained the Earth. I knew his name though. My mom came up with the brilliant idea of naming me after him in the hope that it might guilt Joe Talbert Senior into staying around awhile, maybe marrying her and supporting her and little Joey Jr. It didn't work out. Mom tried the same thing when my younger brother, Jeremy, was born—to the same end. I grew up having to explain that my mother's name was Kathy Nelson, my name was Joe Talbert, and my brother's name was Jeremy Naylor.

As for my grandparents, the only one I ever met was my mom's father, my Grandpa Bill—a man I loved. He was a quiet man who could command attention with a simple glance or nod, a man who possessed equal parts strength and gentleness and wore them, not in layers, but blended like fine leather. There were days when I sought out his memory, when I needed his wisdom to deal with the tidal swells in my life. There were nights, however, when the sound of rain splashing against a windowpane would seep into my subconscious, and he would visit me in my dreams—dreams that would end with me bolting upright in my bed, my body covered in a cold sweat and my hands trembling from the memory of watching him die.

“You do understand that this is a nursing home, don't you?” Mrs. Lorngren asked.

“That's why I came here,” I said. “You have people who've lived through amazing times.”

“That's true,” she said, leaning into the countertop that separated us. From up close, I could see the wrinkles that branched out from the corners of her eyes and creased her lips like a dry lake bed. And I could smell the faint aroma of scotch in the stream of her words as she spoke. She continued in a lowered voice. “Residents live here because they cannot take care of themselves. Most of them are suffering from Alzheimer's or dementia or some other neurological condition. They can't remember their own children, much less the details of their lives.”

I hadn't thought of that. I could see my plan starting to falter. How could I write the biography of a war hero if the hero can't remember what he did? “Don't you have anybody with a memory?” I asked, sounding more pitiful than I would have liked.

“We could let him talk to Carl,” Janet piped up.

Mrs. Lorngren shot Janet a glance akin to the glare you'd give a buddy who'd just screwed up your perfectly good lie.

“Carl?” I asked.

Mrs. Lorngren crossed her arms and stepped back from the counter.

I pushed on. “Who's Carl?”

Janet looked to Mrs. Lorngren for approval. When Mrs. Lorngren finally nodded, Janet took her turn leaning across the countertop. “His name is Carl Iverson. He's a convicted murderer,” she said, whispering like a schoolgirl telling a story out of turn. “The Department of Corrections sent him here about three months ago. They paroled him from Stillwater because he's dying of cancer.”

Mrs. Lorngren huffed and said, “Apparently, pancreatic cancer is a perfectly reasonable substitute for penal rehabilitation.”

“He's a murderer?” I asked.

Janet glanced around to be sure that she wouldn't be overheard. “Thirty years ago he raped and murdered this fourteen-year-old girl,” she whispered. “I read all about it in his file. After he was done killing her, he tried to hide the evidence by burning her body in his tool shed.”

A rapist and a murderer. I had come to Hillview looking for a hero and instead I'd found a villain. He would certainly have a story to tell, but was it a story I wanted to write? While my classmates would turn out tales of Grandma giving birth on a dirt floor, or Grandpa seeing John Dillinger in a hotel lobby, I would be writing about a man who raped and killed a girl and then burned her body in a shed. The idea of interviewing a murderer didn't

sit well with me at first, but the more I thought about it, the more I warmed up to it. I had put off starting this project for too long. September was almost over and I'd have to turn in my interview notes in a few weeks. My classmates had their horses out of the starting gate and my nag was still back in the barn munching on hay. Carl Iverson would have to be my subject—if he agreed.

“I think I'd like to interview Mr. Iverson,” I said.

“The man is a monster,” Mrs. Lorngren said. “I wouldn't give him the satisfaction. I know this isn't a Christian thing to say, but it would be best if he just stayed in his room and passed on quietly.” Mrs. Lorngren recoiled at her own words, words a person might think, but must never say out loud, especially in front of a stranger.

“Look,” I said, “if I can do his story, maybe...I don't know...maybe I can get him to admit the error of his ways.” I was a salesman after all, I thought to myself. “Besides, he has a right to have visitors, too, doesn't he?”

Mrs. Lorngren looked cornered. She had no choice. Carl wasn't a prisoner at Hillview; he was a resident with the same right to have visitors as anyone else. She unfolded her arms, placing her hands once more on the countertop between us. “I'll have to ask him if he wants a visitor,” she said. “In the few months that he's been here, he's only had one visitor come to see him.”

“Can I talk to Carl myself?” I said. “Maybe I can—”

“Mr. Iverson.” Mrs. Lorngren corrected me, eager to regain her superiority.

“Of course.” I shrugged an apology. “I could explain to Mr. Iverson what the assignment is about, and maybe—”

A jingling of electronic chimes from my cell phone interrupted me. “I'm sorry,” I said. “I thought I shut it off.” My ears turned red as I pulled my phone out of my pocket and saw my mother's number. “Excuse me,” I said, turning my back to Janet and Mrs. Lorngren with the pretense of acquiring privacy.

“Mom, I can't talk now, I—”

“Joey, you gotta come get me,” my mother screeched into the phone, the drunken slur in her voice melding her words together, making them hard to understand.

“Mom, I have to—”

“They fucking handcuffed me.”

“What? Who—”

“They arrested me Joey...they...those pricks. I'm gonna sue 'em. I'll get the baddest fucking lawyer.” She yelled her words at someone near her. “You hear me you...you prick! I want your badge number. I'll have your job.”

“Mom, where are you?” I spoke loud and slow, trying to get my mother's attention back.

“They put me in handcuffs, Joey.”

“Is there an officer there?” I asked. “Can I talk to him?”

She ignored my question and spiraled from one unintelligible thought to another. “If you loved me you'd come get me. I'm your fucking mother god dammit. They handcuffed...Get your ass...You never loved me. I did...I didn't...I should just cut my wrists. No one loves me. I was almost home... I'm gonna sue.”

“Okay, Mom,” I said. “I'll come get you, but I need to talk to the cop.”

“You mean Mr. Prick?”

“Yeah, Mom. Mr. Prick. I need to talk to Mr. Prick. Just give him the phone for a second, then I'll come get you.”

“Fine,” she said. “Here, Prick. Joey wants to talk to you.”

“Ms. Nelson,” the officer said, “this is your time to contact an attorney, not your son.”

“Hey, Officer Prick, Joey wants to talk to you.”

The officer sighed. “You said that you wanted to talk to an attorney. You need to use this time to call an attorney.”

“Officer Prick won't talk to you.” Mom belched into the phone.

“Mom, tell him I said please.”

“Joey you gotta—”

“Dammit, Mom,” I yelled my whisper, “tell him I said please.”

A moment of silence, and then, “fine!” My mom turned the phone away so that I could barely hear her. “Joey says please.”

There was a long pause, but then the officer got on the phone. “Hello.”

I spoke quickly and quietly. “Officer, I'm sorry about all this, but I have a brother who's autistic. He lives with my mom. I need to know if my mom's getting released today because if she's not, I gotta go take care of my brother.”

“Well, here's the deal. Your mother's been arrested for DUI.” I could hear my mother cursing and wailing in the background. “I have her at the Mower

County Law Enforcement Center to give a breath test. She invoked her right to call an attorney before taking the test, so she's supposed to be using this time to contact an attorney, not calling you to come get her out.”

“I understand,” I said. “I just need to know if she's getting released tonight.”

“That would be no.” The officer limited his response in a way that my mother would not hear what was in store for her. I played along.

“Is she going to detox?”

“Yes.”

“How many days?”

“Between two and three.”

“Then she'll be released?” I asked.

“No.”

I thought for a moment. “From detox to jail?”

“That is correct, until she makes her first appearance in court.”

Mom heard the word “court” and began to yell again. In her inebriation and exhaustion, her words swung and lurched like a decrepit rope bridge. “Dammit Joey...get down here. You don't love me...you ungrateful...I'm your mother. Joey, they...they...get down here. Get me out.”

“Thanks,” I said to the officer. “I really appreciate the help. And good luck dealing with my mom.”

“Good luck to you, too,” he said.

I ended the call and turned back around to see Janet and Mrs. Lorngren looking at me like I was a toddler who had just learned that dogs can bite. “I'm sorry about that,” I said. “My mother...she's...not well. I'm not going to be able to meet Carl—uh, Mr. Iverson—today. I have to take care of something.”

Mrs. Lorngren's eyes softened, her stern expression dissolving into sympathy. “That's fine,” she said. “I'll talk to Mr. Iverson about you. Leave your name and number with Janet and I'll let you know if he is agreeable to meet with you.”

“I really appreciate that,” I said. I wrote my information on a piece of paper. “I might have my phone turned off for a while, so if I don't answer, just leave a message and let me know what Mr. Iverson says.”

“I will,” Mrs. Lorngren said.

A block away from Hillview, I pulled into a parking lot, gripped the steering wheel with all my strength, and shook it violently. “God dammit!” I yelled. “Dammit! Dammit! Dammit! Why can't you just leave me alone!” My knuckles turned white, and I trembled as the wave of anger passed through me. I took a deep breath and waited for the throbbing in my throat to subside, for my eyes to clear. Then, once I had calmed down, I called Molly to let her know that I wouldn't be able to work the door. She wasn't happy, but she understood. After I hung up, I tossed the phone on the passenger seat and began the long drive south to get my brother.