

A string of mysterious murders summons an Assistant Special Agent in Charge, Murphy Maddox, who boasts a flawless record of solving homicide investigations. However, Murphy soon discovers this cold case is in a category of its own.

Rashun Carter's Stalker

By Rashun Carter

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RASHUN CARTER'S



STALKER

Once you're watched,
there's no escape and no one to help.



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Chapter One: As it Ends, So it Begins

The cool night's breath whispered as Murphy Maddox coasted his unmarked dark-blue Dodge Challenger into his two-story, brick, single-family home's driveway. The lamps mounted on either side of the two-car garage cast an eerie, orange glow across his windshield. He leaned back, exhaling a breath of relief, and ran a hand through his short, graying hair. His cell phone reverberated in his dark slacks. He pulled out the phone; the caller ID displayed Janella Karter, his partner, in bold, white letters.

"Nice try, jerk-off," he said in his usual gruff voice before sliding his phone back into his pocket. "You had me fooled for a while but not anymore." Finally, he had a breakthrough in the Stalker case.

"Serial killer, Stalker, still at large in the Misty Falls area," the female radio jockey reported. Murphy smiled slyly, then chortled. *"We are warning all to use extreme caution if you are heading out to the annual Misty Falls Halloween Parade this evening as authorities continue their manhunt."* Murphy ignited a cigarette within his Caucasian palms, then his steely blue eyes swung over to the file sprawled on his passenger seat. He reached over and scanned its contents. *I knew it from the start,* he mused. *I can't believe I let that bastard nearly drive me to the point of insanity. It was him all along.* The contents faded with the garage lamp's flicker. He looked up and exhaled a plume of smoke, which slithered through the thin crevice between the top of his tinted window and the car door's frame.

"Dammit. I could've sworn I fixed those garage lamps already," he grumbled.

"Again, the Misty Falls Killer, Stalker, is wanted in connection with a string of grisly murders and is considered armed and extremely dangerous," the radio personality continued. Murphy snorted in frustration as he wound down the volume. His cell phone begged for his attention once more, but he ignored the same call.

"Dangerous, my ass," he snarled before taking a long drag. "Just another boogeyman who thought we'd never catch him." His sly grin returned, lifting the cheeks of his round, stubble-mustached and bearded face as the folder's contents garnered his focus once more.

“Well, we’ve got you now.” He was startled by an abrupt thump on his vehicle’s rear—driver-side—passenger door. The streetlights’ amber glow hardly helped to clarify the image in his rear-view mirror’s glass eye: A group of shadows, appearing inhuman in their costumes, pranced along the sidewalk across the street. *Thump. Thump.* He twisted in his seat.

The cigarette plummeted.

“Christ on Sunday!” he grumbled.

Panicked, he reached between his seat and armrest, exchanging glances between the windows and the cigarette’s hiding spot. *Thump. Thump.*

“Dammit, cut it out!” he snapped. Finally, he found the cigarette. Its glowing tip burned with fumes of charred leather. He reached down and was about to grab it when he glanced up and noticed a silhouette next to his rear passenger window. The cinder stung his fingers, and he yelped in panic. The creeping paranoia he had endured from days past returned. Was it Stalker? Had Murphy been watched, unaware prey under a predator’s gaze? He reached for the gun in his holster. *Thump.* Rear driver side this time. *Thump.* The trunk.

Murphy aimed the barrel at the rear passenger window, anticipating the next thump. *C’mon, you sick bastard. I know it’s you.* He was practically panting, unable to catch his breath. The magnum firearm felt glued to his clammy palm. Perspiration beaded along his forehead. The smell of burning leather was thick in the air.

Thud. Driver’s side window this time.

He spun and pulled the trigger, but it jammed.

“Happy Halloween, Mr. Murphy!” the tall adolescent in a shadowed hidden-face cloak yelled.

“Jesus Christ!” Murphy snapped, his heart racing. “I could’ve killed you, Edgar! What the hell were you thinking?”

Edgar shrugged. “I was just testing out my costume for the parade tonight.”

Murphy exhaled a long sigh of relief, then wagged his magnum. "And you almost passed the test with a death certificate."

A laugh escaped the abyss that hid Edgar's face as he leaned toward the small opening in the window. "Ah, come on, Mr. Murphy. You wouldn't shoot me."

The window whirred, lowering, and Murphy tossed the cigarette he had recovered. "Fortunately for you, I had the safety on."

Edgar waved both hands as if summoning a spell. "I'm a mage," he muttered in a ghoulish tone. "I melt bullets that come my way." Edgar, a very well-mannered boy, had an intense fascination with the world of fantasy. He had just graduated middle school and had no intention of abandoning his fascination with the otherworldly in his ascension to the next level of education. He was often bullied for being a nerd, but he never stood down from a challenge. He removed his hood, revealing the mischievous smile on his oval-shaped face. The flickering garage lamps presented him as a sinister, redheaded druid.

Murphy chuckled. "I don't think you'll be melting bullets in this world. Shouldn't you be heading up to the parade with your parents? It's set to start within the next hour."

"Yeah," Edgar sighed, tossing a glance of sorrow at Murphy's home. "I thought Danielle or Max would tag along, but Mrs. Natalie said they're not allowed out because of some serial killer, and I should stay home too."

Murphy cleared his throat and turned his head. *News travels fast.*

"I know Halloween isn't until next week," Edgar went on, "but the parade is an annual event for our town, Mr. Murphy. I don't think this killer is—"

"Hey, listen," Murphy interjected, exiting his vehicle. "Everyone is dealing with this scenario differently, and people are going to do what they want, but my FBI badge says this is a very serious situation. My advice: Stay home."

Edgar, indignant, frowned.

“But I’m not your parents,” Murphy added. “I’d sneak out of the house without my parents’ permission if I knew an FBI agent wouldn’t tattle on me.” Murphy winked before heading toward the front door.

Edgar peered over at his home next door, seemingly contemplating the repercussions of sneaking out for this once-a-year opportunity. His mischievous smile returned as he pulled his hood back on. “You don’t have to worry about me, Mr. Murphy!” Edgar waved his hands, conjuring an imaginary spell. “I have the powers of the light and dark sides with me!”

Murphy shook his head in amusement. “Be careful, kid,” he snickered. “And stay under the streetlights if you run out of light spells.” Edgar had already vanished before Murphy closed the door. “Guess he teleported to whatever imaginary land he came from,” Murphy mumbled, but was soon distracted by the scent of a spaghetti and garlic bread supper as he passed through the hardwood foyer. The catharsis of the dancing flames in the bricked fireplace, partially illuminating the furnished great room, made the plush lounge chair look all the more beckoning. However, the abrupt clanging of pots and pans marred the temptation to sleep.

“Hey, hon!” Natalie Maddox called from the adjacent kitchen. The smile that beamed on her heart-shaped face, coupled with her honey-sweet voice, could brighten nearly anyone’s somber mood. Her wavy, blonde hair was tethered into two French braid pigtails that swayed gently as she transferred dishes from the sink to the dishwasher. Eyes locked on her task, she addressed her husband with swift words. “The kids have had their fill, and I figured you’d be here around the usual time, so I went ahead and made your plate. No need to warm it up. I’m finishing up here, then I’ll—”

“Be heading to work?” Murphy finished.

She paused and placed her hands on her thin hips. “How’d you guess? Was it my scrubs?” She swept a hand over her dark blue attire and flashed a grin.

Murphy closed in and wrapped his hands around her waist. “That may have been a tiny clue.” Before he could kiss her full lips, a child’s voice intervened.

"Hi, Dad!"

Murphy turned toward the great room to take in Max springing from the white, curved sofa. His minute figure slammed into Murphy's side, small arms extending for a tight embrace.

"Heyyyy, Mighty Max!" Murphy exclaimed, lifting him at arm's length. "How are you, buddy?"

"Good," Max giggled. "Dad, you want to see this new cool game Mom got me? It's so cool, I'm not mad about not going to the parade anymore! Do you wanna see, Dad? Do you?"

"Oh, I don't know," Murphy groaned, placing Max down. "Dad's kind of tired tonight and I—"

"Need a shower," Natalie interjected.

Murphy glanced at her. She had already turned away and was rummaging through her purse atop the marble counter. Max, covering his mouth, giggled nearly uncontrollably.

"A shower?" Murphy asked incredulously. "You didn't give me that complaint just a moment ago."

Natalie stopped fumbling through her purse and cocked her head. "Well, I figured it could wait."

Murphy chuckled, then kissed her dimpled cheek. He continued to ignore his phone's seemingly constant rumble in his pocket. "That's why I love you."

"Is that the only reason?" she asked with a coquettish glance.

"Ew, gross, Mom," Max groaned, scrunching his face.

Natalie's jaw dropped in shock.

"Busted!" Murphy snickered, sliding past her.

"Max, go finish playing your game," Natalie said. "It's almost time for bed."

"But Mom!" Max complained.

“But nothing,” Natalie said, now serious. “Your sister has already gone to sleep, and you’ll be falling in behind her soon.”

“Danielle, asleep already?” Murphy asked in disbelief.

“I know.” Natalie’s smile was blissful. “It’s a miracle. She said she wasn’t feeling well earlier, so I gave her some medicine...” She snapped her fingers. “...and boom, she was out just like that.”

“Any idea what it could be?” Murphy asked, leaning against the counter. “Maybe the *thing* from earlier?”

“No, nothing serious,” Natalie said. “The symptoms say stomach bug, but I’ll know for sure when I see her tomorrow night.” She swung her purse over her shoulder and made her way toward Murphy for a goodbye kiss.

“Pays to have a registered nurse in the household, huh, Mighty Max?” Murphy asked.

Murphy’s question fell on deaf ears as he witnessed Natalie hurriedly kiss Max, who was enthralled by his handheld game on the sofa, atop his head.

“He knows it’s a good thing,” Natalie said, winking. She headed down the foyer, her voice echoing. “I should be back around this time tomorrow. And no parade!”

“You don’t have to remind me!” Murphy called back. He heard the door slam shut, followed shortly thereafter by the slight rumble of the garage door. *Finally, she’s gone*, Murphy thought. He eyed his phone: twenty-two missed calls. Twenty-one voicemails. *Oh, how I wish it were really you, Janella. I’ll be sure to get you a new phone tomorrow so we can continue our near-perfect affair. Why couldn’t this Stalker guy have stalked Natalie so I could be with who I really yearn for?* He gazed at Max, then at the matching love seat in front of his son. A fantasy of him and Janella projected before Murphy’s eyes. His breathing slowed, envisioning Janella mounted atop his lap, him kissing her silk-smooth, caramel neck. Her silent moans dilated his pupils. *Oh, how I wish.*

“What, Dad?” Max asked. The handheld game in his small hands illuminated his puzzled face.

Murphy rubbed his eyes and groaned. *Dammit, I can't get her out of my head.* "Nothing, son," he replied, turning toward the stairs. "Turns out I really need that shower after all."

"That was weird," Max whispered, watching his father vault up the carpeted stairs. After ascending the stairs, he flicked the light switch, revealing a long hallway decorated with various framed murals—some of which were painted by his daughter—and a tan throw rug, embroidered with large, brown diamonds sprawled across its length. The rug matched the picture frames and small table that hugged the wall. Two doors, one on the right and one on the left, were the only visible rooms before the hallway branched right at the end. Murphy twisted the brass doorknob of the left door and peeked in.

The sliver of light cut through the darkness and revealed his daughter, pink covers pulled up to her shoulder as she slumbered on her side. He could just make out her blonde hair poking out. He smiled and lightly chuckled while gently closing the door. Rounding the corner brought him to the master bedroom, which was already open. He switched on the bedroom's light, then clicked off the light in the hallway. He threw his jacket onto the king-size, ivory mattress and loosened his black tie. The room was spacious: ivory furnished and offset by the blackout drapes that concealed the windows. The beige, vertical blinds that led to his private balcony were closed. While setting an alarm on his phone, it went off again, pleading for him to answer.

"This guy just doesn't give up," he grumbled. He angrily punched in the command to block the number. *I should answer just to let him know I've got him, but I'd rather surprise his ass. Tomorrow's going to be a glorious day.* He headed for the bathroom, turned on the shower, and continued to undress. Suddenly, a sensation of being watched made his skin crawl. He turned toward the open doorway. Nothing. Was it a flare-up of his paranoia? The fact that the bathroom door was still open? Could Stalker be waiting just around the corner? This wasn't good. He'd absentmindedly left his firearm on the nightstand. He was all alone in the spacious vicinity. If something were to happen, would his kids know? Other than the water pelting the shower base, there was complete stillness in the bathroom: an unnerving silence. Suddenly, his home seemed to have too many places for someone to hide.

He inched his way toward the doorway, barefoot and in boxers. His mind spun with the possible outcomes of a confrontation. *What if Stalker has a weapon? Could I disarm him?* Finally, he peeked around the corner and observed his empty room. Wasting no time, he dashed toward the nightstand and snatched his magnum, then proceeded to check behind the blackout drapes. One by one, they gave way to Murphy's pull with a whoosh. He yanked wide the partially opened closet door. An abyss yawned out beyond what the hovering chandelier and nightstand lamps could reach. With a flick of the switch, aim tense, the light bulb graced him, revealing no worries. How absurd. There was no one in there. With a relieved sigh, he turned on the wall-mounted television for good measure, then proceeded to the shower.

The water cascaded down his body. Just hot enough not to burn him but still warm enough to melt away the stress of a long day. Tomorrow was going to be amazing. He couldn't wait to break the news to Janella in person or to that tobacco-chewing Sheriff Willington. He was going to make it a point as to why he was the best assistant special agent in charge, corrupt or not. Smiling in anticipation, he dipped his head into the stream, running a hand over his face. His bliss was interrupted when the lights flickered.

"What the hell?" he said, hurrying to wash away the lather in his hair. After rinsing, he yanked open the shower door and glanced at the toilet lid. Magnum still there. However, he could've sworn he saw a shadow move across the light beam beneath the closed bathroom door. But that couldn't have been the case. He'd already searched the room. Gathering his towel and magnum, he was met with his bedroom's cool breath. A quick survey of his phone showed one missed call: Natalie. *Probably doing the usual call home after making it to work*, he mused. *So predictable. Why doesn't she at least do something out of the ordinary? Send a naughty picture or something for Christ's sake. And she wonders why I suggested a divorce.* He made sure his alarm was set, then collapsed on the bed. He eyed the television but wasn't really watching it. Suddenly, dissatisfaction crawled through his mind. The forty-two-inch flat-screen mounted upon the wall was decent, but he couldn't shake the desire of wanting something better. *I've gotta find a way to come up with more money.*

Life shouldn't feel like a struggle. It wasn't long before the television became a blur and transitioned to darkness as he drifted to sleep.

He awoke to darkness. This was strange. Turning off the lights or television wasn't in his recollection. Sluggishly rolling toward his nightstand, he reached for his phone. What time was it? How long had he dozed off? Surely his phone could be of some aid. He pressed the phone's power button to access the screen. Still darkness.

"What the hell?" he grumbled. He may not have remembered whether he turned off the lights or television, but he damn sure recalled plugging his phone into the charger. Uncertainty, twisted with gradual fear, filled his stomach as he discovered the phone was still connected to the charger. Panicked, he sprang up and rubbed his eyes. Still blackness. His mind spun. *What the hell's the matter with me?* The nightstand jolted against his weight, sending the lamp plummeting to the ground. The bulb shattered. The gravity sunk in. He was blind, but how?

Max's familiar giggle was followed by his voice, "You're right where I want you now."

Days prior, Murphy Maddox was in hot pursuit of a wanted suspect in connection with a drug ring. The suspect veered through the early afternoon highway traffic, nearly clipping other drivers in his Honda Civic. Murphy had to tightly maneuver to keep pace. Finally, the suspect made a sharp turn off the highway and down a two-lane road.

"This asshole doesn't have a care in the world," Murphy grumbled before putting the pedal to the metal. The engine roared, catapulting him forward and giving him an exhilarating rush of adrenaline. The thought of calling for backup stayed in the deepest part of his mind. If anyone was going to make headway in this case, it was going to be him. After swerving into a suburban neighborhood, the suspect barreled through mailboxes, spinning up clouds of debris in his wake. "I got you now, motherfucker."

The suspect's vehicle, fishtailing, emerged from the debris and narrowly missed an unbeknownst jogger. She paused to observe the turbulent vehicle before turning and looking behind her.

Murphy could see the fear in her wide eyes. His brakes screeched. He veered to miss her. Unfortunately, he heard the sick thud of her petite, fit body slamming and tumbling over his vehicle's trunk. He glanced over his shoulder, continuing pursuit, to see her writhing in pain on the ground behind him.

"She'll live," he muttered, returning his focus to the fleeing suspect. Only death or a vehicle malfunction would have stopped him at that point. Murphy noticed up ahead the suspect still struggling to regain control of his vehicle. It jolted against the corner of a curb, dismantling the street sign, then crashed and rolled onto its hood. The sound of metal giving way to concrete blended with the shattering of glass before the vehicle toppled into someone's front lawn.

A sly smile of relief spread on Murphy's face as he pulled up. *Crazy son of a bitch had it coming.* He approached the totaled vehicle and could hear the suspect's tormented groan. He crouched and peeked inside. The criminal's neck was painfully bent against the car's roof, and blood streaked his olive-toned face. His frail arm was seemingly reaching for something, but the pressure of his body weight made it an impossible task.

"Well, well," Murphy said, before lighting a cigarette. "Just like all the others I've taken down."

The suspect groaned, wide eyed at Murphy in anguish.

"Oh, don't feel bad." Murphy blew a puff of smoke toward the suspect, then reached inside the car, gave the seatbelt a tug, and chuckled. "Smart move, buckling up. I see you need some help getting that off, though, huh?"

The suspect spluttered out something so weakly, it sounded like gibberish.

Murphy, enjoying his cigarette, gazed back at him with a bliss that clearly mocked his pain. He relished moments like this: his prey at his mercy. The ability to aid but instead only watching as they suffered. He had grown to despise criminals through his many years on the force. It wasn't enough, in his eyes, to enforce court justice. Criminals, no matter the crime, deserved pain and suffering to go along with their unlawful acts. *How else would they learn? Slap a man on his wrist,*

and he'll stay right on course. Break that asshole's wrist and let him walk around with that nagging pain. He'll be forced to adjust his everyday activities accordingly. You bet your ass he'll think about his crime during the entire healing process. He was halfway through his cigarette when he heard the whine of a screen door. A tall, elderly man poked out halfway. A white, plaid shirt and brown overalls that matched his ballcap lurked in the porch awning's shade. He adjusted his wide-framed glasses before stepping out.

Murphy rose to full height and pitched his cigarette. "Everything's under control here, sir. I'll be sure to call in the wrecker service momentarily. It's best you stay inside for the time being."

The elderly man stared for a moment, then slid his hands into his pockets. Murphy felt unsettled by the man's gaze, obscured by the shade and lowered ball cap. Murphy expected indignance, surprise, or even stress in response to the wreckage on his lawn. Instead, there was only silence.

Murphy was about to flash his badge when the man slowly stepped forward. The sun beamed across his frail, wiry limbs, but his wrinkled face remained partially obscured under his cap.

"Sir, again, I'm going to have to ask you to remain inside until—"

Murphy was cut off by the man's extended hand. He ambled next to Murphy and gazed down at the vehicle. Murphy noticed a toothpick resting in the corner of the man's thin, cracked lips before an acrid whiff of something similar to mothballs made him cough.

After a long pause, the man slowly twisted the toothpick. "Why here?" the man finally asked. His voice, deep and hoarse, sounded strict, scolding.

"I had no control over where he was heading," Murphy replied. "Hard-headed idiots like this are why there are so many casualties."

The man nodded down the road. "Like that one down there?"

Murphy followed his line of sight and noticed the jogger he had hit. She was being tended to by a few neighborhood citizens. *Shit*, Murphy mused. *Surely they didn't see who did it.*

“Now, I ain’t the smartest man alive,” the elderly man continued, “but high-speed chases like this one here could’ve been prevented beforehand.”

Murphy blew out an indignant sigh, disguising his shared knowledge of that fact with the old man. “Sometimes shit happens.” Murphy knelt and reached toward the suspect.

“And sometimes it doesn’t,” the man countered. “Where’s your backup?”

Annoyed, Murphy held up his badge. “Look, this is FBI business, and I’m warning you to go back inside or—”

“Or what?”

Murphy felt that familiar unsettled feeling return, but he kept an iron, though shallow, composure. He finally heaved the suspect out of the vehicle and slapped on the handcuffs.

“Not going to call the paramedics?” the man asked.

Suddenly, an elderly woman, shrouded from her neck down in a pink robe, screeched from the screen door, “Ted, you said you were only going to be a minute!”

“Back inside, Gretta!” Ted commanded, keeping his gaze on Murphy.

Without another word, she reluctantly disappeared from sight. Murphy shoved the suspect into the back of his Challenger, then slammed the door.

“That ain’t precaution,” Ted muttered scornfully, gnawing at his toothpick.

“Wrecker will be here shortly,” Murphy barked, igniting his engine. “Sorry for the inconvenience.” He sped off in reverse before whipping his car around and up the road.

Ted watched, blank-faced, yet with a razor-sharp gleam in his eyes, until Murphy was out of sight. Shifting his gaze to the jogger, he could see her, still as a statue and flat on the ground, as the citizens tried to comfort her. He then turned his attention to the wreckage on his front lawn. The smell of burnt rubber caused a cough to erupt from his

lungs. After shaking his head in pity, he headed toward his house. The distant wail of sirens echoed from afar.

"That idiot hasn't a clue of what he's just done," Ted said.

Chapter Two: Immoral Interrogation

Murphy's Challenger turned down an abandoned alleyway. Though the sun's smile dazzled over the semi-busy streets beyond, one could say it frowned on the alleyway. Not even the homeless inhabited that repulsive area: Rats, squeaking, scurried along the bases of the grimy, mossy walls that ran down the alley's length. Putrid, ancient trash reeked from a large, graffitied dumpster midway down the alley. Broken pallets and dented trash cans littered the bumpy road.

"Where—where are we?" the suspect stammered. He winced as he repositioned his tender shoulder against the window. Fear of the unknown crept into his psyche.

Murphy glanced up at the rear-view mirror and winked. "Heaven." Seeing the suspect strain in his cuffs brought, just for a split-second, a sinister smile to Murphy's face. The predatory and ruthless core of the ASAC (assistant special agent in charge) had already resurfaced.

"I don't believe in your God," the suspect groaned. The car came to an abrupt halt, slamming the suspect's face against the passenger seat's headrest: The nociceptors in his face shot off like fireworks. Unable to nurse his face with his hands, he could only groan in agony. He felt the door give way against his weight, plummeting him to the ground. Cool air provided minor relief to his face but offered nothing against the pain that exploded from his shoulder as it struck the rough pavement. Rolling over, he met Murphy's gaze.

Murphy stood over the suspect, large and imposing, in his black two-piece suit. He straightened the plaid tie on his white-collar shirt, then turned his head and spat. "Today you will," the ASAC said, bunching the suspect's blood-stained shirt into his hands and lifting him up.

The suspect's air was nearly knocked out of him as Murphy slammed him against the wall.

"You're going to tell me what I need to know," Murphy snarled, his face so close, he could smell the stale, skunky stench of marijuana on the suspect's breath. "Otherwise, I'll just have to report another dead body to the coroner. *Found him in an alley. Probably just another petty bottom feeder of that Egyptian mob.*" Murphy tightened his grip,

squeezing his knuckles against the suspect's neck. "And we all know it's high season to get rid of all you drug-pedaling misfits, don't we?" The suspect gasped for air, then collapsed when Murphy released his hold.

Murphy cocked the hammer on his magnum. The suspect watched, his breaths now coming out in short pants.

"I want in on what you're pedaling," Murphy proposed, aiming his magnum. "All you have to do is give me the name of your boss."

The grim darkness within the Magnum's barrel was like a magnet to the suspect's eyes.

"What makes you think I know anything about an Egyptian mob?" the suspect asked, stumbling to his feet against the filthy wall. "You never even told me why you pursued me in the first place." He glanced at the magnum. "Speeding? Big deal. It doesn't mean you had to chase—"

The magnum thundered. Its explosive force echoed throughout the alley, startling the suspect.

"I want you to know two things," Murphy said, lowering his gun's aim from the sky. "Take a look down there." He jerked his head toward the end of the alley. "You see anybody looking down here?" Silence in response. "Yeah, exactly. I'm not the type of guy to waste time, so if I say I know something, you best damn well believe I'm not bullshitting. Now tell me the name."

"I don't know what you're talking about," the suspect muttered.

Boom. Hot lead penetrated the suspect's shoulder, causing him to collapse in agony.

"I'm not going to say it again," Murphy shouted over the suspect's bloodcurdling shriek. "Get up!" he commanded, repositioning the suspect against the wall. The barrel's muzzle seared against the suspect's neck. "Tell me the name!"

"I...d-d-don't know!" the suspect stammered, his voice straining. He suddenly felt the gun's barrel pressed against his groin.

“Please,” Murphy drawled with a sadistic grin, “lie just one more time.”

Eyes wide with fright, the suspect tried to wriggle away in a panic. His efforts were for naught. Murphy pressed his forearm against the suspect’s neck.

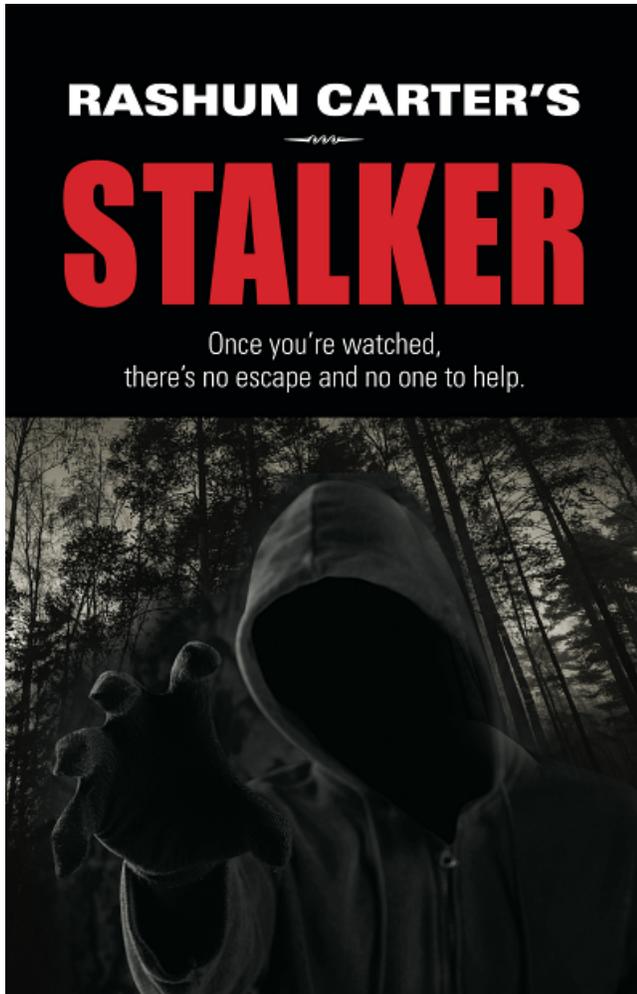
“The name,” he continued. “Or you won’t be much of a man anymore.”

Baring his teeth in anguish, the suspect met Murphy’s gaze and replied, “You’ll find out...soon enough. He’ll find you.”

Murphy backed away with a condescending smirk. “I’ll be waiting,” he said, and then blasted a bullet into the suspect’s pelvis. The suspect dropped in torment, shearing the air with a deafening shrill. Murphy holstered his magnum, approached his car, and then sped off.

The suspect watched Murphy vanish beyond the alley. Helpless, isolated, and cold. His only warmth from the blood that pooled down from his pants and leaked onto the concrete. He curled into a shaky, fetal position and sobbed. *I didn’t give in*, he mused. *I didn’t give you up, Father. Just know I died a loyalist.* He closed his eyes. His breathing quaked. Dizziness blanketed him, softening even the hard, ugly edges of his surroundings. Just before he drifted off, he heard a beer bottle roll across the pavement. Delusion? It had to have been. No one knew he was there. But the bottle continued to scrape against the ground, rolling closer. He managed to peel open his eyes. The empty bottle tapped his knee, but it wasn’t what held his gaze. It was an approaching figure. Too blurry to make out. It resembled a faceless shadow. Crouching down next to him, the figure rolled him onto his back. The last thing the suspect felt wasn’t the excruciating pain inflicted by Murphy, but a cool, metallic sting on his neck. His sight slowly faded, locked with the blurry shadow’s gaze.

“Th-thank...you,” the suspect breathed.



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