

**THE GUISE
OF ANOTHER**

ALSO BY ALLEN ESKENS

The Life We Bury

THE GUISE OF ANOTHER

ALLEN ESKENS



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For Joely

PROLOGUE

That night, there were a few things that the man knew to a religious certainty. He knew that he'd soon be having sex with the woman sitting in the passenger seat of his Lexus. He knew that neither his wife nor the woman's husband yet suspected their infidelities. And he knew that any whisper of guilt he may have felt would soon be silenced by the tumult of their act.

There were other things, however, that the man did not know. He didn't know where or how they would be having sex. He didn't know whether his feelings for this woman reached beyond the carnal pull of her body. And he didn't know that their recklessness that night would trigger a chain of events that would ripple far beyond their self-absorbed little world.

For six months now they'd been acting like mindless teenagers, pushing one another to limits neither had ever experienced, getting bolder with each passing week. Their trysts were all about variety and risk, finding the precipice and pressing everything to the point of catastrophe. If she'd wanted tried-and-true, staring at the same ceiling fan until it was over, she wouldn't have been cheating on her husband. If he'd wanted a menu of only three positions, he could've been at home with his wife. Ordinary was what they were running from.

As they prowled the near-empty streets of Minneapolis—in that part of the city where the glass and granite walls of downtown melded into the paint and mortar of the warehouse district—the woman became restless.

It was time.

She removed her seatbelt and leaned over and unbuckled his. Then, with a practiced grace, she started to undo the cinch of his pants. He must have looked disappointed, because she paused, mid-zip, and

said, “You’ll like this.” Thinking that he knew what she had in mind, he drove in the direction of Third Street, a lightly traveled one-way that became a four-lane highway, nearly desolate at that late hour.

She leaned into his ear and whispered, “Move your seat all the way back.” The tease of her perfume—the way it mingled with the scent of the new leather seats—made his breath grow shallow. The seat motor whirred, moving him back until his fingertips barely held the steering wheel. She slid her dress up and eased onto his lap, sliding a knee on either side of his thighs. He smiled as she took over.

Neither saw the rotation of the city shooting by in an ever-increasing blur of streetlights and shadows. At a place where opposing lanes were separated by a concrete median barely as high as a man’s knee, the woman let herself go. She rocked on top of him, teeth gritted, hands clenched as the pleasure surged through her body.

Had she known that those sensations would be the last thing she would ever feel originating from below her L-4 vertebra, she would have paid far greater attention. Later, after she’d been fitted for her wheelchair and he for his cane, they would denounce each other with a fierce enmity reserved for blood feuds. She would say that he lost control in the heat of his passion, jerking the car sharply to the left. He would swear that her butt cheek caught the steering wheel, catapulting them over the divider. Those who heard their stories—or read the salacious details in the newspaper—would hate them both.

The crash ruptured the calm fabric of the night. And in the span of a single gasp, the northbound Lexus hurtled over the median and into the opposing lane, slamming nose-first into an oncoming Porsche Panamera.

The driver of the Porsche, a guy known to the world as James Erkel Putnam, went for his brake, barely touching the pedal before the grill of his car kissed the steel frame of the Lexus. The cacophony of screaming metal could be heard for miles as the two cars spun counterclockwise, intertwined in a grisly pas de deux, the Lexus leading the dance.

That night, James Erkel Putnam—a man who walked in daylight but lived in shadows, a man who thought he had all the time in the world to seek forgiveness for his many sins—never stood a chance.

PART 1

CHAPTER 1

Detective Alexander Rupert descended the worn marble staircase into the depths of City Hall, pausing on the bottom step to let the clench of knuckles in his gut relax. He breathed in the tired air of the basement, and when he exhaled, his breath carried with it the residue of his frustration. With each new day and each new trip down that staircase, he found it harder to convince himself that he didn't own this new routine, this reassignment into the Frauds Unit. He wore this new job like a suit one size too small, a suit he swore he would never claim as his own. This was a temporary bump in his career path, nothing more. Yet, as the weeks turned into months, as hard edges began to form on the stories that triggered his departure from Narcotics, he began to doubt that he would ever find his way out of that basement.

He took another cleansing breath as he turned the corner and entered the long, stale hallway that led to the Forgery and Frauds Unit of the Minneapolis Police Department, the place where he landed after his ignominious fall from grace. The hallway, with its moss-green walls and mat of tiny white tiles underfoot, reminded him of the men's restroom at the old Metrodome. All it needed was a stainless-steel pissing trough and a few sinks, and he'd feel like he was at a Vikings game.

His transfer from Narcotics to Frauds had been termed a temporary reassignment, just a place to land until the dust settled. But Alexander knew better. He knew that the powers that be intended that he languish there until the federal investigation either exonerated him or sent him to prison. He also knew that when the grand jury came back with a finding of no bill—and he was certain that they would find no bill—that exoneration would not completely pull him out of the hole he'd fallen into.

He sat down at his desk, a gray, metal, standard-issue desk wedged into a cubicle identical to the one he sat in eight years earlier when he first became a detective. That first promotion to detective sent him to the Sex Crimes Unit, a job that had its good side and its bad side. He got a kick out of the prostitution stings, especially when he plastered the mug shots of the patrons all over the Internet. But the child-abuse cases sickened him.

One day, during an interview with a man who videotaped his abuse of a mentally disabled girl, Alexander leaned into the man and whispered, “You’d better hope that you go to prison, because if you walk away from this, I’ll hunt you down and kill you myself.”

That incident ended Alexander’s stint in Sex Crimes. It wasn’t a demotion or a punishment that moved him out of Sex Crimes; in fact, his commander never found out about that comment. As far as she was concerned, Alexander did a bang-up job of getting a sexual offender off the street. But Alexander told that story to his big brother, Max, also a detective, but in Homicide. It was Max who prodded Alexander into asking for the transfer. That’s how, after three years in Sex Crimes, Alexander moved to Narcotics and from there joined the Joint Drug Enforcement Task Force.

And then came the fall of the Task Force.

Alexander sat down at his cubicle in the Frauds Unit and stared at the stacks of reports awaiting his attention. He felt as though he’d been sent back to the kiddie table, removed from the adult conversations that whispered around him. He could feel the icy stares of the other detectives in the room—men and women who, when Alexander approached, parted like a school of anchovies in the path of a shark. They fed on the rumors and knew nothing about the hell that Alexander went through in his days in Narcotics. They knew nothing about the gray areas that a man had to walk when working undercover. They had no inkling of the sacrifices that it took to get in tight with the right group of bad guys. They knew little beyond the dark whispers that swirled in his wake as he passed by.

During his days on the Task Force, Alexander stood shoulder to

shoulder with men who would one day try to kill him. He had set up one of the biggest sting operations in Minnesota history, an operation that led to his first—and only—bullet wound, a shot to his pelvis that cracked his ilium. But that arrest also led to his Medal of Valor and the parade of well-wishers, everyone from patrol officers to senators congratulating him on his outstanding work as a detective.

But that was before the fall of the Task Force, before the newspaper articles, the federal investigation and the grand jury. That was before the backslide that landed him in the Frauds Unit in the basement of City Hall. Because of the stupidity of others, he'd become a pariah, a man so loathsome that none of his fellow detectives even deigned to offer him a cup of coffee.

Now, every day, Alexander Rupert walked to his cubicle in the Frauds Unit, where he would sit and gnaw on the bridle and bit of his resentment. He cursed those detectives from the Task Force whose ineptitude stained them all. He also cursed the detectives around him who had judged him without giving him a chance. After three months, he still found it hard to fight through the muddle of bad thoughts that stirred in his head.

Yet, in a way, he preferred the agitation of that resentment to the calm that lay behind it. On those rare occasions when his bitterness fell quiet, he could feel the loneliness, the stigma of being an outcast. He could feel the full force of his ostracism, powerful and cold like a winter wind. He'd never known anything so consuming.

CHAPTER 2

Alexander glanced at his clock. His first appointment of the day, a personal-injury attorney named Reginald Dogget, was already late. Alexander sensed an edge of disrespect in Dogget's tardiness and slowly began to despise the man. When Dogget finally arrived, Alexander watched him walk to the interview room with the stride of someone who owned every inch of the ground he trod. Alexander recognized Dogget from his ads on television, the man railing against insurance companies, jabbing a finger at the camera and vowing to make them pay.

The receptionist called Alexander to let him know that his appointment was waiting in interview room number 2. Alexander grabbed a pad of paper and a pencil and started to rise, but then paused, sat back down, and sharpened the pencil, once, twice, and three times, grinding off nearly an inch of wood and graphite while Dogget waited for him. When he figured Dogget had waited long enough, Alexander walked to the interview room with a pad of paper, his newly sharpened pencil in his hand and a bead of irritation infecting his mood.

"Mr. Dogget?" he asked.

"That's me," Dogget said in a big voice as he rose and stretched out his hand. Alexander shook it and sat down.

Alexander took a moment to scratch a few unnecessary notes on the page before saying, "I'm Detective Alexander Rupert. What can I do for you today?"

Dogget cocked his head slightly as if taken off guard by something. "Alexander Rupert. Now why do I know that name?"

"I'm sure I don't know," Alexander tapped his pencil on the pad of paper.

“Are you the detective who shot down that killer . . . that guy at the barn?”

Alexander closed his eyes and shook his head before answering. “No. I’m not that guy. That guy is Max Rupert. I’m Alexander Rupert.”

“You related?”

“Only by blood,” Alexander said. “Now, about your—”

“No, that’s not it. I’ve heard your name before. I’ve got a great memory for names.” He scratched his chin. “Alexander Rupert . . .” Then he lit up and snapped his fingers. “Now I know. You were in the news a few months ago. You were one of the cops in that Task Force that they shut down.”

And there it was, like a foot stepping on Alexander’s fingertips, the reminder of how far he’d slipped down the ladder. Alexander gritted his teeth, stared at Dogget, and wondered how big of a handprint he would leave on the side of Dogget’s head if he stretched out his fingers and smacked the man.

“I thought all you guys got suspended or fired for stealing drug money,” Dogget continued.

A pretty big handprint, Alexander thought. He’d always been told that he had big paws. “Mr. Dogget, I have a lot of work to do. If you have a crime to report, I’ll take that report. But if all you want to do is sit here and bullshit, well, then you’re wasting my time.”

Alexander started to stand up and Dogget held out his hands, palms down, over the table. “Hang on there, Detective. I have a crime to report. At least I’m pretty sure it’s a crime.”

Alexander sat back down. “‘Pretty sure’?”

“Yeah.” Dogget nodded his head as he considered. “It’s like this. I have a decent law practice where I make money suing people for car accidents and the like.”

“I’ve seen your ads.”

“Well, thank you.”

“That wasn’t a compliment.”

Dogget cleared his throat and continued. “I have sources that feed me leads on cases.”

“Ambulance chasers?”

“If you want to use that term.” Dogget shifted uncomfortably in his seat at the interruption. Then he continued. “So I get a call from one of my feeders about a car accident in Minneapolis—this Lexus plowed into a Porsche. That’s usually a good sign. An expensive car means that they have deep pockets beyond the insurance. The Lexus is being driven by the owner of a chain of jewelry stores. Now we’re talking big bucks. And to put icing on the cake, there’s no question about who’s at fault. The jewelry guy was getting his world rocked by a woman who wasn’t his wife, and they crossed the lane. I mean the woman was actually screwing him as they jumped the median into oncoming traffic. The criminal complaint referred to that as ‘gross negligence.’” Dogget cracked a smile as if he’d made a joke.

“I heard about that accident,” Alexander said. “One guy died.”

“Yeah, the guy in the Porsche in the oncoming lane, the guy who was minding his own business, not doing a damned thing wrong.”

“Highway Patrol handled the accident,” Alexander said. “They would’ve done the reconstruction. Not us.”

“I’m not looking for accident reconstruction. I have all that.” Dogget tapped his finger on a file lying on the table in front of him, a file he’d brought to the interview.

“Then what are you looking for?” Alexander said. He made no attempt to hide his growing impatience. “This is the Fraud Unit. We don’t handle accidents or deaths.”

“I’m getting there. When I got the lead on this case, I had my investigator try to scrounge up a relative—someone I could send a letter to.”

“A relative?”

“It’s a wrongful-death action. The heirs of the dead get to sue the people who caused the death.”

“So you stalk the relative of the guy in the Porsche, hoping to take a cut of what his heirs should get for his death.”

“Hey, I provide a valuable service,” Dogget said, pointing his finger at Alexander. It was all Alexander could do not to reach out and break the finger in half. It would have been so quick, so easy. “I go after the

deep pocket once the insurance company offers up their meager policy limits.”

“So did you find a relative?”

“Sort of.” Dogget shrugged.

“Sort of’?”

“The guy in the Porsche lived with a woman named Ianna Markova. I sent a letter to her that same day. I normally wait and make sure that the significant other is a wife because a girlfriend does me no good. The heir has to be a blood relative or a wife. Girlfriends are shit out of luck.”

“Sucks to be her,” Alexander said.

“Don’t it, though.” Alexander’s sarcasm floated right past Dogget. “So this Ianna Markova calls me up. Wants to come in and see me. I clear my calendar to get her in. You know, get ‘em while they’re hot. And boy was she hot. Late twenties, maybe early thirties, blond hair, knockers . . .” Dogget gave a sideways glance up to the camera in the corner of the ceiling, cleared his throat, and continued in a manner more professional than before. “So she’s all bereaved, and I’m taking my time with her. Then I ask her if she and James were married.”

“James?”

“The guy in the Porsche. His name was James Erkel Putnam. She had just come from making the funeral arrangements. She tells me that she and Putnam never tied the knot. I almost started crying myself. So I ask her if there were any brothers or sisters or parents. I tell her that we need the names of all of his living relatives. At first she says that James doesn’t have a living relative.”

“So no lawsuit? You must’ve been heartbroken.”

“I don’t give up that easy. I’ve never met a man with no blood relatives. You shake a family tree hard enough, someone always falls out. So I laid it on the line. I told her that without a blood relative, there’s no lawsuit. No money.”

“Why would she care? The girlfriend gets nothing, remember?”

Dogget gave a sly grin, like a man about to share a dirty joke. “I kind of told her that she still gets part of the settlement. I said that once we had the blood relative, she can stake a claim against the jewelry mogul.”

“So you lied to a woman who just lost her boyfriend.” Alexander leaned into the table and aimed his stare at Dogget. “Is that the crime you came here to report?”

“You’re funny, Detective.” Dogget tapped his knuckles against his chest as if trying to pass a burp. “I come in here to do the right thing, and you bust my chops.”

“You understand this is the Fraud Unit, don’t you? Lying to Ms. Markova is the first thing I’ve heard so far that sounds like a fraud.”

“I’m getting there,” Dogget said.

Alexander could see tiny beads of sweat starting to form on Dogget’s temple, and he took some pleasure in it.

“So, the next day, she came back with a box of documents: birth certificate, Social Security card, and some letters.”

“Letters?”

“Yeah, letters that James received years ago from a brother in prison in New York. I had my investigator check into it and, sure enough, Putnam has this older brother doing a stint in the Clinton Correctional Facility for a drug conviction—what they called a class A-1 felony.”

“So why’d she tell you that James had no relatives?”

“She said that she found the stuff in a hidden box full of James’s personal things. She said she wanted to respect his privacy. My thought is that she just didn’t want to share with the brother in prison. But who knows?”

“What’s the brother’s name?”

“William Bartók Putnam. We followed up on the information, compared the birth certificates with city records. Putnam’s parents are dead, died in a car crash back in ’98, and the older brother’s legit.”

“So you have your heir. You can rape the jewelry king to your heart’s content.”

“You would think so, but not so fast with the happy ending.” Dogget folded his fingers together in order to give his words some dramatic weight. “I sent William Bartók Putnam a contract to sign, allowing me to file a lawsuit on his behalf. I also sent him a copy of the obituary of his brother. A week later, I get the whole mess back with a simple note that read: “That is not my brother. That is not James Erkel Putnam.”