

CHAPTER 1

“Do you cut yourself?”

“Not physically.”

Becker Gray stared at the ashtray on Karen Vandenhill’s office desk. It looked like a pile of marbles melted into a drooping bowl-like structure. He wondered where it had come from. Did she have a child who made it for her at summer camp? And why an ashtray? Not many people smoked anymore. Did she?

Gray realized then that he knew nothing about his department-appointed therapist. He’d been seeing her for almost five months straight, and he couldn’t think of anything specific he knew about her. In a city like Lakeland, Florida, Gray should know two out of five people just from living there his whole life. Add on his law enforcement background and community involvement, and he surmised he should, at least, know of three or four out of five people. So he thought it was odd that he didn’t know anything about Karen Vandenhill before therapy.

“Then how?” she asked.

Gray didn’t respond. Instead, he waited her out. Eventually she’d make a note on her pad of paper, realizing he was done talking, and move

on. While ignoring her question, he scolded himself for not paying attention. He hated these sessions, even though he initiated them this stretch of time. He tried to keep the conversation at surface level, but every now and then she'd catch him not paying attention and he'd answer honestly. And then he'd find himself in a conversation he didn't want to have, like this one.

She didn't write in her pad though.

"Becker, have you made any new friends?"

"Where did that come from?"

Gray shifted in his seat, almost leaning away from her and her questions. It was the first time during this session that he'd adjusted his sitting position. Vandenhill made a note of that on her pad.

"I've been thinking about it lately for you." She leaned forward, countering his retreat. "You seem to enjoy your friendship with your partner, but I was thinking maybe you should meet someone who isn't connected to your work life."

"Why would I do that?"

Vandenhill smiled, happy – and surprised – that Gray was entertaining the idea. She responded, "Friendship enhances the human experience."

"I don't think so."

"You don't think friendships make peoples' lives better?"

"Not that," Gray said, moving in his seat again, narrowly closing his posture. "I don't think I'll be making any new friends."

Vandenhill noted his response, then asked, "Why?"

"I'm good." He dismissed the notion.

"The holidays are coming up. Friends are very important this time of year."

"Is that why you asked if I was a cutter? You think I'll kill myself this holiday season?"

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“Since you brought it up ... ”

Gray chuckled at her and the silly theory, but when she didn't move on to a new topic, he asked, “You're serious?”

She clicked her pen twice. It marked the end of a conversation, when she wanted to change the topic. “What are you doing for the holidays?”

“Nothing. On duty, I suppose.”

“You won't see your parents? Or your brother?”

“My schedule doesn't really allow for that.” Gray thought these questions were ridiculous. What did it matter if he saw his parents? Why did she care anyway?

“What about Detective Parker?” She slid her hips to the back of her chair again.

“I don't know what his plans are.”

“I mean, will you spend time with him?”

Gray shrugged his shoulders. Then he remembered something, and he hoped sharing it would get her off his back. Within a few more questions. *There are always more questions.* “The mayor invited me to a Christmas party.”

“The mayor?”

“I'm a big deal since the Pen Pal case.” A smirk slid across his face, faux bragging. Right before he kicked off these sessions again with Vandenhill, he solved a case that thrust him into the national spotlight.

She laughed – he had a smart wit, when he let his guard down – but she didn't want to encourage that behavior. It was hard enough to get him talking. “Well, are you going to attend?”

“Sure.”

It was a noncommittal response.

“I think you should.”

Gray nodded, accepting her statement simply as information.

Wanting to use the rare moment of flowing communication with Gray, she moved on to the next subject, clicking her pen. “Have you picked out a vacation spot yet?”

“You’ve covered a lot of ground here, doc.” He scooted to the front of the chair cushion, like he was positioning himself to stand and leave.

“How’s that?” Vandenhill smiled, knowing the answer, and twirled the pen between her fingers.

“You’ve gone from me cutting myself to my family and now to my vacation. The cutting thing was new, but the rest we talk about all the time.”

She tapped the pen against her pad. “The friendship topic was new too.”

“I guess it was.”

They both knew he was delaying the response. He waited for her to move on, and she waited for him to answer.

Finally, “Well?”

“Well what?” he asked.

His wit had lost whatever amusement it possessed earlier in the conversation.

“No.” Agitation clearly in his tone. “I haven’t done any of the homework you assigned.” He stood to leave.

She stood too, clicking her pen. “Think more about it. I don’t want to make it mandatory.”

CHAPTER 2

Nicole Abernathy laced up her new sneakers, adorned with a colorful mix of purples, greys, reds, and yellows. They arrived via UPS before she came home from work. She had nearly run completely through the soles of her old athletic shoes, not having been able to afford a replacement pair. Two months ago, though, Nicole had accepted a promotion, and the raise that came with it afforded her two splurges: these new sneakers and a better brand of makeup.

She checked herself in the full-length mirror in her apartment bedroom – her face wiped clean of makeup, new shoes making her outfit look ragged, and her body not nearly where she wanted it. She was as content as she'd ever been. Things were going in a good direction for her. Her reflection smiled back at her.

Nicole slipped her driver license in the hidden pocket of her running shorts and strapped on her advanced fitness tracker. Then she headed out the door.

It only took Nicole a few minutes to get from her apartment to the Fort Fraser Trail, despite the heavy, rush hour traffic. She parked Old Thunder, the name she had given her car the first time the muffler fell

off, and tucked her set of keys into the same hidden pocket as her driver license. She stretched her hamstrings, quadriceps, and calves before running down the trail in her ongoing effort to improve her shape.

It took almost 20 minutes before sweat spread across her body, making her ragged outfit adhere to her like skin. The new shoes bounced off the ground, propelling her forward, as if springs were attached to the bottom of her feet. And with every stride of her legs, more of her day's stress waned – the hectic pace of her new job; the feeling of uncertainty that she could fulfill the position's role; the fact that now she was the supervisor of the man she'd been pining over; the idea that she was pining over a man in the first place; and that she had used the word *pinning*. She remembered how she looked in her mirror, and she decided she shouldn't be pining, obsessing, yearning, or whatever over any man. No, men should be dropping at her feet. She laughed to herself at the concept. That's not how her life had been. She was pretty, personable, fashionable, and available, but she just never had any real luck with men. She thought dating in her late 20s would be easy. *Not so much though.*

Soon all those thoughts were gone. Her mind fell blank. Literally nothing going on. Nicole became one with her body, measuring her breathing, her pace, and her heart rate – all by instinct. This was the reason she ran. To reach this point, to turn the world off. To push the bullshit away. To escape into a place and time where nothing existed. She never knew how long the feeling would last, but it didn't matter. Ten minutes. An hour. Who cared? As long as she escaped reality, this is what kept her alive, what kept her pure, what kept her focused.

Yes. Focus.

That was her every day: focus, drive, goals, betterment, dreams, and hopes. Running, that was the backside of focus.

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It bred a persona of superiority. Not in a negative fashion. She never felt herself superior to other people. Maybe, she thought, she felt superior over the situation. She wasn't sure how to explain it. She just knew where she was in life at this moment wouldn't be where she'd be forever.

This was why running appealed to her so much. Eventually her current situation would wilt in her mind and she could focus on what she really needed to focus on. Goals.

Yes, goals.

The more people Nicole dealt with in the world, the more she became convinced that most people had no hopes, dreams, or goals. Most seemed content to let life pass them by. She couldn't understand it. The idea of waking up every morning simply to go to work before coming home every night to watch television and go to bed made her sick to her stomach. She remembered her parents coming home from work and sitting on the front porch, swaying back and forth in their rocking chairs. Every day. Her parents were awesome, wonderful people. There just was no way in hell could she imagine that lifestyle.

No, she wanted amazing things for herself. Her current job was only part of her plan. She was earning real world experience. She was finally making decent money. She had a good schedule – four days on, three off – which left her plenty of time to pursue her dreams of being a travel blogger.

Nicole, when she was 25 years old, met a wealthy man who had swept her off her feet. He was older and was nothing like the men her age. He was polite, spoke about important topics, treated her well, didn't wear his hat backwards, didn't get drunk on lite beer, and he wasn't close-minded. Worldly was another word she used to describe the man. He was like her, in a sense. At least, in one way: he had drive and focus, and goals mattered. That was their initial connection. She loved that about him.

During their relationship, he took Nicole on his business trips. Once a month, they'd fly off together, and she'd experience wonders she never knew about. It was during those trips that she fell in love with travel. She wanted to spend her whole life flying around the world. What better way to do it than to make it a business?

The love of travel lasted longer than the relationship. After a year, she'd found out that three other women in their early twenties traveled with him too: each on a four-week rotation. So the guy had to go, and with him went those trips. Left behind was the desire to travel.

When she finally developed her business plan, she began traveling on her own dime. She'd spent two years building content for her blog launch, which was occurring in six weeks. At first, she focused on weekend trips around Florida. All the beaches had countless locations to feature. She then began driving up to eastern Georgia, featuring places like Jekyll Island and St. Simons. She made it as far north as Savannah, Tybee Island, and Hilton Head. More recently, she began looking at the last-minute trips airlines offered at a very low cost. She had a bag packed and ready to go, so every Friday night she'd find a deal and off she went – to Atlanta, New Orleans, Las Vegas, and Nashville. Wherever the best deal sent her.

It had taken every bit of money she had to pull off those trips. She noticed during this time that she seemed to lose friends. The more she was focused on this launch and traveling, the less time she had for friends. Now she just had a few people she saw outside of work, and she only rarely saw them. Reconnecting with friends was always on her to-do list, but it never seemed to happen. The launch was taking up so much of her time, money, and energy. She had to accept that to reach her goals. And she was. *Mostly.*

This promotion, though, should help. Instead of working five to seven days a week at two jobs, she could work one job four days a week and make more money than the two jobs she was working previously. That left

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time, she thought, to focus on her blog and business, as well as allow time to meet up with old friends.

Nicole realized her thoughts had sped up and her pace had slowed during her run. This was the opposite of what usually happened. She wanted more escape. She pumped her legs faster, hoping to find that place again where her mind shut off. She saw the dimming autumn sky ahead of her and noted the time on her fitness tracker, along with her heart rate and length of run – 5:43 p.m. The sun wouldn't set for almost 30 more minutes, but it would be dark fast. She wondered if she should turn around and head back to her car, finishing the run on the path in the dark night? Or, she figured the other option was to run another mile to the city bus stop and catch one back to her car? Then it happened.

Her vision flipped. What was up was now down and vice versa, like she was watching it happen before her on a television or movie screen. Her brain saw it as if she were upright, which is where the confusion came in. It wasn't until Nicole's body slammed against the trail's hard, compacted dirt ground that her brain registered what had happened. She'd lost her balance and had fallen – tripped maybe – which was what she was afraid of by turning and running back to her car in the dark. The ground attacked her torso, arms and legs. With the next roll, her head connected with the ground then everything went black.

Then she was dragged into the wooded area along the path.