

# THE SUICIDE HOUSE

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*To Fred and Sue  
Parents, Sanibelers, friends*

*Discovery consists of seeing what everybody else has  
seen and thinking what nobody else has thought.*

*—Albert Szent-Györgyi*

# Session 1

## Journal Entry: THE TRACKS

*I* KILLED MY BROTHER WITH A PENNY. SIMPLE, BENIGN, AND PERFECTLY BELIEVABLE.

*It happened at the tracks. Because, as life would teach me in the years to come, a speeding train was many things. Majestic, when it blurred past too quickly for the eyes to register anything but streaks of color. Powerful, when it rumbled underfoot like an impending earthquake. Deafening, when it roared along the rails like a thunderstorm dropped from the heavens. A speeding train was all these things, and more. A speeding train was deadly.*

*The gravel leading up to the tracks was loosely packed, and our feet slipped as we climbed. It was evening, close to six o'clock, the usual time the train rolled through town. The bottoms of the clouds blushed with a dying crimson as the sun settled under the horizon. Dusk was the best time to visit the tracks. In broad daylight, the conductor might spot us and call the police to report two kids playing dangerously close to the tracks. Of course, I made sure that scenario had already happened. It was essential to my plan. Had I killed my brother the very first time I brought him here, my anonymity in this tragedy would have been paper thin. I needed ammunition for when the police came to question me. I needed to create an irrefutable history about our time at the tracks. We'd been here before. We'd been seen. We'd been caught. Our parents had been informed, and we had been punished. A pattern had been developed. But this time, I would tell them, things had gone wrong. We were kids. We were stupid. The narrative was flawless, and I would later learn that it needed to be. The detective who would look into my brother's death was an onerous force. Immediately suspicious of my story, he*

*was never truly satisfied with my explanation of events. To this day, I am certain he is not. But my version of that day, and the history I had created, was watertight. Despite his efforts, the detective found no holes.*

*Once we made it to the top of the embankment and stood next to the tracks, I fished two pennies from my pocket and handed one to my brother. They were shiny and unblemished but would soon be thin and smooth after we placed them on the rails for the roaring train to flatten them. Dropping pennies onto the tracks was an exciting event for my brother, who had never heard of such a thing before I introduced him to the concept. Dozens of other flattened pennies filled a bowl in my bedroom. I needed them. When the police came to ask their questions, the collection of pennies would serve as proof that we'd done this before.*

*Far out in the evening, I heard the whistle. The faint sound seemed to catch in the clouds above us, echoing in the bloodshot cotton balls. The evening was darker now as the sun melted away, grainy and opalescent. Just the right mixture of dusk for us to see what we were doing but not enough to betray our presence. I crouched down and placed my penny on the tracks. My brother did the same. We waited. The first few times we'd come here, we placed our pennies on the rails and ran back down the embankment to hide in the shadows. But soon we discovered that in the evening no one noticed us. With each venture back to the tracks, we stopped running when the train approached. In fact, we crept closer. What was it about being so close to danger that filled us with adrenaline? My brother had no idea. I was quite certain. With each successive trip, he became easier to manipulate. For a moment, it felt unfair—as if I had stepped into the role of bully, a role my brother had mastered. But I reminded myself not to confuse efficiency with simplicity. This felt easy only because of my diligence. It felt easy only because I had made it that way.*

*The train's headlights came into view as it approached—first the top light, and soon after the two ditch lights. I crept closer to the rails. He was next to me, to my right. I had to look past him to see the train's approach. He was aware of me, I could tell, because when I crept closer to the tracks he matched my movements. He didn't want to miss out. He didn't want to allow me more bragging rights or a greater surge of adrenaline. He couldn't allow me to have anything that he could claim as his own. It was how he was. It was how all bullies were.*

*The train was nearly upon us.*

*“Your penny,” I said.*

*“What?” my brother asked.*

*“Your penny. It’s not in the right spot.”*

*He looked down, leaning slightly over the tracks. The roaring train barreled toward us. I took a step back and pushed him. It was over in an instant. He was there one second and gone the next. The train roared past, filling my ears with thunder and turning my vision into a blur of rusted colors. The train produced a current of air that pulled me a step or two to my left and sucked me forward, willing me to join my brother. I braced my feet in the gravel to resist the tug.*

*When the last car passed, the invisible grip released me. I staggered backward. My vision returned, and quiet filled my ears. When I looked down at the tracks, the only thing left of my brother was his right shoe, strangely standing upright as if he’d slipped it off his foot and laid it on the rails.*

*I was careful to leave the shoe untouched. I picked up my penny, though. It was flat and thin and wide. I dropped it in my pocket and headed home to add it to my collection. And to tell my parents the terrible news.*

I closed the leather-bound journal. A long tassel hung from the bottom, keeping my place for the next time I read from it during a session. The room was dead quiet.

“Are you shocked?” I finally asked.

The woman across from me shook her head. Her demeanor had not changed during my confession. “Not at all.”

“Good. I come here for therapy, not judgment.” I lifted the journal. “I’d like to tell you about the others.”

I waited. The woman stared at me.

“There are more. I didn’t stop after my brother.”

I paused again. The woman continued to stare at me.

“Would you mind if I told you about the others?”

She shook her head again. “Not at all.”

I nodded my head. “Excellent. Then I will.”

# Westmont Preparatory High School

Friday, June 21, 2019

11:54 P.M.

A FINGERNAIL MOON FLOATED IN THE MIDNIGHT SKY, ITS TARNISHED sheen intermittently visible through the foliage. The moon's erratic presence penetrated the interlocking tree branches with a pale glaze that painted the forest floor in the lacquered finish of a black-and-white film. Visibility came from the candle he carried, the flame of which died every time he picked up his pace and tried to jog through the woods. He tried to slow himself, to be careful and deliberate, but walking was not an option. He needed to hurry. He needed to be the first to arrive. He needed to beat the others.

He cupped his hand in front of the candle to protect the flame, which allowed him a few uninterrupted minutes to scan the forest. He walked for a few yards until he came to a row of suspicious-looking trees. As he stood perfectly still and scanned the tree trunks, looking for the key he so desperately needed, the candle's flame expired. There was no wind. The flame simply died, leaving a plume of smoke that filled his nostrils with the scent of burnt wax. The sudden and unexplained eclipse of the candle meant the Man in the Mirror was close. By rule—rules no one ever broke—he had ten seconds to relight the candle.

Fumbling with the matches—the rules allowed only matches, no lighters—he struck a matchstick across the phosphorus strip on the side of the box. Nothing. His hands shook as he swiped again. The match broke in half and fell to the dark forest floor. He reached into the matchbox, spilling several others in the process.



“Dammit,” he whispered.

He couldn’t afford to waste matches. He’d need them again if he made it back to the house and into the safe room. But right now he was alone in the dark woods with an unlit candle and in great danger, if he believed the rumors and folklore. The tremors that gripped his body suggested he did. He steadied his hand just long enough to make a smooth sweep against the phosphorus, which caused the match to light in a sizzling blaze. The eruption gave off a cloud of sulfur-tinged smoke before calming to a controlled flame. He touched the match to the candle’s wick, happy for the light it provided. He calmed his breathing and watched the shadowed forest around him. He listened and waited, and when he was sure he had beaten the clock, he returned his attention to the row of trees before him. Slowly, he made his way forward, carefully shielding the flame as he went—a lighted candle was the only way to keep the Man in the Mirror away.

He made it to the huge black oak tree and saw a wooden box at its base. He fell to his knees and opened the lid. A key rested inside. His heart pounded with powerful contractions that rushed blood through the bulging vessels in his neck. He took a deep, calming breath, and then blew out the candle—rules stated that guidance candles could stay lighted only until a key was found. He took off through the woods. In the distance, a train whistle blew into the night, fueling his adrenaline. The race was on. He crashed through the forest, twisting an ankle and unsuccessfully shielding his face from the branches that whipped his cheeks. As he continued through the woods, the rumble of the train shook the ground beneath him as it roared past. The vibration brought more urgency to his steps.

When he reached the edge of the forest, the train was charging along the tracks to his left in a metallic blur that erratically caught the reflection of the moon. He broke free from the dark foliage and took off toward the house, his grunting and panting overtaken by the roar of the train. He made it to the door and pushed inside.

“Congratulations,” a voice said to him as soon as he was through the door. “You’re the first one.”

“Sweet,” he said, out of breath.

“Did you find the key?”

He held it up. “Yeah.”

“Follow me.”

They crept through the black hallways of the house until they came to the door of the safe room. He inserted the key into the doorknob and twisted. The lock surrendered, and the door swung open. They entered and then closed the door behind them. The room was pitch black, much worse than what the forest had offered.

“Hurry.”

He fell to the floor and, on his hands and knees, felt along the hardwood until his fingers came to the row of candles that sat in front of a tall standing mirror. He reached into his pocket and pulled out the book of matches. There were three remaining. He struck a matchstick along the edge of the box, and the tip ignited. He lit one of the candles and stood to face the mirror, which was covered by a heavy tarp.

He took a deep breath and nodded to the one who had met him at the door. Together they pulled the tarp from the mirror. His reflection was shadowed by candlelight, but he noticed the horizontal lacerations that cut across his cheeks and the blood that streamed down from them. He looked eerie and battle worn, but he'd made it. The rumbling evaporated as the last train car passed the house and continued off to the east. Silence filled the room.

Looking in the mirror, he took one last breath. Then, together, they whispered:

“The man in the mirror. The man in the mirror. The man in the mirror.”

A moment passed, during which neither blinked or breathed. Then something flashed behind them. A blur in the mirror between their reflections. Then a face materialized from the darkness and came into focus, a pair of eyes bright with ricochets from the candle's flame. Before either could turn, or scream, or fight, the candle's flame went out.

Peppermill, Indiana  
Saturday, June 22, 2019  
3:33 A.M.

**T**HE DETECTIVE STEERED HIS CAR PAST THE YELLOW CRIME SCENE TAPE already securing the perimeter and pulled into the chaos of red and blue lights. Squad cars, ambulances, and fire trucks were parked at odd angles in front of the brick pillars that marked the entrance to Westmont Preparatory High School, a private boarding school.

*What a goddamn mess.*

His commanding officer had been short on details other than that a couple of kids had been killed out in the woods at the edge of campus. The situation was ripe for overreaction. Hence the presence of the town's entire police and fire departments. And, from the look of it, half the hospital staff. Doctors in scrubs and nurses in white coats glowed as they walked in front of the ambulance headlights. Officers talked to students and faculty as they poured through the front gates and into the circus of flashing lights. He noticed a Channel 6 news van parked outside the crime scene tape. Despite the bewitching hour, he was sure more were on the way.

Detective Henry Ott climbed from his car while the officer in charge brought him up to speed.

"The first nine-one-one call came in at twelve twenty-five. Several others followed, all describing some sort of mess out in the woods."

"Where?" Ott asked.

"At an abandoned house on the edge of campus."

"Abandoned?"

“From what we’ve learned so far,” the officer said, “it used to be a boarding house for faculty but has been empty for several years since a Canadian National rail line went up that sent daily freight trains past that part of campus. It was too loud, so new faculty housing was built on the main campus. The school had plans to develop the land into a football field and track-and-field course. But for now, the house just sits abandoned in the woods. We talked to a few students. Sounds like it was a favorite hangout for late-night parties.”

Detective Ott walked toward the gates of Westmont Prep, and then through the entrance. A golf cart sat parked in front of the school’s main building; four giant pillars rose up to support the large triangular gable that glowed under the spotlights. The school’s logo was engraved across the surface of the stone.

“*Veniam solum, relinquitis et,*” Detective Ott said, his head craned back as he looked up at the building. “Arrive alone, leave together.”

“What’s that mean?”

Detective Ott looked back at the officer. “I don’t really give a shit. Where are we headed?”

“Climb in,” the officer said, pointing at the golf cart. “The house is on the outskirts of campus, about a twenty-minute walk through the woods. This’ll be faster.”

The detective clambered into the golf cart, and a few minutes later he was bouncing through the woods on a narrow dirt path. The trunks of tall birch trees were a blur in his peripheral vision, the light from the moon was gone, and as they drove deeper into the woods, only the golf cart’s headlights offered any glimpse of where they were headed.

“Jesus Christ,” Detective Ott said after a few minutes. “Is this still part of campus?”

“Yes, sir. The old house was built a ways from the main campus to give faculty privacy.”

Up ahead, the detective saw activity at the end of the narrow path. Spotlights had been set up to brighten the area, and as they approached the end of the dark canopy of forest, it felt like exiting the mouth of a giant prehistoric creature.

The officer slowed the cart before they reached the exit. “Sir, one more thing before we get to the scene.”

The detective looked over. "What is it?"

The officer swallowed. "It's quite graphic. Worse than anything I've ever seen."

Woken in the middle of the night, and stuck somewhere between the buzz he'd fallen asleep with and the hangover that waited, Detective Ott was short on patience and had no flair for the dramatic. He pointed to the edge of the woods. "Let's go."

The officer drove from the shadows of the path and into the bright halogen spotlights. The crowd here was smaller, less hectic and more organized. The responding officers had enough sense to keep the horde of police, paramedics, and firefighters to a minimum out here at the crime scene to reduce the chance of contaminating the area.

The officer stopped the cart just outside the gates of the house.

"Holy Christ," Detective Ott muttered as he stood from the golf cart. All eyes were on him as the first responders watched his reaction and waited for his instruction.

In front of him was a large colonial house that looked to come from a century long past. It was cast in the shadowy glow of the spotlights, which highlighted the ivy that crept up the exterior. A wrought iron gate squared off the perimeter of the house, and tall oak trees stretched up into the night. The first body Detective Ott saw was that of a male student who had been impaled by one of the shafts of the wrought iron gate. Not by accident. Not as though he were trying to scale the gate and had inadvertently fallen onto the tine in the process. No, this was intentional. Almost artful. The young man had been placed there. Lifted carefully, then dropped to allow the spear of the gate to rise up into his chin and through his face until it poked through the top of his skull.

Detective Ott pulled a small flashlight from his pocket and headed toward the house. That's when he noticed the girl sitting on the ground off to the side. She was covered in blood with arms wrapped around her knees and rocking back and forth in a detached state of shock.

"This wasn't a couple of kids screwing around. This was a god-damn slaughter."



PART I  
August 2020





# CHAPTER 1

**T**HE THIRD EPISODE OF THE PODCAST HAD DROPPED EARLIER IN THE day and in just five hours had been downloaded nearly three hundred thousand times. In the days to come, millions more would listen to this installment of *The Suicide House*. Many of those listeners would then flood the Internet and social media to discuss their theories and conclusions about the discoveries made during the episode. The chatter would generate more interest, and new listeners would download earlier episodes. Soon, Mack Carter would have the biggest hit in pop culture.

This inevitable fact pissed Ryder Hillier off in ways that were indescribable. *She* had done the research, *she* had sounded the alarms, and *she* was the one who had been looking into the Westmont Prep Killings for the past year, recording her findings, and posting them on her true-crime blog. Her YouTube channel had 250,000 subscribers and millions of views. But now, all of her hard work was being overshadowed by Mack Carter's podcast.

She had seen right away that the Westmont Prep story had legs, that the official version of events was too simple and too convenient, and that the facts presented by law enforcement were selective at best, and straight-up misleading at worst. Ryder knew that with the right backing and some smart investigative reporting, the story could draw a huge audience. She had pitched her idea to studios the previous year, after the case made national headlines and was open and shut before any real answers were given. But Ryder

Hillier was just a lowly journalist, not a bona fide star like Mack Carter. She didn't have the All-American face or the strong vocal cords, and therefore none of the studios had paid any attention to her pitch. She was a thirty-five-year-old journalist unknown outside the state of Indiana. But she was sure her articles about the case, which had run as a feature in the *Indianapolis Star* and were referenced by several other outlets, as well as the popularity of her YouTube channel, had *something* to do with the sudden interest in Westmont Prep. Mack Carter didn't shift from prime-time television to a Podunk town in Indiana by chance. Someone, somewhere, had been paying attention to her findings, and they saw opportunity and dollar signs. They commissioned Mack Carter—the current host of *Events*, a nightly newsmagazine show—to run a superficial investigation and to produce a podcast around his findings. His name would draw attention, and the podcast would draw millions of listeners on the promise that the great Mack Carter, with his proven investigative skills and hard-charging attitude, would find answers to the Westmont Prep Killings, which had been too cleanly closed. But in the end, he wouldn't prove a goddamn thing other than that, with the proper sponsorship and tons of upfront cash, a podcast could grow from the ashes of tragedy to become a lucrative endeavor for everyone involved. So long as that tragedy was disturbing and morbid enough to draw an audience. The Westmont Prep Killings qualified.

Ryder wasn't going to allow the reality of Big Business to deter her. Quite the contrary. She'd worked too hard to give up now. She planned to piggyback on the success of the podcast. She wanted to pull Mack Carter in, to show him the cards she was holding. To gain his interest and make him take notice. Her YouTube channel provided a decent income from advertisers, and her gig at the paper paid the bills. But in her midthirties, Ryder Hillier wanted more from her career. She wanted to break out, and attaching her name to the most popular true-crime podcast in history would bring her to another level. And the truth was, Mack Carter needed her. She knew more than anyone about the Westmont Prep Killings, including the detectives who had investigated it. She just needed to figure out how to get Mack's attention.

Like hundreds of thousands of others, she had downloaded the latest episode of his podcast. She put the buds into her ears, tapped her phone, and took off down the running trail as Mack Carter's practiced voice rang in her ears:

*Westmont Preparatory High is a well-respected boarding school nestled on the banks of Lake Michigan in the town of Peppermill, Indiana. It prepares teenagers not just for the rigors of college but for the challenges of life. Westmont Prep has been around for more than eighty years, and its rich history promises that the institution will be here long after those listening to this podcast are gone. But in addition to the honors and accolades, the school has a scar. An ugly, jagged blemish that will also be here for years to come.*

*This podcast is a retelling of the tragedy that occurred at this prestigious school during the summer of 2019, when the rules that normally define the school's conduct were loosened, just a bit, for those students who remained on campus through the hot summer months. It's the story of a dark and dangerous game gone wrong, of two students brutally murdered, and of a teacher accused. But at its core, this story is also about survivors. A story about the students who are desperately trying to move on but who have been mysteriously pulled back to a night they can't forget.*

*During this podcast we will explore the details of that fateful night. We will learn about the victims and about the reckless game that took place in the woods on the edge of campus. We will go inside the abandoned boarding house where the murders took place. We will meet those who survived the attack and take a closer look at life inside the walls of this elite boarding school. We will review police reports, witness interviews, social workers' notes, and psychological evaluations of the students involved. We'll go in depth with the lead detective who ran the investigation. Finally, we'll creep into the mind of Charles Gorman, the Westmont Prep teacher responsible for the killings. Along this journey I hope to stumble over something new. Something no one else has discovered, perhaps a piece of evidence that will*

*shine light on the secret many of us believe is still hidden behind the walls of Westmont Prep. A secret that will explain why students continue to return to that abandoned boarding house to kill themselves.*

*I'm Mack Carter. Welcome . . . to The Suicide House.*

Ryder shook her head as she jogged. Even the goddamn intro had her hooked.

*I'm Mack Carter, and on episode three of The Suicide House we're going to meet one of the survivors of the Westmont Prep Killings, a student named Theo Compton who was present at the abandoned boarding house the night of June twenty-first. Theo has never before given an interview to the media but agreed to talk to me exclusively about what happened the night two of his classmates were killed. He reached out to me through the message board on The Suicide House web page. Per his request, I met him at the McDonald's in Peppermill.*

*We sat at a back booth, where he whispered through most of our discussion. It took a bit of time to get him talking, so I've edited our conversation down to the last third. Here is a recording of the interview, with my comments added in voice-over throughout.*

*"So you were there the night your classmates were killed?"*

*Theo nods and scratches at stubble on his cheek.*

*"Yeah, I was there."*

*"Tell me about the abandoned house. What was the draw?"*

*"What was the draw? We're a bunch of teenagers trapped at a boarding school with strict rules and a dress code. The house in the woods was an escape."*

*"An escape from what?"*

*"From the rules. From the teachers. From the doctors and the counselors and the therapy sessions. It was freedom. We went there to get away from school, to screw off and try to enjoy summer."*

*"You are about to start your senior year at Westmont Prep, correct?"*

*"Yeah."*

*“But this current summer, you and your friends don’t go out to that house anymore.”*

*“No one goes out there anymore.”*

*“Last summer, on the night of the killings, you and your friends got caught up in something. A dark and secretive game. Tell me about it.”*

*Theo’s eyes go mad as his gaze jets to me, then away as he looks out the window and into the parking lot. His reaction gives me the sense that Theo thinks I know more than I do. It’s been just over a year since Westmont Prep became infamous for the killings inside its walls, and the students who survived that night are about to start their senior year. The police have refused to answer questions about their investigation, and the silence has fueled the flames of rumor. One of them is that the students were playing a dangerous game the night two of them were killed.*

*“Tell me about that night. What were you doing at the house?”*

*Theo pulls his gaze from the parking lot and looks at me.*

*“We weren’t at the house. We were in the woods.”*

*“The woods that surround the house.”*

*Theo nods.*

*“You were playing a game.”*

*“No.”*

*He says this suddenly, as if I’ve insulted him.*

*“This isn’t about the game.”*

*I wait but he offers no more, so I push.*

*“Many have suggested that you and your classmates were participating in a game called The Man in the Mirror. And that it was the commitments and demands of this game that might have brought the horrific events of that night.”*

*Theo shakes his head and looks out the window again.*

*“We screwed up, okay? It’s time to put the truth out there.”*

*I nod my head and try not to look desperate.*

*“The truth. Okay, tell me what you know.”*

*He takes a deep breath. Several of them, in fact, until he is nearly hyperventilating.*

*“We didn’t tell the police everything.”*

*“About what?”*

*“About that night. About a lot of stuff.”*

*“Like what?”*

*Theo takes a long pause here. I wait anxiously for him to say more. Finally, he does.*

*“Like the things we know about Mr. Gorman.”*

*My breath catches in my throat, and for a moment I can't speak. Charles Gorman is the Westmont Prep teacher accused of murdering Theo Compton's classmates. Slaughtering them, in fact, and impaling one of them on a wrought iron fence. The case against him is profound, and there has never been another suspect. But despite the evidence against Gorman, many believe that there is more to the Westmont Prep Killings than what the public currently knows. Theo Compton appears ready to produce the missing pieces of a very complicated puzzle.*

*“What about him?”*

*I sound desperate, and Theo recognizes it.*

*“Shit. I can't do this.”*

*Theo shifts his weight and starts to slide out of the booth.*

*“Wait! Tell me about Charles Gorman. Do you know why he did it?”*

*Theo suddenly stares straight into my eyes.*

*“He didn't.”*

*I fixate, unblinkingly, on the young man in front of me. I shake my head.*

*“Why do you say that?”*

*Theo stands up suddenly.*

*“I've gotta go. If the group knew I was talking with you, they'd freak out.”*

*“What group?”*

*He turns away from the table and is gone in an instant, walking away through the doors of the McDonald's, leaving me alone in the back booth.*

*I sit for a while, asking myself the same question over and over.*

*“What group?”*

## CHAPTER 2

**R**YDER HAD MADE IT THROUGH HALF OF THE EPISODE DURING HER run. She was anxious to finish it but had an article due the next day. She wrote a weekly true-crime column for the Sunday edition of the *Indianapolis Star*. It was one of the paper's most popular columns, always generating long comment threads for the online edition, and popular news websites commonly linked to it.

After a shower, she pulled on jeans and a tank top and sat at her kitchen table, where she opened her laptop. She wrote for an hour, until 10:40 P.M., putting the final touches on an article about a missing South Bend man. There had been some recent developments in the case having to do with the timing of the man's life insurance policy, which brought his wife under suspicion. Ryder was trying her hardest to finish the article, but the writing came slowly, and she was frustrated with her lack of concentration. Mack Carter's deep and practiced voice rattled in her head, and all she wanted to do was get back to the podcast. Finally, she succumbed to her temptation, pushed her laptop aside, and tapped her phone to resume the episode.

*So my interview with Theo Compton was what the kids would call an epic fail. Epic, but not complete. Our short conversation was curious. The Westmont Prep Killings happened on June twenty-first. Charles Gorman came under suspicion after detectives found a manifesto in his home describing in ex-*

*plicit detail how he planned to carry out the murders. In neat cursive writing he explained the exact method in which he intended to kill the students, details about slashed jugulars and the particulars of using the tines of the wrought iron gate for impalement. After chronicling his plans in his journal, Gorman did exactly what his words promised.*

*So, Theo Compton has my mind spinning. With so much evidence stacked against Charles Gorman, I'm curious to know if Theo, or any other student, possesses information that might refute this evidence. Of course, if listeners have any leads I encourage you to head to the message board on the website to share them with me, and the rest of the podcast community. For now let's focus on Gorman and get back to where we left off at the end of last week's episode. I told you that I was granted exclusive access to Westmont Prep's campus and, in particular, to Charles Gorman's home. Now we'll pick up with my tour, which was conducted by the dean of students, Dr. Gabriella Hanover. Here is a recording of the interview, with my comments added in voice-over throughout.*

*The Westmont Prep campus is both striking and ominous. The buildings are gothic structures built from white sandstone and covered by ivy that crawls to the eaves. It's noon on a summer Saturday, and the place is quiet. Only a few students stroll the grounds as Dr. Hanover steers the golf cart over the winding campus paths.*

*"The house where the murders took place . . . is it still off-limits?"*

*I can immediately tell Dr. Hanover does not like the question. She shoots me a sideways glance that connects with a split second of eye contact. It's as if our fingers touched and sparked with static electricity. The look is just enough to tell me not to press my luck. She and the school's attorneys explained during the negotiations that preceded this guided tour that the portion of campus where the murders occurred was not only off-limits to me and the podcast but was inaccessible to the student body as well. That area had been sectioned off by a tall brick wall. I can see the partition in the distance as Dr. Hanover drives me*



*through campus. To curious minds like my own, the red brick does not warn me to stay away; it does just the opposite. It begs me to discover what's beyond it. It shouts to me that it's hiding something sinister. On the other side of that wall are the woods, and in those woods is a forgotten path that leads to the infamous boarding house.*

*For years prior to the killings, the school's plan had been to demolish the house and clear a portion of the forest to make room for a football field, track course, baseball diamond, and soccer field. In just the past few months, the school has secured the funding. Renovation is slated to begin as soon as the Peppermill Police determine that there is no more evidence left to gather from the crime scene.*

*Despite the case being so quickly solved, an executive order from the governor has held up the demolition of the house. Last year he was pressured by the district attorney's office, and they were pressured by the Peppermill Police Department, to delay the destruction of the boarding house. Someone inside the department is still convinced that there are unanswered questions about that night hiding in the walls of that house. And so, demolition has been held off. But the powers that be at Westmont Prep—the board of trustees and those with money tied to the school's success—long for the day the house will meet a wrecking ball. It's a nasty scar on the school's history, and the best way for it to fade is for the house to come down. For now, though, it stands. And I plan to find my way to it.*

*Today, however, I decide to leave my question unanswered rather than press Dr. Hanover on the issue and risk ending the tour. I knew I wouldn't be seeing the abandoned boarding house today, but Gorman's duplex had been promised. And now we are upon it. We approach the faculty housing—a long stretch of connected homes called Teacher's Row. It was here, in number fourteen, that Gorman lived during his eight-year tenure at Westmont Prep. An exemplary teacher of chemistry, he had only the highest marks of accomplishment and praise on his performance reviews. Reviews that, since the night of June twenty-first, have come under scrutiny.*

*We pull up to number fourteen. It's a small, efficient duplex made from burgundy brick and overflowing mortar. Narrow walkways cut between adjacent buildings and are lined by dogwoods and hydrangeas. Dual entrances are present out front, one for number fourteen, the other for fifteen. These are pleasant homes, comfortable faculty housing. It's hard to believe such a monster lived here.*

*The keys rattle as the dean unlocks the front door to number fourteen. We enter to an empty house but for bits of furniture that have sat unused for the past year. Dr. Hanover leads me through the front room, the kitchen, and a single bedroom. As we pass the small den, Dr. Hanover's phone rings. She excuses herself, stepping outside to take the call. Suddenly I'm alone in Charles Gorman's home. It's unnervingly quiet. There is something ominous about being here by myself, and I realize that there is a likely reason this unit has not been reassigned, and likely never will be. It has sat empty for more than a year because Gorman lived a secret life inside the walls of this home, and any faculty member who dared to take this place as their own would be walking in a killer's footsteps and dealing with the spirits of the students he killed. Spirits that surely roam this empty house looking for closure and answers.*

*I feel them now. I'm looking for the same things they are. But I shake the chill from my neck. I know I don't have much time. I also know better than to do what I'm contemplating, but my instincts as an investigative reporter are untamed. I walk quickly into the small office. The room is empty. Depression marks on the carpeting show me where a desk once stood in the middle of the room. It is likely the place where Gorman sat when he wrote his manifesto. All that remains in the room now is an empty bookshelf, a chair crooked from the loss of a wheel, and a portrait of the periodic table hanging on the wall. I know what's behind it.*

*I take a quick glance to make sure Dr. Hanover is still outside. Then I remove the periodic table. Behind it is a safe sunk into the plaster. It was here that detectives discovered Gorman's manifesto.*

*I turned the handle on the safe and pull open the door.*

*“Close that right now.”*

*Dr. Hanover’s voice is neither loud nor panicked. It’s just direct and firm. I turn from the safe. She’s standing in the doorway, and I know I’ve been made.*

Eerie music chimed from her phone and pulled Ryder back to the present, and away from Charles Gorman’s house, where Mack Carter had brought her with his alluring voice and vivid descriptions. The music quieted, and she heard Mack Carter’s voice again.

*On the next episode of The Suicide House, more on my discovery inside Charles Gorman’s duplex. You won’t want to miss it. Until then . . . I’m Mack Carter.*

## CHAPTER 3

**A**N ADVERTISEMENT BLARED FROM HER PHONE, AND RYDER TAPPED the screen in frustration to quiet it. She nearly threw the phone across the room. Mack Carter hadn't discovered a goddamn thing in that safe, and Ryder didn't need to wait for the next episode to hear him say it. It was a cheap bait and switch, an embarrassing self-promotion of his abilities as an investigative journalist. Anyone who knew anything at all about the Westmont Prep Killings knew that detectives had discovered Gorman's manifesto in the wall safe. There was nothing groundbreaking about Mack Carter's discovery, yet Ryder was sure that uninformed podcast listeners would be drooling with the idea that Mack had been caught red-handed just as he was about to break the case wide open with the contents of Gorman's safe. She knew *The Suicide House* website would be overrun with traffic as podcast listeners breathlessly scrolled through the pages to see the photos of the Westmont Prep campus and Charles Gorman's duplex and to view the cell phone pictures Mack Carter had snapped of the wall safe.

Ryder's blog and YouTube channel had much of this information just after the killings. She had obtained the images from newspaper clippings and public records of campus and Teacher's Row. She had even managed to find a picture of the front of Gorman's home roped off by yellow crime scene tape the day after the killings, which had been posted to a student's social media account before being taken down. But Mack Carter's stunt, whispering as he pulled the

wall hanging from its hook and hyperventilating as he described the safe behind it, was sure to bring huge numbers to the podcast. She was angry with herself for falling for it, for being as interested as everyone else. She cursed as she scrolled through Mack's website now, having taken the bait like so many others. The message board was already inundated with threads discussing Mack's findings—theories about Theo Compton's cryptic suggestion that Charles Gorman was innocent and about what Mack might have found inside Gorman's safe.

"It's friggin' empty, you know-nothings!" Ryder shouted at her computer. "Why would evidence still be present at a crime scene a year after the fact?"

After thirty minutes of reading the threads, Ryder could take no more. She was about to click over to her own blog to post some sort of update telling her followers that she was still the fearless, real crusader looking for the truth behind the Westmont Prep Killings and that her fans should not abandon her for such a transparent fraud of a podcast. But before she clicked off Mack Carter's site, she saw a video playing on a loop in the comments section. She recognized the footage immediately because she had shot it. It was from when she had snuck through the woods behind Westmont Prep a couple of weeks after the killings and captured shaky video of the boarding house. It had been difficult footage to obtain, since back then the area was still roped off with crime scene tape and the police were interested in keeping prying eyes away from the place. Under the video was a short cryptic comment:

MC, 13:3:5 Tonight. I'll tell you the truth. Then, whatever happens, happens. I'm ready for the consequences.

Ryder saw that the comment, which was meant for Mack Carter, had been posted at 10:55 P.M. Thirty minutes ago.

She grabbed her car keys and dialed her phone as she ran out of the house.

## CHAPTER 4

*H* E SLOWED HIS CAR AS HE PASSED MILE MARKER THIRTEEN AND THEN hit the reset button to bring his odometer to triple zero. He continued at a reduced speed as he watched the odometer click up from nothing. All the survivors knew the numbers: 13:3:5. It was how this whole thing had started. How different things would be had they never heard those numbers, had they never been lured to this place by the promise of adventure and acceptance. But the past could not be changed. He could control only the present in hopes of altering the future.

When the number three spun up on the odometer, indicating that he'd driven a third of a mile beyond mile marker thirteen, he pulled over, parked his car on the gravel shoulder, and turned off the headlights. The dark night swallowed the vehicle. He was invisible and wished he could stay that way. He wished he could don a cloak and hide from the world. From his thoughts. From his memories. From his sins and from his guilt. But he knew it wasn't that easy. If it were as simple as disappearing, he'd have long ago left this place and all its ghosts behind. How nice it would be to start over somewhere else, maybe at a different school, where he could return to being his old self and leave the past behind. But the demons had hold of him, and running would not cause them to release their grip. Had there been enough miles on this earth to outrun that night, the others would have run and run and run. Instead, they came here.

He opened his car door and stepped out from the driver's seat.

Walking into the middle of the two-lane road, he looked up into the night sky. Heavy cloud cover had delivered a gray and dismal day, and the coming storm tainted the air with the pungent odor of humidity. The clouds erased the stars, reminding him that he was truly alone in this endeavor. Not even the heavens could look down on him tonight.

The quiet of night filled his ears, but he wished for the roar of an eighteen-wheeler, its tires screaming over the pavement as it approached. How much easier would it be to simply stare into the headlights? He could close his eyes and it would all be over. Not for the first time he wondered if the consequences that waited in the afterlife were less than those here on Earth.

Finally, he walked from the road and started his journey. Leaving the door wide open, he walked past the front of his car and into the woods. *Thirteen, three, five.* Mile thirteen, a third of a mile farther, and a half-mile hike through the woods. The path was easy to spot, but the trail through the woods was overgrown since his last trek on it. That had been the previous summer, on the night of the slaughter, and so much had happened since then that he barely recognized his life. He covered the half-mile stretch in ten minutes and came to the edge of the wooded path where a chain—rusted and corroded—drooped between two posts. A moss-covered placard read PRIVATE PROPERTY and was a feeble last attempt to keep trespassers away.

He walked past the sign, and then the infamous boarding house was in front of him. Before that terrible night had plagued their lives, he and his classmates had come here often. Every weekend. Their use of the abandoned building had kept it alive back then. But now, after a year of absolute vacancy, the house was dying. Not like the massacre that took place here, where mortality came quickly and unexpectedly. No, the house was experiencing a slower death. One day at a time. The bricks were crumbling, and the cedar around the doors and windows was warped. The eaves had rotted, and gutters poked like hangnails from the roofline. The place looked ghostly in the dark of night, with frayed yellow crime scene tape still secured to the gate and flapping in the night breeze. He hadn't been back since that night. When he and the others had

come to show the police what, exactly, had transpired. As much as they were willing to tell, anyway.

He stepped into the clearing and walked toward the house. Its wrought iron gate was like a moat surrounding a castle. Rusted and decrepit, the hinges whined into the night when he pushed the gate open, the bottom of the tines clawing half circles into the mud. His mind flashed back to what this gate had looked like the night of the killings. He blinked his eyes, but the image stayed firm in his vision.

His thoughts stuck on the images of that night—blood and gore. He thought of the secrets they had kept, the things they had hidden. His mind became dizzy with it all until the rumble of the freight train pulled him back to the present. He shook his head to gain his bearings, then hurried along the side of the house to where the path bent and led to the tracks. The decisions they all had made that night brought him to this spot—the same spot where Mr. Gorman had come—and it was here that the rest of his existence would start. It was here that he would face down his demons and finally be free.

The train's whistle filled the night as the locomotive approached. Together with the thundering of the train cars on the rails, he could hear nothing else. As he waited next to the tracks, he sunk his hands into his pockets and grasped the item that was there. Like a child sucking on a pacifier, the feel of it between his fingertips provided a calming sensation. It always had.

As the train approached, with its headlamp like a beacon in the night, he didn't attempt to shield his ears from the thunderous roar. He wanted to hear the train. He wanted to feel it, and smell it, and taste it. He wanted the train to carry his demons away.

He closed his eyes. The thunder was deafening.



## CHAPTER 5

**M**ACK CARTER SAT IN HIS RENTED HOUSE IN PEPPERMILL, INDIANA; popped open a beer; and read through his notes one last time. He took a sip to wet his throat, adjusted his noise-cancelling headphones, pulled the microphone close to his lips, and spoke.

“The Westmont Prep Killings left the nation saddened and stunned that such a terrible tragedy could take place inside the protected sanctuary of a private boarding school. So far we’ve taken a look at some of the details of that fateful night. During the next episode, we will learn more about the two students who were killed, and we will take a deep dive into the dangerous game they were playing. To do this, we will take a closer look at what life was like inside this elite boarding school, and we will examine the teenagers that made up the student body. As always, I hope to stumble over something new along the way. Something no one else has discovered, a secret many of us believe is still hidden inside the walls of Westmont Prep. I’m Mack Carter, and *this . . . is The Suicide House.*”

Mack tapped the laptop’s touch screen to stop recording. He played the promo back as he finished his beer, tweaking segments of it and working on the timing of the delivery and the cadence of his voice. When he was satisfied, he e-mailed the intro to his producer. Already, his was the most downloaded podcast of the season. The Westmont Prep case was wildly popular within the true-crime community, and the story still had legs in the mainstream media.

His network, where his popular nightly newsmagazine show ran five nights a week, was backing the production, and the huge sponsorship deals they had signed were a good predictor of success. *The Suicide House* was the next big thing.

He spent an hour in the small recording studio his network had built in the rental house in Peppermill. On the computer in front of him were all the recordings he had created over the past week. His producer had cleaned them up and trimmed them down, and now they waited for Mack's review and approval before his team would start organizing them into a coherent episode. Many of the sound bites were red-flagged, indicating additional voice-over work was needed from Mack.

He popped another beer and worked steadily until eleven-thirty P.M., when his phone rang. He didn't recognize the number, but he'd been getting many random calls since his arrival in Peppermill. Most of his interviews to this point had been conducted over his phone, which was fastened with a recording device that captured not only Mack's voice but the caller's as well. When played back on the podcast, the audio was surprisingly clear. He activated the recorder as he answered the call.

"Mack Carter."

"It's Ryder Hillier."

Mack closed his eyes. He almost stopped recording. Ryder Hillier was a true-crime journalist who ran a popular blog that hosted forums and chat rooms where other nuts shared conspiracy theories about all sorts of cases from around the country—from missing persons to homicides. The Westmont Prep Killings had been one of Ryder's most popular cases. She had researched and written about it extensively over the past year, and she'd been reaching out to Mack since word broke about him hosting the podcast.

"Listen, Ryder, I don't have time right now."

"Have you been reading the threads on your website?"

"I'm right in the middle of something, Ryder."

"Of course not. You probably have a slew of assistants who do that for you. I bet you've never even looked at the comments you ask your listeners to make. But there's one you should know about. Do the numbers thirteen-three-five mean anything to you?"

“Thirteen, three, what?”

“Shit,” Ryder said in an annoyed voice saturated with condescension. “You really are clueless. And you’re the one with the hottest podcast since *Serial*.”

“Ryder, if you get ahold of my producer tomorrow, she can set up—”

“You better get out there. Like, right now. I’m on my way as we speak.”

“Out where?”

“Thirteen-three-five.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“Bring your recording equipment. Take Route 77 south. Once you see mile marker thirteen, go another third of a mile. That’s the thirteen and the three. We’ll handle the five when you get there. But I’m only waiting twenty minutes, then I’m heading in by myself.”

“Heading *where*?”

“To the boarding house. Better hurry or you’ll miss me.”

The call ended abruptly, and Mack stared at his phone. Then he clipped his microphone to his collar, tapped it to confirm it was working, and ran out the door.

## CHAPTER 6

**M**ACK TALKED AS HE DROVE. HIS HEADLIGHTS BROUGHT ROUTE 77 to life in the otherwise dark night. The country roads on the outskirts of Peppermill were pitch black, and listeners would detect urgency in Mack's voice when this segment of the podcast aired.

"I'm driving on Route 77," Mack said into the microphone on his collar. "It's almost midnight, and the road is dark and empty. A comment was left on the website message board about an hour ago asking me to come to a place called *Thirteen-three-five*, so that's where I'm headed."

The entrance to Westmont Prep High School was located on Champion Boulevard, and Mack knew from studying maps of the property that the campus expanded all the way back to Route 77. Maps had been posted on *The Suicide House* website to give fans an aerial view of the woods and the house where the murders took place. A half-mile-wide belt of forest separated the house from Route 77. Mack did his best to explain this as he drove, but his anxiety made him jumble his words. His producer would have to clean up his description, and he'd have some voice-over work to do if any portion of tonight's journey ended up on the podcast.

He watched the mile markers and announced each one that he passed.

"I see the green mile marker up ahead. It's pitch black out here, so I'm slowing down as I approach. I'm looking at mile marker thir-

teen. I was told to drive another third of a mile, so I'm watching my odometer as I do this."

A minute of silence followed as Mack ticked off the mileage. He noticed that, for the first time during the production of this podcast, he was nervous. He swallowed hard when the situation materialized in front of him and his headlights caught more and more of the scene.

"Okay," he said into his microphone. His mouth was parched from the sudden release of adrenaline. "Something's in the road up ahead. I'm just about a third of a mile past the marker, and there's a car parked on the shoulder. It looks like a sedan. The headlights are off, and the driver's side door is open. I'm pulling behind the car now, and my headlights are brightening the interior. No one appears to be inside."

Mack put his car into park and looked around. He spotted Ryder Hillier off to the side of Route 77, in the shallow gully between the shoulder and the woods. She was waving the flashlight of her cell phone for Mack to join her.

After climbing out of his car, Mack walked to the abandoned vehicle in front of him. He looked inside. "So, this car is located exactly one-third of a mile past mile marker thirteen. There's no sign of anyone inside the car. It looks abandoned."

Mack walked down the embankment and over to Ryder.

"What the hell are we doing out here?"

"You recording?"

Mack nodded.

"Good. So am I." She held up her phone. "Come on."

"Is that your car?"

"No."

"Whose is it?"

"Let's find out," Ryder said. She disappeared onto the path that led into the dark woods.

Before the flashlight from Ryder's cell phone was completely gone, Mack hustled after her.

"Ryder, tell me what's going on. Where are we going?"

"Half a mile farther on this path," Ryder said. "Thirteen, three,

five. I can't believe you're doing a podcast about the Westmont Prep Killings and you don't know what those numbers mean."

After half a mile, they came to a chain-link fence that had been sheared by bolt cutters and curled out of the way to allow access to a dirt path. They both ducked through. Not far past the fence, the path ended at the edge of the forest. A rusty chain sagged between two posts and dangled a PRIVATE PROPERTY sign. When they made it that far, Mack Carter was staring at the shadowy structure where fourteen months earlier the Westmont Prep students had been slaughtered.

"So," Mack said into his microphone as he collected himself. His voice trembled. "I've walked about a half mile into the woods and now, as the trees end, a path leads to the wrought iron gate that surrounds the abandoned house on the edge of the Westmont Prep campus. This is the house—"

A thunderous rumble seemed to bubble up from the earth as he spoke, shaking the ground beneath him. Then a deafening whistle.

"The train!" Ryder said as she took off toward the house.

Mack hesitated only a second before he chased her. They followed the path around to the back of the house and then cut to the right as the trail led through a brief thicket of woods and ended at train tracks. The train was already thundering past when they arrived. Ryder held her phone in front of her as she videoed the passing cars, some of which were decorated with graffiti but moving too fast to decipher. It took three minutes before the rattling finally ended as the last car passed, leaving the night assaulted but quiet.

Ryder pointed. "Holy shit."

Mack followed the direction of her finger across the tracks. There, on the other side, was a body lying in a heap. Ryder stepped onto the tracks and crossed. Mack took a quick glance in each direction and saw only the parallel rails as far as the night would allow. Then he stepped to the other side. When he approached the body, Mack followed the glow of Ryder Hillier's cell phone as she recorded the finding. Under the glow of the light, Mack saw limbs at grotesque angles and the head bent to the shoulder, surely broken and unfixable. One leg was trapped under the body, the other bent like a hockey stick at the knee. Both arms were tucked close to

the torso with hands sunk in the pockets of his jacket. Mack's stomach roiled and he was tempted to look away, but something about the face drew Mack in. He slowly crouched down to get a better look. Through the blood and gore and the disfigured appendages, he recognized Theo Compton.





PART II

August 2020



## CHAPTER 7

*D*R. LANE PHILLIPS SAT IN THE BACK SEAT AS THE CAB PULLED DOWN Michigan Avenue. He paged through his notes to bring himself up to date on the Westmont Prep Killings from the previous year. He had become lost in the pages and didn't hear the cabbie until the Plexiglas partition rattled with knocking.

"Here," the cabbie said.

Lane looked up from his notes. The cab driver stared at him in the rearview mirror and pointed out the passenger window. "We're here."

Lane noticed the lobby of NBC Tower on Chicago's Near North Side. He blinked his eyes a few times to come back from the pages that had set him in Peppermill, Indiana, and the gruesome killings that had taken place there.

"Sorry," he said as he closed his folder and handed his fare to the driver.

It was nine on a Tuesday morning, and Columbus Avenue was congested with foot traffic when he stood from the cab and looked up at NBC Tower. Lane Phillips was a forensic psychologist and criminal profiler. His best-selling true-crime book profiling the most notorious serial killers of the past fifty years—many of whom Lane had personally interviewed—had sold more than two million copies in its first year of release. The total was closer to seven million today, and the book showed little sign of slowing down. It was the go-to manual for anyone interested in the most heinous killers

this world had to offer. Lane was a consultant for numerous crime shows, and his frequent television appearances, radio interviews, and op-eds kept him in the public eye. He was good in front of a camera, which made him a sought-after guest on both cable news and the morning programs whenever high-profile cases made it into the news cycle.

A few years back, a North Carolina girl name Megan McDonald had gone missing for two weeks before miraculously escaping her abductor. In the aftermath, it was Lane Phillips whom the networks called to explain what the girl must have been going through as a survivor of abduction. A famed profiler, Lane was contacted by the FBI when Megan's abduction was linked to the disappearances of other women so that Lane would create a profile of the man who might have taken them.

All of Dr. Phillips's talents, and the many opportunities they produced, required a talent agent to manage the offers that came to him. As Lane walked from the cab, Dwight Corey waited on the sidewalk outside of NBC Tower. Lane spotted him immediately. Even on the swarming streets of Chicago, which were populated by every category of businessperson, Dwight stood out in a crowd. He was a six-five black man who wore custom Armani suits when Lane joined him for Saturday afternoon lunch meetings. *Casual* for Dwight Corey meant that the crisply starched shirt he wore under his impeccably tailored jacket was without a tie. Today, though, for this meeting, Dwight sported a sharp green tie with a beige Armani suit. The French cuff sleeves of his shirt protruded perfectly and were highlighted by gold cuff links. His shoes carried some sort of glow that caused Lane to squint.

Lane, on the other hand, gave off an entirely different aura. He wore dark jeans and a sport coat over an opened-neck oxford shirt. His shoes were comfortable and scuffed, and his hair was a mess of wavy locks that he controlled with an opened-palm swipe from front to back whenever the long strands fell into his face. He had carried this look when he was a poor PhD student hopping from one prison to another interviewing convicted killers, and despite a successful and prominent career, it had never varied.

Lane extended his hand as he approached.

"It's been too long," Lane said.

"Good to see you, friend."

Lane pointed at Dwight's shoes. "You have batteries in those things?"

Dwight smiled. "A little style might do you well. But don't worry, this new gig doesn't include anyone looking at your ugly mug, or your terribly out-of-date sport jacket. I'll only be subjecting the audience to your voice."

"This thing about the Westmont Prep Killings? It's not for television?"

"No. But it's the hottest thing going at the moment."

"I thought you said Mack Carter was involved."

"He is. And he wants you badly."

"How badly?"

Dwight slapped Lane on the back and looked at his watch. "Let's go find out."

## CHAPTER 8

**T**HEY SAT ACROSS FROM EACH OTHER AT A COFFEE SHOP IN THE LOBBY of NBC headquarters. Lane poured a second sugar into his coffee.

“Sugar is one of our greatest carcinogens,” Dwight said. “Probably as bad as the tar in cigarettes, yet we ingest it every day. No lawsuits. No legislation. Just a happy bunch of zombies sucking on pixie sticks and dying of cancer.”

Lane paused in mid-pour and looked up with mouth open and a confused expression on his face.

“No,” Dwight said. “Don’t stop now, you’ve already poisoned it. You can’t undo it, and I’m not buying you another one.”

“And you wonder why we don’t have face-to-face meetings as often as we used to.” After a brief pause, Lane finished emptying the sugar packet into his coffee. “The last time we went to dinner, you lectured me about my porterhouse.”

“It wasn’t a lecture, I just pointed out where the meat came from and how it was harvested. Most folks don’t know.”

“And I was very happy in my ignorance.” Lane took a sip of his coffee. “Ah, now that’s damn good.”

“It’s like drinking hemlock.”

Lane ran his hand through his hair. “I hope I live long enough to hear this offer. Tell me about it.”

“Do you listen to podcasts?”

“Podcasts? Yeah, I listened to one about bass fishing before I headed down to Florida last year. It didn’t help.”

“Well, they’re big and popular at the moment. Radio, through the podcast medium, is making a comeback. It’s a similar phenomenon to what’s happening in television. Fewer people are watching broadcast television, but more people are streaming content. Radio is following the same path. No one listens to the radio anymore, but everyone is downloading podcasts. From politics to Zen parenting, there’s something for everyone within the ether of podcasting. But one specific genre in particular is generating huge audiences—true-crime. Right up your alley. Most of these podcasts simply rehash old crimes, attempting to retell the stories in a unique way. A few of them attract big advertisers and make legitimate income. But the podcasts that make it big, well, they never die. They run again and again as new listeners discover them. Years later, listeners can download old episodes. The podcast resells their product to other advertisers, over and over again. If you’re lucky enough to get a piece of the revenue, it could provide income for years.”

Lane raised his eyebrows. “You want me to do a podcast?”

Dwight held up a finger. “Not *any* podcast. The biggest one out there. NBC is producing it, and it’s already generated a massive audience after just four episodes.”

Lane held up the folder he had been reading in the cab. “The Westmont Prep Killings?”

“Correct.”

“Is this about the video of that kid who jumped in front of the train?”

“Theo Compton, yes.”

“Isn’t the guy who uploaded that video to YouTube being sued by the kid’s parents?”

“It’s not a guy, it’s a woman. A journalist named Ryder Hillier. And yes, she’s being sued by the family. YouTube banned the video, and now the footage is hard to find because it’s so heavily restricted and scrubbed from the Internet. It’s a perfect storm. An illicit video, a mysterious suicide, and a lawsuit. All tied to a huge, well-known murder case. Very bizarre, with a splash of gore and mystery. Everything true-crime fanatics salivate over. NBC has this podcast lined up to be the next big thing, including the investigator.”

“Ah, this is where Mack Carter comes in.”

“Correct. It’s ingenious. Mack is on hiatus from his nightly television show, specifically for the podcast. His absence from television gives the podcast more urgency. When his eight million nightly viewers see that he’s missing from the show and learn that he’s preoccupied with an important assignment, they’re naturally curious to know what the assignment is. People who have never listened to a podcast are starting to download it.”

Mack Carter was the host of *Events*, the most popular news-magazine show on television. Millions tuned in each night to watch Mack investigate everything from the JonBenét Ramsey case to the secrets of escaping from a submerged car. The tragic death of a family of four who drowned when their car veered into a retention pond prompted the live event when Mack drove a car into a swimming pool and then showed the world the best way to emerge alive. It was one of his most watched episodes and put Mack Carter on the map.

“And now,” Dwight said, “in addition to a big case and a big host, they’ve got a big mystery. That’s where you come in. The YouTube video of that kid who jumped in front of the train? He was the third Westmont Prep student who survived the attack to go back to that house and kill himself on the tracks. Two girls, one guy. They all jumped in front of that freight train. The same train Charles Gorman—the teacher who was accused of killing the kids—jumped in front of as the police were getting ready to arrest him.”

“Jesus Christ.”

“The suicides have been a well-kept secret. Local law enforcement wanted to keep them quiet, but thanks to that video and Mack Carter’s podcast, they’re a secret no more. Mack is promising to get to the bottom of the mystery, and ratings are through the roof.”

“And my role?”

“NBC wants you, as a forensic psychologist, to figure out why, one by one, every student who survived that night is going back to that house to kill themselves.”

Lane leaned back in his chair, staring up at the ceiling of the café. His mind was already creating a profile of the type of person who would return to a place of such trauma to end their own life.



He finally looked back to Dwight. “From what I read about this case, Gorman jumped in front of that train but wasn’t successful at ending his life.”

“No, he wasn’t,” Dwight said. “The train threw him twenty yards into the woods. The guy’s half a vegetable now, sitting in a secure psychiatric hospital wearing diapers and being spoon-fed. The three students who have actually succeeded at killing themselves have all used the exact spot Gorman attempted suicide. It’s located right next to the abandoned boarding house. And that’s where you come in. Mack Carter needs to tell his listeners why this is happening.”

Lane shook his head, trying to take it all in.

“Podcasts are suddenly sounding pretty good to you, aren’t they?”

Dwight’s shiny gold watch beeped. He looked at it and then pointed to Lane’s coffee cup.

“They’re waiting upstairs. Bring your poison with. It’s show-time.”