



Harken

KALEB NATION

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1

THE MIDNIGHT CLIENT

There are some places in the world so empty you could scream and hear your voice echo a hundred times, like an entire village crying out at once. Almost everywhere else in Los Angeles, even in the vacant hours before dawn, there are distant rumblings of cars over concrete bridges, jets from LAX screaming over shingled apartments, a nearby husband and wife arguing in Spanish over the credit card bill.

But not where I waited. The deserted street was long forgotten by municipal workers, its pavement speckled with potholes and gleaming lines of tar left behind from shoddy repairs. Even the grass barely swayed as the soundless wind crept through the ends of my hair like fingers. You never notice the crickets until their hum has died.

I stood on a thin strip of gravel beside the road, surrounded on all sides by trees and boulders tall enough to block my sight of the San Fernando Valley of California. The glow from a single streetlamp a few paces away was only bright enough to stroke my face and the body of my silver BMW, its usually-sparkling paint now dusty from our drive up the hills. I sniffed with wry amusement. That's the terrible truth about nice cars: you might pay a fortune, but you still drive the same dirty roads as everyone else. Funny how roads are the great equalizer.

I leaned my back against its door, checking the time on my phone then glancing down the street in both directions. The client had told me midnight; he was ten minutes late. Every second I was gone was another chance my mom might get up and do a check through my door, or my little sister might have a nightmare and run into my room for consolation.

Rule Two: No clients on school nights, I could hear my mom's voice saying.

For a hundred and twenty dollars an hour, I think it's worth the risk, I'd murmur back. That came out to two dollars a minute. She'd just grin and remind me of Rule Three: if I was caught, all the money I made that night and from my next two clients would go to my sister's college fund.

For the risk, I added a surcharge.

Finally, I saw blue-tinged headlights appear around the bend of a hill in the distance. I grumbled and stood straighter, hoping it was really the client and not just a random local out for a joyride. I always had late-night clients meet me here, where I could get a good look at them as they approached. Tardy clients made me suspicious. A few extra minutes were easily enough time to check a soundproof basement's padlocks, mix up more chloroform, and test the sharpness of some butcher knives.

But again, I couldn't complain: tardiness brought another surcharge.

The car inched to a park behind mine but the windows were too tinted for me to see who was inside, its lights nearly blinding me. It was regal and as silver as the moon above us, fresh-from-the-factory and polished on every beveled edge—the three-pronged Maserati emblem on its front like a miniature trident. A *GranTurismo*. Wealthy clients were not uncommon in my line of work but I still had trouble acting unimpressed. I opened my hands in greeting as the driver's door opened and my client stepped out.

"Mr. Sharpe?" I said, finally getting my first look at his face: a nearly square chin, tanned complexion, blonde hair cropped short with the stubble of a matching beard. Even in the faint glow his eyes narrowed toward me like scalpels. This wasn't out of the ordinary either. My new clients were usually startled when they saw I was only sixteen.

"Michael Asher?" he checked, a hand still holding on to his door. I nodded.

“One and only, at your service,” I replied. “At least, for the next fifty minutes. Our contract *does* stipulate your hour started at midnight, I’m afraid, and it’s...”

I pulled my phone out to find the time but Mr. Sharpe cut me off, slamming his door and locking it with the remote. He glanced up and down the road, which had resumed its deathly state, and approached me with his hands in the pockets of his jacket.

“Where’s the target?” I asked.

“*My wife* is down the road a bit,” he said with sharp correction. “She’s meeting him over by the lookout I think.”

“Your email said this has been happening all year,” I pointed out. “You could have contacted me earlier and fixed things before it got this bad.” *Lies*, of course—my practiced marketing spiel.

“It’s probably been more than a year,” he replied, brow furrowing. “Likely not even all the same man, knowing how *she* is. Who knows how many she’s—?”

His eyes dropped from mine, suddenly unable to continue what had spiraled into a spitting rant. I shrugged.

“I’d figure at least four or five men by now,” I proposed, which was rather solid math in my client experience. He looked at me with dismay. I was never good at the sympathy part. It was impossible to feel for him, not after being mentally numbed by countless overburdened businessmen all suddenly anxious to keep up with their wives as their marriages crumbled from years of neglect. This was likely the most attention Mr. Sharpe had paid Mrs. Sharpe since their wedding day.

But my job wasn’t to solve his romantic problems. I gestured to my car.

“Climb in,” I told him. “I’ll drive. Just tell me where I can watch from.”

He strolled around stiffly and huffed as he looked over my BMW.

“Work must be good.”

“A lot of people like to know the truth,” I replied. This was why the car was worth the money: it left an impression that I was successful, that I was right, that my gift was true enough for me to be paid well. One good word from a client to his friends and soon I’d have thirty new jobs. Impressions are everything.

Mr. Sharpe sat crammed against the armrest and door with his long legs uncomfortably bent. His clothes were too fancy for

being out on this type of work: a bold jacket over dark slacks, hair trimmed perfectly and skin that showed no flaw. He wore a misty white ring on his right hand that was undecorated except for a single vertical line cut in its center. He could have been a movie star, but I wasn't supposed to ask questions like that.

My headlights divided the night from the road ahead as he pointed for me to turn another corner, going deeper into trees and mountains. As we drove, I crept glances his way, but his eyes told me nothing—he was too determined or distracted to betray himself.

“So you're absolutely certain you can read their thoughts?”

“Not their thoughts,” I reminded him.

“You know what I mean.”

“All I need is a photo,” I replied. “Get me a direct shot, you go up and talk to her, I'll snap my photo and we'll be done. I'll have your answer.”

“Have you ever been wrong?”

“I am always right,” I told him firmly. That ended it. After all, I was Michael Asher: psychic prodigy to the elite, underground celebrity to the celebrities—*the Eye Guy*, some called me. It was why this man, and so many countless people before him, travelled for miles to see me.

Mr. Sharpe squeezed his hands together, glancing at me then back to the road again. We came to a crossing and he pointed left. Minutes ticked by in silence, which was odd to me. Usually when I was dealing with a client who thought his spouse was cheating on him, he would continue to babble and make excuses and eventually start to defend her. He'd proclaim dozens of times that perhaps we should turn around because he was being stupid, only for us to continue driving without pause, because the truth was simply too tempting to ignore.

The trees got thicker and the numbers on the dash clock continued to roll higher. I wondered if we would even make it to this secret rendezvous point before he'd have to start paying for overtime. I really just wanted to get this one done. I could get home and rest before school, and use the cash to pick up the camera lens I'd been eyeing for weeks at the photography shop.

“How old are you again?” he asked. Even though they always wondered, it wasn't the usual type of question from clients—an unwritten rule that the less we knew about each other, the less trouble we would be in if we were caught.

“Five days until I turn seventeen,” I said. “I accept tips for my birthday.”

He gave a low and yet not amused laugh, and I gave up trying to make him lighten up.

“We’re almost there,” he said. “The lights.”

I slowed down and switched the beams off. Darkness enveloped us once again, this time unbroken by anything besides the moonlight. At first it appeared that we had stopped in the middle of a long stretch of road winding up the canyon, but when I followed Mr. Sharpe’s gaze, I saw a thin dirt path leading into the trees on our right.

He nodded toward it.

“They’re down there?” I said.

“No,” he replied. “But we’ll be able to see them. There’s a clear view of the cabin.”

I sighed and considered my car’s underbelly, but in the end left the road. I’d done bizarre things for clients so many times before that this wasn’t strange. I’d once had a teenage girl as a client who was convinced her father wasn’t really biologically related to her, even thinking he’d kidnapped her at birth. She’d led me all the way out of town to grab my photograph when she confronted him at his office, only to find out that yes, he was her father, and no, he was not at all amused by her bizarre accusations.

There was a bump as my tires left the pavement and sank into the loose dirt. The woods glowed with a dim haze. Finally, after the road disappeared entirely from my rear-view mirror, he held a hand up.

“Here,” he whispered. I put the car in park, turned off the engine, and bathed in silence.

We sat still for a minute, just listening for anyone who might have discovered our presence. My eyes scanned the forest. I couldn’t detect any motion or life between the leaves and branches and gnarly trunks. It was a place even deader than the road I’d been on before, and would have been frightening if I hadn’t developed an immense disregard for fear by then.

I grabbed my binoculars and camera from the back seat as Mr. Sharpe pointed out my window. I switched on the night vision so that I could scan the trees in its exposing green hue. *A cabin*, I reminded myself. *That should be easy to find out here.*

But even as I scanned the area, I couldn’t see any building breaking the endless tangle of trees. I pressed the binoculars

harder against my eyes, trying to spot anything unnatural at all, to no avail. All I saw was more brush, tangled even thicker off the path.

“You’re sure it’s this side?” I asked, looking to Mr. Sharpe. He nodded so I tried again. Still nothing. I breathed out with irritation. There wasn’t a building anywhere in those woods, and even if there was, the cabin was far too invisible for me to spot anyone’s eyes. *All I needed was one photo.*

“Why don’t you look?” I proposed, turning to toss the binoculars to Mr. Sharpe. He hadn’t been ready to catch it and the binoculars dropped heavily into his lap.

I opened my mouth to apologize but stopped in that same split second. The moment the falling binoculars surprised Mr. Sharpe, the camouflage that he had so masterfully held over his gaze vanished. I saw *the Glimpse*.

It was gone a half-second later. But that was all I ever needed.

I felt so stupid for not seeing it before.

I’d studied killers, mostly from afar through history textbooks and documentaries. Usually they were nervous, balancing their barely-restrained aggression against the aching of their almost-stifled conscience. But sociopaths had no conscience. In Mr. Sharpe’s eyes, there was no fear for what he was about to do because life meant less to him than a blade of grass.

He unbuckled his seat belt and leaned forward, pretending to study the empty woods—as he’d been doing the entire time. All of it had been an act. There were no lovers in the woods, there was no cabin, and there was no reason for this man to have brought me this far into the middle of nowhere, except for one. I tightened my hands into fists, hoping that this one time, I had read someone wrong.

Unfortunately, I was never wrong.

“I was sure they’d be here,” he said with false lament. “It’s a pity I brought you all the way out.”

Then, with a swift and practiced motion devoid of feeling, Mr. Sharpe jerked his hand from the inside of his jacket, tearing a hidden seam as the handle and blade of a long and thick knife broke free. The knife swung at my shoulder and would have pinned my corpse to my own seat if I hadn’t been ready, sliding down in one swift motion with my head under the steering

wheel, my foot flying up and slamming hard into the man's unsuspecting chest.

Air exploded from his lungs but I wasn't finished, my foot catching the handle of his door and kicking it open. He shouted at me, teeth ground together in rage, ripping his blade from the seat and tearing the cushion and material out in the process. His voice came as a maniacal shriek, striking with the knife but missing within inches of my heart and scraping my arm instead. I shouted at its sting.

"Curse you!" he yelled, turning into a beast of thrashing and stabbing. He swung the knife but in his momentum I kicked him again and he tumbled backward, half inside my car and half on the dirt, his knife still splattered with red.

In a flash of motion, I turned the keys in the ignition and threw all my weight onto the gas pedal, heart racing as the car flew into reverse. With the passenger door still flapping against brush and grass, I rocketed backwards, the murderous gaze of the madman still chasing me through the woods.

My arm burned like a thousand teeth had bitten it, so painful it was like frostbite. Blood ran over the gray material of my seat, its split-open insides an image of what my chest would have been if I'd acted a second too late. And still the man continued to chase me, shouting, clinging the torn bits of his clothes as he ran, diving to reach the passenger door.

I pressed the pedal harder, shaking as my car returned to the road. Its brakes screeched as it whirled around, headlights grazing the trees in all directions. The momentum threw my door to slam shut and I hit the locks as the man burst out of the woods a few steps behind. I scrambled to switch the gears just as he hit the opposite window, pounding the glass with his sweaty face behind it, his hands grabbing for the handle. I shot off, throwing him from his feet again.

Always, always check for weapons, you idiot! I mentally yelled at myself, breathing so fast that I was dizzy, every inch of me trembling with the foreign feeling of terror. I'd had crazy ones before but nothing like this maniac. I shouted again just because it boiled up inside me, trying to hold my arm against my shirt so the blood wouldn't run everywhere.

Mr. Sharpe refused to give up even as I pushed my car to its limits. He appeared in the mirror then fell back into the trees, only to dive back out closer to me again. I cursed at him, sweaty

hands slipping on the steering wheel. I glanced at the speedometer but noticed something else instead.

Holy hell, no... I thought. The gas was nearly on empty. If this car died, so would I.

I checked the mirror but suddenly the man was gone. I hit the steering wheel. This was exactly why I never met clients at my house. I had a website and a special email address for them to reach me, and a screening process to filter out the crazies. Obviously my screening process was in need of improvement.

The car's engine whirred in protest. I checked the mirrors for him again.

In answer, there came a gigantic slam on the roof of my car that threw it swerving into the other lane and left a dent in the ceiling above my head. I wrenched the steering wheel back, sending his legs sliding over the side of my roof. He punched the window glass with the rounded handle of the knife, breaking a hole in it and spraying me with shards of glass.

"Why won't you give up?" I shouted. He reached through the hole to grab me with his free hand as the road and trees sped on behind him. I pushed myself against my door. He swung his hand further, catching the end of my shirt, seizing it and pulling me toward his growling face.

The pull on my arm caused my hand to slip, sending the car flying over the edge of the road and into the grass. My right headlight exploded when I bounced off a tree—the same tree that threw Mr. Sharpe off my car as I careened into the woods.

I couldn't regain control as I sped over sticks and brush, tires rumbling against pointed rocks as the bottom of my car rattled from being beaten. My head bumped the dented ceiling as my feet struggled to find the brakes. I could see a clearing ahead, coming so swiftly that I knew it was the mountain's edge.

Suddenly, there was a pair of trees too close together for me to pass between. My car slammed into one and then the other, shoving me into the airbag from the steering wheel as I came to a stop.

I waved the bag out of my face, breathing heavily and looking up. There was nothing outside my front window except the glittering landscape of the San Fernando Valley, houses and cars and streetlights sprawling for miles. The car had stopped with its front wheels over the cliff's edge, its body sandwiched between a pair of tree trunks and tilting dangerously forward.

Somehow I managed to regain control of myself, diving into the back seat and wrestling the door open. I slid to the ground and crawled away on all fours as the grass and sticks cut my palms and already-bloodied arm.

I collapsed behind a thick bush with my head buried in leaves. Dizzy, breathless... I had to force myself not to pass out as my vision faded in and out of black.

No more than two seconds later, I heard something tearing through the woods, branches being knocked aside like a ferocious animal approaching. The terror brought back my senses. I buried myself deeper in the bushes a moment before Mr. Sharpe appeared from the path my car had created.

His expensive jacket and perfectly styled hair were destroyed, the clothes tattered from thorns and his hair a wild fray above his head. He didn't look like my client anymore, now he looked like a madman.

But the madness had hardly begun. With a leap, Mr. Sharpe suddenly took to the air, flying across the clearing to my car as if he was weightless. He slammed feet-first onto the roof with a shriek of fury, fingers curling open.

Suddenly, ten pointed blades burst from the ends of his fingers like the claws of a lizard. The razors were much larger though—at least six inches long—and they gleamed with silver. He struck the roof of my car so powerfully that his claws speared through the metal, talons aligned exactly where my skull had been moments before.

But they didn't strike anything. I couldn't restrain my gasp, unable to believe my own eyes. Mr. Sharpe heard me and looked up, catching my gaze.

He jerked to stand. Tiny sparks flew where the claw of his thumb scraped my car. But unexpectedly, he slipped when he found that his left arm was still stuck in the metal, the jagged edges drawing deep lines down his arm.

I couldn't move. He seethed and pounded the roof with his other fist, but this only served to upset the already unbalanced vehicle. My car began to tilt forward.

Mr. Sharpe dug his other claws into the roof, clenching his teeth, punching it and leaving more dents in the roof. But it did nothing. No matter how hard he pulled, he was held tight, the split metal of my roof entrapping his arm.

He slipped and lost his balance. With a sudden scraping and crumbling of rocks, my car fell over the edge.

I heard a single crunch of metal against rocks, against skin and bones.

And then silence.

I trembled in the bushes, still too terrified to move, the grass shaking against me. When he didn't reappear, I managed to stand, breathing in gasps as I stumbled to the edge.

My car—my beautiful, gleaming BMW, whose mere down payment had taken me months to afford—was not far below, upside-down with its now-beaten underside showing. It had fallen against a tall part of the mountainous rocks, spiked in the middle so abruptly that it had been smashed almost flat.

It was between this rock and my car that I saw what was left of Mr. Sharpe: two feet, one arm still stuck in my roof, and his other hand sprawled open in death's weakness, its silver claws gleaming like daggers in the moonlight.



KALEB NATION is a producer and Internet personality. With the help of an online army known as the *Nationeers*, his writing and videos have been seen over 50 million times. A black belt in taekwondo, Kaleb lives in California with a cantankerous chinchilla named Chilla.

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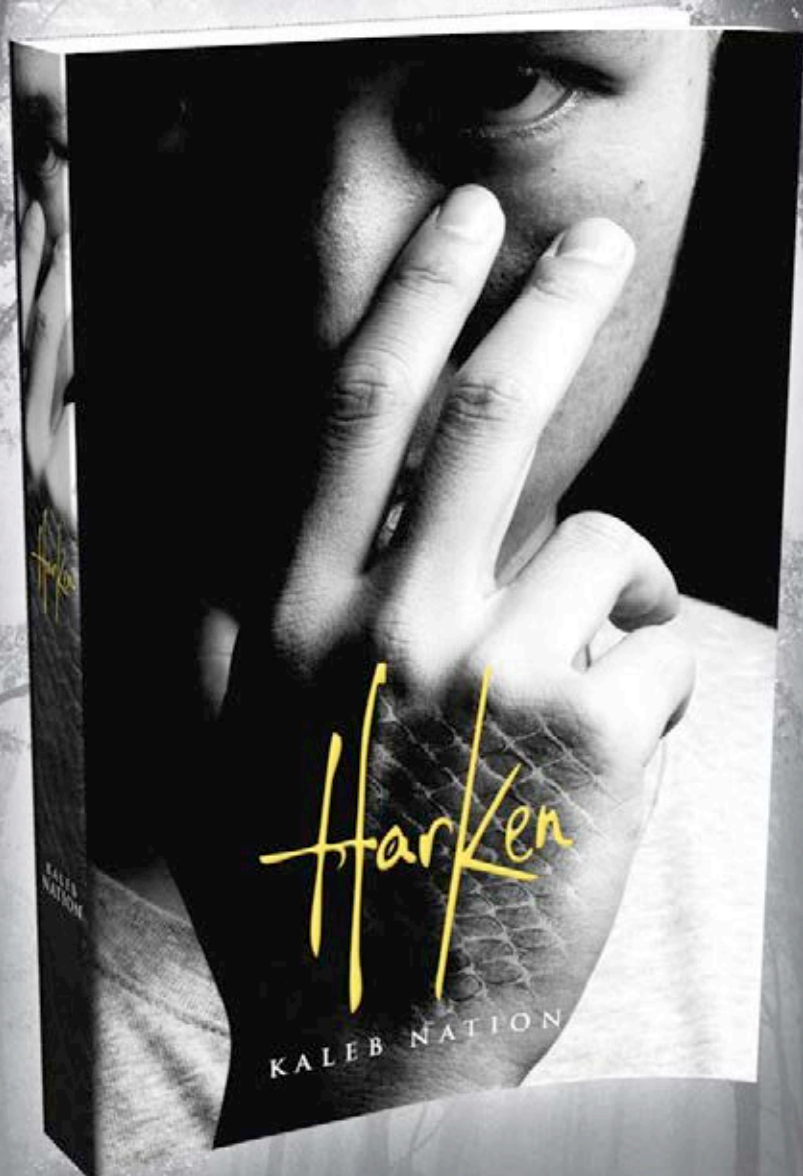
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