A Perfect Evil

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Extract

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Five miles outside Platte City, Nebraska
Friday, October 24

Nick Morrelli wished the woman beneath him wore less makeup. He listened to her soft moans—purrs really. Like a cat, she slithered against him, rubbing her silky thighs up and down the sides of his torso. She was more than ready for him. And yet, all he could think about was the blue powder smeared on her eyelids. Even with the lights out, it remained etched in his mind like fluorescent, glow-in-the-dark paint.

"Oh, baby, your body is so hard," she purred in his ear as she ran her long fingernails up his arms and over his back.

He slid off her before she discovered that not all of his body was hard. What was wrong with him? He licked her earlobe and nuzzled her neck, then moved down to where he really wanted to be. Instinctively, his mouth found one of her breasts. He ravished it with soft, wet kisses. He loved those sounds a woman made—the short little gasp, then the low moan. He waited for them, then wrapped his tongue around her nipple and sucked it into his mouth. Her back arched, and she quivered. Normally, that reaction alone would immediately give him an erection. Tonight, nothing.

Jesus, was he losing his touch? No, he was too young to be having this problem. After all, he was four years away from forty.

"Ooh, lover, don't stop!"

He didn't even realize he *had* stopped.

He began the descent down her body, devouring her with kisses and nibbles. Her body squirmed beneath his touch. She was writhing and gasping for breath even before his teeth tugged at her lace panties. He kissed his way to the inside of her thighs. Suddenly, a sound stopped him. He strained to hear from under the bedcovers.

"No, please don't stop," she groaned, pulling him back into her.

There it was again. Pounding. Someone was at the front door.

"I'll be right back." Nick stumbled out of bed. He pulled on jeans as he checked the clock on the nightstand—10:36 p.m.

When he opened the door, Nick recognized Hank Ashford's son, though he couldn't recall his name. The boy was sixteen or seventeen, a linebacker on the football team.

"Sheriff Morrelli, you have to come…on Old Church Road…please, you have to…"

"Is someone hurt?" The crisp night air stung Nick's bare skin. It felt good.

"No, it's not…he's not hurt… Oh, God, Sheriff, it's awful." The boy looked back toward his car. It was only then that Nick saw the girl in the front seat. He could see she was crying.

"What's going on?"

"In the tall grass…we found…we found a body."

"Hang on a minute."

"Nick, what is it?"

The voice from the top of the stairs startled him. He had forgotten about Angie.

"I've got to check something out."

"Is someone hurt?"

"I don't know."

"Did someone find the Alverez boy?" she asked.

The boy had been missing since Sunday, gone, taken before he began his newspaper route.

"No, I don't think so," Nick told her. Even the FBI was certain the boy had more than likely been taken by his father, who they were still trying to locate. It was a simple custody battle.

"I might be a while, but you're welcome to stay."



Old Church Road was filled with ruts from the rains of the week before. The gravel popped against the Jeep as Nick weaved from side to side, avoiding the deep gashes in the road.

"What exactly were you two doing out on this washboard?" As soon as he said it, he realized the obvious. He didn't need to be seventeen to remember all the benefits of an old deserted gravel road. "Never mind," he added before either of them had time to answer. "Just tell me where I'm going."

"It's about another mile, just past the bridge. There's a pasture road that runs along the river."

Nick slowed down as the Jeep bumped across the wood-slatted bridge. He found the pasture road even before Ashford pointed it out.

"All the way down to the trees?" Nick glanced at Ashford, who nodded and stared straight ahead. As they approached the shelterbelt, the girl, who sat between them, hid her face in the boy's sweatshirt.

Nick stopped, killed the engine, but left on the headlights. He reached across the two of them and pulled a flashlight from the glove compartment.

"That door sticks," he said to Ashford. He watched the two exchange a glance. Neither made any attempt to leave the Jeep.

"You never said we'd have to look at it again," the girl whispered to Ashford as she clung to his arm.

Nick stood outside the Jeep, waiting. The boy's eyes met his,

but still he made no motion to leave the Jeep. Instead of insisting, Nick pointed the flashlight toward an area down by the riverbank. Ashford's eyes followed. He hesitated, looked back at Nick and nodded.

The tall grass swished around Nick's knees, camouflaging the mud that sucked at his boots. Jesus, it was dark out. Even the orange moon hid behind a gauze of clouds. Leaves rustled behind him. He spun around and shot a stream of light from tree to tree. Was there movement? There, in the brush? He could have sworn a shadow ducked from the light. Or was it just his imagination?

It was an effort to walk, pulling each foot out and carefully placing it to avoid slipping.

"Damn it," he muttered. "This better be good." He was going to be mad as hell if he found a group of teenagers playing hide-and-seek.

The flashlight caught something glittering in the mud, close to the water. He locked his eyes on the spot and quickened his pace. He was almost there, almost out of the tall grass. Suddenly, he tripped. He lost his balance and crashed down hard, with his elbows breaking his fall. The flashlight flew out of his hand and into the black water, a tunnel of light spiraling to the bottom.

The sucking mud pulled at him as he pushed himself to his hands and knees. A rancid smell clung to him, more than just the stench of the river. The silvery object lay almost within reach, and now he could tell it was a cross-shaped medallion. The chain was broken.

He glanced back to see what had caused his fall. Something solid. But not more than a yard away was a small, white body nestled in the mud and leaves.

Nick scrambled to his feet, his knees weak. The smell was more noticeable now, and it filled the air. He approached the body slowly. Then he saw the boy's slashed throat and mangled chest, the skin ripped open and peeled back. That was when his stomach lurched and his knees caved in.

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