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The Killing Hour

Written by Andrew Gross

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ANDREW GROSS

Killing Hour

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To Alex Jeffrey Gross, his memory and brief life

Is a dream a lie if it don't come true,
or is it something worse . . .
– Bruce Springsteen, 'The River'

Prologue

Sherry Ann Frazier knew she'd seen him somewhere before.

The gaunt, sharply cut edge of his jaw. The narrow, dimly lit eyes, staring back at her. The probing intensity of his crooked smile.

Maybe on a trip somewhere, or at an airport. You know how you pass by someone you might never see again and yet their face is permanently implanted in your mind. Or maybe she'd seen him at her shop. People were always coming in . . . She'd seen him before – that much she knew. Definitely.

She just couldn't remember where.

She was packing her groceries into her hatchback in the lot outside Reg's Market in the town of Redmond, Michigan. On Lake Superior on the Upper Peninsula. Sherry had a bakery there, a couple of blocks off the

lake. Muffins, zucchini bread, brownies. And the best damn apple crisps on the UP, according to the *Redmond Crier*.

She called them Eve's Undoing – a temptation no one could resist.

He was simply staring at first. Leaning in the entrance to Singer's Pharmacy, next door. Looking very out of place. He never took his eyes off of her. Initially, it gave her the chills, but nothing bad or creepy ever seemed to happen in Redmond. Maybe he was a workman at one of the marinas. Or a war veteran down on his luck. The town always had a few of those; they made their way up here in the summer, when the place was filled with vacationers. She always gave them a treat. Everyone has dignity, Sherry always maintained. Everyone was always loved by someone in their life.

In Redmond, the biggest worry was losing value on the Canadian 'loonies' the tourists came here to spend.

Aware of him, she felt herself hurrying to fill up the car. Then she wheeled back the cart, telling herself not to make eye contact.

As she climbed in her Saab she allowed herself a final glance in the rearview mirror.

He was still following her.

That's when she had the sense that she had seen him somewhere before.

Sherry was fifty-two, youthful, still pretty, she knew, in a bohemian sort of way. She didn't wear much makeup; she still kept her hair braided back from her

days as a flower child. Still wore peasant blouses and kept herself thin. She was single again. Tom and she had divorced, though like a lot of people in her life, they remained good friends. She took art classes and yoga, studied Reiki. She fancied herself a bit of an energy healer. She even did work in Healing/Touch in the pediatric ward at the hospital in town.

Maybe that was it. Sherry brushed away her goose bumps. Maybe he just found her attractive. A lot of people did.

As soon as she pulled out of the lot and onto Kent Street, she remembered why she was there. Her daughter, Krista, was driving up from Ohio with her little four-year-old 'muffin', Kayla. Sherry had closed the shop early and had brought home some carrot muffins and cinnamon buns. She picked up *Shrek Forever After* and *Finding Nemo.* She headed out of town and put the man at the market behind her.

An hour later Sherry was at the house, a converted red barn out on Route 141. Her kitchen was filled with copper pans and her famous coffee mug collection, old Beatles and Cat Stevens albums, and an RCA record player her granddaughter referred to as a 'wheelie'.

Along with Boomer, her old chocolate Lab.

She was up to her elbows in pie crust. Krista had called a while back and said they'd be arriving in another hour. The kitchen door was open; they were in the midst of a late summer heat wave and in this old house, she needed any breeze she could find. She was listening to

NPR on the radio. A discussion about end-of-life medical treatment and how much it was costing. Sherry wasn't sure where she came down on the issue, as long as you could ease people's suffering.

Suddenly Boomer starting barking.

Usually it was a car pulling up in the driveway, or maybe the UPS truck, which often came around this time. Sherry wiped her hands on her apron. Maybe Krista had surprised her and gotten there early. She was just the kind to do that.

'*Boomer!*' she called excitedly, hurrying to the front door.

She looked, but no one was there.

She didn't even see the dog anywhere. Not that *that* mattered – the old boy didn't go anywhere anymore. He could barely crawl onto his mat and take a nap.

Then she heard a yelp from out back.

'*Boomer?*'

At his age, Sherry knew a jackrabbit could scare the dog half to death. She left the front door ajar and went back into the kitchen. She wanted to have the cookies done by the time the girls arrived. *Get those mamas into the oven . . .*

As she got back to the table, her eyes were drawn to the floor.

'*Boomer!*'

The old dog was on his side, panting, unable to move. Sherry ran over and kneeled beside him. '*Poor boy . . .* Not *now*, baby, I'm not ready for this.' She stroked his face. 'Krista and Kayla are on their way . . .'

She ran her hand along his neck and drew it back, startled.

Warm, sticky blood was all over her palm.

'*Boomer, what in God's name happened?*'

Suddenly she heard the shuffle of footsteps from behind her. She looked up.

Someone was there.

A man was in her doorway. He just stood there, leaning on the door frame.

Her heart almost came up her throat when she realized just who it was. It was the man she had seen at Reg's Market.

A shiver of fear ricocheted through her. *What could he possibly be doing here?*

She looked at Boomer, the dog's blood on her hands, and glared back at him. '*What the hell have you done?*'

The man just stood there grinning against the door. 'Hello, Sherry.'

She stood up, focusing on his face, years tumbling back, like a fog lifting over the pines and the lake coming into view.

Her hand shot to her mouth. '*Mal*?'

It had been such a long time ago. Over thirty years, a part of her life she had long buried. Or thought she had. Forever. She never thought she'd see any of them again. Or have to account for what she'd done. She was just a crazy kid back then . . .

'It's been a while, huh, doll?' His dark eyes gleamed.

'What are you doing here, Mal?'

'Making amends.' He winked. 'Long overdue amends. The master of the house – you remember that, don't you, Sherry? Well, he's come home.'

He was grinning, teeth twisted, that same unsettling grin she had seen at the market, tapping something in his palm.

It was a knife. A knife with blood all over it.

Boomer's blood.

Sherry's heart started to pound. Her eyes shot to her dog, whose chest had now stopped moving. A chill sliced through her, and with it, a terror she hadn't known in years.

The man stepped inside, kicking the screen door closed.

'So tell me' – he smiled, tap-tap-tapping his blade – 'what you been up to all these years, hon?'

PART ONE

1

A myriad of lights flickered brightly in the distance. The whoosh of the surf cascading against the rocks was only a far-off whisper hundreds of feet below.

From up here, the lights all seemed just like candles to him. *Millions of candles!* Like the whole world had all come out and assembled before him, an endless procession at his feet.

It made him smile. He had never seen anything more beautiful in his life. He had always wondered what it would be like from up here – the gigantic mound of rock, miles and miles of coastline stretching below.

Now he knew.

You could probably see all the way to LA, the boy imagined. He was no longer a boy really, he was twenty-one – though sometimes he still felt like one.

What are the voices saying to you now?

He stepped out closer to the ledge. 'They're saying this is where I was meant to be.'

He had made the climb up hours ago, before it got dark, to be alone with his thoughts. To calm the noise that was always in his head. To *see* . . . And now it was just so beautiful. And all the voices had quieted except one.

His angel, he called her. The one voice he could trust.

Have you ever seen anything more beautiful? the angel asked him.

'No, I haven't.' He looked down at the lights of the small coastal town. '*Never.*'

Waves crashed against the jagged rocks below. His heart picked up excitedly. 'I can see the whole world.'

Yes, it's all there for you.

He hadn't taken his meds today. Usually that made him a little foggy, his thoughts jumbled. But today, maybe for the first time ever, his mind was clear. Completely clear. 'I feel just like Jesus.'

Maybe you are, his angel answered.

'Then maybe I should just return from where I came. Maybe God wants me back. Maybe that's what I'm feeling.'

You're not meant for this world, the voice replied. *You're smarter. You were destined for greater things. You've always known that, right?*

Yes. The voice was soothing and close to his ear. His heart began to pound like the surf. *There's only one way to find out . . .*

He took another step, closer to the edge, the darkness surrounding him. The breeze brushed against his face. 'That feels good. *I* feel good. I feel good about this.'

Just spread your arms, his angel instructed him.

'Like wings?' He opened his arms wide. 'You mean like this?'

Yes, just like that. Now think of heading home. The pain you will no longer be feeling. You see those lights? They're all so beautiful, aren't they?

'They are!'

Beneath him, a piece of the ledge broke loose. It took several seconds until he heard the sound of it breaking apart on the craggy rocks below. He stepped back, fear springing up in him. 'I'm scared.'

Don't be. This is the moment it's all been leading to. All these years. You know this, don't you?

'Yes.' He nodded. 'I know . . .'

Then open your arms. Just let the wind caress your face. Let the darkness take you. It's easy . . .

'I feel it!' the boy said. He spread his arms. 'I do.'

Feel how loving its touch is. How free of pain. You've been in so much pain lately.

'I have been. Yes, I have.'

It would be good to be rid of the pain, just for once. To stop the voices. To stop feeling he was letting everyone down. He knew how much of a burden he was. To his parents. To everyone who had expectations of him. The absence of pain is heaven, isn't it? *Heaven*. That would be nice. To finally be free of it.

Then just reach out, the angel said. *Let it take you. Like the wind. Just think of heading home. That's all it is. You can do that, can't you?*

'I think so,' he said, nodding. 'I think so.'

Sucking in a breath, he stepped farther out on the edge, his pulse picking up speed. Only the cushion of darkness beneath him. The welcoming sound of the surf far below. How incredibly peaceful it all was. And those candles, so beautiful . . .

So this was it . . .

'I'm so sorry!' he shouted to the panoply of lights. To his mother and father. He knew how much this would hurt and disappoint them.

'Like an angel . . .' he said, shutting his eyes. A final cacophony built in his brain. He stretched out his arms wide, palms in the air.

'Like this . . .?'

Yes, just like that, the angel said.

Then fly.

2

The gal in the white lace sundress was as sexy as I'd ever seen.

She had shoulder-length, sandy-blonde hair, a little tangled and windswept. Eyes as blue and inviting as a Caribbean cove, the kind you could dive right into. A strap of her dress dangled loosely off her shoulder, exposing the shape of her breast, and she smiled, bashful yet unconcerned. The second I laid my eyes on her I remembered thinking, *Now there's the woman I've been waiting for all these years. The one I could live with forever.*

And as I stumbled down across the dunes to the ocean, lugging the bottle of Veuve Clicquot and our meal, the lights from our beach house washing over her face, I said for about the millionth time in the past twenty years just how lucky I was.

'Get down here,' Kathy called. 'There's not much time before I start to freeze my butt off and the whole thing's ruined.'

'You know, a little help might do the trick,' I yelled back.

I was balancing the champagne, the bowl of fresh pasta I had just topped off with truffles and butter, and my iPod speaker. The blanket was already laid out on the sand – the 'table' set, the candles lit, re-creating that night from twenty years ago.

Our wedding night.

No fancy party or trip. Just us, for a change. Both of our kids were away. The truth was, we rarely even celebrated our anniversary, not since our daughter, Sophie, was born a year later on the very same day. August 28. But this year she was already at Penn and our sixteen-year-old, Max, was at fall lacrosse camp before school began.

We were at our beach house in Amagansett, basically just a cozy cape house nestled into the Hampton dunes.

'*Yow, sand crab!*' I yelped, hopping onto a foot and almost pitching the tray.

'You drop that bowl, mister, and you can forget about whatever you have in mind for later!' Kathy jumped up, taking the pasta from me and setting it on the blanket, where she had laid out a hand-printed menu, bamboo placemats, fluted champagne glasses, and candles. There were even little name cards.

I looked closer and noticed that they were from

Annette's, up in Vermont, where we'd had our wedding.

The very *same* name cards – with the same little blue ribbons – but this time they were inscribed with the words: '*To my wonderful husband. For 20 beautiful years*.'

I have to admit, my heart crumbled just a little on that one. 'Nice touch.'

'Thought you'd enjoy that one. Sophie did the lettering. Not to mention letting us have the day.'

'Remind me later to thank her,' I said. I sat down and started to pour out some champagne. '*Wait* – almost forgot!' I connected the speaker to my iPod and pushed the play arrow. 'My contribution!'

Bob Seger's 'We've Got Tonight' spread over the beach. It wasn't really 'our song'; it was played a lot back then when we started getting cozy with each other back at college. I was never the big romantic or anything. Kathy always said she had a thirty-second window to hold my hand before I would let go.

'So happy anniversary,' I said. I leaned in close to kiss her.

'Say it first,' she said, keeping me at bay.

'Say *what*?'

'You know damn well what . . .' She lifted her champagne glass with a determined glimmer in her eye. 'Not like you said it back then . . . like you really mean it this time.'

'You mean how you were the one I wanted to honor and take care of for the rest of our lives . . .?'

'Yeah, *right*!' She chortled. 'If only you *had* said it like that.'

What I'd said, or kind of barked at her back then, going eighty on the New York Thruway – kind of a running joke all these years – after being nudged and pressed to set a wedding date, holding off until I'd finished my residency and hooked up with a job, then further delaying until Kathy was done with hers, was something a bit more like: 'Okay, how about Labor Day? Does that work for you?'

'Does that work . . .?' Kathy blinked back, either in disbelief or shock at having received about the lamest proposal ever. 'Yeah, it kinda works . . .' She shrugged.

I think I drove on for another exit before I turned and noticed her pleased and satisfied smile.

'Well, it seems to have . . .' I wrapped my champagne glass around hers, looking in her eyes. '*Worked.* We're still here!'

The truth was, I'd come from a family of revolving divorces. My father, five – all with beautiful, younger women. My mom, three. None of the marriages ever lasted more than a couple of years. In my family, whenever someone popped the question, it was more like code for saying that they wanted to split up.

'So then say it,' Kathy said. Her gaze turned serious. 'For real this time.'

It was clear this wasn't her usual horsing around. And the truth was, I'd always promised I'd make it up to her if we lasted twenty years.

So I put down my glass and pushed onto a knee. I took her hands in mine, in the way I had denied her those years before, and I fixed on those beautiful eyes and said, in a voice as true as I'd ever spoken: 'If I had the chance to do it all over again – a hundred times, in a hundred different universes – I would. Each and every time. I'd spend my life with you all over again.'

Kathy gave me a look – not far from the one in the car twenty years ago – one that I thought at any second might turn into, *Oh, pleeze, Jay, gimme a break*.

Until I saw her little smile.

'Well you *have*,' she said, touching her glass against mine. 'Taken care of me, Jay. All of us.'

I winked at her. 'Now, can we eat?'

I think we both knew we would stay together from the first time we met. We were undergrads back at Cornell, and I had long, curly brown hair in those days and broad shoulders. Played midfield on the lacrosse team. We even went to the Final Four my junior year. Kathy was in veterinary science. I still kept my hair kind of long, but I'd added tortoiseshell glasses now, along with a slightly thicker waist. These days, it took a hundred sit-ups and a half hour on the treadmill every couple of days to keep me in some kind of shape.

'Yes.' She started to spoon out the salad. 'Now we can eat.'

My cell phone suddenly sounded.

I groaned. I hadn't even realized I'd had it on me. Habit, I guess. After twenty years of being on call, the

ring of the phone intruding on a potential Cialis moment was the ultimate deflating sound.

Kathy sighed. 'Probably the kids. You know how they like to bust a good mood.'

I looked at the screen. It wasn't the kids at all.

'It's Charlie.'

My brother. Eight years older. He and his wife, both bipolar, each with a history of drug and alcohol abuse, lived in California as wards of the state, along with Evan, their twenty-one-year-old son. We helped out with their rent, pitched in financially when they got in over their heads. Which was often. They always seemed to need something. A call from them was rarely good news.

Kathy exhaled at me. 'It's our anniversary, Jay . . .'

My first thought was to let it go to voice mail, but I picked up.

'*Hi, Charlie . . .*' I answered, some irritation coming through.

It wasn't him. It was Gabriella, his wife. 'I'm sorry to bother you, Jay . . .,' she began, like she always began, in her gravelly, deep-throated voice and still-heavy Colombian accent. 'Something terrible has happened here, Jay.' Her voice was shaky and distressed. 'Evan is dead.'

'*Dead?*' My eyes immediately shot wide, finding Kathy's. Evan was their only child. He had always been troubled; he'd been diagnosed as bipolar as well. Out of school. Not working. In and out of trouble with the law. But dead? '*How?*'

‘He jumped off the rock. In Morro Bay.’ Then she choked back a sob, any attempt at control completely unraveling. ‘Evan is gone, Jay. He killed himself. My son is no more.’

3

I turned to Kathy, the bottom falling out of my stomach. 'Evan's dead.'

She looked back at me, tears forming immediately. 'Oh my God, Jay, *how* . . .?'

'He killed himself. He jumped off a cliff.'

Like everything with Charlie and Gabriella – every monthly call on how they were, how Evan was doing, every veiled plea for money or to be bailed out – it spun your head.

Just a week ago we'd gotten a call that Evan was improving. That he was back on his meds. He was even thinking about going back to school. I brought my nephew's cherub-like face to mind, freckles dotting his cheekbones. That smug *Don't worry, I got it all figured out* smirk he always wore.

'Oh, Gabby, I'm so sorry. I thought he was doing well.'

'Well, you know we haven't been telling you everything, Jay. It's not so easy to have to talk about your son that way.'

'I know,' I said, bludgeoned. 'I know.'

I was a surgeon. I dealt with life and death every day. But when it's someone close to you, your own . . . everything changed. They'd never had jobs or money. Or even friends that I knew. They lived on welfare, totally under the radar. Evan was their only hope. The only thing good in their own failed lives.

Now that was gone . . .

When he was younger, my nephew had shown a lot of promise. His early report cards were always A's. He was kind of a basketball whiz, his room lined with trophies. I remembered how brightly Charlie and Gabby spoke of him back then.

'How's Charlie holding up?' I asked. 'Let me talk with him.' Kathy inched closer and took my hand. I shook my head grimly.

'Your brother cannot come to the phone,' Gabriella said. 'He's a mess, Jay. He can't stop crying. He's blaming himself for the whole thing. He can't even speak.'

Blame . . . My brother's life was a monument to blame. I could think of a million reasons he might be feeling that.

Charlie was my half brother, from my dad's first marriage. Eight years older than me; I barely knew him growing up. He was raised in Miami, in the sixties, brilliant in many ways – a math whiz, early into quantum

physics and Eastern religions – but just as wild. My dad's marriage to his mother had only lasted a year and a half, then he made his way up to New York; started his business, a women's apparel firm; and married my mom. He barely even acknowledged he already had a son.

Charlie was smoking pot by the time most kids were hiding beers. Then he went upward from there: speed, mushrooms, LSD. He grew his hair out, totaled his Corvette. A ranked junior in tennis, he flung his racquet into the stands at the state high school championships and never went back. He always had this dream of becoming a big-time rock star. And he even produced a record once, in LA – the only real accomplishment in his life.

Then there were a lot of dark years . . .

First, when he was twenty-three, it was the Hartford House of the Living, where he spent three months after the cops picked him up on the streets raving that he was Jesus Christ.

Then the street scene in New Orleans, with this ragged band of drugged-out bikers and felons known as the STPs – the Stinky Toilet People – who slept on the floors in abandoned buildings whacked out of their minds. Charlie once told me that you could wake up with a knife stuck in your chest if you simply rolled up against one of their girlfriends wrong.

And finally that commune up near Big Sur, where I'd heard about this cult of stoned-out musicians and

drifters, several of whom were later convicted for a string of horrible murders, though Charlie always claimed he was only hanging around there for the chicks and the drugs.

For years, he bounced in and out of hospitals and jails. Schizophrenic and bipolar, he'd been on lithium for thirty years, not to mention his own private pharmacy of antipsychotics and mood stabilizers. He always battled with our father, right up to the day he died.

Ultimately, he did settle down. He met Gabriella in a recovery clinic back in Miami. Together, they moved out west and lived this quiet, codependent life in a coastal California town, granted disability by the state, just enough to squeak by.

They had Evan, and they tried their best to raise him. We always pitched in, anteing up for a car when theirs broke down or paying off their debts. Charlie once said to me, 'You know how ashamed it makes me, Jay, to have to take money from my little brother just to get by.'

But of course they always took it. We were all that kept them from living under a bridge somewhere.

Now Evan . . .

My nephew's life was a perfect storm of things that had gone wrong. Mental instability. No money. Violence and fighting in the house. At first, everything seemed on the right track; then it all changed. Scrapes at school became brushes with the law. He started taking drugs – speed, ecstasy, OxyContin. He and my brother began to

clash – just as Charlie and our father used to clash – furniture tossed, punches thrown, the police called. Evan's behavior grew increasingly erratic and withdrawn. He started hearing voices. He was placed on a daily diet of the same pills his father took – lithium, Klonopin, Thorazine – but he always seemed to be more off them than on. Finally he dropped out of school, got himself fired from a series of menial jobs. I tried my best to get him private counseling, to lure him away from their house. Once, I even begged him to come live with us and go to a junior college back east. But Charlie and Gabby never seemed prepared to let him go.

Only months ago, they'd told us that Evan had turned around. They'd said he was back on his meds, being helpful around the house. Even thinking of going back to college. Then only last week they'd left a message: He'd been taken away. He was in a state hospital. They were talking about finding him some kind of a halfway facility where they could place him under supervision. Force him to stay on his meds. We thought this was good. For the first time in years, we thought maybe there was a reason to hope.

Now this . . .

'Your brother needs you, Jay,' Gabriella said. She choked back a sob. 'I'm afraid for what he might do. You know we don't have anywhere else to turn.'

They had no money. No jobs to focus on. No friends to help soften the pain. All they ever had was this kid. And now he was gone.

I gave her over to Kathy, who tried to comfort her, but what was there to say? In a couple of minutes she put down the phone.

'I have to go out there,' I said.

She nodded.

I scrolled through my commitments for the following week – mostly things I could pass off on my partners, other than a procedure I had to perform on Friday on the teenage daughter of a friend.

'I'll go Monday. I'll only stay a couple of days.'

Kathy shook her head. 'You can't wait until Monday, Jay. These people need you. You're all they have.' She took my hand in hers. 'You have to go tomorrow, Jay.'

My gaze drifted to the meal spread out on the blanket, now cold. The glasses of champagne. Our little celebration. It all seemed pointless now.

I realized I hadn't seen my brother in more than five years.

'I'll go with you, you know,' Kathy said, moving next to me. 'I will.'

'Thanks.' I smiled and drew her next to me. 'But this is something I ought to do alone.'

'You're a good brother, Jay.'

She handed me my glass. Then she took hers and we touched them lightly together. 'Here's to Evan,' Kathy said.

'To Evan.'

We took a sip and sat, knees up, watching the waves

against the shore. Then she leaned over and re-pressed the play button on the iPod.

'Like the man says . . .' She put down her drink. 'We've still got tonight.'