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ALEX NORTH



THE
ANGEL MAKER

A NOVEL

THE
ANGEL
MAKER



ALEX NORTH


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For Lynn and Zack

Prologue

“If you could see the future,” Sam asked her, “would you want to?”

It was the end of the day, and they were sitting outside the school building. There was a roundabout there with a stone edge and a circle of flower beds in the center, and Sam and Katie met there every afternoon at the end of lessons. They were seventeen years old. As teenagers do, they sat and gossiped. They complained about her parents.

They asked each other questions.

If you could see the future, would you want to?

Katie thought about that. It was exactly the kind of question that had made her fall in love with Sam in the first place, but in that moment it made her uneasy. Sam was handsome and charismatic—full of talent and ambition—and for some unfathomable reason, he seemed to be in love with her as well. That made her happy, of course, but she was also frightened of losing him. Next year they would both be going away to different universities, and that upcoming separation felt like a threat looming on the horizon.

What was going to happen to them then?

“Katie?” Sam prompted.

“I don’t know.”

“Why not?”

“Because what if you saw something you didn’t like?”

“Then you’d be able to change it.”

“Maybe.”

It was a warm afternoon with only the slightest of breezes. She watched as a group of kids drifted past them, hitching their bags up on their shoulders, talking and laughing. They were heading down the sunlit drive that led to the nearby village, while others were wandering away toward the bus stop. It was a reminder that she and Sam would have to part

ways shortly. Katie lived close to the school, whereas his house was a bus journey away.

For a long time, Katie had felt like a spare tire in her family; it was her younger brother, Chris, whom her parents doted on. But over the last year, Sam had made her parents a *lot* more interested in her life than they had been previously. Her mother, especially, was suspicious of him and overly keen to monitor their relationship and keep it from going too far. If Katie was not home on time after school, there would be questions. At weekends, she and Sam were not allowed to be alone together. If Katie went to his house, her mother was always careful to ensure his parents were home too.

The resentment that caused had been growing steadily, simmering away inside her, a little hotter every day. What she *wanted* to do was to spend as much time as possible with Sam before they were separated, and it seemed desperately unfair that her mother believed she was entitled to intervene.

“*Could* you change it though?” Katie wondered.

“What do you mean?”

“Well—if you just saw the future, you wouldn’t know how you got there. So anything you did to avoid it might actually be what led you to it all along.”

Sam considered that.

“You’re so clever,” he said.

“That’s why you love me, right?”

“No. It’s just *one* of the reasons.”

She leaned her head on his shoulder, and he kissed her hair.

They sat like that in comfortable silence for a few seconds, and she closed her eyes, enjoying the sunlight on her face.

But then Sam started to say something and stopped.

She opened her eyes.

“What?”

He hesitated, which made the familiar anxiety flare up inside her. They hadn’t spoken about what was going to happen next year, but she was sure university must have been on his mind as well—that he might be worrying about what was going to happen too. Perhaps that had been what had prompted his question. Maybe he’d decided it was better to end things now.

Katie leaned away and looked at him.

“Sam?”

“I was just thinking.”

“Yeah, about what?”

“That my parents won’t be home for an hour or so.”

Her chest tightened for a second, and then her anxiety evaporated. He’d said it so casually, as though the words meant nothing at all—just an observation, really—but the weight of his suggestion hung in the air, and despite the warmth of the afternoon, she shivered a little.

She wanted to go back with him so badly.

“I can’t,” she said.

“Yeah, I know.”

“I mean ... I want to. I just can’t.”

He nodded. Katie wondered what was going through his mind. Was he losing patience with her? Had he already? There had been no pressure from Sam on that level at all, but she couldn’t help feeling she’d just failed a test of some kind. And she supposed that she had. Because even though her parents didn’t seem to care very much about her, she was still being good, wasn’t she?

Still doing what she’d been told.

“One day though,” she said.

“One day.”

She looked to her right—and there was Chris, walking slowly along the road toward them. As always, he was alone; she didn’t think he had any friends. His hands were tucked in his pockets, and his head was bowed. He was fifteen but looked younger and smaller than his age, and Katie had to wait for him every day and walk home with him. Her mother insisted. Katie supposed it made sense. They were at the same high school, after all, and were both going to the same place at the same time.

But while she loved her brother very much, she was not his keeper, and the sight of him now caused the resentment inside her to blaze even brighter. God—he even *carried* himself like he didn’t belong. Why couldn’t he look after himself instead of her being expected to do it? Why didn’t her life matter to her parents as much as his?

Sam saw Chris approaching them.

He sighed and stood up, hitching his bag onto his shoulder.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” he said quietly. “I love you.”

“I love you too.”

Then he stood in front of her, waiting for her to stand up and kiss him

goodbye as she always did. But she was still looking to her right, watching Chris walking toward them, and the feeling of resentment that had been building inside her finally spilled over.

She looked back at Sam.

“No,” she said. “Wait.”

★ ★ ★

If you could see the future, would you want to?

You can't, of course. A life is lived forward. The present is a vantage point from which every moment in the past is inevitable and every moment in the future invisible. Most of those moments won't be important, but a handful will turn out to be pivotal—shattering, even—and you never know which until it's too late.

As Katie boarded the bus with Sam that day, she didn't know that a local man named Michael Hyde was leaving his house right then.

That he was walking toward his car with a knife in his hand.

She spent an hour at Sam's house that afternoon. She had made a decision to do what *she* wanted to do for once, and it was thrilling. She would deal with the consequences later—and really, how bad could they be? Sam walked her to the bus stop afterward, their hands clasped tightly together and their upper arms pressed against each other. He kissed her goodbye. When the bus set off, Katie smiled at him through the window until he was out of sight, and then she looked straight ahead, smiling to herself instead, her body full of warmth and light. It felt as though she hadn't just discovered a secret but somehow become one.

After getting off the bus, she walked home slowly. She was more than ready to have whatever argument awaited her there, but she also wanted to hold on to that feeling inside her for as long as possible. And besides, it was a beautiful afternoon. The sun was still bright and warm, and there was a lovely cast to the light that brought out fresh colors in the world around her. Everywhere she looked, it was like she was seeing things for the first time. As though everything had changed.

And, of course, it had. She just didn't know it yet.

Katie reached their road.

As she turned the corner, the scene before her made no sense. They lived in a quiet area, but the street ahead was crowded with police cars and vans. Everywhere she looked, she saw red and blue lights flashing around.

The sight of it all stopped her in her tracks. Her gaze moved to the yellow cordon that had been set up across the street, with what seemed like crowds of police officers moving around behind. A part of her was aware there should have been a great deal of noise, but for a few seconds it was like being underwater, and all she could hear was her heartbeat thudding dully in her ears.

Something terrible has happened.

She would always remember the sickening, sinking feeling inside herself. And she would remember what came along with it: the desperate urge to go back in time and change things.

Please, she would remember thinking.

Oh God, please.

Because right then, she would have given up Sam for that chance.

She would have given up herself.

She would have given up anything.

Katie took a few faltering steps forward, unsure at first whether her body would work properly—and then she began to run. One of the police officers saw her coming and intercepted her at the tape. She didn't know it at the time, but he had been expecting her. Her parents had called Sam's house while she'd been on the bus and learned she was on her way.

"Hey," the officer said gently. "Hey."

Katie ignored him. He was tall and solid, and she had to step to one side in order to stare past him at the scene beyond the cordon.

She didn't understand what she was seeing—not right then. But she took it in anyway, and even seventeen years later she could still see it all so clearly whenever she closed her eyes.

The old red car, abandoned at an angle across the pavement, where it had swerved in to block Chris's path.

The blood spatters from where he had been stabbed repeatedly.

And the larger pool of blood, in the gutter, where Michael Hyde had begun his desperate attempt to cut off her brother's face.

PART ONE



One

You can't do this.

It's not allowed.

Alan Hobbes looks up from the book on his desk. He listens carefully, but the only thing he can hear is the silence ringing in the room. There is nobody else here. He sent everyone home earlier and is alone in the house. Or, at least, he is for the moment.

And yet the voice of his brother, Edward, echoes in the air from across the years.

Hobbes stares at his bookshelves for a few seconds and then shakes his head. He is old now; that is all it is. Everything is swimming together as the end approaches. And really, that is fine. They say that people's lives flash before their eyes as they die, and what else can that mean except that the nature of time changes as death approaches? Or rather—he corrects himself—that our *perception* of it does, so that we finally begin to see time for what it was all along. A journey seems to take place step by step while you're on it, but if you could look down from above you would see the whole route laid out below you. You would understand that the beginning, middle, and end all exist at once, and that they always had and always would.

It is not something to be afraid of.

Hobbes looks back down at the notebook on the desk. The time he has left is limited, and he needs to concentrate. Because death is coming for him. He can feel it approaching steadily and inexorably. It will be arriving at the house in just a few short hours, whereupon it will open the door downstairs and creep up one of the twinned staircases that lead to his rooms.

And then it will all be over.

Except that isn't true. His *own* journey will end tonight, but others will

continue. Has he been careful enough? Is everything in place? It is difficult to be sure, especially as there are other drifts than the perception of time that come with old age. But he has done his best.

He thinks of those people he has never met and never will, but whom it feels he knows so well.

Right now, Katie Shaw is at home, making dinner. She is worrying about her daughter, her marriage, and one of the children she teaches. She is blissfully unaware of the turn her journey will take tomorrow and where it will lead her.

Detective Laurence Page is listening to classical music at home. He doesn't know Hobbes's name yet.

And Christopher Shaw, of course.

Christopher will be here soon, which reminds Hobbes that time is short. He can see death edging ever closer in his mind's eye—a knife in its hand—and the thought of what is going to happen spurs him on.

It is October 4, 2017.

Hobbes picks up the old pen.

You can't do this, he remembers.

It's not allowed.

Even so, he begins to write.

Two

“Holy shit,” Pettifer said. “Would you look at this?”

Laurence was doing exactly that.

He had his shirtsleeves rolled up and his arm resting on the sill of the open passenger window. He had been staring idly out for some time, watching as they left the old factories and office blocks of the city center behind them and then the suburbs full of crammed houses. Now they were passing through the more affluent neighborhoods to the north. It was aspirational here: a world of sprawling bungalows, detached mansions, and enormous gardens.

But there were even richer locales ahead.

“How the other half live,” Pettifer said.

“And yet die like the rest of us.”

“Yes, well. Let’s try not to upset anyone at the scene, shall we?”

“Don’t worry.” Laurence closed his eyes, enjoying the sensation of the fresh air rushing over his face. “I will behave.”

“Do you need to have the window open?”

“I like the wind.”

“Could you close it?”

“I could,” he said happily. “It is within my power. But I’m not going to.”

Pettifer sighed. She had fallen into that trap before.

But she did have a point, Laurence thought. Not about the window, or him behaving (although, of course, there was that), but about the divisions of wealth within the city. Although it was *also* interesting that it seemed a fresh observation to her. Laurence had come to this city—this country—as an infant, shortly after his mother’s death, and one of the many things he had inherited from his father was an immigrant’s sense of curiosity. Many of the other officers seemed to take the city for granted, whereas Laurence

had never quite shaken away the sensation of being an outsider here. Of not quite belonging. Of seeing the city as something that needed to be understood. The way he thought about it was this: his colleagues were excellent at telling the time on the clockface, but it often seemed to surprise them to discover there were cogs behind it that made the hands turn.

A short time later, he opened his eyes.

They were driving through countryside now. Fields sprawled away into the distance on either side. Some were dotted with cattle or crops, but most seemed empty. Perhaps they were simply being left fallow? Laurence wasn't sure; his knowledge of the agricultural industry was cursory. But it was difficult to shake the sensation that the land here belonged to people who owned so much of it that they could afford to leave acres barren and untended, forgotten afterthoughts in their vast inventories.

Laurence yawned.

"How much farther?" he asked.

"I'm afraid I can't hear you because the window is open."

"I don't believe you."

She didn't reply—this time avoiding another familiar trap. Laurence smiled to himself. He liked Pettifer a lot. They had been working together as partners for more than three years. They complemented each other well in that they annoyed each other in precisely the right ways unless it was important that they did not.

A minute or so later, she slowed down and flicked the blinker. They turned right onto what seemed to Laurence little more than a narrow dirt road leading off between the trees that were packed in tightly on either side. The muddy ground beneath the car had hardened into an undulating wave, and the tires rolled from one side to the other as Pettifer navigated the twists and turns.

"Mr. Hobbes liked his privacy," Laurence said.

"I guess so. But if you had as much money as that, wouldn't you?"

"I honestly don't know how much money he had."

"No, well." Pettifer ducked her head slightly, peering out of the windshield at the winding track ahead. "Clearly enough to get away from other people. Which I have to say has always been an enduring dream of mine."

"And of all the people who know you."

The world suddenly brightened as the dark trees fell away, curling off

to either side to form a black perimeter around a large, sunlit clearing. The dirt track beneath the car became an immaculately maintained driveway of pale gravel that led in a straight line across an expanse of neatly trimmed grass.

The house was about three hundred feet ahead—although, Laurence thought, leaning forward himself now, *house* barely did the structure justice. There was a three-story building at the center, and taller wings stretching out on either side, every visible edifice topped with towers and turrets. His gaze moved over the face of the property. There were almost too many windows to count. Some were aligned in neat rows, while others appeared to be just randomly placed dark squares. Taken as a whole, the building looked like a curve of jawbone, inverted and pressed into the land.

Two police vans were parked out front.

A few officers dotted around.

The *house*—he needed to think of it as something—loomed ever larger as they approached. Looking up, Laurence noticed that a part of the roof in the middle was more jagged than the rest. Whatever room had once been up there was now partially exposed to the air, and he could see a few blackened struts of wood sticking up. An old fire. The bricks below were scorched, and the window directly beneath had shattered and not been repaired.

The tires crackled as Pettifer brought the car to a halt behind one of the vans at the entrance. One of the uniformed officers approached the vehicle.

Laurence held out his ID.

“Detective Laurence Page,” he said. “Detective Caroline Pettifer.”

“Yes, sir. Ma’am.”

They got out of the car. Laurence looked at the entrance before them: two enormous wooden doors beneath a stone arch. They were far wider and taller than any human would require.

“Good Lord,” he said. “You could ride a horse through there.”

Pettifer walked around the car and stood beside him, hands on her hips, looking up.

“Told you so,” she said. “The other half.”

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A sergeant led them inside to the scene.

Through the doors, there was a large reception area, the floor made of cracked black and white tiles. Laurence looked up as they walked; the ceiling was two stories above. Ahead of them, separated by a vast mirror, two wooden staircases curled upward. There were no windows, and dust hung visibly in the air, and yet there was the hint of a breeze coming from somewhere.

He and Pettifer followed the officer up one of the staircases—which joined the other on a small landing. Another pair led up from there, curving around each other like a figure eight, so that they turned back on themselves again as they ascended. The arrangement seemed pointless to Laurence—whichever route they chose, they ended up in the same place—but eventually they emerged into a large area he estimated must have been above the entrance hall. Despite the solid floor beneath his feet, he was aware of a vast distance stretching away below him, and it felt like if he fell he would be falling forever.

“This way, sir.”

“And ma’am,” Pettifer said.

“Yes, ma’am. Sorry.”

A thin corridor led away to the left with an open door at the far end. As they approached it, Laurence could see officers moving in the room beyond. He was expecting another grand, ornate space, but his expectations were confounded. He and Pettifer followed the officer into a small area that, in some ways, reminded him of the modest confines of his own apartment. Looking around, he saw little in the way of furnishings: a single bed against one wall, on which the victim was still lying; a cart of medical equipment beside it; an old television on a stand, angled toward the bed. He looked to his left. There was a small, open-plan kitchen area there, and a closed door next to it that he assumed led to a bathroom.

And at the far end of the room, an archway.

He stared at that for a moment. It clearly led away into some deeper chamber of the house, but the blackness there was impenetrable. Laurence could hear the faintest rush of air emerging from it, and the sound reminded him of something breathing.

He stepped over to the bed and looked down at the victim.

Breathing was clearly not a sound Alan Hobbes would be making again. The old man’s lower body was still beneath the covers, but he was exposed from the waist up. His head was tilted at an unnatural angle, all but severed by a vicious knife wound.

The cause of death, at least, was clear.

But Laurence also scanned the man's exposed, scrawny torso, taking in the additional stab wounds there. The bedsheets below the body had once been white but were now saturated with blood. Whoever had murdered Alan Hobbes had taken their time in doing so, and the old man had clearly been too weak and feeble even to begin to fight them off.

It was too early to form an opinion, but Laurence found himself working through possible scenarios. Hobbes was clearly rich—or *had* been, he supposed, given you famously couldn't take it with you. Money conferred privilege but rarely came without problems of its own. You made enemies along with it, and there would always be people who wanted to take it from you once you had it. The torture could suggest either—it was impossible to say right now. But Laurence was already confident that the motive would ultimately reside, as they so frequently did, in the dead man's bank account.

Pettifer was standing beside him. He was sure she would have formed the same opinion. He was about to voice it anyway, as it was important to be first, but then there was a cough from behind them.

They both turned around.

The man standing there was not a police officer. Instead, he was dressed in an expensive-looking three-piece suit, and his brown hair was gelled into neat curls. He was thirty, at most, and obviously trying to appear older than he was.

Like a little boy trying on his father's suit, Laurence thought. Which he might have considered uncharitable if the man hadn't also been curling his lip slightly as he looked between Laurence and Pettifer, as though trying to work out who was the superior, and if so, why.

Laurence saved him the bother. He beckoned to the nearest uniform.

"Excuse me," he said. "Who is this young man, and why is he in my crime scene?"

The uniform, predictably, looked slightly helpless.

The man coughed again.

"My name is Richard Gaunt," he said. "I'm a lawyer at the firm that deals with Mr. Hobbes's estate. We look after his investments and finances."

Good God, Laurence thought—Gaunt was actually extending a hand, as though this was a business meeting rather than a room with a murder victim lying on the bed.

“Which doesn’t explain why you’re here.” Laurence nodded toward the body behind him. “I mean, the paint is barely even dry yet.”

He felt Pettifer tense slightly beside him.

Gaunt lowered his hand.

“It was me who found Mr. Hobbes this morning,” he said quietly. Then he rallied slightly. “And actually, I have permission from your superior. I spoke to Chief Barnes earlier. It was considered useful for me to be here, as I have knowledge of the property’s inventory.”

Laurence looked at Pettifer, but she just raised an eyebrow at him.

“And is anything missing?”

“I don’t know yet.”

Gaunt glanced toward the dark archway at the far end of the room. Laurence followed his gaze. A camera flashed. It was pointed at the corpse on the bed, but the light briefly illuminated a corridor beyond the archway. Old stone walls. Cobwebs clinging to the ceiling.

And still that faint rush of air.

There were no windows here, Laurence noticed. It was a room without a view. But one with a breeze.

He turned back to Gaunt.

“You said you found the body this morning. Why were you here?”

“I had an appointment,” Gaunt said. “Mr. Hobbes had requested a meeting to discuss his finances. I was given a key and told to let myself in—although the door was open when I arrived.”

Laurence frowned. That bothered him. Not the open door, as such, but the arrangements. Why would a key be required? Hobbes had been an old man, and the cart beside the bed pointed to him relying on some degree of medical assistance. Surely there must have been carers? That aside, the property was large and must have required a team of staff to handle general upkeep and maintenance.

“So there was nobody else here?”

“That’s correct.”

“Mr. Hobbes had no family?”

“No.”

“And no staff at all?”

Gaunt frowned.

“Not this morning. That’s the strange thing. I’ve worked on behalf of Mr. Hobbes for a few years now, and there’s always been quite a team on site whenever I’ve visited. I handle the accounts, so I have most of their

contact details. I've already spoken to a couple of them today."

Laurence felt a flare of annoyance. First of all, this man was in his crime scene, and now he appeared to be conducting their investigation for them.

But waste not want not.

"And?"

"The two I spoke to both said they were dismissed yesterday afternoon," Gaunt said. "And from what they told me, it was the same for every other member of staff. They were all told by Mr. Hobbes that their employment was no longer required. He thanked each of them individually—warmly, I'm told—and said they would be contacted shortly about severance pay and references."

Laurence fell silent for a moment, considering that.

Obviously, Gaunt's words by themselves could not be trusted, and so he and Pettifer were going to spend a great deal of time verifying his claims. But he also suspected Gaunt was telling them the truth. And if so, what did that mean?

He turned his back on the lawyer and stared at Alan Hobbes's body. Another camera flash went off, the bright light emphasizing the man's pale, emaciated frame and the vicious injuries that had been inflicted upon him.

"It's like he knew," Gaunt said quietly.

Laurence didn't turn around. Instead, he crouched down slowly. From this angle, he could see Hobbes's face. It was contorted in an expression of sorrow and suffering so acute that, even in death, it was easy to imagine he was still feeling pain now.

"It's like he knew," Gaunt said again. "Like he knew this was coming and was ready for it."