

CYNTHIA MURPHY

~~WIN~~

~~LOSE~~

~~KILL~~

~~DIE~~

"A lethal, high-stakes thriller that gave me whiplash and trust issues."

—NATASHA PRESTON, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Fear*

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This one is for the godkids...
Kyla Somerville,
Grayson Coffey,
Dominic Kelly...
always remember to follow your dreams.

1

I didn't mean to kill the first one.

Honest.

It was just...too easy, I suppose. She was already in the water, and when I plunged my hands in to help her out, I kind of...changed my mind.

Something inside me snapped.

I held Little Miss Perfect's head down and waited for her to stop thrashing around.

It took longer than I thought, and then she just...floated there. Limp. Pathetic, really.

"Accidental death," according to the experts. That's nearly right. Like I said, it's not like I set out to do it.

It felt good, though.

2

I can't believe we're back here already.

Summer had passed by in a daze thanks to the bang to the head I took at the end of last year. Instead of going to beach parties with my friends and staying up to watch the sunrise like I'd planned, my days were full of police interviews and PTSD. That last day of school had started so perfectly, and then...

"Liz." A sharp hiss and an elbow in my ribs bring me back to the present. Taylor is standing up straight, her gorgeous hazel eyes focused on the stage, for all the world playing the perfect mourner. I mimic her, my gaze following hers to a large easel draped in black cloth. It's displaying a blown-up photograph of Morgan.

The girl who drowned on the last day of school.

"Pay attention." Taylor says this out of the corner of her mouth, like she's a bad ventriloquist with one of those creepy puppets. She does it so effortlessly—not one muscle in her face moves. I guess I haven't recovered as well as I thought, even after all those hospital visits over the summer. I try to concentrate, I really do, but my mind wanders as the headmistress's words blur into one long sermon, each pause punctuated by the squeaking sound of rubber heels on the parquet floor. Autumn is seeping into the corners of the building already and the air smells of rain and damp, freshly laundered uniforms.

I study the picture. Morgan was pretty, in a preppy, Reese Witherspoon in *Æ* *habns* kind of way. She looked so sweet and unassuming, which I know was total bull. Truth is, Morgan had the personality of a venomous snake. You did *not* cross her, if you knew what was good for you; she'd make your life at Morton a living hell if she felt like it. It had been her idea to take the boat out on the lake that night, her big moment after being sworn in as head girl. She'd bullied most of us into it, from what I remember, though admittedly I don't remember much. Not after the boat flipped.

Dr. Patel, the headmistress, ends her monologue with a request for a moment of silence. She's flanked by several members of the faculty—some of them are crying, dabbing handkerchiefs or tissues at their faces. Her sharp black trouser suit is conservative, appropriate for a pupil's memorial, but super stylish and paired with some killer heels. I can't help admiring

anyone who can walk in shoes that high, never mind run the country's most elite boarding school in them. The rest of the staff look frumpy in comparison. I watch the clock and sway slightly. I'm not used to standing up for so long after spending the summer in bed watching nineties teen movies.

Taylor ignores me, her head down, eyes closed: the perfect pupil. And mourner. Her long, naturally red hair falls like a curtain, spilling over the gray tweed of her blazer. Morton Academy's very own Cheryl Blossom, standing right next to me.

Dr. Patel calls the memorial to a close and bodies start to shuffle toward the exit in silence.

"So," I whisper as we wait our turn to file out of the hall, "how does it feel?"

Taylor looks at me as we emerge through the tall, wooden doors into the corridor, smiling with her mouth but not her eyes. "How does what feel? Being passed over for head girl? Being so close to that full-ride scholarship I could practically taste it? Great, thanks for asking."

"Oh, come on. You're deputy! That's still pretty sweet. Plus"—I lower my voice, even though everyone else has resumed their own conversations too—"you know what that means for Jewel and Bone. Being deputy in the society means you get your pick of colleges."

Now the smile reaches her eyes.

"Yes, I do. I am very excited for this year. If I can just find the right sponsor, schmooze the right rich person, then I won't have to worry about working through university at all. Just think of all the people we're going to meet, the events we'll get to go to...."

"*You* get to go to," I correct her, smiling ruefully. "Some of the perks of the society don't stretch past head and deputy, remember?"

"Yeah, sorry." Taylor chews her lip and avoids my eyes. "I know that if you hadn't helped me and Kat with the scavenger hunt, you would have finished it before us. You'd be the one being sworn in as deputy head tonight, and—"

"Hello, gorgeous!" A deep voice interrupts her as two heavy arms thump down around our shoulders. I'm kind of grateful for the interruption. Marcus's aftershave is so strong I start to cough, but Taylor immediately twinkles up at him. I duck out from under his arm and let them have a moment.

“What do you both look so serious about?” He looks good, like maybe he actually slept over the summer. Lucky him.

“Oh, you know—life, death.” She waves her polished fingernails in the air. “How I spent half an hour choosing a shade of lipstick that didn’t clash with the funeral flowers.” Taylor glances around furtively. “Actually, we were just talking about my ceremony at JB tonight.” She stands on her tiptoes to kiss him. “You know your girl is moving up in the world.”

“I sure do. I still think you should’ve gotten the top spot instead of Jameela, though. I mean, if there was anything I could do...” He walks out of the hall with us, but I stop listening as we start up the corridor to the entrance hall.

God, I missed this place. I breathe in deeply, as though I can inhale the pure essence of Morton into my very soul. I love the feeling of belonging, being one of a handful of kids from all over the country who are invited to attend such an exclusive institution. It doesn’t matter who we are or where we’re from—we’re here because of our brains. Rich, poor, it doesn’t matter at Morton. We’re all here because we are damn clever—and the truth is that most of us wouldn’t have gotten the chance otherwise. It’s in the middle of nowhere and boarding is compulsory. There’s no internet access without supervision, either—that’s one of Morton’s unique selling points: good old-fashioned bookwork. You win some, you lose some, I guess.

I take a second to remind myself it’s all real. The stone ceiling soars over us, and our shoes tap softly on the ancient stone floor as we weave through bodies clad in gray blazers that are piped with an almost lurid acid green. The mahogany wall panels glow, sunlight streaming through the long windows that allow us glimpses of the vast, manicured gardens beyond them. We pass the headmistress’s office and start to climb the large, curving staircase that always makes me feel like I’m in a Disney film. The handrail is gleaming, so polished that it’s slick beneath my hand. The whole place smells of wood and citrus and I adore it. It smells like home.

“Hurry up, Liz.” Marcus and Taylor are watching me with amusement from the landing above, and I realize I’ve zoned out a bit. “Stop daydreaming.”

“Sorry.” I duck my head to hide my flaming cheeks as I take the remaining stairs two at a time until I reach the landing beneath a huge stained-glass window. I walk slowly, following them through the wide

double doors into the West Wing. Yes, I said West Wing—that’s how big this place is.

This floor is all classrooms and the science labs are right next to classics, so I watch the perfect couple disappear into their room and then enter my own class. Classics is my main subject—all students do three in total, but we have been hand-selected for these classes in particular. It’s kind of like a specialty, something we will take on to college, maybe even get fast-tracked. The teaching here is the best in the country—expectations are high. There’s hardly anyone here yet; the assembly interfered with the timetable for the first full day back, so I choose a desk in the middle row, by a window that looks out onto a wide expanse of water.

The lake.

Morgan.

I move quickly, my flesh crawling as memories of that night once again try to claw their way to the surface. I take a seat at the opposite side of the room, as far from the window as I can get.

The classroom fills up slowly and I’m pleased we have a small group—not that we ever have large classes, with only fifty chosen to attend Morton in each year group. The teacher arrives last, and I’m happy to see we’ve got Professor Insoll again. The man’s a legend—in the world of ancient religious artifacts, anyway. He used to teach at a university, but I guess Morton pays pretty well—plus it has to be a bonus when you have a bunch of kids who are desperate to learn rather than perpetually hungover undergrads.

We go through all the usual first-day-back motions—new textbooks, a prep schedule that looks ridiculously full, and a winter exam timetable. I’m busy writing my name on everything when a note slides across my desk.

“Pass this to Jameela,” a voice hisses.

Jameela? Hmm. I wonder if it’s Jewel and Bone business, maybe a note about the first of the donor meetings, where we’ll get to meet prospective sponsors who will hopefully pay our way through college, but a quick glance around reveals that hardly anyone else in the class would have that kind of information. I shrug and pass it on to Frank, just in case. I can’t go handing out potential secret society information to just anybody. “For Jameela,” I mouth, nodding to the girl with long, dark braids sitting in front of him. I go back to signing my name with a flourish and forget all about the note.

Until Jameela shoots out of her seat, screaming, and drops the paper like it's on fire.

3

“Then what happened?”

“Nothing.” I shrug. Taylor hoots a laugh, though there’s not much humor in it.

“Trust Jameela to get away with making such a scene,” she grumbles. “How did Insoll not confiscate the note?”

“She hid it pretty quickly, told him there was a spider on her desk.”

We fall silent for a moment and I enjoy the sound of the gravel driveway crunching beneath my new shoes as we walk away from the main school building. I glance back, watching it get smaller and smaller, its myriad windows reflecting the late-afternoon sun in a hundred different directions.

I divert my attention back to the path and smile over at Taylor, irresistibly reminded of the first time we walked this way. We’re still in our uniforms, a JB requirement, and the stiff wool of my pleated skirt tickles my bare legs with every step as I try to keep up with her.

“She looked pretty shaken up,” I say. “I wish I knew what it said. Why didn’t I look at it? I mean, I was holding it!”

“Because you’re Liz Williams, the nicest girl in all of Morton.” The main gates into the grounds, large metal things that hide us away from the real world, have come into our line of sight, so Taylor veers off to the left. We decide against the driveway for the manicured lawn and head toward a dense copse of trees. She’s right, of course. I am nice.

“Boring, right?” I say. She pauses and turns back to me, linking an arm through my own.

“Never.” She grins, bumping my hip. “You’re my moral compass, Lizzie. What would I do without you? Besides, it was probably just another of her nudes from last year.”

She has a point, on both counts.

“Come on,” I sigh. “We don’t want to be late for this.”

“Agreed.” Taylor drops my arm as we approach a thickly wooded section of the grounds. She holds open a small wooden gate as I take one last glance around for any stragglers. The long, sweeping driveway is clear, with Morton House tiny in the distance. It’s almost seven, so everyone else will be doing prep after dinner. Perfect. We both ignore the No Entry sign

hammered into the flaking wood—it's not for us, after all—and within seconds the darkness of the trees has enveloped us.

It was last summer when I first realized this part of the grounds even existed, after the riddles appeared on our pillows and we followed the clues that had been scattered around the building. No one really comes out this way, which is kind of the point, I guess. The rest of the grounds here are so picture-perfect: grass always cut, flowerbeds freshly dug, hedges pruned. This bit is wild, like a fairy-tale forest, full of snapping twigs and tiny, scampering feet. As if on cue, a squirrel appears in front of us, his bushy tail twitching in time with his tiny nose, ears pricked and alert. He eyes us bravely but scampers the second we move.

“Aww, cute!” I whisper.

“Why are you whispering?” Taylor whispers back.

“Why are *you* whispering?” I giggle. She rolls her eyes at me, but the laughter is contagious and a smile starts to tug at the corner of her mouth.

“Stop it,” she whispers back, and we both dissolve into silent laughter. It's the nerves, it must be. Last time we were all here was *that* night.

The laughter dies in my throat.

“Hey.” Taylor pauses. I'm sure she can read my mind sometimes. “How are you feeling? Are you ready for this?”

“Yes.” My voice comes out as intended, firm and unwavering, though I'm not sure I *am* ready. Taylor reaches out a hand and for a second, my vision blurs and it's hers, *Morgan's*, reaching desperately from the black water.

Then it's just Taylor's hand again, nails perfectly manicured, not blue and dripping lake moss. I stare until she drops it and sighs.

“Come on, then. Like you said, we can't be late—you know what she thinks about starting on time. I don't know about you, but I want to be charming all those rich donors once we start meeting them. I heard a rumor that two girls from last year were so late to a meeting that they were stuck serving canapés during their first sponsorship party as punishment....”

We delve deeper into the trees and I keep my head down, away from the low-hanging branches that threaten to tangle their bony fingers in my hair. The path is narrow here, fringed with wild orchids that are taller than both of us. Their dark purple tongues leer as we pass, and they stink of decay, a sweet, sickly odor that burrows into your nostrils and doesn't go away. We should have taken the other path, the one that's maintained, but that would

have brought us past the lake, and I don't want to deal with that until I have to. I realize Taylor has brought me this way on purpose—she knows I'm avoiding the lake. I thank her silently.

The area ahead of us begins to widen and I can just make out glimpses of roughly hewn gray stone through the brush. Brambles have been left to grow wild here and my brain dredges up a memory of an old DVD I would watch on repeat, when the witch curses Sleeping Beauty and the thorns surround the princess's castle. These vines are almost welcoming, though, the way they have woven together, arching over us to create an entrance of sorts. We duck and pass through, then follow the short stone path to an ancient wooden doorway where we pause for breath.

"Ready?" I whisper.

Taylor straightens her shoulders and nods once. "Ready."

We push open the door, which, despite its obvious antiquity, is well oiled and guides us into the chapel in silence. It's dark inside and the thick walls immediately muffle any sounds of the outside world. We close the door gently and give our eyes a second to adjust to the flickering candlelight at the opposite end of the aisle. You'd almost think it was a fully working church, not a front for something else. I guess that's kind of the point.

I follow Taylor down the aisle and pause in front of the altar, my good-girl Catholic school upbringing making me drop a knee and bow my head quickly before catching up with her at another wooden door. This one is behind the altar, where the priest goes at the end of mass. We pass through it in silence and it feels wrong, like it usually does, but I remind myself it's not a *real* church and keep my head down as we walk past the others. We stop at the far end of the room, in front of one of the wooden benches that line the walls. My mind flashes back to the last time I was in here, snatches of memory seeping in. Puddles of lake water on the worn stone floor. Morgan, her blank face, lips blue...

I shake my head, hard. No. Not now. The doctor warned me this might happen once I came back to Morton, but I didn't expect so many flashbacks so soon.

I shrug off my blazer, hang it carefully on a peg, and run my fingers over the small, gem-encrusted pin that's attached to the inside pocket, the one that sits over my heart. I smile as I remember finding it on my pillow, its sharp spike pushed through the paper that invited me to the hunt. I take a

second to smooth down my skirt and make sure my shirt is tucked in neatly—not that anyone will see it. Only then do I pick up the long, folded gown from the bench and slide it over my head. I remove the little skull-shaped pin from my blazer. The sharpness of the gemstones pricks my fingers as I fasten it onto my cloak. The thick velvet flows down over me, swallowing my uniform and pooling around my feet. I brush my hair back and tuck it behind my ears, pulling the hood up and over so it sits low, casting a large, hollow shadow where my face should be. I glance at Taylor, now hidden behind an identical robe, before following her and half a dozen other figures down the staircase that is hidden in a shadowed corner.

To the crypt.

I trail the dark procession to the bottom step, and, as usual, I am the last one. I wait as everyone else takes their positions, and when it's my turn, I step out onto a narrow platform. I am standing on a raised stone pathway that forms a circle, more paths spiking off toward the center, so from above they look like the spokes of a wheel. My robe, always too long, drags in the inches of floodwater below and cold fingers spread up through the velvet as though they are clawing at my ankles. I shake the thought from my head and finally arrive at my platform, taking my place in the circle.

I try my best to ignore the dead body in the center.

4

I keep my head down, so I'm cocooned in my own little world of velvet and icy cold. Around me the air gradually stills, shuffles of feet and whispers of swishing robes quieting down as the rest of the group settles into their positions. Only when the room is silent do I allow myself to look up and focus my eyes on the stone plinth in the middle.

I won't lie—the first time I saw Old Josef, I was pretty freaked out. I'd just trekked through the woods, following the final clue in the library—the image of a small, jewel-colored chapel wrought into one of the stained-glass windows. When you stand at a certain angle, at the right time, the sun shines through and practically points at this part of the woods. The clues in the hunt had all been so cryptic—kind of the point, I guess, so not everyone could solve them—but I'd worked my way through them, dropping hints for Kat and Taylor, who had both received riddles too. When I found the chapel, they were there as well. I let them go in ahead of me, not quite realizing what it would mean, and we followed the music down into the crypt. We weren't the first ones there. I was handed a robe and led to my place—there were five others ahead of us—while we waited for the rest of the platforms to fill up.

When the room was full and we took off our hoods, it was explained to us that this revealed the hierarchy of the society. Marcus had been the first male to arrive, and out of the girls, Morgan was in the top spot. They were sworn in as head girl and head boy, along with their deputies, and the rest of us became prefects. I would have been slightly higher in the pecking order if I hadn't let Taylor and Kat in before me.

I refocus on the present and narrow my eyes at Old Josef again. The more you look at him, the more fascinating he becomes. He rests in his coffin of glass, like some twisted medieval version of Snow White, and has been there for as long as Morton has been a school. Some people say he came from Poland, others Germany, though all that is left of him now is in this casket, so we'll likely never know either way. He was some kind of saint, apparently, who ended up here when the school's founder needed something new and eccentric for his cabinet of curiosities.

My eyes travel along the skeleton, and I imagine trailing my fingers along the rough golden brocade that wraps around each individual rib, the central panel of fabric encrusted with precious stones that decorate his

sternum, and the magnificent collar that envelops his bony neck. His face hangs open in a rictus grin and the top of his skull is encircled by a glorious crown of hand-carved crystals, all wired together with gold. His skeletal hands are beringed and rest gently on his stomach—or where his stomach would be, I guess. His bottom half is out of sight, draped in moth-eaten velvet and shadows.

“Bow to our hallowed companion, in honor of our founder.”

I do it automatically, following the instructions of the disembodied voice, as though the words themselves curl around my spine and push me gently forward at the waist. The words echo around the room and I dip my upper body forward in as deep a bow as I can manage without falling into the water below. Once I straighten up, I glance at Old Josef once more and whisper the same words as everyone else in the room, though this time they are directed at the grave that lies below his casket—the final resting place of Patrick Morton, founder and first headmaster of Morton Academy. The man who decided he would help the *really* clever kids succeed by matching them with people who would pay for their educations. He’s kind of a Jewel and Bone hero. “Thank you, founder. We honor you with jewels and remember you with bone. May we succeed.”

“Acolyte Asanti, step forward,” the voice calls, and I pinpoint its location to the plinth that would be at twelve if this were a clock. The figure in Jameela’s spot glides forward on the narrow stone ledge that connects the outer circle to the inner sanctum. As soon as she steps onto the island that holds the bones of our founder, another command is given. “Remove your hood.”

Jameela is pretty and petite, and the cloak swamps her more than most. Taylor must be gutted. Jameela was the second girl to complete the hunt, so she’s been promoted from deputy and now has the pick of any university she wants to go to. Like, *any*: Oxford, Harvard, Stanford. She can walk right in and the whole thing is covered. I allow myself to daydream for a second, imagining attending classes at Yale or Cambridge, all paid for. No student loans, no work-study jobs.

I refocus and watch intently as Jameela removes her hood. To be fair, the girl is clever—she was plucked from a nowhere town as some kind of mathematical genius. I hate math—too many numbers, too much logic. I much prefer the history of people, delving into the reasons behind the beauty they have created and left behind, whether it’s in artwork,

architecture, or just good old stories. I think it's why I was so smitten at the idea of a secret society—it's like stepping into an as-yet-unwritten part of history.

Jameela's smooth skin gleams golden in the flickering candlelight, but she is biting her lip. She looks nervous, and I just know that Taylor is screaming on the inside. She would never allow herself to show fear. She would appear brimming with poise and confidence even if she didn't feel it.

Especially if she didn't.

"Acolyte Asanti, do you dutifully ascend to the coveted position of head girl? A role that will not only afford you status within Morton Academy and beyond, but also within the Society of Jewel and Bone?"

Jameela clears her throat. "Yes. I do."

"Then may you succeed."

"May you succeed," I repeat with the rest of the group. It feels like a lifetime ago that we stood here doing the same ritual for Morgan, but it has only been weeks. Six to be exact. Maybe that's why Jameela looks so worried—does she think the position is cursed?

"Acolyte Fox, step forward."

Here we go—this is how it should be done. In her gown, Taylor strides down the narrow path like a supermodel and takes the place next to her superior. She drops her hood, and even from here I can see the sparkle in her eyes, the perfect flick of her eyeliner. I stand a little straighter, proud to be watching her. She's a natural.

"Acolyte Fox, do you respectfully ascend to the position of deputy head girl? A role that will not only afford you status within Morton Academy and beyond, but also within the Society of Jewel and Bone?"

"Yes, I do."

"Then may you succeed."

"May you succeed," I say through a smile. I want to applaud, but the most important part is coming.

"Are you both ready to swear your blood oath?"

"We are." The girls clasp hands, and the figure who has been speaking breaks away from their platform and joins them in the center. A shining silver blade slides from an oversized sleeve and is presented to Jameela, who I swear goes a little gray even though she's done this once before, when she was sworn in as deputy last summer.

Taylor keeps her head held high as Jameela takes the knife. It's an old blade, as old as the body they are flanking, I'd guess, and just as encrusted in jewels. The blade is kept sharp, though, something that is evident as Jameela slices into her own palm, and then Taylor's upturned one. They both step toward the skeleton, and, as the glass case is opened for them, they each lightly grasp an arm bone, smearing their blood upon the blood of hundreds of previous pledges. On top of Morgan's.

"Esteemed acolytes, please welcome the new head and deputy head girl of the Society of Jewel and Bone. As you know, this grants you the same esteemed positions within Morton Academy. Many congratulations."

Applause and a loud whoop from someone who can only be Marcus echoes around the cavern, and I join in enthusiastically. That feeling of belonging floods through me again, and I remember how intoxicating it can be. No matter what happens outside these walls, this place right here is mine. I am part of something special. Something important.

Jameela and Taylor embrace and the third figure removes her own hood, a shiny sheet of hair swishing as Dr. Patel, the headmistress of Morton, kisses each girl twice, once on each cheek. She then turns to the crowd and holds up one hand, a signal to silence our applause and remove our hoods. I tear mine off like a doctor pulling off a mask after a seventeen-hour surgery and relish the tickle of the cold air on the sweaty nape of my neck. The space to my left is empty, meaning Kat hasn't returned yet. I hope she doesn't get in trouble for missing the first meeting.

"Welcome back, acolytes." Dr. Patel gestures around the room with the blade she has retrieved from Jameela, before it disappears back into her robes, still bloodstained and dripping. "Our first meeting of the year is usually brief, given that it is the first day back. Tonight, however, we had to undertake the somewhat unusual task of welcoming a new pair into the hierarchy. Thankfully our head boy and deputy are both present and well." Dr. Patel nods toward Marcus and Frank, respectively. They nod back. "Now that is over, I will proceed as normal and ask the traditional question of our new head girl and the head boy." She turns to face Jameela, who holds a thick, bloodied piece of gauze to her left palm. "First, Acolyte Asanti, do you have any business you would like to discuss with the group?"

"Yes." Jameela's answer is a shock, and judging by the whispers around the room, not only to me. What could she have to discuss so soon?

The note?

“I see.” Dr. Patel’s voice is hard to read, as usual. That woman gives nothing away. “Well, the floor is yours.”

“Thank you.” Jameela looks less nervous and more terrified as she pulls a piece of paper from within her robes. She clears her throat. “I got this today.”

It is the note. I lean forward a little.

“I didn’t want to believe it, but I don’t think we can ignore it.” She hands the crumpled paper to Dr. Patel, who reads it with an inscrutable expression.

“It could be a sick joke,” she says to Jameela.

“It could,” she agrees, “but Morgan was my best friend. I think we should take it seriously.”

“Very well.” Dr. Patel hands the paper back to her. “You may address the group.”

Jameela swallows hard and holds the crumpled paper aloft. The room is swathed in silence. “It’s...it’s a photo. Of Morgan, from her memorial.” I strain to hear as her voice drops. “With her eyes scratched out.” There’s a collective intake of breath as she clears her throat and reads aloud from the page in her hand.

“Morgan’s death was not an accident. I killed her. And you’re next.”