

# Midnight Rain – Chapter 2

written by Holly

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NOTE: UNCORRECTED PROOF. Refer to the publication copy for any quotes or reviews.

Alan MacKerrie left the emergency room at the end of his shift feeling like he'd been kicked in the gut. His final patient of the night hadn't made it, and it felt like Fate slamming him in the face again – the fifth anniversary of his wife's and daughter's deaths, and once again he couldn't do a goddamned thing to save the life of the person depending on him.

He drove home with his head pounding. Logically, he knew it wasn't the same – he hadn't even been in the ER where they took Janet and Chick following the accident. No one had set out to destroy either of them – not even the wife-stealing bastard they'd been with. By contrast his last patient of the night had died because of a drunken brawl with her husband, and her death left Alan sick with humanity. He couldn't understand the sort of heedless violence that kept pouring through the ER doors. He couldn't comprehend taking a life. To have something – to have someone – and to destroy that life instead of protecting it ... he had never been able to get a handle on that.

He took a few deep, steadying breaths, determined to put his patient and her husband, the night, the anniversary – the whole hellish ordeal – out of his mind. At least for a while – he knew it wouldn't stay gone, but he could banish it for the drive home.

The morning traffic heading east on Commercial was brutal but he was heading west. No sunlight in his eyes, almost no one else on the road with him, the brief but unquestionable

pleasure of watching half a million poor shmucks coming the other way, enduring the dreadful commute to their cubicles when he was on his way home to sleep. That drive home was one of the few real benefits of having the night shift in the emergency room; Fort Lauderdale traffic rarely got better.

He drove through the nest of side streets that led to the development where he lived and pulled into his numbered slot in the communal parking lot. The neighborhood had headed downhill, but the place did look better in the long-shadowed light of dawn. The sun gave the peculiar flamingo pink of his townhouse that shade so loved by Florida developers a rosy glow, and made the palm trees and the coarse grass look like they'd been made of emeralds. In a few hours the boom boxes and the stereos would start up, and the parking lots would fill with blank-eyed men with no apparent sources of income.

At the moment, though, the only people visible were the dog-owners who spent their morning walks studiously not noticing their animals crapping beside the sidewalks, and carefully leaving the steaming messes behind. Aside from them, the place still looked deceptively middle-class.

Alan took a deep breath as he got out of the car and consciously shook off the night and everything associated with it. He had a couple days off. And he had never been more grateful for those days. He walked around the corner of his privacy fence rubbing his eyes and yawning, and ran right into the girl with the cane.

She went over backwards with a cry of pain, and his first ungallant thought was, Shit, my malpractice insurance. But he dropped to one knee beside her. "Christ, I'm sorry. I wasn't paying attention. Are you hurt?"

She closed her eyes and took a slow, deep breath, and with her eyes still closed, said, "I'll be fine." She looked at him then, and he saw a flicker of recognition in her eyes – and

she managed a strained smile. "You're the guy next door. The doctor."

He nodded. "Alan MacKerrie. Sorry to meet you this way."

Her pained smile got a little broader, but he noticed that she did not offer her name.

"If you were going to get pasted on the sidewalk, I guess you got pasted by the right guy." She was pretty in a delicate, underfed sort of way. Long, curly dark hair worn loose, large dark eyes, a pointed chin, the undeveloped build of a teenager who might one day fill out and be gorgeous but this girl wasn't a teenager, he realized. If he looked at the first ghosts of smile lines in the corners of her eyes, he'd have to guess early thirties.

He'd only seen her in passing before and had never paid much attention most too-thin women never showed up on his radar. "So where do you hurt?"

"My butt. My knee. The palms of my hands." She held them up and looked at them. Dirt embedded in the skin, a few scrapes and flecks of blood, nothing major.

"Any pain in your wrists?"

She wiggled them. "They're fine. My knee's the only thing that really hurts, and it already hurt."

"You feel a pop or a snap when you fell?"

"No. The pain just got worse, but it was already pretty bad."

"Let me take a look, okay?"

"I'd . . . rather you . . ." She sighed and shrugged. "Sure. Take a look. I don't think it's any worse than it was, but if it is, I'd rather know now." She tugged up the leg of her jeans, and for an instant he thought she had really pretty

legs, which made up for the flat chest, and then he saw the scar tissue and it was everything he could do to keep the shock from showing on his face.

He put his hands on either side of the knee and made a production of palpating and gently moving the joint to hide his reaction. Her right knee bore the branding of half a dozen surgeries; the square outlines of two grafts, one white and relatively old, the other pink and a bit puffy; a dozen black circles tattooed into the skin and grown over; a missing chunk that had healed hard and red and ugly. "What happened?" he asked, keeping his voice neutral and not looking at her face.

" Shotgun." He looked into her eyes and saw a wall so solid no emotion leaked past. She said, "I've had a bit of work done on it."

" I see that." He said, "I don't see any new damage, but if you want, I'll take you to the ER and get it x-rayed for you. I'll cover the cost – I did knock you down."

She smiled and shook her head, and he marveled that her expression could convey absolutely nothing of what she was thinking. "I'll see if I can stand on it. It doesn't feel any different now than it did when I walked out the door. I think it just twisted a little when I fell."

" Twisting can be significant. Pins can slip loose, slice things up inside ...." He stood and gave her his hand and said, "I'd feel better if you'd have it x-rayed." He leaned back and pulled, and she rose to her feet without much difficulty. He guessed that she weighed less than a hundred pounds, and that she was about 5'1" or 5'2". But there'd been a sinewy strength to her grip that surprised him, and a grace to her movements that changed his first impression of fragility. She was tougher than she looked at first glance.

" In the last two years I've seen more of the insides of hospitals than I ever wanted to; if I never have to go through

the doors of one again, that will be just fine.” She scooped up her cane and tested the leg, putting her full weight on it, then taking it off several times in a row. Testing. Her face remained impassive, but Alan caught the flicker of suppressed pain in her eyes. She wiped her palms on her jeans and slung her bag – a small canvas backpack that looked heavy to him – over her shoulder again.

” Good as new,” she said, then with a shrug added, “or at least good as slightly used.”

Definitely tougher than she looked. “Let me know if it gives you any trouble.”

She smiled, already moving away from him. “I’ll do that. Thanks. Thanks for being so nice.” She headed toward the parking lot. He watched her for a moment, wondering about her, about the scars, about her polite but carefully-maintained distance, and the fact that she didn’t offer her name. As she limped out of sight, he turned to his townhouse corner unit, one of four on the side and eight in the building, and for just an instant he was conscious of those other people in those other units, with their separate lives kept apart from his by only a layer of studs and drywall but the walls might as well have been acres thick. He didn’t know any of his neighbors by name, only a couple of them by sight. They were neighbors only in the physical sense, in that they inhabited the same building.

We all keep our secrets, he thought.

He found himself wondering what hers were.

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Phoebe went to Winn Dixie and wandered up and down the aisles, getting a few cans of beans, three cantaloupes and a bag of grapefruit. Her thoughts bounced between the doctor who had run into her and Michael. She was surprised to discover that

she wanted to like the doctor. She would never have noticed him, really. He was, well, plain. Sandy brown hair cut short, kept neat; light blue-gray eyes; straight, white teeth in a face that had regular features that didn't quite add up to handsome.

She looked at him and thought 'reliable.'

Not like Michael.

Nothing like Michael, who had been dark and handsome, who'd had women swarming around him hoping for one of his electric smiles.

Michael.

Phoebe shivered, and blamed it on being in the produce aisle. It probably hadn't been Michael on the phone, though she wished she could afford a quick trip to Cleveland to be sure. If she could see him curled in the bed not responding to anything, she would feel better.

By the time she got home, her anxiety had passed; she felt certain she could figure out who was calling her and put an end to it somehow. She put the grocery bag down on her front stoop and started unlocking the deadbolts, but stopped as she realized she was being watched. She looked to her left and to her right. No one.

She felt the steady stare, though. The fine hairs on her arms and on the back of her neck rose, her heart began pounding, and her breathing got quicker. She unlocked the door, dragged her bags into the house, and locked each of the deadbolts behind her. Then she leaned against the cool painted metal, shaking.

The sensation should have passed. But it didn't. Instead, it got worse. Her nerves and her gut insisted that even in her home, with the curtains drawn and the doors and windows all

locked and securely barred, someone still watched her.

She left the groceries on the floor and grabbed the pistol – a Browning Mark III – from her backpack. She didn't have to fish around for it. When she got her Florida carry-concealed permit, she sewed a holster into the front section of the backpack so all she had to do was reach beneath the front flap, unsnap the holster, and pull the weapon out. Gun in hand, Phoebe leaned against the door and put most of her weight on her stronger left leg. Then, safety thumbed to Off, stance wide, and pistol gripped in both hands just the way the cop she'd trained with at the range had taught her, she surveyed the spaces before her. Stairs right in front of her leading up to a railed loft; most people, she supposed, used that loft as a TV room or a playroom. She didn't use it at all no furniture, no storage, nothing – so nothing blocked her view. No one up there. The second-floor bedroom door was closed, the way she'd left it. She hated the idea of fighting the steps to get up there. But she might have to, just to check things out.

To her right lay the opened door to her bedroom. She could see her bed, the door into the connecting bathroom beyond, her closet door along the back wall. Bathroom door open, closet door closed. Had she left that closed? She couldn't remember. No one in the visible part of her bedroom, but there might be someone behind the partially open door to her right, up against the wall.

She scanned left. Impossible to tell about the kitchen, which lay all the way to the back of the open space. A half-height counter and shadows – because she'd turned the lights off back there before she left the house – could easily be hiding someone. Shit. Her gaze moved forward – her little dining-room table, four chairs in their places, tarot stuff still spread all over. Underneath – nothing. Closer, the couch, which stuck out from the wall. Might be someone on hands and knees behind that. Dammit, she needed to rethink how she had her furniture

arranged. She'd provided more hiding places than necessary. The place already offered too many.

She could put a few mirrors around, convex ones that would let her see into the blind spots. One of those would let her see the spot that concerned her most at the moment the place just to her left, where the tiny coat closet jutted out from the wall and then, on the opposite side, dropped back, forming a little alcove where her television and a couple of bookshelves sat. Someone could be standing right there, just an arm's reach away from her, and she wouldn't know it until he burst out from around the corner.

So. How did she move so that she could check out the house? Possible danger to the left. To the right, behind the opened door to her bedroom. In front of her, from both the couch and the kitchen. Did she trust her leg to get her safely out the door and back to her car?

Something moved. Back behind the table, in front of the kitchen half-wall, she saw someone take two steps forward and turn huge eyes on her. She aimed at the space between those eyes across the Browning's sights – then realized the person against the wall was a kid. A girl. Cute. Blonde hair. Maybe seven or eight.

" Oh, hell," Phoebe whispered, and, shaking, lowered the gun. The kid took two more steps toward her, raised a hand, opened her mouth to say something. And vanished.

Phoebe's shaking got much worse.

The feeling that someone was watching her disappeared with the kid. Phoebe was once again alone in the house – she knew she was alone in the house, the way she could tell sometimes what the cards were going to be before she even turned them over. But being alone in the house had ceased to be the issue.

Hands trembling so badly she could barely hang onto the

Browning, she managed to thumb the safety back into place and got the pistol back into its holster in her backpack. She let the backpack slide to the floor, let the door support most of her weight, wrapped her arms tight around herself.

Was she crazy? She'd thought she might have been the last time.

Shortly before Michael tracked her down two years earlier, she'd started hearing voices. Or, more precisely, a voice. Her favorite grandmother's. When Phoebe slept, Nana appeared in her dreams, shaking her head, telling Phoebe that disaster was coming. When she drove to work, Nana told her to keep going, to not look back. And when she stood in front of the classroom, it was Nana's voice whispering, "Run."

Phoebe wrapped her arms tighter around herself, fighting the wash of memories.

... screaming ... the white-lightning flash of pain, the taste of iron ... blood on the chalkboard ...

Phoebe hadn't listened to the voice. Hadn't believed. Her grandmother had been dead for almost eight years at the time, and Phoebe had been sure she was suffering from stress and overwork, that hearing the voice was just imagination. She had not wanted to believe, had not wanted to throw away every bit of the life she had fought so hard to rebuild. She kept telling herself that she had earned her life, and the voice kept telling her she hadn't – that she had to run.

... blood on the floor ... on the desks ... on the display tables and the reports in careful cursive on lined three-ring notebook paper ...

Phoebe couldn't breathe.

She shook, and closed her eyes tightly against the memory of the child standing there, looking at her, trying to tell her

something. Maybe the child had been a hallucination. Maybe the phone call had not been real and the child's ghost had not been real, and Phoebe was simply losing her mind. That would be best – madness would be far preferable to the alternative. Because if she were going mad, she would still be safe inside her locked doors. He wouldn't be coming for her.

Again.

But could she hide behind the hope of insanity?

... blood on the walls ... and small, broken bodies still beneath white sheets ... and the anguished wails of bereaved parents ...

Madness would be a comfort. But Phoebe hadn't listened before; she had instead sought comfort in excuses and a foolish faith in rationality, and the price of that had been more than she could bear.

Under different circumstance, she would tell herself that the constant grind of guilt and worry and the awful scramble to keep a roof over her head and the lights on and food on her table had taken its toll, and she would laugh a little and shake off what had just happened. Just as she'd done before.

Phoebe, however, didn't have different circumstances. She had her circumstances, and her circumstances included a man with Michael's voice calling her on a phone for which he should not have had the number, for which he could not have gotten her name. It included a phone call that had come through a closed system without leaving a trace. And it included the image of a dead child trying to tell her something before vanishing.

The phone call had been real. The man on the phone wasn't Michael. Couldn't be Michael. Couldn't be. But even if it wasn't Michael, it was someone who could imitate Michael's voice, someone who knew things about her that only Michael had known. It could be someone who hated her enough to try to turn himself into the man who had made her eight years of married

life and three years of hiding a living, breathing hell. She ran lists through her head.

Who hated her that much? One of Michael's relatives? The father of one of the kids who died? Some psycho she'd picked up who wasn't related to her past at all?

Any of the above, or none of the above. Then who knew her that well? Who knew them – the couple that Phoebe and Michael had been, with all their terrible secrets?

Nobody.

The people at Sebastian Bright Experimental School knew some of the story, and the police knew most of it, but the real details – Michael's voice, his tone, the way he spoke to her and the words he used – were something only the two of them had known during the eight years of their marriage. Michael was a brilliant and dedicated lawyer in front of his partners, his clients, the judges; an affable, intelligent, loving husband in front of her family, his family, the members of the country club, complete strangers ...

She closed her eyes, hugging herself hard just to keep from feeling like she was going to fly apart if she let go, remembering the day she'd finally gathered up the nerve to tell someone the truth. Ran through the Yellow Pages, looking for Women's Shelters. Found several, dialed the first one on the list, waited for someone to pick up, and when at last a woman answered the phone, said, "I need help. My husband is ... hurting me. Please. I need help."

"Where are you?" the woman had asked, skipping past all the unnecessary details and straight to the heart of the matter.

And Phoebe had looked up to find Michael standing there, staring at her, smiling, his index finger pointed between her eyes, his thumb up. Pow!, he mouthed, pulling the imaginary trigger.

Phoebe had hung up the phone without answering, staring at that unwavering smile, at the implied gun.

"Naughty girl," Michael had said. "Hope I heard all there was to hear of that, or whoever you called is going to have a terrible accident."

Terrified, her heart pounding, she'd dared to stand up to him. "I've had enough, Michael. You can't do this anymore. I'm not your prisoner, I'm not your slave, I'm not a toy for your sick games." She'd jammed her shoulders back straight, and snarled, "And I'm not Eileen. I'm sorry she hurt you, I'm sorry she left you, but I'm not going to pay for what she did to you for the rest of my life."

And that smile had changed. Michael had watched her, so amused, so delighted. Murmured gently, "No one leaves me, Phoebe."

"Eileen did."

"Did she? Mmmmmmm. Lucky Eileen. And you want to follow in her footsteps."

His smile vanished then, and Michael stared into Phoebe's eyes, and she felt like she was falling down a well. His voice got softer. She knew in that instant what some part of her had suspected for years. No matter the sad story of betrayal he'd spun her when they were dating – his fiancée, Eileen Ganella, hadn't left him at the altar. She hadn't shown up for her own wedding because she was dead; he'd killed her. He'd successfully gotten away with murder once, and if Phoebe crossed him, he intended to do it again.

And he said, "You won't leave me, Phoebe. Not ever."

That was the moment she knew that if she stayed with him, she was going to die.

Hot tears burning down her cheeks – tears of shame, that she

could be so much a coward, tears of fear, that her life could mean so little, could be crushed out so quickly – she'd hung her head and said, "No, Michael. I'm . . . sorry I tried to tell someone. I'm so sorry. I won't do it again. And I won't leave you." She had taken his punishment like an obedient slave. Had endured the humiliation yet again, the careful, methodical torture.

And the next morning, when she knew he was in court with a client, she ran. Aching and stiff, terrified for her life – but not bruised, because he never allowed any evidence of his brutality to show – she withdrew five hundred dollars cash from an ATM using two credit cards she'd stolen from his wallet. She knew the PINs she wasn't supposed to know she'd watched him when he didn't know she was watching, and got them one number at a time over a period of weeks. He changed PINs fairly often. Just not quite often enough.

She'd also used his platinum American Express card to buy three bus tickets, all from different booths. She gave a one-way ticket to Albuquerque, New Mexico to a plump young woman with wistful eyes who'd been staring at a travel poster, and a one-way ticket to Fort Lauderdale, Florida to a relatively clean homeless man who had seen something of her terror in her eyes and had spoken kindly to her. She kept the one-way ticket to San Francisco for herself. When the bus got as far as Toledo, however, she got off, gave her seat to a man who said he'd always wanted to go to California, and purchased another ticket for herself.

To Miami.

With her small supply of cash.

She diced both of Michael's credit cards into confetti with a sharp pair of scissors, scattered the confetti in three different full trash cans, and got on her new bus. From Miami, she headed back to Fort Lauderdale. She'd never been there,

knew no one in the vicinity, had no reason to run there and she'd made sure Michael would be able to figure out that the person who had taken the ticket to Fort Lauderdale that she'd purchased had not been her.

She'd hoped that when he eliminated Fort Lauderdale, Albuquerque, and eventually San Francisco, he would never consider them again. That her careful deception would put him off her trail forever. Nonetheless, that finger had stayed pointed between her eyes for the three years she'd eluded him, and that smile had never left her nightmares, waking or sleeping.

" You won't leave me, Phoebe. Not ever."

In the end, he'd been wrong. And right. When he found her, she beat him. She won. But the price she'd paid in winning scarred her in ways she would never escape. She would never again walk without pain. Would never again trust. Would never again love. Would never escape the guilt or the nightmares that she'd earned for allowing other people to stand between her and Michael.

For just an instant, she thought of her next-door neighbor – the doctor with the kind eyes. She remembered the gentleness of his touch as he checked her knee for damage, the way he tried to conceal his horror at her scars. He'd seemed – kind. Genuine. He hadn't been particularly tall or particularly handsome, but Michael had been both those things. The doctor – Alan – was someone that, just for an instant, she'd wanted to like. She'd liked his hands on her knee, his wary smile, his wonderful, rich voice in the ordinary face.

But someone with Michael's voice had called her. The dead had come to visit. She wasn't safe. She would never be safe. She couldn't let her guard down for an instant. Could not chance having someone standing between her and Michael a second time if Michael returned.

Besides, her neighbor was simply another unknown. Another hazard. The men who seemed best on the outside – good families, good jobs, good looks – were sometimes the worst on the inside. And how could anyone tell until it was too late?

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