



THE
LETTER
KEEPER

A Murphy Shepherd Novel

THOMAS NELSON
CHARLES
Since 1798

MARTIN



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CHAPTER 1

FLORENCE, ITALY

She didn't move when I opened the door. She lay stretched across the bed, her skin cold. Eyes half closed. Pupils rolled back. Her carotid pulse was slow but strong, which suggested medicated sleep and probably total loss of memory. I compared her face to the picture, and while she was skinnier, hair shorter and darker, and eyes painted in darker circles, I'd found her. I pressed her thumb to my phone, scanned the print, and sent it to Bones. Seconds later, the match returned. After twenty-seven days, four countries, twenty-some thousand miles of travel, and little sleep, I'd found Christine Samson.

Chris was a high school junior. Cheerleader. National Honor Society member. Beginner violinist. Restaurant hostess. Weekend babysitter. Boy-crazy Snapchatter. And she was the daughter of an absent dad and divorced parents. Her mom worked a couple of jobs but made less than forty thousand a year, which meant Chris attended the seventy-five-thousand-dollars-a-year West Florida boarding school on a merit scholarship. She was currently ranked third in her class and had already received offers from most Ivy League schools. She could take her pick.

The scumbags who brought her here had vetted her through her Instagram account. She looked great in a bikini. Never met a stranger. Didn't drink. Not one to party. Innocence wearing skin. Through a direct

message from an up-and-coming amateur soccer player, she agreed to a milkshake. And a cheeseburger. Jean Pierre, who was twenty-one and preferred the name JP, drove a Porsche. But he was no gangster. No gold chains. He wore button-downs and chinos. Somewhere in a greasy burger joint, they laughed through the burger and then the milkshake, but he couldn't stay out late because his team was playing a doubleheader the next day and the pro teams would be watching.

Chris remembered laughing and singing along to the radio as he drove her home at two miles over the speed limit. *Mom would approve.* Finally, a good guy.

She woke the next morning in a hotel room across town. Her muscles ached. Her head thumped, and when she opened her eyes, he was next to her. One eye swollen shut. Busted lip. Blood caked to his face. And just as naked as she. She sat up as the shock set in, but no matter how hard she tried, she could not remember how they got here or what precipitated it. Neither could he.

She grabbed her phone to call the cops and only then saw the photos. Who were these people and why were these pictures in her inbox? Then she looked closely. Her face. His face. Their bodies. She tried to focus. How did this happen?

If these get out . . .

She started to cry, but JP took charge. Gently. "We've got to get out of here." They dressed, slipped out the back, and spent the morning looking over their shoulders and trying to piece it all together. Little developed. But he was calm and assuring. When he dropped her off, he asked to come inside and suggested they tell her mom everything. She made him swear. Not a word. To anyone. Ever.

A week ticked by. They talked every day. Their emotions intertwined. Most conversations centered on the photos, but she had one question she couldn't verbalize.

What if they took video? If so, my life is over . . .

Late in the week, as they greenlit through worst-case and end-of-the-world scenarios, he described how his coach had been understanding about

his no-show at the game and how professional soccer teams were beating down his door. Some were even Northeast clubs. Driving distance to Ivy League schools. Maybe he could get picked by a club near her. He could keep an apartment. He just needed somebody who understood him.

After a week, she was no longer holding her breath. Maybe the worst had passed. One and done. When not working, they were inseparable. He was a gentleman. Held the door. Paid for dinner. Didn't put a hand on her—although she needed him to.

But then the attachments showed up in her email. His too. She threw up in the bathroom. When his Porsche arrived, she signed herself out of school.

Exhibiting the strength she needed, JP sent the videos to his dad. An international lawyer with offices in Germany and France. His father immediately canceled meetings and got on the phone, demanding answers from the authorities. He was flying in tonight to meet with a special crimes unit that handled this sort of thing, hire an investigator, and spend some much-needed time with his son. They were headed to the islands for the weekend. A short trip to the family home. She was welcome to come along. They had a sailboat. *They could just get out of here.*

He'd set the hooks deep.

Her mom dropped her off, exchanged phone numbers with the dad, and Chris promised to call when they landed.

That was twenty-seven days ago.

JP, whose real name was not Jean Pierre and who had never been a semi-pro soccer player, had one thing going for him. A boyish face. While I don't know the particular facts, I know his type. On their first date, he had slipped something in her drink, driven her to a hotel, and staged the photos—which, when they awoke, made him look like just as much a victim as she. Completing the act that knit them together.

The last bread crumb led me to a small villa outside Florence. One more stop on the underground railroad, although this one did not lead to freedom. More like a train to Auschwitz. I tore a strip off the bedsheet and tied a tourniquet around my arm. JP was no high schooler but he was a

knife guy, and the puncture was deep and the blade serrated. I hate knives. Maybe worse than guns.

I press-checked my Sig. One in the chamber. One in the magazine. Not much to work with so getting out should be interesting. Footsteps and angry shouting thundered above us. Multiple languages. Evidence that the fire I'd set was spreading toward the tank. We didn't have long.

I pulled her cheerleading sweats onto her sweat-soaked body and felt a profound sense of sadness. Why hadn't I gotten here sooner? What evil had been inflicted while they transported her and other girls in a drug-induced haze by bus and boat and plane? I stared at JP lying limp on the floor beneath me. *Why do the evil prosper?*

Bones had taught me that. I pushed him out of my mind. He pushed back.

It had been three months since I learned the truth about Marie, and I still hadn't come to grips with the reality. For fourteen years, Bones had known she was alive and yet not told me. Fourteen years while I circled the globe looking for her. Logically, I understood why he said nothing as a priest. Emotionally, I could not wrap my head around how he kept silent as my friend.

I would have walked through hell if I'd known she was alive. He knew that. The chasm between knowing why and how was a lonely, painful place. I tried to shake the memory. Dwelling on matters of the heart in moments like this would get me killed.

I glanced at Chris. Tender, young, and now wounded. One more casualty in a twisted world where sick and wealthy men with no conscience buy what they want because they can. No matter the damage. Trafficking in people is an evil without comparison. And the motivations of those responsible are beyond comprehension.

If I got her home, I'd offer to find her and her mom a place at Freetown and nurse them both back to life. I'd suggest a gap year because while some of this would wash off quickly, some would not. She needed time. Her tendency—like all of them—would be to “just put it behind her.” Bury herself in the present. Focus on next steps. College. But in my experience, she

could either deal with the trauma now or wait until it festered and the residue spilled out her chest. Neither would be fun. Bones and the team would surround her with girls who had the same experience. Let her know she wasn't alone. Rebuild her one tear at a time. Undoing what had been done.

I often marveled at the resiliency of the wounded. Who would walk out the other side?

I glanced at JP's leg unnaturally canted across the doorway. If there was any consolation, and there wasn't, it was knowing Jean Pierre and his "father" would cause no more damage. Prison is not kind to those who traffic in flesh.

No matter how many times I'd done this, I could not get used to how attached the girls grew to their captors. It was the deepest form of emotional warfare. JP had played the part to the end, as evidenced by the fact that as I lifted Chris off the bed, she reached for him.

Don't leave him . . .

In truth, JP was an emotional terrorist. They all are. He'd done this to dozens, maybe even a hundred girls. For Chris, it would be a while before the light clicked on. But when it did, how deep would be the well of her hate? Would she hate men? Could she ever trust another?

I wouldn't blame her if the answer was no.

They had stolen something she had wanted to offer. Her hope. Which is a crime against the soul.

And betrayal of the soul is . . .

I carried her out of the house where flames rose from second- and third-story windows. Frantic shouting sounded from inside. I had cleared a half mile before the gas line lit. When it did, Chris again reached back for JP, crying.

I lifted her into the jet where the pilot closed the door and the nurse inserted an IV into Chris's arm. To flush the toxins and the drugs. Broad-spectrum antibiotics. Something stronger would be needed to flush the memories.

Eight hours later, we landed at a private airport outside of West Palm. Chris's mother was inconsolable. We loaded them into an ambulance as

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the rain began to fall. I was stepping into my truck when the text came in. I leaned my head back and closed my eyes. Another beep. All I wanted to do was go home and pull the covers over my head.

Send somebody else.

In my mind, I could hear Bones's response. *There is no one else.* A pause before the next text. "This one matters."

I thought, *They all matter.*

Then I did the one thing that makes going home all but impossible.

I looked at the picture.



THOMAS NELSON
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CHAPTER 2

MONTANA

When Bones had sent the picture, he'd included the words, "Tight window. Now or never. And . . ."

"What?"

"He might not be the only one."

At the time, I had sat in my truck wanting to tune Bones out. Completely. But I could not mute this kid. Not his blue eyes or the dreams behind them.

I pulled gear from a West Palm storage unit and returned to the plane. When the copilot shut the door, my phone rang. It was Bones. "One more thing."

I waited while the nurse inserted an IV needle into one arm and started stitching the hole in the other. I planned to use the flight time to replenish the fluids my adrenaline had spent.

"The owner of this ranch is not your average cattleman with a Stetson. Instead of chaps and boots, he wears a collar, a robe, a big silver cross, and a you-can-trust-me smile."

"He's a priest?"

"At one time."

"I thought you said, 'Once a priest, always a priest.'"

“For him I’d make an exception.” He continued, “Just don’t take anything at face value. Nothing is as it seems.”

Four hours later, the jet touched down an hour outside of Whitefish in the shadow of Glacier National Park, where the landscape had become popular with A-list actors, rock stars, and hedge fund moguls who stood in streams casting shiny new equipment trying to look like Brad Pitt.

All the world was white. My GPS routed me forty minutes down a two-lane asphalt to a spiderweb of dirt roads. I parked the rental at a vacant house where I found a three-seater snowmobile and, judging by the throttle response, enough horsepower to slingshot to the moon. I wound through the trees for an hour to the boundary of a sixty-thousand-acre ranch. Complete with its own bison, elk, and cattle herds, the spread was larger than many cities. I stashed the snowmobile, donned snowshoes, and tried to ignore the pain in my arm. Every step reminded me.

Bones would call me the moment the satellite showed them fueling the jet. If they wrangled the kid onto the plane, it became extremely unlikely we’d ever see him again this side of eternity.

As the sun set, I crested a hilltop and looked down over the compound. Multiple buildings. Cabins tucked into the trees. All of which had been constructed out of giant timbers. Many of the logs were too large for two people to wrap their arms around. In the surrounding areas stood several hundred horses, cows, and llamas. Across the river that serpented out of the mountains and through the property sat a private airport complete with seven Gulfstream G5s. Several barns were filled with hay bales and multiple tractors, snowmobiles, Jeeps, and ATVs of every shape and size.

The main house looked to be twenty thousand square feet and was lit up like Christmas. Smoke spiraled out of six chimneys, filling the air with a festive scent. As I stared down on wonderland, I saw fifty to seventy-five people milling about the porches. Slender girls in bikinis swam in the heated pool or frolicked in the sauna with a dozen cigar-smoking men, most of whom were visibly rotund or grossly overweight. Somewhere music played. From my perch beneath the arms of an evergreen, I counted seven patrolling and armed guards. And those were just the ones I could see.

Bones had no idea where they were keeping the kid, but every man has a basement.

It's where we hide the skeletons.

I waited for cover of darkness because I wanted them as medicated and heavy-lidded as possible. Under clouds and a quarter moon, I crept the last mile to the barn, where I let myself in and checked the snowmobiles for keys and gas. Both of which they had. If they were expecting me, or someone like me, they didn't show it.

The trick to getting inside a house in which a party is under way with some hundred or more partygoers is to look like you belong. The porch sprawled across the mountainside and wound around two pools and three hot tubs. Spaced throughout, three bartenders and multiple servers kept the partygoers topped off with liquid courage. Supporting the flow of alcohol were three young guys whose sole job it was to keep the bars stocked, bus glassware, and light cigars. They were hopping. When one young bar stocker made his way to my side of the barn to refill an ice chest, I shoved him in the cab of a tractor and borrowed his sheepskin jacket.

I press-checked the Sig 220, screwed on the suppressor, counted six magazines inside my belt, and set my AR inside the ice chest. Then I dialed Bones on the sat phone. The earpiece allowed us to talk while also amplifying noise around me—which was helpful if people tried to sneak up behind me. I spoke briefly. "Radio check."

Bones responded, "Check." I entered the house carrying the chest, wandered through the kitchen, and descended into the basement. Three minutes later, I changed my mind. It wasn't a basement.

It was a dungeon.

At the base of three levels of stairs, a bunker door led to a long, dimly lit hallway that reeked of cigar smoke and incense. A dozen rooms had been designed for sadistic people to live out their fantasies. From a massage parlor to a bathhouse, locker room, theater, circus, no expense had been spared to meet whatever level of otherworldly depravity descended the stairs. Judging from the construction, each room had been lined with foam insulation and sound panels guaranteeing that a rock concert could

not be heard in the house above. Mood lighting, soft music, and spinning ceiling fans—not to mention the smell of human sweat and various essential oils—suggested all the rooms had been inhabited just moments prior to my arrival. Some of the sheets were still warm, drops of sweat were on the floor, and one of the bathroom showers was still running, pouring steam through the opening above the glass door—suggesting someone had been standing in there when I appeared. Mounted on every ceiling and in every corner were cameras. Each room had at least six, and those were just the ones I could count.

I worked quickly, clearing each room. If the kid had been here, he was gone now. Along with everyone else. I spoke to Bones. “No boy.”

His response was quick. “Check.”

The hallway ended at an elevator shaft, which I supposed lifted the trolls who visited here back to the surface, where I was rather certain cars waited to whisk them to waiting jets. I returned to the stairs, climbed back to the ground floor, and felt my anger growing. Something in me told me I was caught in a game of cat and mouse while the puppeteer used young lives as bait.

That many cameras had to lead somewhere, and I wanted to find that room. More than that, I very much wanted to find the guy who sat in the chair staring into the monitors—and more than that, I wanted to find the guy who paid him to do it.

While the underground had been emptied, the surface party continued unfazed. As if the two were oblivious of each other. I turned left from the kitchen and scurried down a hallway that led to what looked like an office. Mahogany walls, stylistically lit artwork, ivory tusks—the room was a museum, but two things surprised me. First, the far wall was covered in swords of varying type, size, and purpose. Many looked quite old. Second, the room was void of photographs. Not one.

I had a feeling the entrance to the media room could be found there, but I didn’t have time to search for secret doors and hidden stairs. I circled the desk, which looked unused and ornamental. I doubted anyone had ever sat at it. On top sat a Wi-Fi picture frame. Every few seconds, a new

picture flashed onto the screen and rotated through. I walked to the back of the desk, studied the viewer, and was surprised to see a picture of me, taken moments ago, as I crossed the field to the barn. The following fifteen pictures traced my progression into the house, down into the dungeon, through the kitchen, and down the hallway into the office—some thirty-five seconds ago.

Someone was watching me.

When I lifted the frame, the picture changed again to one of me holding the picture frame. Judging from the angle of the camera, I studied the wall and found a dime-sized camera lens posing as one of the eyes in the artwork hanging above the fireplace. The picture flashed again, this time to a picture of me holding the frame and staring into the camera. Present tense.

When the frame changed again, it showed the towheaded boy I'd been sent to find. The photographer had taken the picture close up. The boy's pupils were dilated and eyelids droopy. I doubted he was conscious. I studied the picture, trying to make sense of the blurred images in the background. Finally, my mind put the pieces together. They were bodies. Intertwined like driftwood.

I was in the process of setting the frame on the desk when it flashed one last time. To a picture of Ellie. My daughter. The photographer had been standing behind her and the picture was taken over her shoulder. She was studying at a coffee shop on Main Street in Freetown. Head tilted, shoulders relaxed, the fingers of her right hand unconsciously twirling her hair. Something she did when she was thinking.

I placed my fingers on the screen, expanded the picture, and read the date and time off the top of her laptop screen. The picture had been taken ten minutes ago. As I stared in disbelief, it changed again. This time to Angel. Playing Ping-Pong. The white ball hung suspended in midair, hit by an opponent with her back to me. The expression on Angel's face was one of elation. I expanded my fingers over the news report on the TV screen in the background. Date and time showed twelve minutes ago. When the frame flashed a final time, I was staring at a black-and-white picture of

Casey as she typed at a laptop in her room, Gunner asleep at her feet. This picture had been taken from a distance through her bedroom window.

“Bones?”

“Check.”

“Lock down Sally.”

Bones and I had worked together long enough to develop a language that meant much more than the words themselves. *Lock down* meant, “I have reason to believe someone we love is in imminent danger. So secure everyone at Freetown. Right now. DEFCON 1.” *Sally* added specificity to the threat and told him who to find: the girls.

Bones responded without comment. “Check.”

My experience thus far told me there were two parties going on here. One party in the underworld and one on the surface. Which was smart on somebody’s part. It allowed for plausible deniability—if you had a really good lawyer.

The numbers around the pool were thinning, suggesting those who knew the real purpose of the party were departing while those who did not remained.

I needed a diversion, and fire had always been my friend. The sight of an in-house sprinkler system suggested that unless I blew up the house, the fire wouldn’t last long. And while I’d enjoy the fireworks, I ran the risk of hurting some people who, in all honesty, thought they were simply attending a party and had no idea what was going on in the tombs below.

I quickly descended the stairs and held my lit Zippo beneath a fire sprinkler, causing multiple alarms to sound. Accompanying the earsplitting racket were umpteen streams of high-pressured water soaking every square inch of the basement and stairwell. While I preferred fire damage because it just felt better, water damage can be worse. It can also make life uncomfortable in subfreezing temperatures, but I’d worry about that then.

I headed back up to the kitchen and glanced out the window. Scuttled either by sound or water, additional armed guards appeared from a cabin behind the house and began filing across the pool deck with purpose.

I held my Zippo to the kitchen sprinkler, which sent signals to one half

of the house, and watched as partygoers began scurrying like scared cats. Standing in the kitchen while the water rained down, I studied my options.

As I thought, Bones rang into my earpiece. "Sally locked down. Gunner standing guard. All good."

"Check that."

Through the kitchen window, I counted seven private jets sitting along the runway. Given the glow of their engines glistening through a light snowfall, all of them were warming up. Bones chimed in my ear again: "Engines hot." That's about when I heard the report of the rifle and felt the fire scorch my left leg.

The massive kitchen island was constructed mostly of stone, so I tucked myself behind it, made a makeshift bandage out of a kitchen towel and a curtain pull cord, secured it around my leg, then belly-crawled to the porch. I grabbed the spare propane tank beneath a portable fryer and set it on a grill set to high. I then returned to the kitchen and used a butcher knife to hack off the feed line to the gas stove, pouring propane into the open air. I exited the kitchen about the time one hundred thousand BTUs heated the tank beyond its holding ability. The first explosion blew out all the glass in the kitchen, which ignited the propane-laden air in the kitchen, which blew out the sides of the house, which then lit the gas line leading to the much larger tank that heated the pool and secondary houses.

The three explosions must have registered on Bones's satellite feed because the next words sounding in my ear were, "You good?"

"Check."

The explosion shook the second half of the house and disintegrated any glass that remained, allowing me to hear the jet noise on the runway half a mile away as one jet after another lined up to disappear into a gray Montana sky.

Bones again. "Wheels up."

"I see 'em."

Whoever sent me the pictures of the boy, the bodies, and the girls was trying to keep me busy while everyone boarded their planes and disappeared into the night sky. A head fake. I knew this. I also knew I couldn't

very well leave the captives to fend for themselves. And I knew men hide bodies in basements.

I returned down the stairs through a shower of cold water into the basement, asking myself where I'd hide people I didn't want found. I searched every room. Looking for seams in walls, secret doors, secret crawlspaces. Anything that offered space enough to hold several people. My search brought me back to the elevator, but this time one thing stood out that had not before: a trail of liquid smeared along the floor. Urine. I punched the button and the elevator door opened, revealing a completely normal elevator. Save one thing. The trail of liquid continued across the floor of the elevator and beneath the far door—as if whoever'd left it had been rolled through the opposite door when it opened at the floor above. My problem was simple: whoever had left that trail would have sat there while they rode the elevator up. Making a puddle. But no puddle existed. They hadn't sat at all. They'd been dragged. Straight through.

I studied the buttons. "1." "2." "3." "In Case of Emergency." And "Light." Oddly, the two most worn buttons were the last two, causing me to wonder just how many emergencies one residential elevator could have. Judging by the wear on the buttons, they had been pushed simultaneously. And often. I pushed both and the back door of the elevator rolled open. Revealing another hallway.

In the back of my mind, I heard Bones. *Nothing is as it seems.*

I stepped into the hallway, triggering the motion lights. If I thought the first hallway was a den of iniquity, I had another thing coming. My room search took me to a locked door behind which I heard scuffling, which was either a really big rat or a person trying to get out. Fortunately, the lock and light switch were on my side. Just like in a prison.

I flipped both and tried to slide the door open, but something prevented me. I pushed harder and slid the obstruction out of the way enough to squeeze my body through the opening, where I found a sleeping teenage girl at my feet. A quick scan and I counted nine more. All unconscious and poorly clothed, if at all. Scanning the room, I found two eyes staring back at me.

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The eyes of a boy.

He was shaking more from shock than cold, but what does it matter. He was leaning against the concrete with his arms wrapped around his knees, leaving me to question whether he was hugging himself or bracing himself. When I squatted across from him, he flinched. “You cold?”

Chattering teeth. Puffy eye. Bloody nose. He was a fighter. I liked him.

I draped a comforter over his shoulders. Blond hair stuck to his face. He never took his eyes off me. Or the Sig.

He wiped his nose on his sleeve. I looked a second time at the finger-shaped bruises on his neck.

“Can you walk?”

He stood. Unsteady. Working hard to focus his eyes. If he was aware that he’d wet his pants, he didn’t show it.

When Bones had sent the picture, he’d included the words, “Tight window. Now or never. And . . .” I stared at the bodies strewn about me and remembered his last words: “He might not be the only one.”

I needed to get these kids out of here, so I rode the elevator to the surface and took a look around. My shadow in tow. The kid never let me get beyond arm’s reach. The elevator opened into an empty garage large enough to hold a couple of tractor trailers. Two bay doors suggested vehicles drove in one way and exited another. I returned downstairs, grabbed every blanket, sheet, or jacket I could find, and then loaded the elevator to capacity. Getting everyone topside required two trips. When finished, the floor of the garage looked more morgue than triage. The kid and I wrapped each of the girls in the bedding. We put two in each cocoon, hoping they’d unknowingly share body warmth. I didn’t know what they’d been given, but each pulse was strong, suggesting the concoction produced sleep and not death.

When we’d finished, I waved my hand across them. “You know any of them?”

He shook his head.

I glanced out the bay door. The main house sat down a slight hill some two hundred yards through the trees. The party had long since ended, but

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I wanted to look around. I had a strong sense the puppeteer was hanging around. I turned to my shadow. I knew what he was going to say but asked anyway. “Can you wait here?”

He stepped closer and shook his head.

Another glance out the bay door. I squatted in front of him. “I’m going to burn their playhouse down. Can you do what I tell you?”

He nodded without hesitation.



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