

# CHILDREN <sup>OF</sup> PARANOIA



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# Prologue

Dear Maria,

I doubt that you expected this journal to amount to much when you gave it to me, but here it is. I wrote it for you. When you gave it to me, you said that you wanted to understand me. I'm still not sure you'll understand what I've done but I have hope.

You're a big part of this story now, bigger than I expected when I started. I just kept on writing. So here it is. Here I am on a few hundred ratty pages.

I don't know if I've sinned or if sin even exists. If it does, then I guess I've committed more than my share. Maybe I should care, but I don't. All that I care about now is that you and Christopher are safe. Everything else will take care of itself.

I love you.

Love,  
Joe

# One

It's hard to decide where to start. I know you're supposed to start at the beginning, but how do I know where the beginning is? It's hard for me. I've always had a much better sense for endings. But I guess it starts in Brooklyn, standing in the dark on a street corner, waiting for a woman to finish closing up her shop.

When she first stepped out of the building, I backed into the shadows. She took a few quick glances in each direction but I knew that all she could see was the empty street. Seeing nothing, she turned her attention back to locking up. She had spent the last hour cleaning up, wiping down the counter, and putting the bottles of wine that the customers had rearranged back in order. Now she stood there on the street outside, her long day over. She was ready to go home to her family. She pulled down the metal grate meant to protect her store, attached a padlock to the grate, placed the key in her purse, and then stepped back again. She took another quick glance in both directions. Still nothing. She reached into her purse and pulled out a loose cigarette. She lit the cigarette, took one deep draw, turned to her left, and began walking down the dark street toward home.

So far everything was exactly as I had been told. She had no escorts. She exhibited no suspicions. Her husband was away on busi-

ness. This one was supposed to be easy. For once, it looked like it might actually work out that way.

I waited until she was a full block away before stepping out of the darkness where I had been waiting. I turned to my right and began to walk down the opposite side of the street from her. She walked quickly, each stride deliberate but relaxed. Every few steps, she would take another draw from her cigarette. She was wearing a long black skirt, black sneakers, and a purple blouse. She was attractive, but I did my best to block this from my mind. I concentrated on pacing myself so that I would move just fast enough to catch up to her by the time she turned toward her apartment, but not so fast as to arouse suspicion. This wasn't the first time I'd done this. I busted my cherry years ago. It wouldn't be the last time either. I was certain of that even then. The thought didn't bother me. I had a job to do.

I was less than a quarter of a block behind her when she turned left down the street toward her apartment. I watched as she flipped the butt of her cigarette onto the sidewalk and put it out with a twist of her foot. Then she started down the even quieter, tree-lined street that she lived on. When I was sure that she couldn't see me, I jogged across the street. As I did, I pulled a pair of thin black leather gloves out of my bag and slipped them onto my hands. It was darker on the side street. There were fewer streetlights.

She was moving quickly now. Faster than I suspect she normally would. I don't think she saw me but she must have sensed something. This was normal. It was some sort of sixth sense, a sinking feeling of impending tragedy. She didn't dare look back, not yet. With a few long strides, I closed the distance between us to little more than ten feet.

It was clear now that she knew I was following her. She still hadn't seen me. She simply felt me behind her. She could have screamed now but I knew that she wouldn't. She wouldn't risk the embarrassment. After all, I might have been one of her neighbors returning

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home just like she was. She'd been out of the game for a while. She'd lost the ability to trust her instincts.

I watched as she put her hand back into her purse. She could have been reaching for anything. I watched her hand. If she pulled out a gun, Mace, even a cell phone, I would have had to move faster than I wanted to. I would have had to grab her wrist, twist it, and force her to let whatever she was holding go. I didn't have to, though. I heard a slight jingling sound. She was just reaching for her keys.

There were shadows on the sidewalk from the trees and she stepped quickly between the darkness and the light. Three more houses and she would make a left turn toward her brownstone. I did my best to control my pulse. Adrenaline—adrenaline that I hoped I wouldn't need—began to flow through my system. Physically her reaction likely mirrored mine. She began to walk faster but she still refused to run. I kept my strides long and even and was able to close the gap between us until I was almost touching her.

By now she knew. She must have. I was a mere pace and a half behind her. She must have been all but resigned to her fate. Certain thoughts would be flying through her head, regrets, thoughts about what she could have done differently to save herself. I'm sure she was thinking that it was stupid for her to walk home alone at night even though she'd done it hundreds of times before. It had been years. Years of pleasant walks home through the quiet Brooklyn streets after an honest day's work. This was her home. Twelve years. Two children. Who knows how many fond memories? Could she still scream? What if her screams woke up her kids? She wouldn't want to frighten them. I knew. So what could she have done differently? She could have hugged her kids this morning. She could have told them how much she loved them. She could have not yelled at the poor four-year-old Eric after he spilled his Cheerios on the kitchen floor.

I thought back to that moment, earlier in the day, as I watched her through her kitchen window from the stoop across the street. I would

have liked to have said something to her. I would have liked to let her know how much she would regret yelling at her kid like that. Let him spill, I thought when it happened, let him spill. Of course, I didn't say a word.

Now, one building from her home, I ran through my plan again in my head. As I did so, she turned left and pushed open the small gate that led to her apartment. I was close enough behind her that I was able to catch the gate before it clicked closed. I could hear her breathing now. I could hear the sounds of the television from her apartment. The babysitter must have been watching TV.

I couldn't see her face but could imagine her expression. At that moment, her face would be full of one of two things, panic or determination. I had seen both before. I could only hope for determination. Panic could make things messy. She was about to place her foot on the first of the steps that led up to her apartment door. Before she could, I reached forward and grabbed her wrist tightly. I went for the hand with the keys so that she would not be able to use them as a weapon. She'd been taught that at some point, I'm sure. "Go for the eyes," she was taught. All women are. After grabbing her wrist, I spun her toward me and, after giving her a chance to release only a small gasp of air, I placed my free hand over her mouth.

There we were then, face to face. For one brief moment she would get a clear look at my face in the light. This would confirm only one thing in her mind. She did not know me. I pushed her back into the shadows next to the stairs. As we moved, I slipped the keys from her hand and dropped them into the soft soil next to the entrance to the garden apartment. Her place was a typical Brooklyn brownstone, where the garden apartment door was slightly inset below the stairs to the main entrance. I continued to push her backward until her back was pressed hard against the door. We were quickly swallowed by shadows. No one could see us. No one would see her die. Each step of my plan had gone off without a hitch.

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In one quick, coordinated motion, I took both my hands holding her wrist and my hand covering her mouth and wrapped them around her neck. Wasting no time I squeezed. I worked quickly enough that, even if she developed the courage to scream, no sound would come. I watched her face as I cut the air off between her lungs and her brain. She stared into my eyes as I clenched my gloved hands around her throat. Her face began to slowly turn color as her mouth opened and closed, trying in vain to capture one last breath of air. She didn't fight much. No kicking, no punching, just gasping. A few tears began to roll down her cheeks as her face turned from a reddish color to the initial shades of blue. Even through my gloves, I could now feel her pulse in my hands, as her heart began its furious work to try to get oxygen to her brain. I could feel her pulse in my thumbs and my pinkies. I felt no pulse beyond that. My index fingers could only feel the tightening muscles in her neck. Now her thoughts, if she could still piece together a coherent thought, were surely of her sons, wondering if they were okay, wondering if she could hear them one last time, hear their little voices, hear their laughter. No luck. The only sound from the apartment was the television.

A small stream of blood began to flow from her left nostril as her eyes began to glaze over. First the blood balled up inside her nose, and then, when the force of gravity became too much, it trickled quickly down to her lips. The last thing she would taste would be her own blood. Not once did she take her eyes off mine. Her eyes were not questioning. She didn't know me, but she knew why I had to kill her. Seconds later, she was gone.

I eased her body down to the ground and stood back up. She was slumped against the door in the shadows, her knees bent under her, the blood already beginning to dry on her face. Her eyes were open but were lifeless. I felt almost nothing. I was numb. I felt no pleasure in doing what I'd done. I had gone through stages in the past. We all go through stages—different feelings. Power. Pride. Guilt. But

I didn't feel any of that. All I felt was satisfaction in a job well done. This one was supposed to be easy. I guess it was.

I backed away from the body, stepped back into the light, turned, and began walking casually away. They would find the body in a few hours. The babysitter would soon wonder why the kids' mother was so late coming home from work. She would call her parents, who would call the wine shop. Eventually the parents would come over and call the police, who would find the body. As I walked away my pulse returned to normal. I took my gloves off and placed them back in my bag. I would leave town tomorrow and this crime would remain unsolved. The neighborhood would go into a minor panic for a few weeks. Then things would settle down again. To all but her family, the events of this night would merely become a tale children tell to each other, like a ghost story around a campfire, real death co-opted into urban legend. Her family, like her, wouldn't question why she was killed. The same way I didn't question why I killed her. It's simple, really. I killed her because I am good and she was evil. At least that's what they told me, Maria.

I'd be lying if I didn't admit that sometimes, I still believe it.