

The background of the entire image is a photograph of a dilapidated interior. In the center is a large, ornate brick fireplace with a stone mantel. Above the mantel, the word "BURN" is spray-painted in red. The fireplace opening is dark and filled with debris. To the right, there is a doorway leading to another dark, cluttered room. The floor is made of wooden planks, many of which are missing or damaged. The overall atmosphere is one of decay and horror.

**YOU WILL NEVER ESCAPE...**

# **DARKEST FEAR**

**ETHAN CROSS**



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## About the Book

Would you commit murder to save your own family?

A father returns home to find that his family has been kidnapped and the only way to save their lives is for him to kill another innocent person ...

So begins a journey that will force Special Agent Marcus Williams of the Shepherd Organization to question all that he believes, unearth his family's dark legacy, and sacrifice everything to save those he loves.

In order to stop this brutal and deadly game, Williams must enlist the help of one of the world's most infamous and wanted men ... the serial killer Francis Ackerman Jr.

## About the Author

Ethan Cross was born and raised in a small town in rural Illinois. When a fireman or a policeman would visit his school, most of his classmates' heads would swim with aspirations of growing up and catching bad guys or saving someone from a blazing inferno. When these moments came for Ethan, however, his dreams weren't to someday be a cop or put out fires; he just wanted to write about it.

Now his dream of telling stories on a grand scale has come to fruition with the publication of the Shepherd novels.



Also available by Ethan Cross

The Shepherd Series

*The Shepherd*

*The Prophet*

*Blind Justice*

*The Cage* (an exclusive digital short story)

# Darkest Fear

Ethan Cross



arrow books

For my daughter Madison . . . even though she's too afraid  
to read my books . . .

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To all of these and my extraordinary readers, thank you so much. I couldn't be living my dream without your support!

## Prologue

DONNY JEUNG CONSIDERED removing his badge before sticking the hypodermic needle in his arm. It was a strange and fleeting thought. What difference did it make? He could take off the uniform and the badge and the gun, and he'd still be a cop. And he'd also still be a junkie. Such thoughts floated into the ether as he depressed the plunger and the heroin entered his veins. He leaned back against the toilet bowl, the porcelain cool on his back. Sounds and smells took on exaggerated vibrancy. The aroma of pine-scented air freshener and the acrid tang of urine swirling over the muted conversations and scraping of plates in the restaurant. Euphoria enfolded him, and for a few moments he forgot the argument he'd had with his father earlier that evening.

His father, Captain Dae-Hyun Jeung of the Kansas City Police Department, was the highest-ranking Korean immigrant in American law enforcement and wanted his son to follow in his footsteps. Donny had never wanted to be a cop and had only agreed to join the academy because it was the best of his limited options.

He jumped as the radio on his shoulder crackled to life. "Donny, get out here. We've got a possible burglary in progress."

"On my way," Donny replied as he tried to clear his head.

He pushed open the door of the bathroom stall, splashed some water on his face, and floated past the throng of restaurant patrons—mostly drunks and college kids at that hour—as he made his way out to the cruiser. He fell into the passenger seat and noticed his partner, a large-framed guy



called Neil Wagner, shoot him a suspicious glance before they pulled away from the parking lot. Donny wanted to smack the condescending look from the other cop's face. Wagner's gut hung over his belt, and he stank of cigarette smoke. He had barely passed his last physical-performance exam, and yet Wagner had the nerve to judge Donny for a few harmless extra-curricular activities. Luckily, Wagner knew better than to say anything or report Donny. It was one of the few instances when Donny was glad to have Captain Dae-Hyun Jeung as a father. Not that his father would protect him out of love, but the captain wouldn't want to hurt his own illustrious reputation and his dreams of one day becoming commissioner.

They followed Barry Road into the Jefferson Highlands, onto streets filled with modest but newer homes with large well-maintained yards. The residences sat back from the street, and shadows obscured the house numbers. When they located the source of the call, Wagner pulled to the curb and they began to check the perimeter. Donny moved to the east side of the house while Neil circled west.

Donny's flashlight beam danced over the red-rock landscaping as he checked the windows for any signs of forced entry. His head felt like it wasn't attached to his body, and he fought to maintain focus on the task at hand. He tripped over a tiny lawn gnome that wore a funny red hat matching its plump cheeks. Donny giggled at the peculiar little figure and then kicked it over on its side.

"I think I heard something out front. I'm going to head back that way," Wagner said over the radio.

"Copy that."

Donny continued around to the home's rear. No swing sets, sandboxes, or toys. No kids in the house. He congratulated himself for the deduction. He could have been a detective. Take that, Dad.

"Donny, head back to the car. We're at the wrong—"

“Don’t move! I’ve got a gun!” A voice shrieked behind Donny and startled him into action. Without thinking, he whirled around, dropped to one knee, and fired his Glock at the shadowy figure who had threatened his life.

A small voice cried out in pain, and the figure crumpled to the grass of the backyard. Donny kept his gun trained on the unmoving form of the attacker. He heard running footsteps coming around the side of the house and looked up to see Wagner heading toward him, wide-eyed and winded.

Donny didn’t move from his shooting stance as Wagner shone his light on the assailant. Wagner bent down and checked for a pulse. “Dear God you stupid—” Wagner uttered a string of curses and ran his hands through his shaggy brown hair as he paced back and forth across the manicured lawn.

“What is it?” Donny asked. “This guy was gonna shoot me . . . I was defending myself.”

Wagner’s face twisted in fury. He stomped over to Donny and grabbed him by the collar, pulling him up to his feet and dragging him toward the body. “Look at her! It’s some old woman. I was trying to tell you that we went to the wrong house. She probably thought we were burglars!”

“She had a gun.”

“Do you see a gun here? Do you have any idea what you’ve done?”

Donny searched for answers and replayed the events in his mind. “I was defending myself,” he whispered again.

“We’re screwed, Donny. All of us. You just killed an innocent woman in her own backyard.”

“I . . . it was my fault. You didn’t do anything wrong. I’ll take responsibility.”

Wagner jammed a finger against Donny’s chest. “You ignorant, naive little prick. You’ve screwed the whole department on this one. The media’s going to eat us alive.

You think your drug habit isn't going to come out? Think your father isn't going down for this?"

"I thought . . . She . . ."

"You don't think, kid. That's the problem. Just shut your mouth and do exactly as I say. I'm calling your father, and we're going to figure a way out of this."

# Part One

# 1

HER REAL NAME was Rhonda Haynie, but her clients called her Scarlet. None of them had ever asked her about a last name or inquired if “Scarlet” actually appeared on her birth certificate. The kind of men who hired her didn’t care about who she was as a person. They paid for the fantasy, and that was what they got. And some of those fantasies tested the boundaries of what even she would do for money—they exposed the dark and depraved inner workings of people who seemed perfectly normal by all outward appearances.

When she opened the door of the motel room, Rhonda knew that tonight’s job would push those boundaries once again.

The paint on the walls had most likely started its life cycle as a flat white but had now aged into a dull yellow. Only one lamp lit the space from the far corner, leaving most of the room in shadow. No lights overhead. All the better to hide the filth-ridden sheets and floors that were probably swept once every six months. Generic prints of babbling brooks and nature scenes had once covered repairs in the drywall that hid holes placed there by inebriated former occupants. For some reason, the pictures had all been removed and stacked in the corner. The bed hadn’t been slept in or touched, and a blanket and pillow lay crumpled along the floor against the far wall. The place smelled like the carpet had been left out in the rain.

It was no surprise that none of the motel’s rooms seemed to be occupied, and that the parking lot was free of cars.

The client had pulled an old wooden desk chair into the center of the room and handcuffed himself to it. He just sat



there, shirtless and staring at the wall, clothed in darkness. Trepidation clawed at the corners of Rhonda's mind, but the rent needed to be paid, and so she stepped cautiously into the room and closed the door behind her.

"Hello, darling. It looks like you're all ready for me." She stepped toward the dresser and flipped on another small lamp. She gasped at what the light revealed.

Scars covered the man's chest and arms. She had seen plenty in her time on the streets, but never anything like this. Burns, knife wounds, bullet holes. More damaged tissue than healthy skin. His body was a road map of pain and suffering.

"Is something wrong?" he said in a deep and confident voice.

Rhonda forced her gaze up to his face for the first time. It didn't match the rest of the man. Handsome. Youthful. Strong features and bright, intelligent eyes. She often wondered what led her clients to seek her services. With this man, the reasons were self-evident. Anyone would be self-conscious about scars like this.

She offered her best smile. "No, baby. Everything's fine. Just give me a minute to freshen up, and we'll get started."

She moved toward the bathroom, but his next words stopped her. "There's no need for that. We won't be engaging in any sexual activity."

"Then what kind of activities did you have in mind?"

"There's a knife on the dresser. I want you to cut me. Just stick in the tip and run a nice long slice. Along a triceps to start."

Rhonda had received more than her fair share of crazy requests. Some guys wanted to be beaten or whipped or to dress her up in all manner of crazy outfits and live out their sick fantasies. But she'd never had a client ask her to mutilate his body. The thought of it nearly made her sick.

"I was told that you were the most adventurous companion that the service offered. The money's there on

the dresser beside the knife. It's three times the fee that I was quoted."

She looked at the dresser and the money. Judging by the thickness of the wad of bills, he was telling the truth. Still, she knew her limits all too well. She couldn't go through with this, and she didn't want to spend too much time in the company of any man who would make such a request.

Then an idea took shape. "Are these real handcuffs?" Rhonda asked. An edge of fear caused her voice to tremble.

She tried to examine them without raising too much suspicion, running her fingers over the edges of the cuffs and feeling for releases or anything to indicate that they were fakes.

"They're standard police-issue."

"How did you plan on getting those off when our business was completed? Are you a magician?" Rhonda tried to laugh, but it didn't sound convincing even to her own ears.

The man smiled, but the expression didn't reach his eyes. "I assumed you would be kind enough to remove them. The key's also on the dresser."

"Good. That's what I hoped."

She patted him on the shoulder, grabbed the money and the key, and headed for the door. Her fingers wrapped around the knob—but then something struck her from behind. Strong hands squeezed her shoulders and spun her around, slamming her back against the door.

He pressed the edge of the blade against her neck with just enough force to hold her in place without breaking the skin. His breath was hot on her exposed flesh. "I apologize if I gave the impression that I was secured to the chair. Because of all the scarring that runs up my forearms, my wrists are much larger than my hands. It comes in handy when I want to slip out of a pair of cuffs. The restraints were to keep me from lashing out involuntarily when you began to make the incisions. They were for your protection."

Tears ran down Rhonda's cheeks, streaking the layers of make-up. "Please . . . don't . . ."

The man lowered the knife from her throat and leaned closer. "I suppose that I shouldn't judge you too harshly. I do admire a woman who shows initiative, and you can't blame a girl for trying. But you see, we had a verbal contract, and you've yet to hold up your end of things."

Her fingers clawed at her thigh, pulling up the black fabric of the skirt. She kept a small switchblade concealed there for moments such as this. "You want me to cut you?" She felt the metal handle of the knife, pulled it free, and pushed the button to expose the blade. "How's this for a start?"

Rhonda jammed the knife into his leg and shoved him away. She expected him to drop, but he remained on his feet and fell against the room's door, blocking her escape. Screaming for help, she bolted for the bathroom, nearly falling over the chair resting in the middle of the floor. Once inside, she slammed the door behind her and engaged the lock.

Lime green tiles covered the walls, and the room smelled of mildew and urine. A blow shook the door frame. "You're trying my patience," the man said calmly from the other side.

Her whole body trembled. She wiped the man's blood from her hand onto her dress as she scanned the room for a way out. The shower curtain was thin and white, and light shone through it. She ripped it back, snapping the rings in the process. They fell to the tile with small metallic clinks.

A window occupied the back wall. She scrambled into the tub and pushed up on the window's frame. It wouldn't move. She checked for a lock. Flipped the latch. Pushed again. But the window still wouldn't budge. It must have been painted shut.

The bathroom door flew open. The wood splintering, and the knob striking the tile on the opposite wall. The old green ceramics cracked and shattered and fell to the floor.

Rhonda screamed, but he was already on top of her. His grip was like a vise. It crushed her airway and cut off her cries. He pressed her against the window and lifted her from the floor of the tub.

She clawed at his hand and kicked at him with her legs, but he was so strong and refused to relent. A wave of dizziness swept over her, and she realized that this was her last moment on Earth. She would never see her baby girl again. She would never have the chance to tell her grandma that she was sorry for running away after her parents died.

She wondered what he would do with her body. Would he mutilate her? Bury her in some shallow grave, a feast for the bugs? She imagined the worms crawling through her veins.

The man raised the knife and admired the blade. Light from the translucent window danced across its surface.

This was it. Rhonda tried not to think of the pain to come. Would he bury the knife in her stomach, stabbing her over and over, relishing each thrust in some twisted sexual way? Or would he slice her throat and let her bleed out quickly? She prayed for a quick death.

The knife came toward her. She wanted to close her eyes, didn't want to see the sight of her own blood. But, for some reason, her eyelids refused to obey the signal that her brain was sending.

She watched as the blade swiped across his forearm just in front of her face, opening three long gashes in his flesh. The blood flowed quickly and dripped down into the bathtub. He closed his eyes as if savoring the moment and licked the blade clean.

Then he relinquished his grip. She dropped to her knees, and he backed away. She gasped in greedy mouthfuls of air, and violent sobbing seized her whole body.

Rhonda looked up to see him sitting on the toilet, watching her. He took a deep breath and said, "I apologize. I lost my head for a moment. I didn't want to hurt you. To tell

you the truth, this is the first time that I've contracted with someone of your profession."

Her hands found the edge of the tub, and she pushed herself to her feet, preparing to lunge for the door. He must have sensed her intention and moved forward, blocking her way out.

"What's your name? Your real name."

"Screw you." Her throat felt like she'd swallowed sandpaper.

He stepped closer, and his eyes narrowed. "I've killed a lot of people. Men, women. Knives, guns, fire, my bare hands. I possess an unnatural talent for extinguishing life. But I'm trying to be a good boy here, and I would appreciate it if you showed me at least some small measure of respect. What's your name?"

"Rhonda," she said through the tears.

"Thank you, Rhonda. It's moments such as these when a person must examine their existence and their place in this world. We all have regrets. Some mistakes can be rectified, and some can never be undone. The trick is realizing the difference and acting upon it. In the past, I would have enjoyed killing you. I would have drawn out the process and extracted every exquisite moment of pain possible. But I've come to believe that there are three kinds of people in this world. At our core, we're all either a creator, a maintainer, or a destroyer."

He took another step toward her, reached out, and took her hands in his. She didn't recoil from his touch. She just stood there, oddly transfixed. Hypnotized by the intensity of his gaze.

"Maintainers keep the status quo. They're the worker bees of our little hive, and they enjoy keeping the cosmic wheels turning. It's what they were made for, and without them the walls of our reality would crumble. Then there are creators. Those rare individuals who dare to discover new things and think differently, to break the chains of fear and bring into



existence something beautiful and new. I fall into the third group. The destroyers. But I want to be better than that. I need to be more. Unfortunately, I've found that I only feel alive when I'm inflicting pain or experiencing it myself."

The man kept hold of Rhonda's hand as he guided her gently back into the bedroom. "What I'm asking you to do is a kindness to me. I want you to help me to be a better person. To transcend my nature as a destroyer and become something more."

He gestured toward the chair and laid the knife in her palm. She stared down at it in confusion. When her gaze returned to his face, he smiled and said, "Now, are you ready to begin?"

MARCUS WILLIAMS STARED at his office ceiling, counting the dots in the tiles and trying to ignore the terrible pounding in his skull. The throbbing stabs felt like tiny construction workers jackhammering against the backs of his eyeballs. If someone had told him that drilling a hole in his skull would have relieved the pain, he would at that moment have been standing in line at the hardware store, anxiously waiting for the business to open its doors.

He wondered if the headaches would still be happening if he didn't work for the Shepherd Organization. On the surface, the group was a think-tank operating under the auspices of the Department of Justice and the Attorney General's office. In reality, their mandate was to track down serial killers by any means necessary. Even if that meant bending or outright breaking the law to do it.

Marcus gently pulled his arm out from beneath Maggie Carlisle's naked form. She stirred, rolled her shoulders, and said with a moan, "It's time you got a real bed."

"This is a real bed."

"It's a futon. Death Row inmates have nicer beds than this."

"What can I say? I know how to treat a girl right."

He pulled himself up from the futon, the thin metal frame creaking beneath his shifting weight. "Where you going?" Maggie asked, yawning.

"Nowhere. Go back to sleep. I just need some Tylenol."

Maggie rolled over, exposing the long tanned curve of her back and her golden blonde hair.

He stared at her a moment. Their relationship had always been rocky, and they had achieved a sort of stalemate, but he couldn't seem to shake her words and actions after an incident with a serial killer in Chicago. He had asked her to leave the Shepherd Organization, to put all the death and darkness behind them and start new. To be normal. She had turned him down. She had chosen her job over him. That just didn't sit right, and although he had tried to let it go he knew that resentment had tainted their relationship. He imagined that once upon a time he would have fought to make things right, but these days he just didn't have the energy to fight anymore. What was the point?

Marcus glanced around the office at his collection of movie memorabilia and screen-used props. An Indiana Jones hat. A replica pulse-rifle from *Aliens*. Carl Weathers's severed arm from *Predator*. He could have bought a house in the burbs for what he had paid for that one. But he didn't want a house. Once, maybe, but not now. He would never be normal, and the sooner he accepted that, the better off he'd be. Nearly everything he owned was in that room. He ate, slept, and worked there when he wasn't on the road, which wasn't too damn often.

He would have been on the road at the moment—tracking down a murderer known as the Coercion Killer—if he hadn't been recalled to DC for some kind of mandatory psych evaluation. The Director claimed that it was just a routine hoop that the pencil-pushers were making them jump through, but Marcus suspected there was more to it than that. Even he had to admit that his work had begun to suffer due to the headaches and insomnia.

His fingertips slid across the dark woodgrain of his desk's surface as he rounded the workspace and pulled open a drawer. He took out his pills and a bottle of eighteen-year-old Glenfiddich. Then he downed the OxyContin with a long swig of Scotch straight from the bottle. His eyes watered,

and his face contorted as the dark liquid slid down his throat.

He leaned back and closed his eyes as he waited for the drugs to dull the pain. After a few moments he started back to the bed, but a vibrating against his leg stopped him in his tracks. Only a handful of people in the world had his cell number, and a call this late at night was never good. It was one of two things. Either they had an urgent situation, and the Director needed them on the road immediately. Or his older brother wanted to chat.

For most people, a call from a sibling at such a late hour would have been a minor annoyance. But when your brother was one of the most wanted men in the country and a notorious serial murderer, a late-night phone call took on a whole new dimension. Still, family was family, and Ackerman was the only family Marcus had left.

Marcus looked at his phone and didn't recognize the number, which almost without fail meant that it was Ackerman calling from a burner cell line.

He and Ackerman shared a set of parents, although they hadn't grown up together and Marcus had only recently learned their true connection. His mother had escaped with him while he was still in the womb, abandoning his brother to a life of torture and sadism at the hands of their biological father. Ackerman Sr. had been a not-so-well-respected psychologist who wanted to explore the mind of a serial killer by creating one from his own young son. What had followed for his brother were years trapped in an undying hell marked with abuse and agony and ultimately a string of corpses from one coast to the next, the true number of which was still unknown.

Marcus couldn't help but sympathize with his brother. Marcus had been raised by a New York City cop in a loving and caring home, at least up until the time when his parents were murdered. And, even then, his aunt had given him the best home she could. Despite all that, his nature was still

one of violence, and dark thoughts swirled at the back of his conscious mind. Even blessed with a normal childhood, Marcus was far from normal. Ackerman had never been given a chance.

And then there was a recent revelation that Ackerman might have had even less free will regarding his murderous tendencies than previously thought.

Answering the call, Marcus said, "Hello?"

"It's good to hear your voice. Have you missed me, brother?"

"What do you want, Frank? I was sleeping."

"No, you weren't. And did you know you're the only person who has ever called me Frank?"

"Fascinating. Can we get on with it?"

"You're in a bit of a pissy mood. The headaches are getting worse, aren't they?"

"Yeah, well, you're not helping the situation."

"I'm sorry for that. I don't want to be a burden on you, dear brother. But I was calling to tell you that I've been a good boy."

Marcus walked to the window and watched the trees of Northern Virginia sway in shadow as Ackerman described a run-in with a prostitute. Finally, Ackerman said, "You made me promise not to take anyone's life, if you would keep taking my calls, and I have fought very hard to keep that vow. Although I think it's a bit extreme. A little too black and white for my tastes. After all, sometimes the situation warrants—"

"No. Never."

"Agree to disagree. Besides, *you* kill people."

"I'm tired, Frank. I'd like to get at least a little sleep tonight."

"I saw a preview for a movie yesterday that got me thinking. The plot involved an apocalypse of some kind and dealt with the survivors in the aftermath. The details aren't

relevant, but it made me realize that, in a world like that, I would be a hero or even a king.”

“High monarch of a burned-out wasteland. Good for you. I’m going back to bed.”

“That thought spiraled into other revelations. Consider this: in any other period throughout history, our skills would have made us valuable assets instead of the outcasts that we are now. If we’d been born in Ancient Greece, I could have rivaled the great warrior Achilles and you would have been my Hector. During the Spanish Inquisition or the Middle Ages, my talents in the art of inflicting pain would have been in high demand. Even in the not too distant past of the Old West, I would have been a folk hero like Billy the Kid.”

“You’re a regular man of the people. When you’re not murdering them in their sleep.”

“I’ve never killed anyone in their sleep. I always wake them up first. But think about it. Maybe there are so many murderers these days because men with our gifts can’t find an honest trade to act as a healthy outlet for the natural predatory hunger in their souls. Anyway, something to think about. Sweet dreams, brother.”

Ackerman ended the call. Marcus moved back to his desk, opened the drawer again, and popped two more pills.

### 3

JOSH STEFANSON HAD never thought of himself as heroic, but he had been relatively confident that he would rise to the occasion if an emergency ever presented itself. Despite working a desk job at a local architectural firm—as opposed to something more physical and dangerous like a firefighter or police officer—he felt that he could protect his family. Now was his chance to find out.

He had seen the news stories about the killer loose in the Kansas City area whom the media had dubbed the Coercion Killer. Still, he hadn't given a second thought to such things. The chances of actually running foul of a serial killer were astronomical, much too low to make him question his safety or that of his family. Being the next victim of the Coercion Killer would be akin to winning the lottery.

But people did win.

He drove the little blue Nissan into the parking lot and found a spot next to the entrance. The lot was nearly empty—only three other cars parked toward the back, suggesting that they belonged to employees. That was good: no witnesses.

Josh's hands shook, and sweat dripped down his face. He didn't bother to wipe it away. The gun rested in the glovebox. A .38 special that had been his father-in-law's. He had never been around guns, but his wife Nancy had grown up on a farm south of KC. She had insisted that they have one in the house and that he knew how to use it. He had gone along with it, not that he ever thought he would have cause to touch the thing.