

HUNT KILLER[®]

AN ORIGINAL NOVEL

PERFECT SCORE

High school can
be a real killer.

A . M . E L L I S



HUNT  KILLER[®]

PERFECT
SCORE

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AN ORIGINAL NOVEL BY A. M. ELLIS

SCHOLASTIC INC.

For DeJesus, Kairi, and Aaliyah. Always speak your truth. —AME

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ONE

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 21, 9:18 A.M.

CHLOE ST. JAMES stared up at me, her stormy-gray eyes pleading for me to save her. Unfortunately, she was already dead, her entire existence reduced to the contents of a banker box stashed away in the back row of Chicago PD's records room.

I flipped through a few of the tagged items—a modest engagement ring, old playbills, bloodied silk scarves. The forensic photographer managed to capture the last glint of light in Chloe's gaze, even with her left pupil blown. Another stack of photos focused on the ligature marks around her neck, rope burns at her wrists, and her left ring finger—broken. The lead detective had given up after a matter of

days, the death of an understudy from the South Side swept under the red carpet of the historic Chicago Theatre.

I snapped my own photos with my phone. Cautious not to leave any trace of my presence, my gloved hands removed and replaced every piece of cataloged evidence with care. My phone buzzed, making me almost drop an engraved cuff link. I checked the alarm that I'd silenced one too many times.

Shit. Late for AP Calc.

Tucking the cuff link back between the bagged, bloodied scarves and unrequited love letters, I resealed the banker box and heaved it up onto the shelf above. I grabbed my Irish-cream coffee, my saving grace from the overwhelming smell of mildew and wet cardboard, and made my way out of the storage locker. I passed row after row, shelf after shelf, all of them full of banker boxes, tagged and forgotten.

How many of these cases sat here, cold?

The concrete walls and dim fluorescent lights sent a shiver trickling down my spine.

Too many, I thought to myself.

It was that fact that had set me on the path to starting my own PI firm one day, whether my parents approved or not. Too many families were in need of closure—justice. They're what kept me coming back every week. I wasn't going to sit around and wait for these cases to be solved. And I didn't see anyone else rushing to be the voice of the silenced.

At the end of the last row, I knocked for Officer Hal to buzz me back through to the basement's hallway. He sat behind the guard desk in front, chowing down on the pastrami sandwich I'd brought him from Manny's, spicy brown mustard somehow smeared high on his freckled cheek.

I grinned. "Appreciate the assist, as always."

He lifted his sandwich as if to say ditto for the meal, his sandy-blond hair spiked at odd ends. That, combined with his third cup of under-brewed joe, meant another night spent on the couch. Not sure what he did this time to wind up in the doghouse—most likely out too late drinking at McNally's, based on his bloodshot eyes. One thing I did know: Marjorie wasn't packing his meals in the meantime.

"Did you find it?" he asked, mouth still full.

"Exactly where you said it would be. I took pictures of everything, and"—I peeled off the black latex gloves and tossed them in the trash bin—"I already have an angle to explore."

He winked, goofy as ever. After a year of me wandering into police headquarters during my lunch break back when I still attended school across the street, Hal had developed a soft spot for me. He claimed I was the spitting image of my mother. It was possible that he needed his eyes checked. I may have inherited my mom's curiosity, but my complexion was a good couple of shades lighter than her deep mahogany, I had my daddy's hazel-green eyes instead of her pecan brown, and my hair was more frizz than curl, though I

tamed it this morning with a few too many passes of my flat iron.

“Well, you keep supplying Manny’s, I’ll keep moving you to the front of the access queue,” he said. “Happy to help with that dream of yours.”

I stole a chip from his desk and slid on my backpack. “Operation PI is well on its way.”

“Jolene Kelley, private investigator. Has a nice ring to it.” He smiled. “And by then, Junior will be in college and can intern with you.”

I shook my head as he wagged his brows. Junior was all of eleven to my sixteen.

“What can I say, we Halligans like our older women.”

“You just focus on getting off the couch. Buy Marjorie some flowers, pink tulips.”

“How did you—”

“It’s the little things, Hal.” I swiped another chip and waved, turning down the hallway. My phone buzzed for the umpteenth time as I stepped into the elevator. I hit the button for the lobby before peeking at the screen. Four unanswered texts.

Frankie:

Did you get it?

Sabrina:



Frankie:

???

Sabrina:

This is not the type of suspense I signed up for.

A smile tugged at my lips. Frankie was the one who found the case. His sights set on attending Columbia, he spent all his free time in the library scrolling through old newspapers, perfecting his craft for a future in investigative journalism. When he came across the unsolved murder of a forgotten Black girl from the same street we grew up on in Englewood, he knew it was a case that would pique my interest.

Jolene:

You were right. Case went cold back in '89. Hanging in Chicago Theatre, but not a suicide. Detective chalked it up to a jealous ex, but he didn't put in the effort to actually track down the guy.

I shared the photo album with Frankie and Sabrina, already knowing what Sabrina was going to say.

Sabrina:

Oooh, this is giving me Michelle Gray vibes.

Frankie:

Everything gives you Michelle Gray vibes.

Sabrina:

What was that cold case she went up to New York to solve a few years ago? That one had a cuff link, too! There was an actress from the 1930s, a fancy theater . . .

I rolled my eyes as the elevator doors opened. Light flooded into the lobby from the floor-to-ceiling windows that faced South Michigan Avenue. Shoes echoed against the marble tiles, a steady rhythm as the city's finest moved through the space. I nodded to a few familiar faces, a couple of lieutenants, deputy directors, and Chief Ryan making his way around security and out the door. Frazzled, he was oblivious to my greeting as he rushed outside, his assistant running behind to hand him his coat. *Must be late to another press conference.* He usually liked to hear what I was up to. I'd have to pick his brain about the cold case another time.

My gaze landed on the clock behind one of the desk sergeants. I sighed. One of these days I was going to be on time for calculus. Today was not that day.

At least I was consistent.

I shot back a text to Sabrina.

Jolene:

Great detective work, Bri.

Sabrina:

☹️ You follow Michelle just as closely as I do. You know the case—you remember the killer?

“Jo?”

I glanced up at hearing my name. Reya Morales passed through the metal detectors, channeling every bit of Meghan Markle’s Rachel Zane—her dress perfectly tailored, her silk press flawless. No one would ever know her outfit was from the discount rack at Target the way she pulled it off. Except for me. I was with her when she bought it last weekend.

“Hey! New case?” I asked, nodding to the papers in her hands. “Anything good?” I rocked on my heels, hoping she wouldn’t notice the time. No such luck.

Reya raised her glasses as she checked the watch at her wrist. She looked at me, then back to her watch. Then back to me. She held up the files. “Need a few signatures for the state attorney’s office. What brings you south of the Loop during school hours? Trouble with calc?”

That’s what made running into Reya different from everyone else. She’d known me since I was in diapers and, with that, my class schedule. Everyone else was used to me coming over from De La Salle High during my lunch break or before school, but not everyone knew my parents made me transfer to a fancy academy in Lakeview for sophomore year. They had big dreams for my future, ones that didn’t include community college and opening my own PI firm. The fact that the classes were harder now—many of them pointless (who needs a semester studying Gothic literature?)—and that I was now the weird girl who ate lunch with her guidance

counselor didn't seem to bother my parents one bit.

"Calculus is still a breeze," I lied as I held up my phone. "Grabbing a new case for the gang."

"Let me see." Reya flipped through the photos. She loved the cases as much as I did, shadowing my parents at the public defender's office for years before choosing the paralegal route to save up for law school.

"She was from the neighborhood. The department just let it go unsolved, it seems."

She nodded. "Come by tomorrow—*after* class. I'll see what I can help you with."

I let out a sigh of relief, making a mental note to pick up some frappés for fuel.

Reya handed back my phone with a raised brow. "Your friends are asking you to skip and meet them at the Chicago Theatre in an hour."

I flipped back through the messages. Sabrina had already hit the forums and wanted to check to see if there were any employees left from the time of the murder. Not surprising considering how much she enjoyed interviews and undercover work. Any opportunity to gossip—that's where she thrived.

"I already turned in all my assignments for the week, and studied for the pop quiz in AP Spanish that Mr. Perez thinks no one knows about." Only one half of that statement was true, but I put on my pouty lip and hoped for the best.

Reya crossed her arms. "Okay, then," she said before

narrowing her eyes. “But don’t tell your peeps I’m letting you skip. I’m supposed to be a model adult.”

“Not a word!” I sent off a quick text to Sabrina and Frankie.

Reya turned to the elevators, calling over her shoulder. “If you can wait a half hour, I can give you a ride.”

“I’ll catch the Green Line. Thanks, Rey!”

Pulling my coat out of my backpack, I hurried out the door and headed to the L. For a moment I almost forgot it was February in Chicago. The wind slapped me in the face, back and forth from multiple directions. A familiar nemesis. Mounds of dirty snow lined the streets, too stubborn to melt in the hazy sunlight, and cold air bit at my legs. Every winter, Mom huffed about us needing to move somewhere warm, but Dad and I knew she would never leave. Both their families went back generations, roots planted firmly in this city.

I rushed down the block and over to Thirty-Fifth and Bronzeville, slipping inside the station house before letting myself navigate to a podcast for the ride. I slid on my headphones. *Behind True Crime* was next in my queue. This week’s episode went behind the scenes of a failed homicide investigation in Mississippi—the lead detective obsessed with an innocent man.

Heading up the steps, I passed the familiar stench of paint remover used for the now-faded graffiti on the walls. Other people passed me on the way down. A train had just let out.

As I reached the platform, I spotted Mr. Medina stepping out of a southbound train, the only guidance counselor I had ever known to rock a man bun. I froze at first but then remembered if he was here, he was skipping school, too.

Mr. Medina was part of the reason I now attended North Shore Preparatory. He used to work at Kershaw Elementary, where I spent kindergarten through eighth grade, and he even helped me through some tough times with my mom. But then he left for his fancy new school right after my eighth-grade graduation. After a year at North Shore, he decided to convince my mom and dad I needed to do the same. Him, I had forgiven. My parents . . .

I pulled my phone out of my pocket.

Jolene:

Just saw Mr. Medina.

Sabrina:

Bring him with you.

Frankie:

REUNION OF THE ORIGINAL KERSHAW
MYSTERY BOOK CLUB

Sabrina:

Does he have the man bun today or is it more
Keanu Reeves/John Wick type vibes?

I looked up, hoping to catch his attention before he left the platform. I waved and lifted my headphones.

“Mr. Medina!” I took a few steps closer. It was hard to

hear much of anything with the wind whipping in my ears. He didn't notice me. Instead, he was gesturing wildly, deep in conversation with someone I couldn't see—one of the platform's steel columns was blocking my view. Based on his body language, I got the impression they were talking about the papers he held tight in his hands. He looked pissed.

A few stragglers walked between us, including a couple who looked lost. They huddled together over one of those tourist maps, mumbling about the Bean. This was definitely the wrong stop.

My phone buzzed again.

Frankie:

Tell him about the case!

Sabrina:

Still waiting on the man bun update.

A scarf flew by me, and my fingers grazed the soft wool as I failed to catch it. Dark blue with an orange-and-white crest. I didn't have to see it clearly to recognize the design. North Shore Preparatory Academy.

A horn wailed as another southbound train streaked into the station, followed by a screech—metal on metal. The conductor was applying too much pressure to the brakes. I glanced up just as Mr. Medina went flying off the platform.

Time slowed as I clocked every beat of movement before my eyes. Mr. Medina's body folded over as if he had taken a

forceful push to the gut, his eyes growing wide in disbelief. The papers he held only moments before fluttered around him like a snowstorm.

The train was moving too fast.

And I was too far away to do anything.

No one reached out to pull Mr. Medina back to safety. No one even seemed to notice what was happening. There was only the one person I saw stepping away from the tracks. A dark figure that slipped back behind the steel column, shielding themselves from view.

Then the world was going full speed again. I flinched and squeezed my eyes shut as Mr. Medina hit the front of the train with a sickening crack.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Photo credit: DeJesus Ellis

A. M. ELLIS is an author and a lover of all things steeped in mystery, magic, and mythology. Hailing from the suburbs of Washington, DC, she lives with her husband and three kids while working as a senior brand and creative manager for a nonprofit focused on ending childhood hunger. Her stories are often inspired by her adventurous daydreams and the characters in her life, blended with her own experience as a Black woman with neurodivergent children. If she's not writing or designing, you can find her nose deep in a book or playing video games with her family.

ABOUT HUNT A KILLER



Since 2016, Hunt A Killer has disrupted conventional forms of storytelling by delivering physical items, documents, and puzzles to tell immersive stories that bring friends and families together. What started as an in-person event has now grown into a thriving entertainment company with over 100,000 subscribers and over four million boxes shipped. Hunt A Killer creates shared experiences and community for those seeking unique ways to socialize and challenge themselves.