

the heavens may fall

**the
heavens
may
fall**

**allen
eskens**



SEVENTH STREET BOOKS®

AN IMPRINT OF PROMETHEUS BOOKS

59 JOHN GLENN DRIVE • AMHERST, NY 14228

www.seventhstreetbooks.com

Published 2016 by Seventh Street Books®, an imprint of Prometheus Books

The Heavens May Fall. Copyright © 2016 by Allen Eskens. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, digital, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, or conveyed via the Internet or a website without prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarities to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

Cover design by Jacqueline Nasso Cooke

Cover design © Prometheus Books

Inquiries should be addressed to

Seventh Street Books

59 John Glenn Drive

Amherst, New York 14228

VOICE: 716-691-0133

FAX: 716-691-0137

WWW.SEVENTHSTREETBOOKS.COM

20 19 18 17 16 10 9 8 7 6

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Pending

Printed in the United States of America

PART 1
The Death

Chapter 1

The courtroom had fallen quiet, the judge's words lost behind a low hum that droned in Max Rupert's ears. Max reached for his water glass, a waxy paper cup on the rail of the witness stand. It lifted empty and light. He didn't remember drinking the last of his water. He paused, the empty cup halfway to his lips, unsure what to do next. Pretend to take a drink? Put the cup back down on the rail?

And such silence; how was that possible in a courtroom full of people? So quiet that he could hear the blood pulsing through his ears, his rage thumping against his ear drums, flicking the tips of his fingers. He fought against showing any facial expression. The jury would be studying him as the echoes of the cross-examination pinged and settled into their memories. *Look at me Sanden*, Max yelled in his mind, the words pounding like ball-peen on steel. *Look in my eyes you sonofabitch*. He willed the attorney to raise his head, but Boady Sanden kept his gaze fixed on the legal pad at his elbow.

Max took a slow, subtle breath and tried to relax. He didn't want the jury to see the emotion that fought to break free of its tether. He saw the empty cup in his half-raised hand. He'd forgotten about it for a moment. He raised the empty cup a few more inches, tipping it to verify that it was bone dry, not a single drop to trickle onto his dry tongue. He pretended to take a sip anyway, and then he gently returned the cup to the rail.

"You can step down now Detective Rupert," Judge Ransom said. Rupert detected a slight edge in the judge's voice—the tone of a man who'd just had to repeat his words.

Max stood, picked up his file, and exited the witness box, glancing at the fourteen jurors as he passed them. Only one, an alternate, returned

his look. As he passed the counsel table, Max looked down at the defense attorney, Boady Sanden, his friend—no, not his friend, not anymore.

Sanden kept his eyes focused on the yellow tablet in front of him. He pretended to be writing something, but Max could see that the man's pen twirled in meaningless circles in the margin of the page. Max wanted Boady to look up as he passed. He wanted Boady to know that lines had been crossed and it would forever sever the connection they once shared. But Boady Sanden never looked up.

Max exited the courtroom, his thumbnail scuffing against the fold of the investigation file in his hand. He found an empty conference room, a space the size of a jail cell where attorneys fed false hopes to clients, a room where desperation clung to the walls as thick as grease in a fast-food kitchen. He spread his hands on the table, the cool metal chilling the sweat of his palms. He let his heart rate slow from a boil to a simmer as he watched a slight tremor twitch in his fingers. Anger? Sure. Embarrassment? Maybe a little of that too. But there was something more to that tremor, something that shifted his sense of balance and felt very much like doubt.

For months now Max had carried the Pruitt case around with him, its reflection looking back at him from the mirror, its scent infusing the air he breathed, its rough hem tucking up around his shoulders as he fell to sleep at night. He'd bestowed life upon this investigation, animated it in a way that gave it a presence in his world. He felt that presence at his side when he took his seat in the witness chair. But when he left the witness stand, he left alone.

Sanden had cut him up pretty good—made Max look like he'd trained his crosshairs on Ben Pruitt from the very beginning and shut out all other possible suspects. But had he?

Max opened his investigation file and began sifting through the reports looking for the beginning, that day when they found the body. But then he closed the file. He didn't need notes to take him back to that morning. He remembered that morning all too well. It was a broken morning, torn apart by the memories that visited him every year on the anniversary of his wife's death.

Chapter 2

On that day, the last Friday in July, Max Rupert woke well before dawn. He opened his eyes and waited a moment to let wake and sleep separate in his head. A shadow in the shape of a cross floated on the wall beside him, cast there by a yellow streetlight bleeding through his window pane. Outside, the air conditioner clicked on and whirred as if this was just another day. But it wasn't just another day.

He reached a hand to her side of the bed, touching the undisturbed sheets, feeling the slight rise where the mattress remained unaffected by four years of her absence. He grazed his fingers across the soft cotton and felt the pain in his chest grow and ebb with each breath.

She used to wake up before him, a morning glory to his night owl. In so many ways, she brought balance to his life. Nobody but Jenni could cut through his wall of self-control and expose the child-like happiness he kept locked away. He'd never laughed so hard as when they were alone and she felt free to unleash her cutting wit. And she loved pretty things. Porcelain dolls, silver candlesticks, and China tea cups still filled the shelves and covered the fireplace mantle. He'd learned to take care of her flowers, the chrysanthemums she'd planted in front of the house. He remembered that first year when they bloomed, how he wanted to tee-off on those flowers the way Bill Murray had done in *Caddyshack*. He didn't of course. And now, every year Max tended to those flowers the way she had done for so long.

But there were other times when they were not counterweights, but a perfect blend. She loved fishing as much as he did. They both loved black-and-white movies and heavily buttered popcorn. And they enjoyed sitting in silence together. Whether it was reading books or just swinging on the porch swing, it didn't matter as long and she was there.

Those moments of tranquility sometimes reminded him of their first date and how he fell in love with her. He no longer remembered the Homecoming dance itself or the dinner before, but he remembered how stunning she looked. He remembered the way her simple dress accentuated her natural beauty in the same way that dew can make a rose sparkle. But what he remembered the most from that night was what happened after the dance.

They'd gone to a party at a friend's house. Some kids talked, others made out, and still others navigated the waters between budding relationships and break-ups. He remembered sitting on a couch with Jenni, caught up in the only moment of awkward silence they had come across all evening. He had his arm stretched across her shoulders, his palm dangling in the air. He wanted to kiss her. His thoughts tangled around the logistics: how to create an opening for the kiss, how to move in—opened lipped or closed. He contemplated what he would do if she kissed him back or, God forbid, if she didn't. He had never been more nervous.

Then she moved, turning into him just enough to lay her head on his shoulder. She put her hand on his chest and sighed—not the sigh of a tired high-school girl, but the sigh of a young woman, content with the world. The struggles in Max's head vanished. He no longer thought about angles and lips and reactions. All he wanted to do was hold her. He lowered his dangling hand until it rested on her hip, his fingers gently pressing against the soft cotton of her dress. At that moment he felt more deeply for her than he'd ever felt for anyone ever before. He tenderly kissed the top of her head and that was enough.

How many times over the years had they sat in that exact same position—slowly rocking on the porch swing or watching TV from their couch? How many times had he kissed the top of her head and told her that he loved her. And to himself, he would whisper the promise that he would always protect her. He would never let anything bad happen to her.

It had been four years to the day since he broke that promise.

On that first morning when he woke up without her, he could barely pull himself out of bed, and when he did, he crawled to her closet

and wrapped himself in her sweaters and blouses, things she'd worn, things waiting to be washed on the day of her death. He pressed the fabric to his face and inhaled her essence until his last tear fell and he could again put on the façade of strength that he wore for everyone else. He returned to that closet a few times over those first months, repeating his ritual until the scent in Jenni's clothes surrendered to the dust and decay of time.

As months turned to years, he found a way to live with the sadness, but he never learned to live with the guilt. A picture on the wall, his wife smiling down at him, reminded him every day that her death had gone unsolved. Not his case. Couldn't be his case. He was the husband and the husband can't be involved in the investigation. Rules kept him locked out, and so the hit-and-run driver got away.

Max stood, walked to his bathroom and splashed his face with cold water. He knew from experience that he would not be able to get back to sleep. Instead he would go for a run. He would put in five miles before the sun crested the horizon, five miles of listening to the rhythm of his own breathing and the pounding of his feet on concrete and nothing else.

July mornings in Minnesota were perfect for such a run.



After the run, Max showered, brewed some coffee, and went outside to sit on his porch swing and eat biscotti. From there he watched the day rise from behind a cluster of rooftops in his Logan Park neighborhood, quietly absorbing the tranquility and beauty of that slow turn of the earth. She told him once that sunrise was her favorite part of the day, and now it was his.

Max finished his biscotti and was downing the last tepid sips of his coffee when the chimes of his phone went off. He could see that the call came from dispatch, so he answered by saying, "Max here."

"Sorry to wake you, Detective, this is Carmen James in dispatch."

"You didn't wake me, Carmen. What do you have?"

“A body in Kenwood, possible homicide.”

“Kenwood?”

“Affirmative. The deceased is reported to be a white female. Officers on the scene have confirmed the death.” Carmen used the formal tone and language that dispatchers were trained to use for radio calls—that calm, you-can’t-rile-me resonance that gave the same weight to a murder that it did to a stolen bicycle. She read Max the address, an alley off of West 21st Street, and Max tried to remember if he’d ever heard of a murder in Kenwood. Bodies found in alleys usually took him to North Minneapolis—not Kenwood.

“Have they cordoned off the area?”

“They’re doing that now, Detective.”

“Call my partner, Niki Vang, and tell her I’ll meet her there. Then call the M.E. and Crime Scene and get them on their way.”

“Yes sir.”

Max ended the call, climbed into his unmarked squad car, and headed in the direction of the Kenwood neighborhood where the body of a dead woman awaited him. And as he drove, he couldn’t help feeling like a monster, like his soul deserved the damnation that undoubtedly awaited him, because deep in his heart he was grateful for the call. For those few minutes, as he drove through the gray streets of Minneapolis, he was glad to have a death to think about—a death other than his wife’s. He welcomed the rush of thoughts that silenced those memories.