

THE MIDNIGHT KING

**TARIQ
ASHKANANI**



VIPER

This paperback edition first published in 2026
First published in Great Britain in 2025 by Viper
an imprint of Profile Books Ltd
29 Cloth Fair
London
EC1A 7JQ

www.viperbooks.co.uk

Copyright © Tariq Ashkanani, 2025

Text design by Crow Books

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

The moral right of the author has been asserted.

All rights reserved. Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise), without the prior written permission of both the copyright owner and the publisher of this book.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Our product safety representative in the EU is BGC Sustainability & Compliance, 7 avenue du Général Leclerc, Paris, 75014, France
<https://baldwinglobalconsulting.com>

ISBN 978 1 80522 2309

eISBN 978 1 80522 2293



For Mum and Dad



Author's Note

Many of you will find this book to be in bad taste.

In part, it is due to the violence. Murder is – by its very nature – a violent crime. I believe this to be true no matter how the act is performed. Loud, quiet, bludgeon or lethal injection. A murder is the ending of the most precious thing there is: a life.

In part, it is due to the victims. As with all crimes, there are surely degrees to murder, and so perhaps we should look to the murdered as much as the method. For if a killing is always violent, then it must be at its *most* violent when it is the killing of a child.

In part, it is due to the scale. During the fourteen-year period from August 1994 until May 2008, thirteen children were reported missing from Davidson County and the greater Nashville metropolitan area. Thirteen children who would later be discovered dead. Their bodies wrapped in black garbage bags, bound tightly with nylon rope, tied with the same constrictor knot. Each one of them left by a body of water. Each one of them strangled, their corpses showing clear evidence of having been bathed in bleach post-mortem. Some were found

quick, but most were not. Most had rotted away to some degree by the time they were uncovered.

In part, it is due to who I am: Lucas Cole, aka Jack Cross. A man who has written an obscene number of objectively poor novels. Novels that, to varying degrees, idolise vigilante justice, casual sexism and toxic masculinity. Perhaps it surprises you to know that I am quite familiar with these terms, perhaps it does not. I make no apologies for knowing what sort of novels my audience wants to read, and playing to it for maximum effect. I am a writer, that is my job.

But the main reason that many will struggle with this book is because the crimes are still relatively fresh, their impact still felt in the local community. Here, the name 'Edward Morrison' is akin to that of the bogeyman. It is a name spoken quietly and with some degree of trepidation, when it is spoken at all. Many prefer to use the moniker coined by the media: the 'Music City Monster'. Possibly this dehumanises him, I don't know.

What I do know is that Edward Morrison was convicted of the abduction of a ten-year-old boy and the first-degree murder of the boy's parents. While he was never formally prosecuted for killing the thirteen other children (and seven parents, who are often sadly overlooked), this is nothing unusual. To use an unfortunate phrase, it would likely have been overkill: as I type, Morrison now sits on death row, where – legal appeals and congressional interference aside – he awaits his own violent murder, at which point a line might finally be drawn under this unsightly story.

The final point that I wish to make from the outset is that

while I have taken these crimes as a starting point, I did not set out to write a factual account of these child murders. There has been plenty written about the so-called Music City Monster already, and it was never my intention to add my work to that collection. My aim is – and always has been – to entertain. If you find this to be distasteful, then I would refer you to the start of my Author's Note.

Accordingly, this book is a work of fiction.

It is not a confession.

Lucas Cole



1

NATHAN

A hanging, in a place like this – it showed dedication.

The ceiling fan was no good. It was clearly broken: a blade missing, the whole thing suspended purely by exposed wiring.

The shower rail above the bath wouldn't work either. Too flimsy. Nathan wrapped his hands around it, and when he pulled gently he felt it flex. Cheap plastic screwed into crumbling drywall.

He spent a couple of minutes surveying the rest of the small, sad room. The results continued to disappoint.

Lightbulb fittings: too neat.

Door handles: too low.

Wardrobe rails: non-existent.

Of course there were other ways to kill yourself. Easier ways. Ways he'd seen on TV or in books. A toaster in the bathtub, a few boxes of pills. A high ledge. A handgun. A sharp knife and some warm water.

*

The motel was called The View. An ironic name, given where it was. Squeezed tight between an apartment block on one side and a thundering highway on the other. The only view Nathan had from his window was another window, this one with the blinds closed. Permanently, maybe.

The man in the dirty shirt at the front desk had given him a funny look when he'd asked for this room. Tried to palm him off with another. Gotten antsy when Nathan had insisted.

'It's being cleaned,' the man had said.

'I can wait.'

The guy had started to say something, then shrugged and handed over the key. What did it matter, at the end of the day, that one week earlier a man had hanged himself in this room? To the owner behind the desk, the dead man was a stranger. A blot on his bottom line at best. People didn't like staying in motels where guests had died. Didn't like seeing housekeepers crying or squad cars in the parking lot. Suicides were bad for business. So if someone came around and asked to stay in the room for a night, you took their money and you kept quiet.

It was different for Nathan. For Nathan, he wasn't a stranger, this man, this dead man, this hanged man.

It was his father who had made the reservation, who had checked into this motel, who had validated his parking so he wouldn't receive a ticket. It was his father who had systematically checked the room before deciding that the best way to end his life was by looping his belt around the back of the bathroom door, who had decided to wait until he'd showered and dressed in smart jeans and a clean shirt, who had eaten a Snickers and

drunk a whiskey and left the wrapper tucked neatly in the empty glass, perhaps all the while sitting at the window, perhaps all the while staring out at that dreadful view.