

Prologue

In the misty depths of her subconscious, she vaguely recalled that an angel had been sent down to save her, but the dark clouds of her past dragged her back to Hell. If she could just hold on, maybe her angel would return, and carry her beyond the darkness.

Shrill ringing pulled her from the distant nightmare. She reached for the phone with one hand and fumbled at the bedside lamp with the other, causing an empty liquor bottle to fall to the floor.

“Sarah?” Her heart ached as she recalled where she was and why. It wouldn’t be Sarah. She sat up in bed and rubbed her gritty eyes as she listened to the voice on the other end of the line. “Sorry, Lincoln. Say that again?” She tried to focus as the voice spoke. “Okay. Hang on.”

She reached for the pen and notepad sitting on the nightstand. “Why are you calling me? ... Okay. Who’s at the crime scene? ... All right, I’ll be there, but it’ll still take me a while.”

Minutes later, Abby Stanfield emerged from the bedroom, tucking the folded slip of paper into the pocket of her jeans. Walking silently, she slipped her borrowed cell phone and the black wallet containing her gold shield into the pocket of her leather jacket. She reached for her keys and, as an afterthought, grabbed a bagel to eat on the way. Hearing the pounding of the rain, she turned back and snatched a new ball cap that read POLICE. With the bagel gripped between her teeth, she quickly pulled her hair through the back of the cap and headed out into the miserable gray of the early morning.

The flashing lights of the gathered police cars directed Abby to her destination. She approached a uniformed officer, lowered the window of her Jeep, and showed her ID.

“Park it over there. Quinn’s down that path. You can’t miss him.” The officer raised the yellow tape, allowing Abby to wheel in alongside a patrol car.

She climbed slowly out of her vehicle. She was tired and sore and it showed. Slipping a piece of gum into her mouth, she headed for her partner.

“Abby. Down here.”

She raised her hand in acknowledgment and made her way toward a man holding an umbrella. Even in the pouring rain at a murder scene, she could see his tie and white pressed collar under his dark raincoat. “Morning, Linc.”

“Morning. Thought I’d better get you out here before you heard about it from somewhere else. Down here.” He motioned down the path.

“Heard what?” Abby stopped and stood nose to nose with the black man with the umbrella.

Lincoln Quinn was one of the few people Abby literally looked up to. At six feet one inch, most people were unable to look her straight in the eye, but Lincoln Quinn topped her by several inches. He had taken her under his wing when she had first arrived in the department with her new gold shield. They were more than partners; they were friends.

“You’re not even supposed to be here, so I’ll make this quick.” He noted the tired look in her eyes and the faint smell of alcohol, but he didn’t blame her. She had good reason. He wondered how much sleep she’d had over the last few days.

“Lincoln.” Abby interrupted his thoughts. “Show me the body.”

He pointed over his shoulder. “It’s over here.”

They made their way through the tall trees of the park. A winding asphalt path took them down toward the handful of men scouring the crime scene. The rain had stopped, but the sounds of incessant dripping echoed as they made their way toward a small bridge. The creek running beneath was engorged with rainwater, its color a murky brown.

“Abby — wait.”

It took her a moment to realize Lincoln was no longer beside her. Turning back, she looked at her partner. “What?”

“Abby, before you go down there...”

She turned from the concerned features of her friend to the faces of her fellow officers.

“Abby, wait!”

Not waiting to hear what Lincoln had to say, she took the last steps down the path.

There were half a dozen men performing various crime scene investigation procedures, but they all stopped working as she approached. They wanted to see her reaction.

“Goddamn it, Abby, would you wait?” Lincoln caught up to her and grabbed her by the arm. “Look at me.”

Her eyes moved slowly over the men, and then to the stained white sheet draped over a motionless mound next to the creek. The noise of the swollen stream made it hard for her to make out what Lincoln was saying. Through her thick jacket, she felt his grasp on her arm tighten as he gently shook her.

“What?” Her own deep voice sounded distant as she turned to look at Lincoln. “What?”

Lincoln released his hold. “It’s Ward.”

“What?”

“It’s Billy Ward.”

Abby followed him as he bent down and pulled back the white sheet. She looked down at the victim. Forgotten emotions pulled at her. It was unreal; it was untrue; it couldn’t be... And then Lincoln’s words sunk in. It was Ward. The reality of it felt distant, but at the same time the pain was so close it almost overwhelmed her.

The deceased had short black hair, wet from the rain. His face was battered and bruised, frozen in a grossly distorted mask of death. Something was in his mouth, but Abby didn’t look at it closely. Instead, she focused on his arms. They were bound behind his back. She swallowed hard, but refused to look away. “You fucking bastard — you had it coming,” she whispered hoarsely. “You had it coming.”

“And they made sure he got it,” Lincoln said as he lifted the sheet further away from the body.

There was a multitude of stab wounds, dark and deep, that opened the flesh in wide, gaping wounds. Large abrasions and small scrapes covered what was left of his exposed body. Abby’s eyes went down his mutilated body, stopping at his bloody and butchered groin. “Jesus Christ,” she said quietly, looking back to his mouth, where his penis had become his gag.

An older woman in a late model sedan wheeled up to the closed gate of the park. The young patrol officer nodded at the driver. “Morning, Lieutenant.”

“Is Detective Quinn on site?” Lieutenant Banks asked.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“And Detective Stanfield?” The officer suddenly looked uneasy. “Officer...Barker, is it? Is Detective Stanfield on site or not?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Thank you.” She watched as the gate opened. “Keep that press back, way back. Understood?” Officer Barker nodded.

Lieutenant Mary Banks seldom left her desk, but the torture and murder of one of the city’s infamous murderers and rapists was enough to bring her out, even on this miserable morning.

William Daniel Ward was the lowest form of life, an animal that preyed on young, innocent women. He had a demented reverence for young high school girls; he loved them but he hated them. Using the sap from a dieffenbachia plant, he made a paste that would numb their vocal chords, rendering them silent, so he could brutally and repeatedly rape and sodomize them, knowing no one would hear their desperate screams. When he was finally through with them, he’d dismember them. They died a slow and extremely painful death. Every law enforcement officer in the city was involved in one aspect of the case or another, but Detectives Stanfield and Quinn were the primary investigators. Abby and Lincoln had worked tirelessly, but they couldn’t seem to catch a break. Until chance threw them a name: William Daniel Ward. A spark of possibility grew to a flicker of probability. Abby became fixated on the case, working like one possessed, but Billy Ward had covered his tracks well. Then his thumbprint showed up on a soda can found in the car of the last victim. Abby finally had a chance to bring about an end to the fear that had a stranglehold on the city. It wasn’t much, but it was enough for a warrant. She made sure she and Lincoln checked every step, crossed every “t” and dotted every “i” before they went to Ward’s farmhouse on the edge of town.

The two served the warrant. All the evidence they needed was there for them to find: the room in which he had kept his victims, the knives he had used, the clothes he had left behind, and the blood that would forever stain the basement of the house on Elderberry Lane.

Abby and Lincoln had him — without question, without doubt. The evidence gave them all they needed. They were confident, and the prosecution was satisfied they had the right man. The muted voices of the victims and the extensive evidence found in that basement led them to an arrest in the most gruesome case the city had ever seen. The case was about to be delivered to a judge on a silver platter, and then it fell apart. A first year law student stumbled across a major malfeasance in the execution of the warrant, and the foundation of the prosecution’s case crumbled. The warrant had specified the house, not the basement. The defense argued that the basement was a detached dwelling because it had a separate entrance and the judge agreed. He threw out all the evidence collected in the basement and there wasn’t enough left to substantiate the case. William Daniel Ward walked out of the courtroom a free man.

Abby and Lincoln left Billy’s corpse to the forensic team and headed back to the parking lot. A simple statement by Lincoln started a heated conversation, and now they stood face-to-face, oblivious to those around them.

“Not all of it has to make it into the police report!”

“Goddamn it, Abby, Banks needs to know! They’re part of the investigation.”

Her patience and emotions were riding on her sleeve. “No, they’re not!”

She was exhausted and he could see the stress of the last few days clearly on her tired face. Lincoln knew more than anyone, that it wasn’t just the hunt for Billy, it was everything Billy had done to her...her and Sarah. “It’s her name—”

“Don’t! I mean it!” Abby’s temper flared and she got up in his face. “Just back off!”

“Abby, you need to back off the bottle. I can still smell the booze on you.”

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean?” Abby fired at her partner as a set of headlights flashed over them.

“It means exactly what it means. And as to this other thing, you don’t trust me!”

A car door slammed and Lincoln and Abby looked over to see Lieutenant Banks heading straight for them. *I don’t fucking need this right now.* Abby lifted her cap and ran her fingers through her hair.

Lieutenant Banks approached them. “Lincoln,” she said, nodding. “Abby, we won’t go into why you shouldn’t be here.”

“It was my idea—” Lincoln started.

“She’s a big girl, Lincoln. She knows she isn’t supposed to be here. That aside, tell me the two of you are not standing here arguing while evidence is being trampled and lost.”

“No. What evidence there is has been collected,” Lincoln replied, his brown eyes shifting to Abby.

“What do you mean, ‘what evidence there is?’” Banks demanded. “Elaborate.”

“What there is wouldn’t fill a shoe box. It’s like Ward fell from the sky. There’s nothing in the vicinity of the body — not a footprint, a tire track, nothing. Ward didn’t die down there,” Lincoln stated.

“Show me.”

All three turned and headed for the dead man. Lieutenant Banks was quiet as she examined the crime scene for herself. She had yet to look at the body. Whatever evidence was there for the coroner to discover wasn’t going anywhere, and any secrets the scene held were for forensics to find. Abby excused herself and walked over to the detectives who were doing the site measurements and the correlation of the body’s location, as well as the basic sketch of the area.

Lieutenant Banks watched Abby. “She can’t be here.”

“I had to call her.”

“She’s not a part of this. I want her out of here. Understood?” Lincoln nodded. “Was the description of his body accurate?”

“Very,” Lincoln said, thinking back to the placement of Billy’s penis. “I think someone was trying to send a message.”

“Mafia?” Banks questioned.

“Possibly.”

“Sabatini?”

Lincoln considered the name, and the man. Frank Sabatini was the father of one of Ward’s victims. “He did claim to *have friends*,” he answered.

There was a long pause before Lieutenant Banks spoke again. “On a personal note...how is she?”

Detective Quinn kept his eyes on his partner as she conferred with one of the investigators. “I don’t think it’s hit her yet. I mean, I wasn’t expecting her to shed tears, but...”

Neither spoke for a while, each lost in their own concerns. Abby wasn’t the only female in Lieutenant Bank’s squad, and though she tried not to play favorites, she knew she sometimes did. There was something special about Abby. She was a dark shadow of mystery behind a wall few got past.

“I don’t want this coming back to bite us in the ass, Lincoln.”

“I know, Lieutenant.”

“There’s going to be a lot of people looking in her direction over this. We need it by the numbers and by the book. Got it?”

“You have my word,” he promised, and then returned to the job at hand.

Lieutenant Banks motioned for Abby to join her. She walked to the creek bridge and waited at the weathered handrail as Abby approached.

“The body wasn’t dumped from up here,” Abby stated firmly. “With all the rain we’ve had in the last few days, the ground down there is very soft and would have shown some sign of that amount of weight landing, even from this small height.”

The lieutenant nodded as she looked up to see the coroner coming down the trail with Lincoln.

“Abby, after everything—”

Abby held up a hand. “I know.”

“The press is out there in full force and I don’t want this to become a media circus. If your name shows up in a headline—”

“It won’t.”

“It can’t.” The two women studied each other. “My hands are tied, Abby. I’m sorry.” Lieutenant Banks turned to leave, but then turned back to face Abby. “This case has been your main focus for so long...and once before I had to force you to take a step back and take a leave of absence. Don’t make me do it again.”

Abby’s eyes drifted down to the swollen creek rushing below her, but she made no sign that she’d heard her lieutenant’s words. “Abby, he’s dead, and no matter what happens, he can never take another life.”

Abby remained silent as the water churned beneath her. She wanted nothing more than to believe her lieutenant, but something told her, it wasn’t over yet.

“Abby, I’m sorry about Sarah.”

Abby’s memories swirled like the water below and took her back to another time — before it all started, a time when it should have all ended.