

## Chapter 1

### *Cicero, Illinois March, 1993*

The streets of Cicero were quiet, the bright lights washing out any sign of stars in the evening sky. March rains fell hard on the grungy sidewalk; their cool waters surged along the cracks, a network of tiny rivers on a cold, gray land. Beth's feet splashed loudly through puddles as she struggled to keep up with her lover's long strides.

"In here," Dusty hissed and gripped Beth's hand tighter.

Beth barely had time to look behind them to see if their pursuers were still there, before she found herself jerked down a side street, past several heavily grated store windows.

Beth gasped for breath, her lungs burning in painful protest. Far from athletic to begin with, the forced run sucked the life out of her. The rain-soaked clothing clung to Beth's skin, weighing her down as she ran. How had a night at the movies turned into their own private horror scene? Here she was with the one person that meant everything to her, and they were both running for their lives. She abhorred violence. Had the world gone mad?

Fear clawed at Beth's mind like a rabid alley cat, and only Dusty's strong grip forced her on. A heated argument in Spanish from a window above drowned out the sound of their footsteps and labored breathing as they raced among the walkways like gazelles evading a hungry pack of hyenas.

"Dusty, wait," Beth wheezed loudly as they ran past a trio of poorly maintained apartment buildings. The street ended abruptly at the back of a large red brick structure covered in graffiti. "If we stay in here, they'll catch us for sure."

"You're tired." Dusty pulled Beth closer with an arm around her shoulders, and slowed to a fast walk. "You can't keep this up, babe. We have to find someplace so you can rest."

They turned down a narrow walkway and came across a set of steps that led to the basement of a grey and beige stone building. Dusty stopped and glanced the way they had come. Beth took the respite to catch her breath and study Dusty's bedraggled appearance. Her straight, shoulder length hair clung to her ruddy brown face in pitch-black clusters. Her once tan Statesman hat was now a soggy dark brown. Rainwater fell from the wide brim in a steady flow of droplets.

Dusty turned back and guided Beth down to the stairs, into the doorway. Water-soaked trash littered the stairwell, the musty smell that accompanied the detritus only adding to Beth's despair. Dusty's hands moved from Beth's shoulders. She slipped the cell phone from her jacket pocket into Beth's shaking hand. "Stay down here. Call the cops again. Tell them where you are now and what's happening."

Beth's eyes widened and her throat tightened with fear. "You're going out there, aren't you? Are you mad? We have to get out of this together," Beth pleaded. "Promise me. Together."

Dusty kissed her lips and placed her palm on Beth's abdomen, caressing the barely noticeable swelling of her pregnancy through her silk blouse. "I'm going to have to deal with this alone. I can't let them touch you or our baby. No matter what, you have to be okay."

There was something about the feel of Dusty's rough hands that always brought her comfort, no matter how upset Beth might be. The hand caressed her stomach and Beth closed her eyes. It took a moment through the precious breaths of peace for Dusty's words to reach Beth's consciousness enough to sink in completely.

"No." Beth shook her head vehemently, her thick, drenched curls lashing her face. "Together."

Dusty gripped Beth in a tight embrace, her voice deep and gruff. "Not this time, babe. It's not you they want. These assholes are after me. Make the call. I'll lure them away and then double back to get you as soon as I can."

"Who are they? What do they want?" The desperation in Beth's voice magnified as her fear and confusion grew to a fevered pitch. Dusty was an architect, for Christ's sake. Why would anyone be hunting her? "Dusty..."

"Shhhh..." Dusty kissed her once more. Beth's lips quivered, but she returned the kiss, fearful Dusty was saying goodbye. "No time to explain now. Later."

Dusty backed away and headed up the steps; Beth followed.

"No." A callused hand barred Beth's way. "You have to stay here. No matter what, you think of our baby. Got that?" Tears welled in Dusty's eyes, but her voice never wavered. The look on her face told Beth all she needed to know. "We have to think of our baby. Promise me you'll stay here. Promise me you'll not follow. Stay hidden and safe. Not a sound. It'll give you away."

Beth flinched at the words "promise me". She had never been a good liar and keeping her word was something her father had instilled in her from an early age. The women locked eyes, and after a pause that seemed to Beth like eternity, she found herself nodding, her voice barely audible. "I promise."

"I love you." Dusty touched her cheek, her eyes soft and sad. Then suddenly Dusty broke away, sprinting up the steps.

Beth hugged herself and shivered, listening to the familiar sound of Dusty's work boots growing distant. She pulled out the cell phone and dialed 911.

"911. This line's recorded. What's your emergency?"

Before Beth could respond to the voice on the other end, the phone went silent and the call was lost. *Dammit*. She pressed the buttons madly, but to no avail. Panic filled her, and she struggled hopelessly to push it back. Dusty was out there trying to lure those men away. The cell phone was dead. This was a survival situation and Beth felt completely useless.

She heard a shout from the street followed by the sound of Dusty's swearing. Startled, Beth covered her mouth to stifle a gasp. Before she could move, the swearing became louder. Her sense of panic grew, and she paused, unsure whether she dared to crawl out from her hiding place to see what was happening. Beth felt like such a coward, but the promise held her in place.

There was a loud crash. Fear churned in her stomach, and for a moment, she thought she might retch. Beth took deep breaths in a vain attempt to calm herself as she crept up several steps and strained to catch sight of Dusty through the space between two of the apartment buildings, the dead cell phone gripped tightly in her hand.

Under the light of a flickering street lamp, Beth could see one man amidst a pile of garbage cans who held his arm and yelled. Four men moved towards Dusty, blocking her path out of the dead-end street. Each of them wore dark suits and ankle-length tweed coats. Dusty turned from the fallen man to face a larger guy with red hair. After a moment's hesitation, he rushed at her, his fist raised.

Eyes blazing with anger, Dusty smiled as the man charged her. She ducked her head, and the punch sailed high above her, missing its mark. From a crouched position, Dusty drove a knee hard into his stomach. The man's off-balance punch and momentum flipped him through the air. He landed flat on his back, and grunted as the wind was knocked out of him.

One of the men struck Dusty between her shoulders with some sort of club, knocking her to the ground. Beth bit her lower lip and closed her eyes. She was not a

religious woman, but not knowing what else to do, she prayed. There was a shattering of glass and a howl of pain.

Beth's eyes shot open to see the man stumble backwards as blood poured from his nose. She knew Dusty could have a temper, but nothing could have prepared her for the sheer brutality of what she saw. Dusty thrust a broken bottle into the dark-haired man's neck, and he fell to his knees. The man held his throat with both hands as blood gushed through his fingers. The sight of so much blood made Beth feel faint.

The first man struggled to free himself from the pile of crushed garbage cans, while the two still standing ran at Dusty. A rake across the eyes of one man with the shattered remains of the bottle sent him reeling, screaming, and clawing at his face. Beth watched horrified as Dusty grabbed the other man by the tie and crammed her knee into his groin. He doubled over, and then Dusty's forearm landed across his temple. The blow slammed him backwards into a parked car whose alarm screeched out in protest to the disturbance.

The flashing street lamp reflected within the predatory look in Dusty's eyes. Through her tears, Beth watched Dusty turn back to face her first assailant. Dusty charged and leapt. Her boot crashed into the man's face and bounced his head off the brick wall behind him.

Without warning, Dusty screamed, fell to the ground, and thrashed about wildly. Deep lines of agony rippled across her face. Neither woman had seen the sixth man. No matter how good a fighter Dusty was, fifty thousand volts from a Taser proved to be more than a match for her.

As one man lay on the street and choked on his own blood, his companions moved in toward Dusty. They said things, but Beth was too far away to hear them. Dusty struggled to stand, but a second shot from the Taser sent her back to the ground hard. The men slowly closed in, and soon Beth lost sight of Dusty beneath the circle of stomping feet.

Beth held her nose and mouth in her cupped hands, to suppress the scream of fear and rage that bubbled inside her. She had to get help. Beth hadn't forgotten the promise, but no one was going to be able to come back for her. She couldn't use the phone to call for the police. The rules had all changed, and she had to adjust. If Dusty was hurt or worse...

She scanned the group of men, gauging their condition and her chances. Most of them were bloody and bruised, and the one man now lay motionless in the rain-swept gutter. There was a path to the road past a large dumpster just behind them. If she could get to a payphone to call the police, Dusty might still stand a chance. Maybe they would chase her instead, leaving Dusty the opportunity to get away. Dusty had told her to stay hidden and safe, but she certainly wouldn't want Beth to remain here if there was no help coming at all.

Beth started to move the rest of the way up the stairs, but one man glanced her way. She froze in place, and held her breath as he moved a step closer. Sirens sounded from far off and rapidly drew nearer. The man halted his progression toward Beth, and turned back to his companions. They grabbed the dead man's body and scattered down the street. Beth paused for barely a second before she sprinted from her hiding place.

The clatter of her shoes on the wet pavement echoed in the empty street as she ran. Her heart hammered like thunder in her chest, tears burning hot on her cheeks. Beth cried out as she caught sight of the Statesman. The hat lay in a puddle and crimson clouds spread out over the water's surface. Then, Beth saw Dusty and froze.

Dusty lay face first, crumpled in a muddy patch of grass near some fallen trashcans. Her hemp shirt was torn in several places, large patches of the pale blue fabric taking on

a deep purple from the blood that covered it. There were several black burns from the Taser on the back of the shirt, and the air smelled of charred fabric and flesh.

Beth fell to her knees. She gently turned Dusty over and gasped at the heavy swelling and bruising on her face. She cradled Dusty's head in her lap and wiped a mass of blood-soaked hair from her sharp features. "Dusty? Can you hear me?"

Dusty opened her dark eyes and a weak smile crossed her face. Her voice was barely audible, and Dusty's words were muffled by the gurgling sound in her throat. "Yeah, babe."

"Help will be here soon. Can you hear the sirens?" Beth's hands shook, but she forced her voice to remain calm.

"It's bad." Dusty closed her eyes. "Go to my family's place."

"But Dusty." Beth could barely see through her tears. "You'll be with me. You have to be."

Dusty coughed hard followed by an ominous whistling exhale. "Promise me. Call Orion. They'll...look after...you and our baby."

"Okay," Beth said, as she listened to Dusty struggle to speak. The despair spread in her chest like ice across a window. "I promise."

"I love you." Dusty smiled. The firm grip of Dusty's hand at the nape of Beth's neck relaxed, and Beth's choked sob was muffled in their passionate kiss. Dusty's fingers released their hold, and slid slowly down Beth's neck, her arm falling limply to the pavement. Beth gazed into Dusty's eyes, feeling the truth grip her heart so hard she feared it would shatter.

Dusty was gone.