

Prologue

The world was one big swirl, mixing with the cool breezy night. Christine stepped out of the rental car she had parked smack in the middle of the rickety old bridge. She had no idea that bridges like this even existed anymore. They certainly didn't in L.A.

The boards creaked under her booted feet, her unsteady body reeling as the chemicals raced through her bloodstream, slamming every nerve ending alive as they passed. Her vision blurred, and the rail she was heading for seemed to recede. She reached out a hand, trying to catch it and bring it back.

The brunette nearly fell as the rail hit her midsection, knocking her off balance. She giggled to herself, thinking of those warning signs on rear-view mirrors: *Warning: Objects may be closer than they appear.*

Grabbing onto the rail, she steadied herself, looking over it, down into the murky depths of the river. Which river? Hell, she couldn't remember. All she knew was it was some river in the podunk town she had found herself in.

Raising a leather-clad leg, Christine rested her boot against a rung of the railing, grunting slightly as she pushed with her thigh, her other boot finding the top of the railing. She cursed at the splinter that lodged in her hand as she grabbed the nearest support pole, the dangling light attached to it swinging back and forth as she disturbed it with her head.

"Fucker!" Christine slurred, bringing a hand to her head, then grabbing the pole with both hands as she began to lose her balance again.

Steadying herself, she once again looked down into the water, midnight black in the near moonless night. The swinging lantern cast eerie shadows on everything, shadows dancing across the wood planks of the bridge, shadows dancing across Christine's features.

She felt a sting behind her eyes and shook her head to try and get rid of it. She was also trying to shake the memories that were beginning to flood back, her high wearing off, the numbness wearing off. She was starting to be able to think, and she didn't want to think, feel, remember.

The crowd in front of her, huge and loud, demanding, wanting every part of her that they could get or could take. The band behind her, playing, exchanging glances with each other as Christine stood there, microphone between her hands, forehead resting against the silver head. She had missed her cue twice already, and she didn't care. She couldn't remember the words; her mind and focus had been stolen by the good hit she'd taken in her dressing room.

"What the fuck is the problem?" the lead guitarist, Joey, had asked, after he'd made a stroll up to her, playing the entire time.

The question snapped Christine out of her stupor for a moment. She grinned at him, telling him it was all good, and then turned back to her audience, not seeing any of them, not one single face.

A disaster. A total, fucking disaster. Christine felt the sting in her eyes worsen and then wetness on her cheek, chilled by the breeze.

Her eyes refocused on the water below, so inviting, so calming in its chaos. She felt the weightlessness as one boot left the security of the railing. She leaned further over, seeing her leg dangling above the churning river. Leaning further, further, further. She got another splinter in her palm as she let go, she realized. It was her last thought.

Frizzy synthetic red hair brushed across the ceiling of the Dodge Ram. A pale hand slammed against the steering wheel in time with the music on the radio, and a ridiculously pale face, streaked with color, bobbed to the beat of the gloved hand, flopping that frizzy red hair around like a huge bush.

"Yeah, sing it, Britney!" Willow sang out, her painted green eyes closing for just a moment before opening to squint with raucous laughter. She wasn't exceptionally keen on Britney Spear's attitudes or public persona, but the girl could sing.

Willow loved the buzz she got after doing her gigs on the side. All the energy from the little rascals at the birthday party seemed to flow into her, giving her a natural high like nothing else. Even her main job as a nurse on the children's ward didn't affect her the way the parties did.

She reached down to the volume knob and cranked the sucker, laughing at herself as she sang along, quite horribly, with the next song that came on. The loudness made it worse, because she had absolutely no idea what the words were.

Life was good for Willow Bowman as she drove out of the small town of Williamsburg, Oklahoma, a short distance from Oklahoma City, and headed toward her small ranch.

Her voice gave out finally, probably God's way of telling Willow to shut it, but she continued to bob her head and beat the steering wheel along with the music.

Heading around Dittman's Curve, she approached the bridge, named after some old guy who had done something or other for the town a hundred years ago. *What Dittman really needed to do was fix his bridge*, she thought.

As she neared the bridge, she noticed a car parked smack dab in the middle of it, lights off, looking abandoned.

"Shoot," she muttered. The one-lane bridge was the only way to get to the ranch. Eyes still on the bridge, Willow blindly reached across the console until she felt the passenger seat, then her phone.

Movement caught Willow's eye, and she looked to the rail of the bridge.

"Oh my God!" Pulling the truck to a stop, she dropped the phone, leaving the engine running and door swinging, and ran to the rail. There was a huge splash in the dark depths. Without another thought, Willow climbed up where she had seen the dark figure before it had jumped and followed suit.

The water was freezing, chilling every part of her, stabbing at her like thousands of tiny knives. It took her a moment to get her bearings, then she began to thrash around in the near complete darkness, using her hands to feel around frantically.

It was cold, but Christine had figured it would be. She allowed the cold to embrace her, swallow her. She was angry for a moment as her body's natural survival instincts made her hold her breath, her body far more interested in surviving than her heart.

As she sank further into the dark water, her brain was still hazed enough to feel it as a comforting cocoon, engulfing her body, vanquishing the demons that lurked above the surface of the water.

She felt the numbness begin to overcome her again, that lack of feeling or even ability to feel, inside or out. She welcomed it, prayed for it, *wanted* it.

Something grabbed her wrist, bringing her out of her reverie. She began to thrash, horrid images swarming her mind, scenes from a child's nightmare. She tried to escape the demon that had followed her into the depths, but it refused to let go.

She took in a lungful of water as she tried to scream, then began to thrash anew as she tried to expel it, only to take in more water.

Floating, floating, blackness, sinking, sinking...

Willow broke the surface, synthetic hair now covering one eye, and dragged her find out of the water and to the banks of the river. It was heavy, but Willow was determined. The body was that of a woman, she saw, one whose own face was half covered by long, dark hair. Not bothering to move it away, Willow jutted the woman's jaw back, plugging her nose, and leaned down to blow hot, life-giving air into the open, chilled lips.

Sitting back up, she pressed on the woman's tank-top clad torso, feeling the woman's chances of survival speeding away with each second.

"Come on," she panted as she went back to giving air. After several more tries, Willow threw herself back, startled at the feel of water hitting her lips. She looked down, relief filling her as the woman coughed, the movement racking her entire body and throwing her halfway to her side as she spewed a stream of water to the sand beneath her, following it with more coughing and spasms.

Willow sat back on her heels, waiting, watching, in deep concern. The woman calmed after a few moments, still coughing, but alive. She slowly rolled onto her back, head turning, then she jumped violently.

“Fuck!” Christine exclaimed, as she saw a monster sitting next to her — a mass of smashed red hair covered part of the face, which was streaked with white, black and blue. A slash of red extended from the lips down the chin and splotted the neck.

“Shh, it’s okay,” Willow said, realizing she must look a sight. She yanked off the wig to reveal short, wet blonde hair, turned a strange gray-green in the night. “Are you okay?” she asked, her voice soft as she put a hand to the woman’s arm.

Christine calmed again, finding it funny that she’d been dragged out of the river by a clown. She hated clowns. As a kid they used to creep her out. She nodded, trying to sit up, but the hand that had been on her arm moved to her shoulder.

“Just lie there. Can you breathe?” the woman asked, and Christine nodded, taking several deep breaths just to make sure. “Okay. Stay here.” The clown jumped up and ran, though Christine couldn’t work out how she was able to do so, given the massive red shoes she had on.

They must have made great flippers to swim in. This thought sent a giggle through Christine’s still fuzzy brain. Within moments she heard rocks crunching under foot and the low, soft voice of her savior, coming back, having a one-sided conversation.

“Okay. Thanks, John. We’ll be here.” Willow flipped her phone shut and knelt down next to the woman again. She lay there, staring up at the sky, then closed her eyes, resting an arm across them. Sighing, Willow couldn’t stop the questions from parading across her mind. Why had the woman done this? Was it suicide or an accident? Who was she? From the woman’s dress, a black tank top with black leather pants and heavy boots, she doubted she was from the area. Also, the car had a Hertz sticker on the back window.

She sat next to the woman, waiting for the ambulance to arrive. It wouldn’t take long for the ambulance to get there; the hub wasn’t far. But the drive to the hospital in Oklahoma City, that would take much longer. She began to shiver, the chill night breeze seeping into the completely saturated material of her once baggy clown suit, which now clung to her like a second skin.

“Do you have a name, honey?” she asked quietly, reaching out to brush some of the hair from the woman’s face.

“It doesn’t matter.” The arm came down, and blue eyes looked into Willow’s briefly before turning away. Finally the woman sighed. “Christine,” she said quietly.

“Nice to meet you, Christine, though I’m sorry it has to be under these kinds of circumstances.” Christine could see worry in the other woman’s eyes, and that surprised her. They were total strangers to each other; why should she care? *Shit*, those in Christine’s life who knew her better than anyone on the planet didn’t care about her or show the kind of concern this woman did.

“Yeah. And you, Bozo?”

Willow stared at her for a moment, about to protest when she remembered her current get-up. She chuckled lightly. “Willow Bowman.”

Christine nodded in acknowledgment, then turned to look back up into the heavens as the sound of a siren not far away broke the quiet of the night.

The lights of Mercy Medical’s ER nearly blinded Willow as she parked her truck and hurried in after Toby and Allen, the two EMTs.

The sound of chaotic activity surrounded her as she pushed through the ER doors, hurrying alongside the gurney on which Christine had been strapped down.

“Why am I here?” Christine asked, her head lolling from side to side, her face pale with heavy, dark shadows beneath her closed eyes.

“Just to make sure everything checks out okay,” Willow said, holding the woman’s hand.

“I don’t need to be here,” she muttered, then began to cough violently, bringing up more water. She had had similar fits the entire way in the ambulance. As doctors and ER nurses emerged onto the scene, Willow knew it was her cue to back off; Christine was no longer her patient.

She grabbed a cup of coffee and headed out into the waiting room, wanting to get out of the way. She told one of the nurses to notify her the moment they were done with Christine.

“Hey, girl, what are you doing here?” Rachel Smith asked, lightly touching Willow’s arm as she sat in one of the black, plastic chairs against a wall.

“Hey,” she smiled, then sighed. “Guess I decided to go fishing at,” she looked at her watch, noting that the hands weren’t moving and a very menacing bubble was floating around the face.

“Shoot,” she turned to her friend, “some late hour.” She leaned against the wall behind her, exhaustion finally taking root.

“What? What happened?” Rachel sat in the next chair, hands clasped between her spread knees.

“Oh, you wouldn’t believe it.” Willow opened her mouth to speak, then she noticed two men walking through the automatic doors of the lobby. One wore a smart black suit and had a large, black leather satchel in his hand. The other was also dressed in finery, though more understated — a white button-up shirt, its sleeves rolled to the mid-forearm, tucked into expensive-looking gray slacks. He wore more rings on one hand than Willow even owned. His slicked-back salt and pepper hair gleamed as brightly as they did.

The men immediately began to look around; one spotted Rachel in her scrubs. Walking over to her, the man with graying hair, yet young skin, smiled.

“Excuse me, nurse, but I need to find someone.” He looked from one to the other of the women, frowning slightly when he saw the clown makeup smeared over Willow’s face. The expression made her extremely self-conscious. In all the hubbub, she had forgotten completely about her appearance.

“Who?” Rachel asked, standing.

“Uh,” the man turned to the suit behind him, who handed him a piece of paper. “Willow Bowman? We were told by one of your fine physicians she was here,” the man said. “I understand she’s a nurse at this hospital?”

“I’m Willow Bowman,” Willow said, also standing. The man looked at her, doubt evident in his eyes. “It’s a long story,” she said softly. “What can I do for you, mister?”

“Robert Knowles.” He extended a hand, which she took, after removing her ruined white glove. “I need to speak with you concerning tonight’s events. I assume it’s why you look like a drowned rat?” His smile was tight-lipped, and Willow wasn’t so sure she liked this guy.

“Ah, yeah.” She looked down at herself, then back up at him. He held out a white handkerchief to her.

He turned back to Rachel. “Is there somewhere we can speak with Ms. Bowman?”

“Sure. Follow me to the conference room.” Rachel looked at her friend, who only shrugged.

“Ms. Bowman will join us once she’s cleaned up a bit,” Knowles said. Yeah, Willow didn’t like him.

She splashed water all along the white sink, rinsing off the last vestiges of makeup, then looked at herself in the mirror. Her face was clean, though there wasn’t much she could do about her attire. She had unbuttoned the coverall-type clown suit, letting the top hang down, arms flapping around her legs. She was glad she’d worn a tank top underneath it.

Pushing open the doors of the conference room, Willow saw the two men, the suit standing over a laptop, a tiny printer buzzing away next to it, spitting out a sheet of paper. Robert Knowles was sitting at the head of the table, his fingers steepled under his chin, an expensive gold watch glittering against a tanned wrist, and a large, gold pinky ring on his right hand.

“Ah, Ms. Bowman. Please, have a seat.” He indicated the chair to his left, and Willow took it, glancing at the suit across the table from her, who had yet to speak.

“What’s going on?” she asked, looking back to Knowles, who sighed and sat forward in his chair.

“Have you spoken with anyone about what happened tonight? Other than emergency personnel, of course.”

“No. Listen, Mr. Knowles...”

“Ms. Bowman,” he interrupted, stunning Willow into silence. She started as something was put before her by the suit. Looking at it, she realized it was a check. Her eyes flew up to meet his hard gaze.

“This is a check for twenty-five thousand dollars,” she said, her voice breathless and even more confused.

“And all yours if,” he held up a well-manicured finger, “you do one simple thing for us.”

“Us? What, you and the suit?” she thumbed at the other man who was busy typing on the laptop. Robert Knowles chuckled, making Willow’s skin crawl.

“No. Jack is simply Ms. Gray’s attorney. What you’ll be doing will be for her, me, and Ms. Gray’s reputation.”

Willow stared at him, utterly baffled for a moment, his words flowing through her head, trying to make sense of what he was telling her. Ms. Gray, Christine.

"Holy shit!" Her eyes widened, and her hand flew to her mouth. The men exchanged a glance, then Robert looked at her again. "I pulled Christine Gray out of Chandler River?" she breathed. He nodded. "Christine Gray as in won six Grammys last year?" He nodded once more.

"Perhaps now you see just how important it is that we get your full cooperation with this." The paper from the printer was slid in front of her. She looked down at it, realizing it looked like a contract of sorts.

"What is this?"

"It's your promise that you'll keep what happened tonight to yourself," Robert said simply. She picked it up and began to scan over it.

"So," Willow drawled, her eyes still sweeping over the document, "you're saying I get the money if I keep my trap shut?"

"Ms. Bowman, Christine has a great many fans who are young girls, girls in their teens, early twenties. These fans look up to her, emulate her. In her music they find inspiration for their own lives, as well as words they can relate to. These girls would be devastated to find out their heroine, their role model, has fallen from grace."

Willow looked up at the man, the corner of her mouth quirking at his spew of crap. "You play a good game, Mr. Knowles," she chuckled. His brows drew together in irritation.

"Then let me put it to you this way. If this got out, Christine would be finished. Better?" He sighed, flopping back in the chair, his hand going to his forehead. "Cleaning up this mess is going to cost her enough as it is."

"How did you know where to find her?" Willow asked, dying of curiosity. It was a hoot seeing these "citized" boys in the boonies. Knowles glanced up at her.

"Christine's tour manager knew the circumstances under which Ms. Gray left tonight. He was concerned." The man wiped at a smudge on the polished table with a fingertip. "Luckily there aren't all that many hospitals in this area."

Willow turned back to the contract under her hand, then glanced over at the check. Instantly, as if the lawyer were reading her thoughts, a gold pen appeared before her. She picked it up, tapping it against her chin as she read over the document.

"I'll sign your contract here, Mr. Knowles, but I don't want your money."

"The check stays here, Ms. Bowman. Whether you chose to cash it or not is entirely up to you." She nodded, scribbling her signature across the dotted line.

"This is a legal document, Ms. Bowman," the lawyer said, taking the pen and contract from her before the ink had a chance to dry. "If you were to breach it, Christine Gray can and will take legal action against you. Do you understand this?"

Willow nodded, sighing warily. "Yes."

"Thank you," Robert Knowles said, standing. "Good evening to you." With amazing efficiency, the attorney packed up the laptop and printer, and both men were on their way.

Willow glanced at the check, taking it in her fingers. "Holy crap," she whispered. "I just saved the life of the woman who won the Grammy for best female vocalist last year."