

# **DEADLY CAPTIVE: COLLATERAL DAMAGE**

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### **Chapter One**

"The worm gave the bird his secrets and soon flew again, spiraling down, down, down. The bird laid him gently in the mud, pretty eyes wide as she caught sight of bushes of berries, scattered seeds, and more worms than she could ever eat."

Baby faces inched closer, and tiny bodies hung on the edges of miniature seats, all eager for the next part, even though they'd heard the story before.

I softened my tone to do the voice of the bird. "Thank you, little worm. You may go free.' And wiggling away on his plump, pink belly, mud-caked, smiling in rain-slicked glee, the worm once again had not a care."

Scattered claps filled the room as I closed the book. Spotting their mommies and daddies gathered outside the glass-walled room, half the kids raced to their cubbyholes to fetch their galoshes and ponchos. Those that remained loitered by the toys, either knowing their parents wouldn't come until later or not feeling all that excited about leaving.

I made no judgments. Seriously, seeing how exhausted some people were when they came to the Precious Ducklings Daycare to pick up their little ones . . . well, I counted myself lucky. I loved my job, and I loved the children. For me, every day was laughter and crayon-scribbled sunshine. A sniffle here and there, the odd tantrum, but nothing I couldn't handle. I gave what the tired parents couldn't. Nothing wrong with that.

Reaching over, I replaced the book on one of the rainbow colored shelves, among all the other tired-looking favorites at toddler eye level. The top shelves housed the shiny new books, with glossy covers and big, gold stickers proclaiming them bestsellers, recommended by this or that expert. I used those when I taught language, art, and math, but textbooks couldn't teach the

little ones to love reading. For that, the teachers all supplied their own childhood favorites, and each had a color-coded label that matched our Precious Duckling smocks. My pastel green was chosen more often than not. Missy Marlo, the daycare coordinator, said it was because I did all the voices just right. Could be, but could also be that approaching each story like I was reading it for the first time—even if it was the tenth, or the hundredth—made all the difference.

Feeling a little tug on my sleeve, I glanced over at a chubby-cheeked, freckled face wreathed in bright, red curls. She looked a lot like me—twenty-five years ago. Her mother and I were second cousins on my father's side.

"Yes, Gloria?" I settled down, cross-legged, and smoothed my long, white, floral print skirt over my knees as she plunked onto the happy-face carpet we used for story time.

Her tiny nose wrinkled as she pointed at the bookshelf. "I don't like that story."

"*The Worm's Hand?*" I took the book back out and showed it to her. She nodded. "But you ask me to read this every time it rains. Is there a reason you don't like it anymore?"

"Yes." She frowned at the book cover. "The worm is nasty, Miss Reed. He lets the birdie eat all his worm friends so he can get away."

*Clever little thing.* The other kids focused on the beautiful illustrations and the worm finding a way to escape the bird. She'd deciphered a deeper meaning.

I was curious. "What should the worm have done instead?"

She didn't even hesitate. "Let the bird eat *him*."

"But the bird might have eaten his friends anyway."

"Nope." She grinned as though she'd already considered that. "Her tummy would be full."

"Hmm, very true. Well, how about the next time I read the story, I change the ending so he's a noble worm? Would you like that?" I smiled when she nodded vigorously. "Okay, next time it rains."

"Gloria!" Her mother called from across the room, sounding fed up of calling even though I'd only heard her once. "Let's go!"

Gloria didn't seem bothered by her mother's tone, so I didn't let it bother me either. The woman worked in a nursing home; her internal volume was probably a little skewed.

"I hope it rains tomorrow!" Gloria said before she skipped off to retrieve her things.

My shift over, I headed for the teacher's lounge, stopping several times to update a few parents on their child's progress: "Timmy's tying his own shoes now!" and "No, Bobby didn't have an accident today." The usual stuff.

In the lounge, I slipped out of my plain, white, canvas flats and took my favorite shoes—cute, open-toed, silver kitten heels I'd spent two paychecks on—from the shoe rack in the closet. Then I pulled on my long, beige, spring jacket and grabbed my leather clutch.

Amanda, the daycare's cook and my monthly clubbing buddy, met me by the front door on my way out. "Mind giving me a lift?"

"Sure." I waited for her to zip her Carolina Hurricanes sports jacket and pulled my hood over my head. The rain sloshed over the huge windows and glass doors, making the daycare look like it was under a waterfall. Cold water sprinkled in when I opened the door. Outside, parents dashed across the manicured lawns with their shrieking offspring, admonishing them to avoid the puddles.

At least they wore rubber boots. I gave the rain a few moments to lighten up while I considered swapping my shoes again. Before I'd made up my mind, Amanda towed me out. Then she threw her head back and let the raindrops splatter on her face. "Ah!"

The rim of my hood brushed my cheek as I watched her. Much as I enjoyed a spring shower, my enthusiasm didn't match hers. Partly because the water squishing in my sandals was uncomfortable, and partly because I hadn't spent all day over a hot stove sterilizing baby bottles.

We made our way to my car, always parked four blocks from the daycare, right next to the gym. I'd inherited my mother's obsession with weight, but not her distaste for fattening food. An hour a day at the gym, and I could indulge a little.

"Oh, God, if it was just a bit later and no one was around, I'd strip and dance naked." Amanda smoothed her soaked, brown curls off her forehead. "Finally! The weekend!"

"Uh huh." I grinned, anticipating her next words. "Watermelon martinis, here *we* come!"

"This weekend? You'll come with me tonight? Really?" Amanda squealed at my nod. "She's ditched the schedule! Hallelujah!"

My decision was actually a knee-jerk reaction to a recent lecture from my mother about "finding the *right* man"—in other words, I'd go out of my way to take home a man she'd hate. But let Amanda believe what she wanted. Nicole Reed was being spontaneous. *Ra ra ra.*

"Feel like going to the gym first?" *Where I have dry clothes and sneakers.*

"Feel like joining me for a threesome?"

*That's a no.*

"Do I seem like—?" A splash cut me off. A little boy jetted across the sidewalk and into the street. My heart sputtered as I made a grab for him. And missed. "Careful!"

Cars swerved, tires screeched, horns wailed as drivers leaned on them. I couldn't see the boy.

"Do you think . . . ?"

Amanda's fingers dug into my arms as she and I scanned the maze of cars. She jabbed her fingers towards the other side of the street. "There!"

We both ran, weaving around traffic that crawled back into two lanes. The honking kicked up again, but we ignored it. The boy--no more than four or five--must have been scared and lost. If we didn't reach him in time . . . .

He bolted into a narrow alley between a music store closed for repairs after a fire and a pawn shop with a charred, brick wall. The tang of melted plastic and smoke still tainted the air. We followed him, catching up as he tripped over debris. Steps ahead of us, he crumpled to his knees and sobbed. His wet, gray T-shirt clung to the bones of his spine and ribs like dirty, wrinkled flesh. He looked starved and cold. Poor thing.

"Hey." I shrugged out of my jacket, and then crouched and covered him with it. "Sweetie, you'll be all right. We won't hurt you."

"I know." His whole body trembled as he looked up at me. Bloodshot, blue-gray eyes glistened between long wet lashes. Tears streaked the soot on his cheeks. "I'm sorry."

Something sharp pricked my throat. My eyes crossed as I focused on the huge knife in the little boy's hand. I didn't breathe. Didn't blink. Didn't move.

Then Amanda screamed. "Nicole! Ni—"

Liquid gargling. My gaze snapped toward her. Her lips gaped open, and blood spilled over them. Three hands hovered over her stomach—one holding a machete, all three shiny, coated in . . . .

My eye met Amanda's for a second before she crumpled to the ground. The man who'd sliced her came at me. He blocked the mouth of the alley—a massive, black door shutting away the street. Rain rivulets flowed in the creviced, coal face, scarred like he shaved with that wicked blade. His plump lips stretched into a sinister smile.

"Not planning to run, are you?"

*Run! Yes, run!*

My gaze flicked to the trembling boy still holding a knife to my throat. Then to Amanda. Past the man's boots, I saw her hand. Her fingers twitched.

She was still alive.

*I can't leave them. I can't fight him.*

So I screamed.

Pain imploded from my jaw and flared up into my skull. My side hit the asphalt. I tasted a mouthful of pennies. My vision flickered. Red, white, red, white.

"Do that again, and I'll make you eat your friend's guts." Clawed fingers raked my scalp and twisted in my hair. The man dragged me on my knees towards Amanda's body.

Her still body. Done twitching. Done doing anything.

"You hear me?"

"Yes." The word gurgled from my mouth along with acidic vomit. Frothy, yellow drops fell on Amanda's chin. The rain washed it all away, leaving her face clean except for a ring of mascara, leaking in to gaping eyes, streaking cruddy black over the whites. I sobbed and pressed my hands on the wet pavement. *Gone, gone, gone. No helping her.* I sucked in saliva and swallowed. "I hear you. Take me. Leave the boy."

He laughed. "Aren't you sweet."

He hauled me up against him, over Amanda, and then waved to the boy. "Get in the front seat with Vince. He'll have food for you."

"Yes, Darryl." The boy scurried around us to a van that pulled up at the end of the alley.

The van's back doors swung open, and three men climbed out. Darryl handed me over to the smallest. Spiny fingers clamped around my nape. Splintered nails scratched me. Greasy hair framed a narrow face taken over by black, rat eyes and lashes long as spider legs. A bony arm circled my waist.

Cold flooded my brain. Veins swelled as my pulse sped up. I watched him through the wet hair veiling my face, the strands darkened to the color of dried veins, and saw my opportunity to escape.

*Small guy, not much bigger than me. Him I can fight!*

I jammed my hand over his face and gorged his eye with my thumb. A squishy pop, like a soft-boiled egg oozing warm yolk. The man screamed. I bolted towards the front of the van. Something solid struck the back of my thighs and lifted me. I flew, up, up. Swung sideways. My head *thunked* against the van. Scalding agony filled my skull, boiling my brain. My limbs hung, boneless, useless.

A small, helpless animal sound passed my lips.

"You struggled. You fought." Darryl's grinning face wobbled in and out of my vision like a reflection in an oily puddle. "Good. I was hoping we could have some fun."

The world fuzzed in and out. I was carried. Floating. Falling.

*Rip! Slam!*

My arms stretched over my head. Something sticky wound around them, from wrists to elbows. The ground—no, the floor of the van—jerked beneath me. Darkness eased away, revealing Darryl and two men with shaggy hair and pasty faces. All three massive.

I twisted my neck to see who held my wrists. The scrawny guy. He leered at me and let me see the leaky hole in his face. I panted over another wave of nausea.

"Hold her legs." Darryl shifted above me in a way that made me stiffen. Then thrash. The men seized my ankles, and Darryl grinned at me. "I caught her. I'm first."

*First? Oh, God! God, please! Please help me!*

"No!" My lips were slimy with all kinds of fluids, the same fluids that clotted on my tongue, in my throat. As Darryl leaned down, I slurped it all into a wad and spat it in his face. When he reared back, I screamed. "Let me—"

He slapped me. The pain flared up; then my cheek went numb. His lips jammed down on mine, grating them against my teeth. The men at my feet pried my legs apart.

I choked as Darryl held his dagger over my face. Held my breath as he pushed up one-handed and brought the knife down between us.

"Even a little wiggle, and this will hurt." He slit my skirt, and then slid the blade under the crotch of my panties. Metal skimmed my folds as he cut the cotton. My eyes fluttered shut.

A gritty invasion. Stinging, burning. My vision glazed. Thumping flesh came from somewhere far away. I stared at him. Saw nothing but multifaceted, black movement. Felt warmth and twitching within. Dragging outward.

Then one of the other men said, "My turn."

I never blinked. The part of me who was *me* checked out. Hid in a locked room with thick, glass walls. Surrounded by crayon sunshine.