

Chapter 1

April 11, 2008, 9:35 p.m.:

Your time has come, Merissa,” he told her, his words uncoiling snakelike in venomous intention. “I have no further use for you.”

“No!” she screamed, her desperate plea rendered to a garbled wail from the cheekbone-to-cheekbone gray duct tape covering her mouth. “*No!*”

Looking at him standing in the doorway, gun in his hand, the juxtaposition of events culminating in this moment ripped through her consciousness with the unrelenting speed of an assault rifle...



He'd called from his car, explaining that he wanted to give her a gift “to show his appreciation for what she did for him.”

“I just bought it,” he told her, “and I think you're really going to like it.”

With her makeup already off and lounging in Sean's sweats and her slippers, Merissa's plan centered around a glass of wine and finishing her book, but the thoughtfulness of his gift softened her resistance.

“You didn't have to do that.”

“I wanted to,” he said.

“How far away are you?”

“Twenty minutes, max.”

“All right, but it’s Friday night, and it’s been a crazy week at work, so no shop talk, okay?”

“I promise. The only thing I’ll say is I’m sorry you got upset with me. You were right and I learned a lesson.”

“It’s over with,” she replied. “I’ll see you soon.”

“Hey, one more thing. If you don’t mind, I want to show you a magic trick I just learned. It’s a good one.”

“Bring it on,” she said, laughing.

“Is Sean there?” he asked. “I want him to see it, too.”

“No,” she answered. “He performs at a club on Friday nights.”

“That’s right, I forgot. You told me that before.”

When she opened the door, his first comment pertained to her new hairstyle.

“Wow, look at you,” he said. “You’ve got short hair now.”

She had no reason to be anything but unsuspecting when he walked in carrying the wrapped, box-shaped gift. Reaching into the inside pocket of his jacket, he removed a deck of cards.

“First the trick, then the gift,” he told her.

Directing her to sit at the table in the front room, he asked her to examine the cards before shuffling them several times.

“Take any card you wish, but don’t let me see it.”

Selecting the Jack of Hearts, she followed his request to insert the card back into the deck wherever she desired. “Now,” he said, “shuffle them as often as you want.”

She did as instructed before returning the cards to him. Placing the deck face up on the table, he spread them around to allow the visibility of every card except for one, which remained face down.

“Is that your card?” he asked.

Merissa squinted and shook her head in disbelief after turning over the Jack of Hearts. “That’s a good one,” she told him.

“I’ve got one more to show you,” he said, placing the cards on the table, “but I’ll need two sheets of blank paper and something to write with. In the meantime, may I use your bathroom?”

Merissa entered the kitchen but dashed back to the table when she heard the bathroom door close.

“This will be my little disappearing trick,” she said, chuckling to herself. “To reappear as you leave.”

Grasping the Jack of Hearts from the top, she placed it in her pocket before hurrying into the kitchen to retrieve the requested items. When he returned, she watched as he printed the word *hello* on one of the sheets of paper.

“Now on this one,” he said, handing her the other sheet, “write the word *goodbye* in your regular handwriting.”

The instant she finished, before she even had the chance to look up, the violent motion of a clamping hand slammed over her mouth in the simultaneous placement of the gun against her cheekbone.

“If you scream, I’ll kill you.” His voice was a muted shout. “Do you understand me?”

Merissa couldn’t think at first, too shocked and terrified to respond.

“Answer me!”

Eyes shut tight, she nodded her head.

“Now lead me to your bedroom.”

With one arm wrapped around her neck, he placed the metal gun tip inside her ear, nudging Merissa forward until they stood at the edge of the bed.

“Lie face down and keep your mouth shut.”

“Is this really *you*?” she hissed. “How could you do this?”

She winced as he placed his mouth near the same ear as the gun. “Don’t waste my time,” he whispered, his hot breath icing her blood.

Doing as he commanded, she felt his immediate weight drop on top of her.

“Lift your head.”

“*No!*”

Grabbing her hair, he made her cry out in pain.

“Do it!”

After feeling the entire gun placed down between her shoulder blades, a sticky, ripping sound preceded the sight of the duct tape, the same kind found in hundreds of thousands of kitchen drawers and garage shelves. Sliding a long strip across her field of vision on the way toward her mouth, he jerked back hard, like on the reins of a runaway horse, as he secured the ends of the tape firmly on the back of each cheekbone. Maintaining the force of his weight, he pushed his hand on the back of her head, forcing it back down. Unable to see anything, she felt the end of the gun barrel again.

“I’m only going to say this once,” he told her. “We’re going to stand up now, and you’re going to do exactly what I tell you to do. If you don’t...” He tapped the gun along the back of her head. “But we don’t need to think about that, do we?”

Rising from the bed, her eyes yo-yo’d between his and the gun in his hand.

“Take off your sweatshirt.”

The tears blurred Merissa’s vision as she stared, helpless, still struggling to comprehend her cluelessness and the horrifying string of events. Bending forward to avoid his vile gaze, her hands shook as she fumbled with the zipper. Removing the sweatshirt, she dropped it to the floor while maintaining a hunched position.

“Straighten up!”

Unsure whether to oblige him at first, she did as he asked, leaving her arms pressed against her breasts.

“No bra? How typical,” he said, his tone seemingly scornful. “Now everything else.”

Standing naked before him, Merissa’s attempt to maintain her composure collapsed under an avalanche of ice-cold fear

as his eyes spider-crawled her body. At first, the words emanating from his mouth didn't register and she couldn't move.

"We're wasting time!" he spat. "I said, 'face down on the bed!'"

Within moments of following his order, he pounced, straddling her back as he clutched her left wrist. He attempted to grasp her right one, but Merissa tore away from his grip twice before a painful upward jerk of her arm forced her to relent. The clicking sound of the locking handcuffs signaled and sealed her fate, and when he turned her over, he glared, as if incensed over something she'd done wrong.

"You're just another whore like all the others, Merissa," he whispered, his voice robotic in its cold inhumanity. "And now you're going to get what you always wanted."

Merissa kicked at him, but he caught her by the ankle, extending her leg out and squeezing in a vice-like grip.

"Don't make me hurt you," he told her. "That'll ruin all the fun."

Turning her eyes away as he leered at her naked body, she couldn't prevent herself from hearing his voice.

"You were meant to be mine from the first time we met, Merissa. But you knew that, didn't you? Oh, yes, of course you knew."

She slammed her teary eyes shut as he undressed, keeping them closed when he fell upon her. A spate of hateful cussing spewed from his mouth as he proceeded to penetrate her with a painful, merciless aggression. She couldn't bear to listen to him, didn't dare glimpse the face of someone so evil. She tried to think him away, to envision herself in a loving embrace with Sean, but the physical reality overwhelmed any attempt to escape inside her mind.

Merissa didn't know how long her ordeal lasted, but after he lifted his body off, she retained hope the worst was over. He continued focusing his attention on her as he dressed, presenting an expression she couldn't decipher while straightening his collar and slipping on his jacket. Retrieving

the thick roll of tape from the floor, he secured her ankles together, preventing any chance at movement.

“Can’t have you kicking the door closed while I’m gone,” he said, removing a glove from his pocket.

He walked out, leaving Merissa praying for his immediate departure. She listened for the opening of the front door but instead heard the sound of the sliding door leading to her balcony, followed by a jangling of keys.

“*Go away!*” she wailed.

Devastation shrouded her senses as he reappeared in the doorway with his gun in one hand and, in the other, the two pieces of paper with the words *hello* and *goodbye*.

“Your time has come, Merissa. I have no further use for you.”

“No! *No!*”

“I have no choice, do I?” he told her, closing the door. “After all, now that I’ve had you, you’re no good to me anymore.”

He placed the sheet that said *hello* above one side of the headboard, using another strip of the tape. He attached the one that read *goodbye* on the other side. Merissa screamed in raw, stifled helplessness, begging with her eyes for mercy. He took a deep breath and gazed at her with an expression that seemed almost waxen.

“Don’t you see, Merissa? Now that I’ve had you, no other man ever can. Not like my spread-legged *mother*.”

As his gun hovered above her head, the cold-blooded, detached tone of his voice sent her mind reeling toward the realization of experiencing her final moments. A sudden, overpowering calm blanketed her senses as the unmistakable vision of her mother appeared—maybe in her mind, maybe in the room...she couldn’t tell...smiling at her daughter and beckoning her.

“I’ll make this quick and painless, Merissa,” he whispered, “but no one must hear.”

He rolled her over, sat on the side of her body, and leaned forward to place a pillow over her head with his hand re-

maining on top. The ringing of her telephone didn't register under the weighted blackness, nor did the end of his gun nudged under the pillow against the right side of her forehead, as his concluding words crooned the chorus of the familiar Beatles' refrain, signified by the title of those two indicative words on the wall.