

# EDGE OF DARKNESS

*by*  
Jove Belle



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## PROLOGUE

There was no light. Only the heavy pounding of Ali's feet against the soft, plush carpet as she ran blindly, driven forward by the haunting voice behind her in the dark.

"Ali." The singsong tone was laced with acid. "You can't escape. You know this. Why do you make me chase you?"

She stopped running and pressed herself tight against the wall. The hammering timpani of her heart continued and she feared the roar of it would betray her location. She could no longer hear Ricardo's voice above her own labored breathing.

A distant scratch of metal against adobe startled her into moving again. When he captured her, as he always did, he would stand over her, a sneer on his icy face, watching as she polished the scrape marks out of the wall.

"Why do you try to run, my beautiful girl?" he would ask.

If she moved too slowly or hesitated to answer, he would rap the wall with his open palm. The leather shackles—her shackles—would dangle loosely from his other hand, the morning sun glinting off the brightly polished buckles.

She had to find the door. It was right here yesterday. She frantically swiped her hands over the surface of the wall. "Ali." The natural rhythm of Ricardo's voice was hypnotic. "Stop hiding from me, poppet. I'm worried about you."

The melodic warmth created a false sense of security and Ali stifled the urge to call out to him. She knew what awaited her if she was found, yet she was overwhelmed by the desire to comfort him, to assure him she was okay.

“Please, angel, tell Ricky where you are.”

A bolt of panic raced down Ali’s spine. The soft sympathy in Ricardo’s voice promised love and affection, absolute forgiveness. It was the same voice he used when he branded his name on her thigh with a lit cigarette.

“Ah, don’t squirm, poppet,” he’d said. “This hurts me as much as it hurts you.”

He had watched her closely as he pushed the hot embers into her exposed flesh. Both her hands were gripped tightly together in one of his and held high above her head. His voice and hands were at war in an exquisite dichotomy, one comforting, the other torturing. The sadistic gleam in his eye made Ali tremble with fear. The smell of burning flesh had filled the air.

Ali gulped back tears. She could feel him getting closer. The fine dinner of curried prawns and rice rioted in her stomach, working its way up. He was right. There was no escape. She slumped against the wall, defeated.

Warm breath tickled her ear a moment before his vise grip closed around both arms. Ricardo pressed his body fully against hers, crushing her into the cold, hard wall. He ground his pelvis into her, deliberate and slow, his arousal evident and straining against her.

“You’re mine, Ali.” He ran his tongue along the outside curve of her ear. “I’ll never let you go. Never.”

Ali awoke with a violent start, the sound of her screams echoing in the room. Sweat ran down her face as she rocked back and forth. It was always the same. No matter how many times she killed him, he still found her trembling in the dark like a frightened child.

## CHAPTER ONE

Lightning ripped across the night sky and flashed on the steel blade of the katana. Ali Sandoval dropped to one knee and took the weapon from the man crumpled on the floor. Looking down at the lifeless face of her victim, she ran her hand over his eyes, closing them forever. A spreading pool of scarlet seeped into the thick, cream carpet at her feet. Beyond a wall of glass enclosing the study, the faint glow of yard lights failed to brighten the slate patio that skirted an oversized lap pool. By daylight the crystal blue waters bore testament to the man's wealth and decadence. Now, with the sun's descent, the liquid surface was transformed into an eerie dance of reflection and unreadable blackness.

Ali slid the bloodstained sword into its sheath with a deadly rasp and slipped out the door into the night. The dark, unforgiving sky hurled teardrops of rain onto the hard pavement. She flicked the brim of her hat with two fingers and watched the haphazard arc of water join the deluge pouring down from the heavens. The dull roar of a thousand liquid pellets hitting the ground assaulted the peace that only exists in a veil of 3:00 a.m. quiet. The late summer storm did nothing to calm the beast raging inside her.

Stretching her hands above her head, she tipped her face toward the moon and invited the downpour to cleanse her restless soul. The voices of past sins clamored at her from all sides, pleading for redemption. Above the cacophony, she could hear the rising scream of police sirens as they drew closer.

The black-and-white chariot of justice careened around the corner into North Astor Street, stopping just short of the closed gate designed

to protect the Stewart family from harm. Ali retreated into the shadows of the city moments before the crimson and cerulean lights reached her. She would wait until the stench of corruption called her to action again.



Diana's phone rang as she stepped into the dim light of Bernie's Fish Shack. The line to order reached almost to the door. The hulk of a man in front of her made a show of inching forward to allow room for her. He threw a disdainful glance over his shoulder as her cell phone rang. Diana smiled brightly. The circus music she'd chosen for a ring tone was likely the cause of his irritation. It made some people crazy. She took the phone from her front pocket with a look that mixed accusation and acceptance. *What are you going to do? Damn cell phones. Have a mind of their own. Ringing at inappropriate times.*

The man scooted even closer to the person in front of him. Diana snorted a laugh and flipped open the phone.

"You're late." She wasn't chastising, just making a simple observation.

"I know. I know." Brigitte, the youngest of her three siblings, sounded rushed and more than a little pissed off. The noise of city life roared in the background. "I got a call right as I was headed there. Protect and serve and all that."

Brigitte had followed in their father's footsteps and entered law enforcement. To top off her compulsive need to place her life in danger, she'd opted to patrol downtown Chicago rather than the suburbs where they grew up. Diana had no idea how Brigitte reconciled the extremes in her world—diapers and bottles at home, and prostitutes and drug dealers at work.

She heard Brigitte open her car door, then close it a moment later, shutting out the madhouse of activity that lived and breathed every day on the streets of Chicago.

"You gonna make it?" Diana asked.

Ahead of her, the line moved forward at a steady pace. Nobody else had entered the restaurant. Lunch hour was winding down. She could have lagged slightly, but she kept pace with the line.

"I'll be there. But why don't you order for me?"

“The usual?” Diana suppressed a sarcastic comment. Yet again Brigitte had tricked her into buying lunch.

The sound of a siren, presumably the one on top of Brigitte’s patrol car, came to life on the other end of the phone. “That’d be great. I’ll be there in record time.”

“Ciao, baby.” Diana closed the phone and forced it back in her jeans pocket. Not an easy task. It was time to hit the gym and hit it hard, or buy a bigger size of clothing. She sighed.

Surprisingly few people remained inside Bernie’s. Most had elected to take their meals to go, which meant it was Diana’s lucky day. She and Brigitte might actually get to enjoy their lunch on one of the ever-popular outside tables. It was still pretending to be summer, but the balmy September weather wouldn’t last for long. A few more weeks and the tables would be moved inside until spring.

Hulking Man placed his order and tossed Diana one last disapproving look before heading off to the table with his friends. Diana made a kissy-face at him and stepped up to the counter. It was a good day. Yes, indeed.

A bored-looking girl with pieces of metal stuck in her face droned, “What’ll ya have?”

Her attitude was part of the ritual at Bernie’s. The employees looked as though they couldn’t give two shits about you; then, if you didn’t leave a fat tip in the big mason jar on the counter, they would accidentally trip on the way to your table. Fish and fries be damned. You could then wait thirty more minutes while they sorted out what went wrong, or you could eat the stuff that landed on the floor. Neither option was desirable. Both the fish and the service were legendary at Bernie’s. Only one of them was any good.

Diana placed her order, including a pint of lager. She hated drinking beer while her sister drank water, but not nearly as much as Brigitte hated getting caught drinking beer while on duty. The girl behind the counter popped her gum loudly and went on with the difficult task of looking bored while she waited for Diana to pay.

Diana handed her two twenties and made a show of putting all the change in the tip jar. “Did my friend over there leave you guys a tip?” She gestured toward Hulking Man’s table.

Metal-face gum-popper arched an eyebrow. “Sure. If you call two bucks a tip.”

Diana pulled out another twenty and slipped it into a jar. “Thanks for the upcoming floor show.” She smiled wickedly and retreated to the opposite corner of the room. Great view.

That was when all hell broke loose. Or, more accurately, burst through the door. A skittish man wearing a black shirt and black pants charged into the restaurant. Hell, he even had on black boots. Could it get any more clichéd? To top it off, he had a ski mask bunched on top of his head, which he had clearly forgotten to pull down over his face. A pistol-waving maniac in all his glory, he pointed a shaking gun at the no-longer-bored clerk.

“Money!” he screeched. “Now!”

Charming. This place was just full of articulate men. Diana weighed her options. If she didn’t intervene, the crew would be rattled and then distracted by the police. She’d never get her fish. If she stopped him, the crew would still be rattled and then distracted, and she’d never get her fish. But at least with the second option she’d get to hit someone.

She’d always hated the gaudy, dark red flower vases that adorned the tables at Bernie’s. Using one as a weapon would be a public service. She snatched one off the nearest table on her way to the counter. The closer she got, the wider the über-pierced girl’s eyes got. Not good. When she was less than two steps away, the man with the gun whirled around to face her.

Oh, hell. Diana abandoned her plan to club him with the vase in favor of throwing it. The short distance between his head and her outstretched hand didn’t allow for proper execution and the vase bounced off his head with little effect.

“Don’t move,” the man stammered, confused and outraged all at once. “Don’t you fuckin’ move.”

“Okay.” Diana tried to appeal to his sense of logic. “But don’t you want me to put my hands up?”

“I’ve got a gun here!”

Diana made a show of inspecting the weapon from a respectful distance. The small .22 was completely engulfed by the man’s meaty hands. Diana could see enough to pick out that the firing pin was not engaged and the safety was still on.

“Yes, I see you have a gun. It’s very nice.” Trying her best to look

sincerely helpful, she held out her hands, palms up. “Why don’t you let me hold on to it until the police get here?”

The gunman wavered. He started to hand Diana the weapon, then apparently thought better of it. “No, no police. I’m here for money.”

*Why don’t they ever just agree and play nicely?* Diana nodded with understanding. “If that’s what you really think is best.”

Before he could shake the confused look off his face, she lunged. Fifteen years of martial arts training, yet her instincts still told her to scratch his eyes out. Her right fist connected squarely with his jaw. There was enough force behind it to knock out a small pony. Not that ponies deserved to be knocked out, but it would take some doing.

Diana hopped around like a madwoman, shaking her hand. “Ow. Motherfucker! That hurt.” She always forgot that making contact hurt the hand as much as the other person’s face.

The gun dropped to the floor and slid under a table. The man shook his head hard and glared at her. “Fuckin’ bitch! I’m gonna kill you.”

Great. Crazy man with a steel jaw. Diana edged backward, toward the door. She didn’t want to end up pinned in a corner.

Before the armed robber could move in on her, Hulking Man stepped up behind him and crashed a chair over the gunman’s head. Perhaps he wasn’t so bad after all. Now that they had a common enemy, maybe he could overlook her musical cell phone and they could be friends.

The chair splintered and flew around the man in a hail of jagged pieces, right at Diana. A flat section caught her just below the eye. She clutched her face and sat down with a thud on the nearest open bench.

“Christ! You could have blinded me.” So much for gratitude. Now her face hurt.

“That’s all you have to say to me?” the man snarled. “I saved your life.”

The gunman lay crumpled on the ground, moaning, bits of chair lying around him.

“Saved my life?” Diana leapt to her feet and jabbed Hulking Man in the chest. “You didn’t save my life. You gave me a black eye!”

Red and blue lights reflected on the walls inside the diner, and Diana heard a car door open and close behind her.

“Diana! Jesus, Mary, and Joseph! What is going on here?” Brigitte

went immediately into cop mode. She handcuffed the man on the floor, then radioed for backup and EMS. All the while she glared at Diana. “I can’t trust you to do even the simplest of tasks. All you had to do was order fish, for Christ’s sake.”

Diana stood contritely, waiting for a lull in her younger sister’s explosive outburst.

“Well?” Brigitte demanded. “Are you going to explain yourself?”

Diana smiled hopefully. “I did order fish. I was waiting for it to be delivered when this brainiac”—she nudged the unconscious man on the floor—“came in waving a gun around like Jesse fucking James. What was I supposed to do? Let him take the money?”

“Yes! For the love of God, Di, he had a gun.”

“He didn’t know how to use it.” Diana pointed to the gun. “Take a look at the safety. He was more likely to drop the cartridge out than shoot me.”

Brigitte looked no less irritated, but slightly relieved. “What happened to your eye?”

“The big guy over there smashed a chair over this idiot’s skull. One of the pieces caught me in the face.”

Brigitte’s shoulders convulsed with laughter. “You got clipped with flying debris? You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“Keep laughing and I’ll tell Mom what happened to that bottle of rum your sophomore year.”

Brigitte’s face transformed instantly. Their mother was not to be trifled with. “I’m more interested to know what you’re going to tell Russell on Tuesday morning.”

Russell was their six-year-old nephew. For some unfathomable reason, he had asked Diana to come to his school to talk about her career. It wasn’t career day or anything like that, just show-and-tell. But how could she say no to puppy-dog eyes?

“That’s almost a week away. It’ll fade by then.”

“You’ll still have to explain it to Mom and Dad on Sunday.”

“Fuck.” Diana wondered if Bernie’s would supply her with a bag of ice.

The would-be bandit moaned from his manacled position on the floor. Brigitte eyed him warily. “Christ. We’ll have to wait for EMS to take him in.”

Diana's stomach rumbled and she debated the virtues of eating while waiting for help to arrive. She decided against it. No reason to appear crass. She sidled over to an open table near the door. Brigitte wouldn't sit, not while she was in official cop mode. That would be disrespectful to her uniform and, therefore, her position as peacekeeper. She took her duties seriously, just like her father.

"They're sending Ramirez," Brigitte said.

"Angel's coming?" Diana flinched at how pathetic the question sounded.

Angel Ramirez was Brigitte's ex-partner and hell on wheels. She looked better in a uniform than any one woman had a right to. She was also responsible for throwing Diana's tender heart on the 'L' tracks right as a train was passing by. Amazing in bed and liked everyone to know it firsthand.

"I radioed for backup. She responded."

As if on cue, Angel slanted her car into the open space in front of Bernie's, leaving room for the ambulance on her tail.

She walked—a cocky little strut that always made Diana think exceptionally naughty thoughts—up to Brigitte, her cop face firmly in place. Her skin was darker than usual. Summertime did that to her. Blond hair that should have been brown was pulled back in a ponytail and her teeth shone with their customary white brilliance.

*Absolutely wonderful. Still beautiful. And evil. Don't forget evil.*

Before they could discuss the situation, EMS muscled through the door and descended upon the handcuffed patient. With choreographed precision, they checked his vitals, stabilized his neck, and rolled him onto a stretcher. Then they were gone.

"That was quick." Brigitte looked mildly shell-shocked. "They're never that quick."

"There's a fire over on Rampart. They've called for all available EMS," Angel explained.

Diana didn't wait to hear the rest of their conversation. There was a paid-for beer summoning her from behind the counter. All she had to do was convince the girl o' many piercings to snap out of her daze long enough to pour it for her. Hell, maybe she could still get some fish after all. She approached the counter with what she hoped was a comforting smile.

“How about that fish?”

The girl nodded, mouth agape. She collected the order from under the warming light where it had been forgotten and mutely handed it to Diana.

“Thanks, you’re a doll.” Diana gave her a quick wink before walking outdoors where Brigitte had migrated with Angel.

The battered wooden picnic table Diana chose sported many names carved into the surface, in testimony of everlasting love. She realized she’d chosen to sit in the exact spot where she’d added her inscription: *D.C. + A.R.* within an uneven heart. She had been very naïve. Angel and Brigitte stood a few feet away reviewing Brigitte’s notes on the incident.

“I forgot the drinks. I’ll be right back.” Diana stood abruptly and retreated to the safety of Bernie’s.

When she returned, Angel was leaning against the back of Brigitte’s patrol car with the same casual sensuality that had lured Diana in four years ago. They turned in unison as Diana set Brigitte’s water on the table. She took several gulps of her lager and clutched the half-empty pint like her life depended on it. Seeing Angel always left her nerves a little tilted on edge. The cool glass and light amber liquid had an illogically calming effect.

“Diana,” Angel said in greeting, “you look good. Except the shiner, of course. How you been?”

“Fine.” Diana marveled at her ability to speak. Unbelievable. “And you?”

Okay, so it wasn’t sparkling conversation or witty repartee, but at least words came out of her mouth. Words that didn’t include things like: *You evil, heinous bitch! How can you stand there looking so good and acting like nothing happened?* It was a proud moment.

Angel turned back to Brigitte, all business again. “I’ll follow up at the ER. That way you can enjoy your fish.”

“Works for me. I’ll do the paperwork when I get back.” Brigitte held the top edge of Angel’s door as Angel swung her legs into the car.

Angel tilted her head toward Diana. “Good to see you again, Di. I’ve missed you.”

Diana simply arched her eyebrows in disbelief. That easy charm wasn’t going to work a second time. Not a chance. She gave a little half

wave as Angel pulled away from the curb and watched the retreating car until it rounded the corner three blocks up.

“Sit down and stop staring. You look like a fool.” Brigitte drank some water.

Diana dropped roughly into her chair.

“I can’t believe she still gets to you like that. How long has it been?”

“Not long enough.” Diana drained her beer and wished for another.

Brigitte snapped her fingers in front of Diana’s eyes. “Focus on me now. How often do we get to enjoy lunch, just the two of us, without the rest of the family popping up?”

That was a good point. She and Brigitte saw each other every Sunday at their parents’ house when the entire family gathered to share a meal. The tradition had started when Diana’s oldest brother, Maxwell, moved out years ago. They all should have been grateful for the extra room in the house created by his absence. Instead, the loss upset the balance of organized chaos that made their home function. The advent of Sunday dinner didn’t eliminate the sadness they all felt, but it lessened it. Her parents said if they had their way, all of their children would stay at home forever. Empty-nest syndrome took on a whole new level of meaning in their close-knit Irish-Catholic family.

“Focused.” Diana forced her eyes wide open and stared directly at Brigitte. “On you. Talk to me.”

In response, Brigitte threw a fry at Diana’s face, smacking her in the exact spot the chair had earlier. The swollen flesh screamed in protest. Diana winced and clamped her hand over her eye. “I have got to get some ice for this thing.”

“Do you want to file assault charges against...” Brigitte consulted her notes. “Duane Ronaldson?”

“Are you serious? Of course not. He was trying to do the right thing. My face just got in the way.”

They paused as footsteps approached their table. Pierced girl stood a few feet away looking for all the world like a scared twelve-year-old.

“I thought you might want this.” She thrust a bag filled with ice at Diana. “For your eye.”

Diana thanked her and took the bag. The girl retreated, stumbling as she attempted to walk away while still staring at Diana.

Brigitte laughed. "I think she likes you."

"I think she's scared of me." Diana held the ice gingerly to her face and took a bite of halibut. Even at room temperature the fish tasted wonderful. "Tell me about work. Any interesting cases?"

"The detectives are talking about a possible serial killer," Brigitte said with an air of satisfaction. She liked impressing her big sister with "inside" information.

"Really? Here? In Chicago?" Diana knew that her fellow citizens of Chicago were killing each other off at an ever-increasing rate, but a real-deal serial killer...that was a severe escalation from your average crime of passion, and still rare.

"Yeah. Hold on." Brigitte reached through the open window and grabbed the newspaper from the front seat of her patrol car. "Here's the write-up on it."

The paper was folded over to page three, where a short article discussed an ongoing investigation into several murders the police felt might be linked. The victims were all male. The most recent had happened two nights ago. This victim's name hadn't been released yet, just the fact that he'd been stabbed to death in his home.

"I'm surprised it doesn't say more," Diana remarked. "The media lives for this kind of thing."

Brigitte popped a piece of fish in her mouth. "I couldn't believe it either. But so far that's it. How 'bout you? Anything interesting going on in the world of insurance fraud?"

"I'm wrapping up one case now. Typical stuff. Guy gets in a bad spot financially. Decides to make a quick buck off his insurance. This guy was smarter than most, though. He actually hid the merchandise and didn't involve the police."

"I thought no one could get paid without a police report."

"I didn't say he got paid. But he's not in jail, either. You people respond to false police reports, unlike false insurance claims."

"Ah, he dodged that bullet. So he's only half stupid."

"On that note, I should get back to the office. See what other dastardly deeds I can uncover."

Diana gave Brigitte a brief hug and dropped the evidence of their

lunch, including the melted bag of ice, into the nearby trash can. Diana's phone rang as she got into her car. She flipped it open. "Collins."

Her boss, Jeter, never wasted time on small talk. "I need you back at the office. I have a new case for you."

"On my way." She blew a kiss at her sister and pulled away from the curb. It was proving to be a very interesting day indeed.