

IN PURSUIT OF JUSTICE

by

RADCLY*f*FE



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CHAPTER ONE

Everything hurt. Her jawed throbbed where he had struck her; her wrists chafed beneath the rough nylon cord that bound them tightly behind her back; and her breasts, exposed in the chill damp air, ached. The cavernous room was alive with shifting shadows, turning her fear to horror. His hands were rough—holding her down, violating her body, invading her soul. Helpless, she screamed silently, casting into the dark for salvation.

Please, please help me.

And then a voice—strong and certain and sure—called her name. A woman, blazing with strength and purpose, stepped from a darkness deeper than night to light the corners of her terror.

She's here. I prayed for her help, and she heard. She came.

With the cold circle of impending death pressed to her temple, she realized her mistake. Dread followed quickly on the heels of relief. Desperately, she shouted a warning that made no sound. She begged not for her own life, but for that of the woman she had summoned.

No, no! I didn't mean it. Don't come here. He'll kill you. I'm sorry. Oh God, don't do this.

A thundering explosion, deafening her. A searing trail of fire, dazzling her vision, blinding her. A thick red torrent—warm against her cheek; all that remained of her tormentor—his blood on her face and the hole in her heart.

Not my heart, her heart—oh, My Heart, don't leave me like this.

Stumbling, falling, her breath tearing from her chest in slivers of pain, she forced herself to look upon her own soul dying. There on the floor in the flickering candlelight, all of her hopes dissolved in a river

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of crimson, pumping past her hands with inexorable force. Relentless, pitiless, victorious death. The stakes had been set; the trade had been made—one life for another. She had been spared and, in the sparing, had lost everything. She would live, empty and forsaken. Guilt did not do justice to the agony of remorse she suffered for having called this one woman to her destruction.

On her knees in her lover's blood, her neck arched as if pleading to be sacrificed, begging to be taken instead, beseeching to be freed from the torment, she screamed again.

“Catherine.”

Cold, she was so cold. Drowning in an agony of loss and self-recrimination. So dark, no air. “No...”

“Catherine, it's all right.”

“Oh, my God.” Dr. Catherine Rawlings shot upright in bed—gasping, sweat-soaked, and disoriented. Frantically, she turned in the dark room to the woman beside her, her hands roaming over the naked figure, reassured by the solid heat of her. *Alive, she's alive.* Finding her voice, she whispered hoarsely, “I'm sorry.”

“No.” Detective Rebecca Frye pulled the trembling woman into her arms, stroking the damp wisps of auburn hair back from her cheek. “Don't apologize.”

“I woke you,” Catherine said, her voice still shaking. “You should go back to sleep.”

Rebecca gathered her closer, fitting their bodies together, breast against breast, thigh between thigh. “Let me comfort you, just this once.”

“You do.”

“Not often enough.”

“Having you next to me is all the comfort I need.”

“Well, then, let me believe I'm slaying your dragons. It makes me feel important.”

“Oh, you are that.” Catherine shivered, the image of Rebecca lying in a pool of blood chiseled indelibly on the tablets of her memory. She didn't need to be asleep to revisit that moment. Every time she looked at her tall, blond lover, she saw her precious life ebbing away with each heartbeat—seconds from death—having willingly sacrificed herself for Catherine.

During the first few weeks after the shooting, she had been able to shrug off the swift rise of terror and dread that so often took her unawares and left her shaking—sometimes when she was awake, more often when she slept. With Rebecca in the hospital, so critically injured, she'd had enough to occupy her thoughts that she had managed to ignore her own sleepless nights and anxious days. But Rebecca had been out of the hospital for more than two weeks, and the episodes were getting more frequent, and more terrifying.

Smoothing her hand down Rebecca's chest, lingering for a heartbeat on the thick scar tissue above her left breast, she murmured, "You're very important. Without you, I'd never get that great table at DeCarlo's, and I so miss having dinner there."

"We'll go tomorrow then."

"Rebecca...let's wait another week."

"It'll be fine. It's just dinner," Rebecca murmured, running her hand upward along the curve of Catherine's side until she cradled her breast in her palm. "Besides, I'm ready for a night out. I'm going stir crazy—for a lot of reasons."

"I know, but it's too soo—oh—" She caught her breath at the sharp point of pleasure that sparked from her nipple through her stomach as fingers closed hard on her breast. "Don't."

"Why not?" Rebecca teased, her mouth on Catherine's neck, tasting the salt, reveling in the pulse of blood beneath her lips. "I've missed you this way."

"You're still recovering," Catherine gasped. *You're not healed. You're still too thin; you're still so pale.*

Rebecca smoothed her palm down Catherine's abdomen, fingertips brushing lightly through silky hair. Catherine moaned—a faint strangled gasp of longing. *Oh, my God, don't do that. I want you so much. I was so afraid I'd lost you.*

When Catherine's hips lifted involuntarily beneath her fingers, Rebecca smiled and promised, "I'll be very still—just let me touch you. It won't hurt me." Shifting lower, she found a nipple with her teeth. Biting lightly, she slid her hand between Catherine's thighs, hovering a whisper above her, her palm warmed by the heat. "But I want you so much. Please."

"Yes. Oh, yes." Catherine relented because she needed so desperately to know in her bones that Rebecca was safe, to burn with

the desire only this woman could stir in her, to extinguish fear with passion. “Touch me, Rebecca. I need to feel you. Make me...”

She choked, unable to speak, as Rebecca’s fingers danced lightly over her straining flesh, stroking her fleetingly, dipping into the shimmering depths of her desire to spread liquid fire over her painfully engorged tissues. Turning her cheek to her lover’s chest, Catherine closed her eyes, struggling to contain the avalanche of release that thundered demandingly through her blood. Trembling, she filled her hands with Rebecca’s body, fingers digging into her arms, needing to be connected to her—everywhere. Only the tiny fragment of her mind still functioning kept her from pushing her hand between her lover’s thighs to claim her, too. But she resisted with the last fiber of her strength, rocking against the fingers that tormented her.

Too soon...toosoon...oh!’mcomingtoosoon...

“Yess...” Rebecca held back as long as she could, listening to the cadence of Catherine’s breathing, feeling her heart hammering against her own chest, sensing the tightening of muscles deep inside. When the woman in her arms went rigid, a strangled cry escaping her throat, Rebecca slid into her, filling her completely in one swift, sure motion. Muscles clenched, then spasmed, and Catherine arched, shouting in surprise, before finally convulsing in sweet, sweet surrender. Rebecca Frye closed her eyes and, secure in her lover’s embrace, rode the crest of passion like a conquering hero. Never, never had she felt more alive.



“What time is it?”

Rebecca rolled over and peered at the digital clock. “Almost six-thirty.”

“Ugh,” Catherine groaned, pushing back the covers to get up. “Thank God it’s Friday. Ohh...I can’t believe I just said that.”

“Wait a minute,” Rebecca said quietly, pulling her back down. When Catherine moved against her with a sigh, Rebecca settled onto her back with her arms around the still-drowsy woman. “So. Tell me about the nightmare.”

“It was nothing. Just a dream.”

“The third one this week?”

Catherine traced her fingers along Rebecca’s ribs, down her

abdomen, remembering what it was like to make those muscles flicker with urgency when they made love. *What if they never...* She came back to herself with a start. "It's a bit of stress. Nothing to worry about."

"Because of me?" Rebecca insisted, tightening her hold. "Something I did?"

"No," Catherine assured her quickly. *It was hardly your fault...*

"Is it Blake?"

Catherine's stomach turned over. She should have realized that Rebecca was much too astute not to make the connection, although she doubted the detective realized exactly what about that night plagued her. For Rebecca, the idea of sacrificing herself in the line of duty was a simple reality of her life. "It scared me, almost losing you." At least that part was true. So terribly, terribly true. "When you were shot, I saw it. Your body jerked backward as if a giant hand had struck you. And then you fell. You were so still, so quiet, and there was so much blood."

"Catherine..."

"I was terrified...I remember, I was so cold. I felt something inside of me begin to die."

"I'm all right now."

"Not quite," Catherine said fervently, running her fingers over the scar tissue even as she pushed the lingering memories away. It was over. "But you will be."

"It's true," Rebecca insisted vehemently. She hated knowing that Catherine still suffered because of what had happened to her. The sooner she was back on her feet, the sooner this would be behind them. "Listen, I know you've had to take care of me the last couple of weeks, but I'm *fine* now. Everything is back to normal—at least it will be as soon as I pass the physical, re-qualify with my weapon, and jump through hoops for the shrink...uh...sorry. But you know what I mean."

"Yes." Catherine laughed finally, loving the certainty in her detective's voice. "I know what you mean. And you should remember that I *am* a psychiatrist. So believe me when I tell you I'm fine and there's nothing to worry about."

Rebecca pushed up against the pillows until she was sitting and looked seriously into her lover's eyes. "I'm still going to worry until those circles under your eyes go away."

"Well, then, just concentrate on getting well."

"That's exactly what I intend to do. Starting today."



“Thank you for seeing me on such short notice. I’m sure you have other more pleasant things to do at home on a Friday evening.”

“When you call me for a session, I know it’s important,” Hazel Holcomb replied, indicating the two overstuffed chairs flanking a low coffee table. The furniture was arranged upon a thick oriental carpet in front of a stone fireplace; the walls on either side were lined with floor-to-ceiling bookcases, and a large antique mahogany desk sat before bay windows that looked out on a well-tended flower garden. It was a functional but decidedly comfortable space. “Sit down. Do you want coffee or...let me see, I think I have some soda.”

“No, I’m fine. I’ve been drinking coffee all day.”

“You look tired, Catherine,” the chief of psychiatry said kindly, thinking to herself that the woman across from her looked more than tired. She’d lost weight; there were new stress lines around her green eyes and a few more wisps of early gray in her hair. “Even considering the fact that it *is* Friday evening, with your clinical load and the recent events, you have every right to be weary.”

“I am. That’s why I’m here...in part.”

“From the beginning, then,” Hazel urged, settling back and looking for all the world as if she had nothing better to do than to listen indefinitely to her younger colleague.

“I’m not sleeping.” They were in Hazel’s private home office, and the warm comfortable atmosphere was a welcome relief from the too bright, too impersonal spaces of the university clinic. Still, Catherine found it difficult to relax as she leaned forward, her clasped hands on her knees, her fingers intertwined to hide the faint tremor. “I think I have post—”

“Let’s wait before we worry about the diagnosis, shall we? Just tell me what’s happening.”

“Of course.” Catherine smiled ruefully and ran a hand through her collar-length auburn hair, then regarded her friend and mentor apologetically. At sixty, Hazel was fit and vigorous, her quick blue eyes catching every nuance of expression, and she allowed nothing of consequence to pass without comment. “Is there anything worse than a physician as a patient?”

“Not many I can think of right offhand.”

“This is hard...”

“Being a psychiatrist doesn’t make it any easier. That’s for television programs. Maybe I can help. This isn’t about work, I take it? You would have come to the cafeteria for that.”

Catherine smiled. When she needed a curbside consult, or just assurance that she was following the right clinical course in a difficult case, she sought out Hazel’s advice during the chief’s morning ritual of coffee and danish in the hospital cafeteria. “No. It’s not work. It’s the shooting.”

“What about the shooting?”

“My...part in it.”

Hazel regarded her steadily. “What part was that?”

“I insisted on going to meet him,” Catherine said slowly, looking beyond Hazel’s face into the past. “Rebecca didn’t want me to go, practically begged me not to get involved. But I wanted to. I *wanted* to. I thought I could stop him.” She brought tormented eyes to meet Hazel’s. “My arrogance almost got her killed.”

“Why aren’t you sleeping?” Hazel asked, choosing not to comment but to let her talk. She had known Catherine since the younger psychiatrist was a resident, and she considered them friends as well as colleagues. What Catherine needed was for her to listen, not to point out the obvious fallacy in her reasoning. Reason carried very little weight where the emotions were concerned.

“I dream,” Catherine replied, her voice choking. “I...feel him. He’s hurting me, and I want Rebecca to come. I want her to make him stop. I want her to *kill* him.”

“Go on.”

“I’m so cold. He’s torn my blouse.” She shivered, rubbing her arms unconsciously. “I call out for her, and she comes for me. I’m so glad, so relieved. And then he shoots, and she’s bleeding. She’s bleeding and there’s so much blood...oh God, there’s so much blood...”

Catherine pushed back in her chair, as if pushing away the images, breathing rapidly, struggling to erase the vivid memories. “It was my fault.”

“No, Catherine,” Hazel said firmly. “It was the fault of the man who pulled the trigger, and I suspect you know that. I’ll wager that’s not much help, though, is it?”

“Not at the moment, no.”

“I know. We’re going to need more time than we have tonight to talk about why you feel that you’re to blame. What I’m more interested in right now is a quick fix so you can get some rest.”

Catherine smiled. “Such heresy.”

“Fortunately, no one will ever know,” Hazel replied with a grin. “How do you feel about medication?”

“I’d rather hold off for now.” Catherine blew out a breath. “I was hoping it would be better when *she* was better. But it isn’t. It’s worse.”

“How is she?”

“Recovering well. Chomping at the bit to get back to work.”

“How is *she* sleeping?”

“So far, she seems fine. She’s so focused on getting back to work that I don’t think she’s allowed anything else to really register consciously. Not Jeff Cruz’s death, not even the fact that *she* almost died.”

“She intends to resume active duty?” Hazel asked noncommittally, watching Catherine carefully, knowing that ultimately her friend would have to deal with how her lover dealt, or *didn’t* deal, with these issues.

“Yes. The minute she’s able.”

“And there’s no possibility she would change her mind...if you asked?”

“No, and I couldn’t ask her. She loves being a cop. It’s more than a job; it’s who she is.”

“So, she’ll be on the streets again soon.”

“Yes.”

“And how do you feel about that?”

Catherine stared at her friend. Finally she admitted, “It terrifies me.”

“I should think it would. I don’t need to tell you about the fear that every partner of someone in a life-threatening occupation lives with on a daily basis. And you have not only *that* general anxiety with which to contend, you also have the actual experience of seeing her almost die in the course of doing her job.” She shrugged. “You need to give yourself a break.”

“That’s it? That’s your medical opinion?” Despite herself, Catherine was smiling.

“In a nutshell, yes. That and the fact that you need to see me on a

regular basis for the time being. If your detective intends to go back to work, I suspect there'll be some things you need to sort out."

"Yes. I know," Catherine said quietly. If she and Rebecca were to have any future together, she would have to accept the fact that every time Rebecca walked out the door, it might be for the last time. She would have to learn to say goodbye, and she wasn't at all sure that she could.