

JUSTICE
IN THE
SHADOWS

by
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CHAPTER ONE

Dr. Catherine Rawlings awoke, naked, her cheek against her lover's shoulder. They'd slept with the window open in the bedroom of her first-floor apartment, and a faint breeze ruffled the curtains at the window. It was dark. *Five a.m.?*

Soon the alarm would go off, and another day would begin. She loved awakening to the still-new pleasure of Rebecca's body, but even so, she was uneasy, haunted by all that remained unfinished. The last few weeks had been so intense, both personally and professionally, that she'd hardly had time to adjust to the emotional maelstrom.

Despite the reservations of her police detective lover, Rebecca Frye, Catherine had agreed to consult with a joint police and federal task force formed to expose a local child pornography ring. In the process of profiling the perpetrators, she'd become friends with some of the investigators and had also become deeply invested in stopping the abuse of helpless young girls. And in the last twenty-four hours, things had gone terribly wrong. Now one woman lay in a coma, the team had been shattered by jurisdictional rivalries, and the criminals were no closer to being apprehended.

Her last conversation with Rebecca just before they'd fallen into bed, both physically exhausted and emotionally numb, drifted back to her.

"What's going to happen now?"

"I'll be back on regular duty in a day or so, and I'll have new cases to worry about." Rebecca rested her cheek against Catherine's hair and closed her eyes. "It happens like this in police work. You work your ass off, and then you can't make the case because of a technicality, or you do make the case, but the perp plea-bargains it down to nothing."

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“So you’re letting this go?” Catherine asked, surprised.

Faintly, Rebecca shook her head. “Clark will pull the plug on this task force—he’s probably already made the call. But I’ll keep doing what I’m trained to do until we make this right—for Jeff, for Michael, for those young kids.”

Jeff Cruz had been Rebecca’s partner in the Special Crimes Unit of the Philadelphia Police Department, until he and an undercover detective, Jimmy Hogan, had been murdered three months ago. Their killer was still at large, their murders unsolved.

Michael Lassiter had been struck down the night before the porno sting operation by a hit-and-run driver in a thwarted attempt to kill J.T. Sloan, her lover and the civilian computer consultant on the task force. She lay in the intensive care unit at University Hospital in critical condition.

Jeff, Michael, those nameless teenagers—victims all.

“I’ll keep doing what I’m trained to do until we make this right...”

Make it right. That’s what Catherine’s lover did. Stood for right, sometimes at peril to herself.

Catherine’s right hand rested on Rebecca’s chest, her fingers motionless against the ridges of scar tissue above Rebecca’s left breast. Some of the scars were only days old. She didn’t need to trace the outlines to feel each one intimately. She saw them with her eyes open or closed. She saw them in her dreams.

She shivered and pressed closer.

“Catherine?” Detective Sergeant Rebecca Frye kissed the top of Catherine’s head, one hand drifting up and down her arm in a slow caress. She was still a bit stunned to find herself in Catherine’s bed—in Catherine’s life. They’d been together four months, and for a large chunk of that time, she’d been in the hospital recovering from a near-fatal gunshot wound. *Hardly the best way to start a love affair.* “Are you cold?”

“No.” Catherine turned her head to press her lips to the skin beneath Rebecca’s collarbone. “I love you.”

Rebecca caught her breath. “I can’t get used to hearing that. It’s so...damn good.” She held Catherine tighter.

“We’ll practice,” Catherine murmured. “But I don’t want you

to get too used to it.”

“No chance.” Rebecca felt Catherine shiver again. “Is it last night?”

“What?”

“Whatever it is that’s bothering you.” Rebecca laced her fingers softly into the thick auburn hair at the base of Catherine’s neck, stroking her slowly.

And you wonder why I love you? You, with your cop’s instincts and your gentle hands. Catherine took a deep breath and made a conscious effort to shake off the melancholy. “I keep thinking how unfair it all is. You and the others—you worked so hard, put yourselves at risk, and to have it all taken away—God, aren’t you angry?”

“You worked just as hard helping us nail down the perp’s identity,” Rebecca pointed out. “Aren’t *you* angry?”

“*Yes.*” Catherine startled herself with the vehemence of the reply. “God, yes. I am *so* angry about Michael being hurt, and Sloan suffering, and Jason putting his life on the line. And you—working around the clock when you’re barely out of the hospital. It’s just so unjust.”

Rebecca laughed quietly, and the sound was harsh with frustration. “I can’t think about it that way. Because if I did, I’d turn in my badge...or pick up a bottle again.”

“I’m sorry,” Catherine said swiftly, realizing that she was just getting a taste of what was Rebecca’s daily fare. As a psychiatric consultant to the police force, she’d seen the alcoholism, the broken marriages, the gradual loss of humanity resulting from the stress and frustration of the never-ending violence and senseless brutality that police officers faced regularly. She’d witnessed it clinically and thought she’d understood it. But now that she had experienced the disillusionment and helplessness personally, she felt it as an ache in her bones.

Catherine rose up on one elbow to study her lover’s face in the rapidly brightening dawn light. Rebecca looked drawn, and with good reason. She wasn’t yet completely recovered physically from the gunshot wounds, and she couldn’t be emotionally healed from the loss of her partner or her own near-death, either. Her state of mind, however, was difficult to discern. Like many cops, Rebecca

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kept her pain and uncertainties to herself.

“You have to deal with this all the time, and I’m not helping, am I?”

“You’re wrong.” Rebecca drew Catherine down and kissed her mouth, then murmured, “You are the one sane thing in my life.”

“You don’t know how glad I am that’s true.” Catherine framed Rebecca’s face with her hands, lightly tracing the strong jaw with her fingers, then skimming through the thick blond hair. She thought about the bottle of scotch that Rebecca had purchased only the week before and then poured down the sink without drinking. Searching the deep blue eyes, Catherine tried to see what Rebecca could not share. “Do you still want to drink?”

“Every day.” Rebecca’s full mouth lifted into a shadow of a grin. “But I’m okay. I promised I’d tell you if I got into trouble, and I meant it.”

“Thank you.” The words were barely a whisper as Catherine’s lips brushed Rebecca’s.

“I love you. You don’t ever have to thank me.” Rebecca kissed her again, then shifted upright, drawing Catherine with her. Encircling her with an arm and softly cupping her breast, Rebecca rested her chin atop Catherine’s head and mused out loud. “I *know* Avery Clark and his whole Justice task force ties in somehow with Jeff Cruz and Jimmy Hogan being assassinated. That can’t be a convenient coincidence. Clark might *think* he can just pull the plug on this operation and we’ll take it lying down, but he’s wrong.”

Catherine’s heart thudded painfully. “What are you going to do?”

“Just dig around a bit.” Rebecca was evasive, both out of habit and out of a desire not to alarm her lover. She’d lost more than one lover who couldn’t stand the constant worry of being involved with a cop. She didn’t intend to let that happen this time. What she felt for Catherine went far beyond anything she had ever known, and the thought of losing her made her stomach churn. “I know Sloan won’t walk away from what happened to Michael, and I’d rather keep her busy doing computer checks for me than worry that she’s running around grabbing people by the throat.”

Remembering the fury in Sloan’s face when she had accosted Avery Clark in the hospital, accusing him of being responsible

for Michael's injury, Catherine could only agree. "She's in agony, Rebecca. She feels guilty for what happened and helpless to change it. Plus, she's terrified of losing her lover. Until Michael recovers, Sloan's going to be very volatile."

"I'll keep an eye on her," Rebecca promised. *As if anyone could control Sloan.*

"Who's going to keep an eye on you?" Catherine asked, only half teasing. "Watts?"

Rebecca snorted. She thought of the overweight, perpetually ruffled, and generally believed to be washed-up cop she'd been saddled with after Jeff's death. The same cop with whom she'd gone through a door the night before without a second's hesitation and to whom she'd entrusted Catherine's life when she'd thought herself about to die. "Yeah, right."

Catherine merely smiled.

"What are you doing today?" Rebecca turned to stretch lazily against Catherine's body, running both hands up and down her lover's back. When she circled her palm in the small hollow at the base of Catherine's spine, she felt her tense. She pressed harder, insinuating a leg between Catherine's thighs. "Hmm?"

"Back to routine." Catherine's voice was husky and slow. She rested a hand against Rebecca's chest, rubbed her thumb across a nipple. She smiled when Rebecca gasped. "Rounds in the morning, then clinic...ahh, yes, right there...in the afternoon. I thought...that's nice...I'd stop to see...Mmm..." Catherine tilted her head back, her eyes hazy. "Unless you intend to make good on what you've started, Detective..."

"Oh, I do." Rebecca grinned and slid one hand between them, cradling Catherine's breast as she rocked her leg a little higher.

"Thank God." Catherine felt Rebecca's mouth on her neck, felt teeth against her skin, and felt herself grow heavy and wet. "When you touch me..." She lost her thought as fingers closed around her nipple, sending streams of pleasure streaking along her nerve fibers. Her stomach clenched with excitement.

"What?" Rebecca squeezed the hard nub, twisting very gently, her head suddenly light at the sound of a quiet whimper. "When I touch you...what?"

Catherine found Rebecca's eyes, tried to focus on them

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through the blur of desire, needing something to prevent her surrender to passion too soon. "You make me...forget...everything. Oh, darling...stop...for a second."

"Too much?" Rebecca murmured, easing her grip on the tense nipple.

"Too good. You'll make me come."

"Didn't you just say..." Rebecca's eyes widened as fingers stole between her thighs, sliding unerringly around the hard ache of her own desire. She felt a tug along her length, and her whole body twitched. "Ohh...Jesus, don't do that unless you want me to go off right away."

"Not right away." Catherine stroked her lightly. "But soon."

Rebecca's brain was already swimming. She drew her fingers down Catherine's abdomen, laced them through the silken hair between her legs, and glanced gently over her clitoris. "You're so beautiful."

"Kiss me while you make me come," Catherine breathed against Rebecca's mouth.

Their lips brushed tenderly, as lightly as a breeze through summer leaves, their fingers echoing the kiss over flesh ripe with promise. A sigh, a quiet moan, the only sounds. A lip sucked gently between careful teeth, the touch of a tongue soothing the tiny bite. A lift of hips, a flood of arousal, a cry cut short by the quick rush of pleasure.

"Catherine," Rebecca whispered. "I love you."

"Please," Catherine moaned. "Don't stop..." *touching me, loving me, needing me...*

When their tongues slid inside warm welcoming hollows, hands followed, until they filled one another, body and soul. They pressed ever closer, muscles straining, hearts thundering, blood racing, climbing for the heavens.

Rebecca groaned, shuddering in Catherine's embrace. "You're making me come."

"Yes, oh yes." Catherine pressed her face hard to Rebecca's chest as she clenched around the fingers curled inside her being, holding her very life with certainty and strength. "I'm coming... with you. Always...you."



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Only blocks away, a black-haired woman with violet eyes sat beside the bed of a still figure in a room illuminated only by the otherworldly glow of medical equipment. With impersonal readouts and muted sounds, those machines monitored the fragile essence of her lover's life. Hunched forward, elbows on her knees, unaware of the cramps in her shoulders and thighs, J.T. Sloan held Michael Lassiter's hand tenderly in both of hers. Slowly, carefully, she turned the heavy platinum wedding band on Michael's finger, the mate to the one on her own, and watched with desperate intensity the pale eyelids below delicate brows for signs of awakening. The nurses had washed the blood from Michael's rich blond hair, but Sloan could see it still. See it on Michael's face, in her hair, pooling in the street below her head as she lay so still in the road.

"Michael," Sloan whispered, tears streaking her cheeks. "I'm so sorry, baby. So sorry."

Catherine had sworn that Michael had opened her eyes for just a second the night before, but she hadn't awakened since. The doctors told Sloan that Michael had a closed skull fracture along with a serious concussion and that it was difficult to predict when she might regain full consciousness. They said that head injuries were tricky.

Tricky. Sloan moaned softly, but she didn't realize it.

There's some swelling in the brain. She could wake up in an hour, or a day, or a week. They didn't say *she may never wake up at all*, but that was all that Sloan could hear.

Bowing her head, she brushed Michael's hand back and forth across her cheek, choking on her fear and her guilt. *If I lose you, I'll die.*

No truth had ever been clearer to her.



Six a.m. Quitting time.

The thin blond with the short, spiked hair leaned back in a booth in an all-night diner on the corner of Twelfth and Locust and sighed. All the other girls had gone home, but she'd stayed just a little longer.

Stupid. She's not coming.

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It had been a long night and not a particularly profitable one. She could have turned a few more tricks, but she'd turned down most of them. She'd made enough to cover her food for the week doing quick hand jobs in the front seats of the mid-range sedans of the middle-aged suburban husbands who wanted to get off on their way home. But twenty bucks a pop wasn't enough to make the rent. For that kind of money, she'd need to do more than the hand action and the occasional blowjob in dark alleys. She'd have to fuck for it.

And she hadn't been. Not since the night she had seen Anna Marie lying naked on a dirty mattress in a filthy hotel room, looking so frail and helpless. Looking so pathetic, and so very dead. She had gazed at Anna Marie, but she'd seen herself. She wasn't particularly afraid of dying. There were worse things than that. But she hadn't run away from one kind of hell just to end up another kind of victim. Sure, she had a place of her own, and she didn't owe anyone for it. She was a free agent. Dangerous choice to be alone on the streets without a pimp, but she got by. But she was too smart not to know that some night it could be her, and seeing Anna Marie like that had brought it all home. She'd get into the wrong car or walk down the wrong alley, and it would be her, broken and tossed aside.

It almost *had* been her, not so long ago, even after she'd quit giving it up on her back in the rooms-by-the-hour over on Thirteenth. He'd said he just wanted a quick toss and he'd give her fifty bucks if she'd jerk him off just the way he asked for it. Like she didn't always. *Jesus*. He was clean-cut and well spoken and looked like a lawyer, so when he said he was in a hurry and didn't need a room, gesturing with his chin toward an alley at the end of the block, she figured he'd come fast. So she said, *Sure, come on baby, let me take care of that for you*. But when they'd walked so far into the dark narrow space that she couldn't see the street, he pushed her hard against the jagged brick wall and slid his hand up under her skirt. He grabbed her roughly and unzipped with the other hand, and she knew she was in trouble.

It all happened so fast.

She screamed and kicked at his crotch, and he roared and slammed her head into the wall when she tried to run. Then there

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was a terrible flash of pain in her forehead and blood in her eyes, and he punched her in the stomach and she thought she might die. Then suddenly, he let her go and she slumped down, and through the tears and the blood and the awful pain, she saw—

“Hey, Sandy.”

Sandy looked up into Dellon Mitchell’s blue eyes, remembering the fierce look the young cop had had on her face that night. The night she’d stood between Sandy and her assailant.

“Hi, rookie. You look like shit.”

“Thanks.” Mitchell managed a smile, but her eyes were dull with fatigue. “You eat already?”

“Just about to,” Sandy lied, because she wanted an excuse to stay. She’d never seen Mitchell like this, so worn and weary. Supercop wasn’t in uniform, either, but was wearing a dirt-smeared football jersey and jeans. It was scary to see her looking less than spit-and-polish, or less than strong and sturdy. Sandy did a quick eye scan for signs of injury, fearing she’d been hurt somehow. “You buying?”

“Sure.” Mitchell grinned for real this time. “You order for us, okay?”

Reassured, Sandy cocked an eyebrow. “What’s with you, anyhow? Something happen?”

“Just a bad night.”

“Did you guys go after those Internet pervs?”

Mitchell nodded.

“You get ’em?”

“We got the guy we wanted.” Mitchell’s voice was harsh with anger. “But the fucking feds took him right out from under us. We came away empty.”

“That sucks, Dell,” Sandy said vehemently. “So you still don’t know where they’re filming the skin flicks or where they’re getting those kids?”

“Nope.” Mitchell tapped her fork on the tabletop despondently. “And now I’m probably gonna get pulled back to a desk somewhere.”

“They screwed you over for helping me, didn’t they,” Sandy said quietly. It wasn’t a question.

Mitchell wanted to object, but the last time she’d tried to soft-

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pedal the truth with Sandy, she'd almost walked out on her. "I'm in trouble for clubbing the guy with my weapon."

"The fucker deserved it."

Mitchell met Sandy's eyes. "Yeah, he did." *And I'd do it again if someone was hurting you.*

"So what now?" Sandy searched Mitchell's blue eyes, looking for truth and afraid she'd find what she was hoping for. More afraid that she wouldn't.

Mitchell's gaze softened, and she almost reached out to touch her. "We have breakfast, then I walk you home. Sound okay?"

Sandy's throat felt oddly tight. "Sure, why not?"

Forty-five minutes later, they stood in front of a row house south of Bainbridge where Sandy had a small studio apartment.

"So, I'll see you later," Mitchell said, making no move to leave. She leaned against the rickety wood railing on the small stoop while Sandy pulled a key from the impossibly tiny purse that hung on a long chain around her neck. Her scoop-neck cotton top was too thin and too tight, designed to show off her breasts, and Mitchell noticed.

Sandy looked up and caught Mitchell's gaze moving over her. Men stared at her body all the time, sometimes with fever in their eyes, and their looks left her cold. The appreciative warmth in Mitchell's eyes made her blush. "If they're gonna stick you on a desk somewhere, I guess maybe I *won't* be seeing you."

"That doesn't matter." Mitchell shook her head, her stomach suddenly tight. "I'm not going anywhere."

Sandy didn't believe her. She shrugged.

"Anyhow, I think the psychiatrist doing my eval is on my side—"

"They're making you see a shrink?" Sandy's voice rose in indignation. "Jesus, Dell."

"It's SOP...uh...standard operating procedure in a disciplinary situation."

"That blows." For the first time, Sandy realized just how bad things were for the rookie because of her. Quickly, unthinkingly, she stepped across the small space and rested her fingers on Mitchell's cheek. "I'm really sorry."

Surprised, Mitchell straightened, her chest unintentionally

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brushing Sandy's. "Not your fault. I'd do it again."

Sandy's nipples contracted swiftly at the touch of Mitchell's shirt against her breasts. Startled, she dropped her hand and backed up, wondering if Mitchell had felt it. "Nobody asked you to."

"Yeah, yeah." Mitchell grinned. "I gotta go. *I'll see you.*"

"Whatever," Sandy replied. But, her body still humming, she remained in the doorway watching until Mitchell was out of sight.