

SHIELD OF JUSTICE

by

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CHAPTER ONE

Dr. Catherine Rawlings pushed the last patient file aside with a sigh and glanced at the clock on the wall opposite her desk. During a session, she could see the time without looking away from a patient regardless of whether they occupied one of the two leather swivel chairs in front of her desk or the sofa on the far side of the room.

Not too bad—9:20 p.m. Just enough time to head home for a hot bath, a cold drink, and an hour in bed with...who will it be tonight? Kellerman? Grafton? McDermid?

Smiling ruefully at the mundane plans that were fast becoming her nightly routine, she ran a slender hand through her shoulder-length auburn hair and tried to shake the fatigue out of her neck and back. She was halfway to the door when the interoffice line on her desk buzzed. With a frown of surprise, she turned at the sound. At this time of night with her office hours over, her secretary, Joyce, had usually left. Even if Joyce stayed to catch up on filing, she rarely put a call through that could wait until the next day, and almost all of them could—a consult at the hospital, a new patient referral, a current patient calling about a prescription renewal. Puzzled, she leaned across the wide teak desk to push the speaker button.

“Yes?”

“There’s a police officer here to see you, Doctor,” Joyce replied in the voice she reserved for professional exchanges.

Catherine noted her formal tone and didn’t bother to ask for details. She frequently performed consultations for law enforcement agencies—evaluating officers for work-related stress or other forms of psychiatric disability—but she’d rarely been called for anything on an emergency basis. She tried not to speculate; things were rarely as one imagined them to be. “Show him in, Joyce.”

A moment later, her secretary, a slight, dark-haired woman who had worked for the Department of Psychiatry before becoming her personal assistant, pushed open the heavy mahogany door separating Catherine's office from the outer waiting area. Joyce's expression was both curious and slightly perplexed. Before she could speak, however, a figure moved from behind her and strode briskly forward.

Catherine, private by nature and reserved by virtue of her training, knew that her face rarely revealed her inner feelings, and she was glad of that now. She would not have liked her surprise, or her subsequent chagrin, at assuming that *police* meant *policeman* to be displayed to the woman who approached with one hand outstretched.

Quickly, Catherine took in the gold shield clipped to the pocket of the officer's navy blue blazer and noted the tailored fit of her pale shirt and gray gabardine trousers. Tall, blond-haired, and blue-eyed, the woman moved with a degree of assuredness that suggested she was rarely intimidated. She was slender, but there was a suggestion of power in the sleek lines of her shoulders and narrow hips. *Viking* was a term that flashed through Catherine's mind, and it certainly seemed appropriate. Surprisingly, she felt an instant surge of curiosity that went beyond the basic interest in people that had led her into the practice of psychiatry. Putting the distracting thought from her mind, she rose to accept the woman's outstretched hand. "Catherine Rawlings." The strong hand that took hers was smooth and surprisingly warm.

"Dr. Rawlings, I'm Detective Sergeant Rebecca Frye. I'm sorry to disturb you so late, but I need to ask you a few questions."

Her voice was as cool and even as Catherine had expected it to be, totally professional, and although her words were appropriately apologetic, her tone was not. There was a hint of impatience and something else—something just beneath the surface. Anger?

"Yes?" Catherine replied, settling into her high-backed leather chair, looking into the clear blue eyes that revealed nothing. "Is it Detective or..."

"Detective is fine," Rebecca said tersely, considering her next words carefully.

Interrogation was an art. Some people you befriended, some you manipulated, some you intimidated. Almost never did you reveal what you wanted, and you never gave up until you *got* what you wanted. What she wanted now, what she desperately *needed* now, was

information, and Dr. Catherine Rawlings had it. The problem was that the legalities in this particular situation were cloudy. If they got bogged down in technicalities right off the bat, she might have to wait days for answers. And she didn't even have hours to spare. She took stock of the psychiatrist seated across from her, trying to get a quick fix on the best way to proceed.

Medium height and build. Eyes—gray-green; hair—reddish brown. Pale green silk suit. Expensive, not flashy, just like her. Confident carriage; intelligence behind the eyes. Intense, composed—cool. No anxiety, no irritation, no hostility. Solid, steady, strong. Bottom line—she's not going to be impressed by my badge or intimidated into divulging information. Let's try the direct approach.

Rebecca pulled a small black notebook from the inside of her jacket, flipped it open and gave it a cursory glance. *Maybe a little surprise will soften her up, make her lose a little of that composure, and she'll tell me what I need to know before she has a chance to think about it too much.*

“Dr. Rawlings, do you have a patient by the name of Janet Ryan?” Rebecca had hoped to catch the doctor off guard, but the eyes that regarded her were calm, almost gentle.

“Detective,” Catherine said softly, leaning forward over her desk, her hands folded loosely on the top, “surely you know that I can't answer that question.”

Oh, fuck. Not this again! Rebecca shifted almost imperceptibly in her chair, struggling to contain her intense irritation. God, how she hated dealing with these ethically rigorous types, when all she needed was a little assistance. People kept saying that the Special Crimes Unit—really the Sex Crimes Unit—wasn't responsive enough to the needs of the community. It was damn hard to be effective when no one, including the victims themselves sometimes, wanted to tell you anything.

“Believe me, Doctor, I wouldn't be here if this weren't serious. I understand that you have to protect your patients' privacy, but this is official police business.”

“I do believe you, Detective, but, police business or not, it does not supersede my responsibility to my patients,” Catherine replied quietly. “There are protocols for these situations.”

Rebecca bit off a retort and settled back into the chair, reminding

herself that she'd handled roadblocks like this before. Persistent to the point of belligerence, or so she'd been told, she was often effective where other investigators failed precisely because she wouldn't allow the resistance of professionals or even the fear of victims to deter her. She never harassed the victims, though. With them she took it slow, explaining as many times as necessary how she could help if given the chance. Most of the time, her sincerity and compassion won the needed cooperation, and she had been able to bring to trial many offenders who might otherwise have gone free. This time, the stakes were so high that her usual imperturbation was taxed to the limit, and she knew she would blow the whole interview if she didn't settle down.

"I don't want you to reveal confidences, Doctor," Rebecca tried again, forcing a conciliatory tone into her voice. "I need help with an identification, that's all." She was stretching the truth, but she was in the ballpark of veracity at least.

Catherine watched her carefully, sensing the detective struggle with her impatience. "Perhaps if you could tell me what this is about?"

"I presume you've heard of the recent attacks along River Drive?"

Catherine's face grew tense as she nodded.

Good, that got some reaction. "We have reason to believe that Janet Ryan witnessed an assault around six o'clock tonight near a turnoff on the Drive. There is evidence to suggest that this may be the third attack by the same perpetrator. I need to find out what she saw." *And I need it two hours ago. Every minute I sit here teasing information out of you, the trail gets colder.*

"Why don't you simply ask her?"

Rebecca's gaze never altered. She continued to stare directly into Catherine's eyes. "Because she's in the intensive care unit at University Central. She's been beaten; she's incoherent; and as far as we've been able to ascertain, she can't remember anything about what happened. Your business card was in her purse. It seemed like a place to start."

Oh, Lord, Janet! Catherine stood up and walked to the window that overlooked the downtown skyline. After a moment's deliberation, she returned her gaze to the detective, who sat silently watching her. "Would you mind stepping into the waiting room for a few moments? I need to make a phone call."

Rebecca rose immediately, hoping that the psychiatrist was going

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to meet her halfway. Before she broke eye contact, Rebecca said vehemently, “I want this bastard, Doctor. I want him off the streets before he touches one more woman.” She thought she saw a flicker of rage that matched her own in the green eyes that held hers. “Right now, I can use any help you can give me.”

CHAPTER TWO

As soon as the door closed behind the tall detective, Catherine unlocked her active patient files and retrieved a pale blue folder. She glanced at the personal intake form and jotted down a number. Dialing quickly, she prayed she wouldn't get one of those infernal answering machines. To her relief, a human voice answered after only two rings.

"Hello?"

Sensitive to the slightest nuance of tone or expression, Catherine heard the anxiety and fear in the young woman's voice and began gently. "Barbara? This is Dr. Rawlings—"

"It's Janet, isn't it?" Barbara Kelly interrupted tremulously. "She should have been home hours ago, and she always calls if she's going to be late. What is it? What's happened?"

"She's alive and in no immediate danger," Catherine said immediately, knowing that the fear of death was what caused most people to panic in these situations. "I don't know all the details, but I do know that Janet is in the hospital. She's injured, but she's conscious. Do you understand that, Barbara? She's alive."

"Oh, God! Where is she?"

"University Central. I was afraid that you hadn't been notified." Inwardly, she cursed the system that ignored the most important relationship in a person's life when it most mattered. "I know you want to be with her, Barbara, but there's something I need to discuss with you first. The police are here at my office. They believe that Janet may have witnessed a crime, and they need some information. I'd like to help them as much as I can if you'll trust me to protect Janet's confidences."

She hated to do this to Barbara now; the young woman's anxiety was practically palpable over the phone. Still, she couldn't discuss Janet

Ryan with the police without the consent of Janet's designated medical power of attorney. She was stretching the definition as it was, but she knew Janet well and made the judgment that Janet herself would have given her permission had she been able.

"Yes, of course—we both trust you. Do what you think is best. Please, I need to go to her!"

"Wait. Do you have someone to drive you there?"

"I'll call my sister, Carol. She'll go with me. Thank you for calling me..."

Having been left with the dial tone sounding in her ear, Catherine set the receiver in its cradle and walked to her office door, opening it to scan the waiting area. Joyce had apparently gone home, as the lights had been turned down low and the room was still.

Detective Frye was slumped in a chair, her head tilted at what appeared to be an uncomfortable angle. For the first time, Catherine noted the deep circles under the detective's eyes and the lines of fatigue that marred her otherwise flawless face. The well-tailored clothes were also rumpled from hours of wear. *She looks like she hasn't been to bed for days.*

"Detective," Catherine said softly.

Rebecca Frye jolted upright, her eyes snapping open. She focused instantly on Catherine. "Yes?"

"Come in, please."

When they were once again seated, Catherine informed her, "Janet Ryan *is* my patient. I'm not sure how I can help you, however."

"I don't know either, but at this point any information is a start," Rebecca responded in obvious frustration. "We need a statement from her as to what happened tonight. We think she's a witness, but she *claims* she can't remember anything. Is she likely to lie to us?"

"I doubt it," Catherine answered with certainty, "but it would help if you could tell me the circumstances of the situation."

"Around six p.m. tonight, a twenty-year-old woman was savagely beaten and sexually assaulted. That makes a total of three similar sexual attacks in that area of the park in the last eleven months. This one and the last one were only six weeks apart. This rape victim is in a coma, Dr. Rawlings. She's one of the lucky ones. The other victims are dead." Rebecca was unable to keep the anger from her voice.

She and her partner had been working the cases since the

beginning, but they hadn't connected the first two assaults because of the long time interval between them. With the third attack, the pattern had become clear, and they realized that they were dealing with a serial rapist. Now, three victims too late, they had almost nothing to go on and no witnesses. She blew out a breath. She couldn't make up for the lost time, but she refused to lose any more.

"There were signs of a significant struggle, but the victim didn't look like she had a chance to fight back at all. Your patient was found wandering around not far from the scene just before 7:00 p.m., disoriented and clearly having been involved in an altercation. We need a break—and your patient may be that break."

"And she can't tell you what happened?"

Rebecca shook her head.

"Surely you've had the psychiatrist on call see her?"

Rebecca nodded and consulted her notes. "A Dr. Phillip Waters."

"I know Phil," Catherine remarked. "What did he say?"

"That it *might* be traumatic amnesia—shock induced by whatever she may have seen." Rebecca tried not to sound skeptical, but it wouldn't be the first time that she'd been stonewalled in an investigation by cautious health care personnel who didn't want to commit to a diagnosis.

Catherine nodded in agreement. "Very possibly. What about head trauma? You said that she'd been beaten." Her voice was steady, but she shuddered inwardly at the thought of the young woman she knew being violated that way.

"A CT scan was normal," Rebecca said, again consulting her notes. "Preliminary examination showed evidence of concussion and a...uh...nondisplaced fracture of the left orbit."

"That's a significant injury, Detective," Catherine said quietly. "It makes the possibility of traumatic amnesia even more likely."

"Is Janet Ryan a stable person?"

"What do you mean?" Catherine asked.

Rebecca was too tired to hide her annoyance. Why did these people insist on answering every question with another one? "I mean, Doctor, is Janet Ryan likely to fake this amnesia thing—for attention, or a thrill, or to fuck with the police? Until I know, my hands are tied." At Catherine's questioning look, she continued sharply, "If Janet Ryan is mentally impaired, any statement she makes will likely be inadmissible

in court. At the moment, I'm more interested in an arrest, but I'll need her to testify when the time comes. I can't question her under less than optimal circumstances."

Catherine regarded Rebecca silently for a moment. She would have been irritated by her seemingly callous suspicions of Janet's condition, when Janet was clearly a victim herself, if she hadn't recognized the detective's frustration and fatigue. Everything about her, from the barely contained tension in her body to the rage simmering in her voice, made it obvious that this case affected her strongly.

"I have known Janet Ryan for several years," Catherine answered firmly. "She is a very reliable, responsible woman, and I would be very surprised if she didn't do everything in her power to assist you—when she's able."

Rebecca started to point out that people were capable of all types of subterfuge, given the right motivation, but she was interrupted by the sound of her pager. Grimacing at the intrusion, she flicked it off with her thumb and pointed to the phone. "May I?"

"Of course," Catherine replied, watching the detective, who had leaned one hip against the edge of the desk as she dialed. As she was facing the windows, her profile was to Catherine. If she was aware of any scrutiny, she didn't show it. Her eyes were fixed on the streets below, her expression distant, and Catherine doubted that she actually saw the life passing outside. She seemed impervious to distractions. Catherine wondered what price that kind of focus and control exacted, especially when the case was as high profile and emotionally charged as this one.

"Frye here," Rebecca said as the dispatcher picked up. She raised an eyebrow as she listened. "When?... Yes, I'm there now... All right, fifteen minutes." She replaced the receiver and turned to Catherine. "Janet Ryan is asking for you."

Catherine rose quickly. "I'll go right now."

Rebecca reached the door first, pulling it open. "I'll drive you."

Catherine understood that this was not a request and lengthened her stride to match that of the taller woman beside her. It was clear that Rebecca Frye was not used to giving up until she got what she wanted, and, unfortunately, she wanted something that Catherine knew she might not be able to give her. For some reason, that thought bothered her.