

THE SEEKER

by

Ronica Black



2009

PROLOGUE

Seattle, Washington

Keri Scott-Boudreaux hugged herself on the couch, curling her legs beneath her as the fingers of the tree branches outside clawed hungrily at the windowpane. Heavy blots of rain splattered the glass with every strong exhale of the wind. She stared beyond it, into the inky blackness of night, watching one lone silver cloud drift over the small moon. Below, Puget Sound surged and churned with the storm.

She inhaled deeply, catching the far-off tingling scent of swirling salt water and rain. Normally, she loved a good storm. But tonight was different. Tonight it was more unsettling than elemental.

She rested her hands on her protruding belly and tried to relax. The baby had been kicking throughout the day and she hoped it would now, to help ease her qualms. As if sensing the new life inside her, Jaxx, their large golden retriever, stood to nudge her hand. She patted his head and gave a small smile, always thankful for his calm, protective presence.

The house was quiet, the children asleep. The television played the highlights of her husband's football season in silence. She should be happy and relieved that Tom had played so well and his position was secure ahead of the upcoming draft. She should turn on the lamp next to the couch and flip through the baby catalogues, eager to choose the décor for the new nursery for the house in Lafayette, Louisiana, their hometown. But instead she sat in darkness, calmed by none of it, uneasy.

The phone sat on the end table next to her and she knew she could

call her sister and tell her what was going on, but she didn't want to concern her. Kennedy was a behavioral profiler, a former agent with the FBI. Just talking with her always eased her anxiety. But Kennedy was arriving the next day. There was no need to cause her to worry now. Keri was sure to get an earful either way, so she decided to put off telling her until tomorrow.

Just as she was imagining what Kennedy's words would be, a powerful gust of wind dragged the tree branches along the side of the house. Long, loud scrapes seemed to shoot straight up her spine. She jerked and Jaxx pulled away from her, ears back and on alert. She rose quickly and padded across the room to the hallway, where she flicked on the light. She checked in on her boys and found them sound asleep, one strewn across the top bunk with a pajama leg shoved up above his shin, the other curled onto his side on the bottom bunk.

After closing their door behind her, she switched off the hall light and crossed to the other side of the house. Jaxx followed, his head at her hip, claws clicking on the wood floor. She maneuvered through the darkness, fearing that turning on a light would illuminate the house like a giant fishbowl.

She found her way to the kitchen, which glowed under a soft night-light. She opened the fridge for her evening bottle of water and then eyed the control panel to the house alarm. During the day she kept it on "chime," which let her know with a single beep if a door or window was opened. The boys were forever running in and out the back door, setting off the big alarm, so she had been keeping it on "chime" as an effective compromise. And lately she had been keeping everything locked during the day as well, as an additional precaution. So far, things had been calm, and she armed the security system fully at night when she was ready for bed.

She was just about to do so when Jaxx pawed at the back door. Letting him out, she registered the single chime and then shut and locked the door behind him. The assault of cold and rain and salt caused her to shiver. When Jaxx scratched at the door, she let him back inside and secured the locks. Her finger hovered over the alarm panel when she heard it.

Another chime.

She froze.

Blood pounded in her ears.

She focused on the tiny green panel light that indicated the master bathroom door to the backyard was ajar.

A single chime sounded again, rooting her terror completely. The green panel light extinguished. The master bathroom door had been opened and then closed.

A door that she knew for certain was locked.

She stood as still as the black of night, staring at the doorway to the master bedroom. She couldn't move, could barely breathe. Terror seized her entire being. All that separated her from the master bedroom was the dimly lit hallway.

She knew she should grab a knife, a bat, something, anything. But the figure stepped into view before she could move. The presence jolted her and she shrieked, her hand flying up to cover her mouth. Hot tears ran down her face. Jaxx barked, pitched high in fear, and lowered his head.

The figure appeared to be male, covered head to toe in black. A dark ski mask covered the head. He seemed to see her and instead of fleeing, he stepped slowly into the hallway. Next to his thigh a sharp hunting knife reflected the light from the bedroom. He moved carefully, one slow, deliberate step at a time, twisting the knife almost all the way around again and again with the methodical turn of his wrist.

Hot blood flooded her face and chest. Her heart thudded so loudly and thickly it nearly deafened her. She knew she should move. Run, flee, attack. But she was rooted to the spot, sheer, pure, unadulterated fear anchoring her to the floor.

Her breath shook as she whimpered into her hand. She couldn't scream, she couldn't risk waking the boys. But even if she'd been able to, her breath seemed to be rushing too quickly from her body. She thought again of her children.

Her boys. Her angels.

The heat in her face nearly sizzled through to bubble on her skin. The man halted in his approach as Jaxx barked and then whined with fear.

The sound jolted her. Shook her thoughts. Broke through the growing wall of fear. Suddenly, she stood straighter. Her boys. She had to protect them. At any cost.

She grabbed the phone off the kitchen counter. A weapon she hadn't realized she had.

She lifted it and dialed.

“Nine-one-one, what is your emergency?”

“Someone is in my house!” she whispered hurriedly.

“There’s an intruder in your house?”

“Yes! He’s standing right in front of me.” Quickly, she rounded the kitchen island, putting it between her and the intruder but still enabling her a full view of him as he stood at the entrance to the kitchen. Jaxx stuck to her side.

“I’ve got someone on the way, ma’am, stay calm. Stay on the phone with me. Can you get to safety?”

“No. I can’t. Not right now.”

“Try to get out of the house.”

“I can’t!” She couldn’t leave the boys, but she wasn’t about to share that information.

The masked intruder remained still, angling his head slightly as she spoke to the operator, as if amused. The knife rose slowly and he turned it over as if mesmerized by its glinting.

He wasn’t afraid and he wasn’t retreating. She knew he could hear her. Did he think she was bluffing?

“Ma’am? Ma’am, are you still there?”

“Yes, I’m here.”

The intruder took another slow step.

“I’m on the phone, you motherfucker! Can you hear me? They’re coming for you!” Her voice cracked with strain as she shouted. Her body trembled and Jaxx barked shrilly.

She began to cry but she wasn’t afraid for herself. Jaxx barked again and she shushed him, glancing hurriedly toward the other wing of the house, terrified her boys had been awakened. The man followed her gaze curiously.

What was this? Why wasn’t he running? It was like this was a game, one full of curious amusements and obstacles. Almost as if he enjoyed everything she said and did.

A game. Power. Control. Suddenly her sister’s words sounded in her mind. What fed people like this was the fear and control of their victims.

She decided she would give him neither.

Sucking in a deep shaky breath, she spoke to the 911 operator.

“There’s a man in my house.” She spoke loudly and with complete

control. “He came in through the master bedroom door and he’s standing in the bedroom hallway in front of me. On the east side of the house.”

The man took another step closer to her but she didn’t budge. “He’s about five foot eight, a hundred and forty pounds. He’s dressed in all black with a mask, but I can tell you that he has blue eyes.”

The man took another step and raised the knife higher. She clenched the phone as well as her teeth and took a step toward him. Challenging him. It was fight or flight, and she was ready to fight. If she stood any chance at all, she had to trust her instincts and the knowledge of her sister. “He has a knife, he’s white.” She glanced down at his feet. “He’s wearing blue and dark gray Nike runners, about a size eight.” She met and held his icy gaze, glaring at him, almost daring him to lunge.

You will not hurt my children.

The man stared at her. She could feel the strange energy coming from him. Intense, chaotic, and sinister. The unease in the air caused Jaxx to yip and whine.

From the other side of the house she heard the voice of her son Landon. “Mommy?”

Her body reacted at once. She took another step toward him.

“Leave. Now.” Her voice was low and deadly serious. “Or I swear to God I will get my own knife and shred you to pieces.”

He turned to look toward the voice as Landon called out again.

Sirens screamed right behind the cry, approaching quickly.

Her rage had grown and now it drowned her fear ferociously, holding it down until it clawed for the surface, bubbles surging upward from its chest. She pulled a knife from the butcher block behind her and then stomped toward the intruder. She screamed at him.

“You sick, twisted fuck!” She threw the phone at him and nearly grinned when it smacked into his forehead. She lunged toward him, knife held high. Catlike, he turned and fled before she could reach him. But she kept on, sprinting and screaming like a madwoman, chasing him out into the stormy black night.

The door to the master bath hung open, the rain and wind pummeling it. Darkness loomed just beyond, having swallowed the intruder whole. Terror gripped her once again and, breathing hard, she yanked the door shut and held it tightly.

“Mommy?” Landon stood at the bathroom’s entrance, face contorted with worry.

“Come here,” she said, sinking down to the floor. She enveloped him hurriedly, kissing him and holding him tight. Then, as she heard the sirens and the shouts of responding officers, she carried him to the bed, lifted the phone, and dialed. It only rang twice before her sister answered.

“Kennedy? It’s me—it’s Keri.” She fought back burning tears. Kennedy seemed to know at once that something was wrong.

“What is it? What’s going on?”

“Someone broke into the house.” Sobs overtook her. “He had a knife—mask—I’m so scared, Kennedy. I’m so scared.”

Then Kennedy said the words she needed to hear. “I’ll be right there.”

Keri ended the call, then buried her face in her son’s hair and cried.

CHAPTER ONE

Four months later
New York City at dusk

She watched and waited. Waited and watched. She was getting good at waiting. Even better at watching.

They would be arriving any minute now. Any minute now she would show her true love that she meant business. She shoved her hands down deep into the pockets of her thick coat. Cold tingles of rain fell upon her face as she looked up into the graying sky. The muted pewter color made her think of her blood. The way it had slowly deadened over the years, feeling as if it had grown darker and heavier, running black inside her, turning her skin gray just like that sky.

Willing her sludge-like blood to do its job, she pushed her way into the gathering crowd, needing to get closer. She had to find the perfect spot. And she had to be close.

The man in front of her was larger, heavysset. Yes, he would be perfect to hide behind. She swayed from foot to foot, the irritation and anxiety of standing and waiting for over an hour settling in. She ran her fingers over the cold steel of the gun she had hidden in her coat pocket. She held it close, warming it with her hand. It wouldn't be long now.

Shoves came from behind her as a couple of kids pushed their way to the front of the crowd just behind the police barrier. They had homemade signs, the words lettered in glitter. They giggled and bounced with excitement. Couldn't be any older than eleven.

She looked away, her skin suddenly on fire. Her stomach clenched

as the giggles turned to shrieks of glee. She grimaced. They were in the way.

Briefly and oh so sharply, she thought about killing them. To kill that part that reminded her of herself. The thought clawed at her brain, fighting to stay as it was forced out. Killing them wasn't an option. Too messy. But she would think about it later that night. Mull it over in her mind, play out each possible scenario again and again. Relish it all, mentally roll around in the warm blood and laugh at the brutal screams.

But reality came barreling back. She had to do something. Quietly, she moved to the other side of the large man. Now. That was better. She tried to focus but still the girls giggled and shrieked with excitement.

"Shut the fuck up already," she mumbled.

The large man glanced at her.

Immediately, she looked away from him and tugged on the bill of her ball cap. She couldn't afford to call attention to herself.

Closing her eyes, she forced herself to block everything out and concentrate.

As she shifted her weight she wondered if her true love had read her letters. She had sent dozens of them, wanting and needing the attention of the woman she would die for. But there had been nothing in response. Only an autographed eight-by-ten photo of Veronica Ryan. And that had angered her. She and Veronica were in love. But others were keeping them apart. Well, not anymore. She would find a way. Didn't anyone understand what she was trying to do? Couldn't anyone see that she was incredibly intelligent and one hundred percent devoted to the one who meant the most in the world to her? The one person she knew would understand her if she would only open her eyes and pay attention? Veronica needed her, needed her help. They needed to be together. Forever. She shoved her hands down deeper into her coat pockets. No one had paid her any mind, and now it had led to this.

But it was better off this way. She would take care of things once and for all.

As the first of many limousines pulled up, she eased closer to the big man and gripped her gun harder.

It was time.



Cold-looking rain streaked across the window of the Lincoln limousine as the car splashed through the streets, hurrying to a Manhattan destination. It was dusk in the city and the weather was quickly cooling off as the black of night crept in daylight's door. Shawn Ryan sighed and rubbed her temples. Nervousness and agitation pumped through her blood.

"I told you I don't want to go. I hate these damn things," she said to her wife, Veronica.

"You're going," Veronica replied, not really wanting to talk about it. Shawn was never happy when it came to public appearances, and it was evident in her voice and always evident in her attitude.

"Rory has a fever; I should be at home with her and Kiley. We should be at home with our kids." Frustration strained Shawn's throat as she watched the buildings go by, gray and dreary with the New York rain. She was desperate for Veronica to hear her, but she knew she wouldn't listen. She never had before.

Veronica sat in silence as she stared out the vast window of their stretch limousine. Shawn watched her with growing anger, hating that her own wants and wishes were never put first. Veronica met her stern gaze.

"It's one little benefit, Shawn. I think you can handle doing this for me for just a couple of hours." Her voice was patronizing, her look blank and unconcerned.

"A couple of hours?" Shawn asked with excitement, but careful not to yell. She never yelled and she wasn't about to start now. She prided herself on always being the calm and levelheaded one. Veronica was the one who walked the wide range of emotions, not her.

God, she hated these kinds of engagements, and they were never just a couple of hours. The benefits, the people, the fans, they always required more than your time. They demanded your life.

"I don't want to hear this," Veronica said shaking her head, as if Shawn's words were annoying. "We're obligated, you know that."

"When's it going to be enough, V?" Shawn clenched her hands together in her lap, so tired, so frustrated, so damn fed up. "When the kids are moved out and married? Then will it be enough?" She sighed, her voice wavering with emotion. Veronica had a demanding career, and lately she had been spending much of her time away from home.

It seemed she saw more of Veronica in the magazines than she did in their home.

“It’s work. It’s my job. It’s what pays for our home, our vehicles, our life.” Veronica glared at her, the look that always was a warning. Then, just as quickly as it had spawned, the look was gone, replaced by surprise as her cell phone rang. She dug it out of her expensive tailored suit pocket. “It’s Clair, I’ll call her back. She put these new hair extensions in, what do you think?”

“Don’t do that, V,” Shawn said, swallowing back her tears of fury.

“Do what?” Veronica fingered her hair.

“Change the subject, like what I say doesn’t matter.”

Veronica sighed, dropping her hand away from her hair. “What were you saying?”

Shawn wrung her hands and spoke, trying her best to remain calm. “Don’t act like you have to do this. Like we’re living paycheck to paycheck. You’ve made millions of dollars in the span of your fifteen-year career. We’re set for life and you know it.” She knew it wasn’t about the money and she hated when Veronica pretended like it was. The plain and simple fact was that she craved the attention, craved the limelight. She couldn’t live without it. And she had sacrificed her marriage and family in order to keep it.

“Jesus, Shawn,” Veronica whispered with anger. “What the hell do you want from me?” Her emotions were quickly getting the better of her, as they always did, and Shawn braced herself for the wrath of her temper.

“Don’t yell.” Shawn kept her voice low, not wanting the driver to hear. The last thing she wanted was to read about this squabble in a tabloid magazine.

They sat in silence and both acknowledged the presence of the driver. The divider was up but they both knew from unfortunate past experiences that he could still hear if they raised their voices.

Shawn eased the tension in her hands and watched Veronica’s profile. Her skin was like cream, her sculpted cheekbones brushed with the crimson of her harnessed temper. Shawn sighed again, calming her shaky breaths. She hated it when Veronica yelled and she didn’t want to fight with her right now. She didn’t want to fight with her ever. But fighting was one thing they did well, and lately they had been doing a

lot of it. She met Veronica's dark eyes and spoke calmly. "I want you to tell me that this will all stop soon. That you'll come home and stay home." *Please tell me you will. Tell me there's hope for us after all.*

Veronica stared out the window at the many faces on the street blurring with the rain. The limousine slowed and they passed a line of police officers who directed the vehicle up alongside the red carpet.

"I can't promise that. You know I can't."

Shawn bit her lower lip and tried to fight back the tears that were biting at her throat. *So there it is. This is how things are going to be.* She stared at her hands, her body burning with the need to lash out in hurt and anger. Why couldn't Veronica just walk away from all the glitz and glamour? Why couldn't they just turn around and go home? She didn't understand. She never would.

"I won't do any more of these benefits," Shawn said as the door opened directly next to her. If Veronica wouldn't give for her, then she would stop giving as well. But inside she held little hope, knowing that little would faze Veronica. Nothing would stop her. Not even the loss of Shawn's support.

"Fine," Veronica replied, her voice stern.

Shawn climbed from the vehicle, fists clenched at her side. Veronica ran one last practiced hand through her hair before stepping out into the cold drizzle after Shawn.

Bright flashes assaulted her as the dozens of photographers began snapping photos. She and Shawn were America's famous lesbian couple. Veronica the successful actress, Shawn the beautiful, doting wife.

That was an image Veronica wasn't about to let slip away. She waved at the crowd as her large bodyguard Monty approached from the car behind. He was flanked by two more security personnel she'd not taken the trouble to get to know. Monty shut the limousine door behind her and opened a black umbrella but she shook her head, refusing it. She wanted nothing impeding her grand entrance.

"Veronica, over here!" photographers yelled immediately, drawing her into their world, snapping photo after photo. She stood proudly, posing from side to side.

"You look great! Who are you wearing?" Their flashbulbs lit them up in a startling lightning storm. She moved further along, smiling and waving, leading Shawn gently by the hand. Her security moved with them, keeping their immediate path clear. Her public relations person

wasn't there to guide her, so she began readying herself for the quick interview stops up ahead. She smiled again, enjoying the fact that she would be able to pick and choose which networks she spoke to and which she would snub.

The enormous cluster of fans began to scream as she neared. "I love you, Veronica!" Young girls screamed, waving their arms, holding up homemade signs lettered in glitter.

"I love you too!" she yelled back, blowing a kiss. The crowd laughed and cheered, thrilled at her attention. She left the carpet, touched by the young fans, and approached a few kids who stood behind the police barrier. They squealed with delight and jumped up and down as she shook their hands. Their hands felt small, cold and damp from the rain. She smiled once more and pulled away. The shouts continued to come from every angle as she waved at the crowd.

The noise filled her ears as the excited faces of the fans filled her mind. Adrenaline surged through her pleurably, causing a warm rush through her veins. This was her mantra, her drug, her addiction. And she would be damned if she was going to give it up. These people needed her almost as much as she needed them. It was her calling, it was who she was.

Glowing from her high, she looked to Shawn, who stood waiting for her graciously on the carpet as she always did. She met her gaze briefly and knew that Shawn was silently reminding her that they were not done talking. Shawn was still upset. But she stood smiling, a plastic yet dazzling smile. Veronica smiled back and by all appearances they looked like the happiest, most beautiful couple on the planet. Veronica blew another kiss to the crowd and took a step toward Shawn. She grabbed her hand, ready to accompany her inside.

As they turned to walk down the red carpet together, a loud pop rang out. Instantly, Veronica felt Monty slam into her, tackling her to the ground, knocking the wind completely out of her. The crowd screamed as people panicked and tried to run. She looked to her empty hand where only seconds before Shawn's had been.

Frantic, she searched and found Shawn on the ground next to her, her blond head contrasting sharply with the lush red of the carpet. Her sparkling eyes were wide and frightened, focused on Veronica like a trapped animal. A spot of dark red pooled on her shoulder, drowning more and more of the sequins of her dress with every passing second.

Veronica cried out for security to cover Shawn, but the other guards were surrounding her solely, completely focused on her rather than Shawn. Monty was yelling, trying desperately to shield both Shawn and Veronica with his body as he tried to direct the other two guards. In seconds that seemed like an eternity, several more security guards rushed to them and Monty moved to Shawn.

Screams continued to come from the crowd as people tried to run for cover. Chaos erupted around Veronica and her heart thudded madly in her chest. She watched as men and women tripped over one another in order to get away. Helpless and trapped by the bodies of the security guards, Veronica reached out and grabbed Shawn's hand. It felt cool, bringing a sob to her throat. Now it meant something more than her apparent indifference. Now it meant something dangerous. More men arrived, surrounding them in a protective tight circle as they yelled, fingers pressed to their earpieces.

Veronica breathlessly tried to reassure Shawn. "It's okay, Shawn. It's okay." She held Shawn's gaze, shuddering at the terrified look on her face. Shawn looked scared to death, her lower lip trembling. Monty pressed on her shoulder, trying to control the bleeding, screaming for an ambulance.

"It's okay. It's okay," Veronica said again.

As she repeated the words over and over, she thought back to Shawn's simple request. If she would've listened to her, this wouldn't have happened. If they had stayed home, everything would be okay. But she hadn't listened. Instead, she had put her family in danger by exposing them to the public. And now Shawn had been shot.

She clenched her eyes shut as one of the security guards repositioned himself atop her, still determined to keep her down.

She looked back at Shawn, helpless.

She had paid the ultimate price for fame. She had paid with her family.

Why couldn't she stop?