

Chapter 1:

Aimee chuckled at her co-worker as they parted ways at the front entrance, exchanging pleasantries and see-you-tomorrow. She fished her keys out of her purse, as she did every night, looking down instead of at her surroundings. She was almost to her car when she thought she saw a movement in front of her. She stopped in place, looking up, then around. Not seeing anything more, she hurried toward her car, keys in hand, frowning when she realized the front of her car was hidden by shadows. Trees lined the edge of the parking lot, and their leaves danced under the nearby streetlight, casting patterns of lace across her face and torso, increasing the dread she felt rising within her.

She chided herself for being paranoid, yet still allowed herself to nearly run the rest of the way to her car. She was two steps away when the toe of her heel caught on a crack in the cement. She lurched forward, catching herself with palms against the side of the car before her face could connect with the driver's side window, dropping her keys in the process.

"Shit!" She said under her breath. She quickly stooped down, hand reaching blindly under the car, feeling along the ground for her keys.

"Looking for these?" A male voice said from above her. Aimee froze. The hair on her arms and the back of her neck stood away from her skin, and she fought back a chill. As she slowly rose, she kept her head down, eyes trailing up his body. She took in his leather sneakers, well-fitted jeans, and expensive t-shirt. She noticed his slim build, his well-defined arms, as he stood with one arm across his chest, his other out in front of him, dangling her keys on one finger by the keyring. When her eyes reached his face, she breathed out a sigh of relief.

"What are you doing here?" Exasperation colored her voice, and she immediately regretted it. Where his look had been hard yet neutral before, his gaze on her turned cold. She instinctively took a step back.

His grin was full of malice, but also a hint of humor, as if he were sharing an inside joke with himself. He jingled the keys once on his finger, his arm remaining out in front of him. Aimee looked at him cautiously, raising her hand hesitantly. When he didn't move, she made to grab for her keys. Aimee was quick but he was quicker. He grabbed her wrist, keys still in hand, and they dug into her flesh. She uttered a small cry, raising her other arm to pry his fingers away. He grabbed her other wrist, also, and jerked her to him, knocking the air out of her lungs.

Aimee was frightened and angry. *Who does he think he is?* she thought indignantly. Her heart pounded in her chest, even as she managed a glare up at

him. He glared back at her, and when she remained unblinking, he gripped her wrists tighter. The metal teeth on her keyring pierced her flesh, and only then did her harsh gaze falter. Still, she gritted her teeth. "You're hurting me."

"Baby- you haven't felt anything yet." Before she could respond, Aimee felt herself being pulled with him, as he stepped backwards into the shadows. Panic rose in her throat, along with bile. "What are you doing?!" Her voice was high-pitched and although her gut told her what was happening, her brain tried to rationalize.

"Taking what's mine," he answered with a growl. He drug her farther back, just inside the perimeter of the trees. They were wrapped in darkness, the moon hidden behind both the clouds and the leaves. Aimee tried to maintain her footing, but she tripped repeatedly over fallen branches, and her heels stuck in the soft earth, damp from the rainstorm earlier in the day. She didn't remember him being this strong.

A million thoughts raced through her mind in a matter of seconds. Oh, God, he's going to rape me. My shoes are probably ruined. If I scream, will anyone hear me? Why don't we have security?? I don't want this. Let's just get this over with. Why on the ground? How bad will it hurt? If I pretend to like it, will he leave. Can I like it?- We've had sex before. Does he think he can get away with this? No one will believe me. I can't tell. No one will believe me. Even if they do, he will buy his way out. He will get away with it.

"Are you going to rape me?" she asked.

He chuckled darkly. "Rape you?" The clouds shifted and she could make out his features, still handsome even through the now obvious anger. His eyes were as dark as the night sky, and held something more than rage, though she couldn't place the emotion right away. "I'm not going to rape you." Disgust filled his voice, as if she were talking down to him.

Aimee was on the ground now, not even attempting a struggle. She was trying to remain calm, and she was puzzled by his words. "But you said..."

He cut her off with a slap to the left side of her face. Her head spun as it whipped to the side, stray branches and rocks scratching her right cheek. "I *will* take what's mine. But your body has nothing to do with it." Aimee flexed her jaw, trying to assess both her damage and his words. "What do you want?" She managed before he struck her again, the force causing her to hit the side of her head on a rock that stuck up out of the ground. She could feel thick warmth run down towards her ear; could taste warm, wet metal in her mouth; and she saw stars.

Fighting the dizziness that threatened to take her, she looked up at him. He was kneeling over her, and he brought his face down close to hers. She could feel his breath on her, smelling oddly sweet, like flavored ice cream or chocolate chip cookies. He took her face roughly between his thumb and fingers, gritting his teeth as he spoke, answering her question.

"Vindication."

He picked her head up by her now swelling jaw, and flung it back to the ground. The wet soil did nothing to cushion the blow, as nature's debris surrounded them. She struggled to think clearly; swallowing her own blood was making her nauseous, and her head was pounding. *Vindication? What the hell is he talking about?*

She now realized what she had seen behind his eyes: revenge. *But for what?* Her mind searched frantically for the answer, any indication that his actions toward her were deserved.

Aimee didn't have long to think before his hands gripped her throat, squeezing tighter with each breath she tried to take. She clawed at his hands, and quickly seeing it would do no good, she went for his face. Thankful she had just had her nails done, manicured in an oval, she took advantage, and scratched deeply at his cheek, unable to reach his eyes. He hissed in pain, and Aimee realized she did indeed draw blood.

Her actions only proved to anger him more. With the speed of lightning, or maybe her reflexes were slow due to her head wound and lack of oxygen, he pinned her arms to the ground with his legs, straddling her chest. "You bitch!" he spat, as his hands grabbed her neck. He picked her head up and hit it against the ground again, and Aimee nearly blacked out.

"You think you can get away with that? With any of what you did to me?!" Aimee could see him coming undone. He was visibly shaking now, and his voice was rising in volume. His eyes took on a far away look, as if he were seeing past her, but to what, she had no idea.

She tried to shake her head, but his hold on her was like a vice. His voice suddenly became distant, and everything around her began to grow dark and fuzzy around the edges, blending into the night. In one last ditch effort, she raised her hands as far as she could, and clawed at his bare arms. She was unsure of the damage she left, if any, her strength being drained at alarming speed.

The last thing she saw was the scratch on his cheek, and a large drop of blood falling onto her face, which she knew would blend with her own.