

# One

## *Angela*

A trail of white fog from my unsteady breath indicates I'm alive, yet I can barely feel the icy breeze that nips my skin, a sense of awareness as unobtainable as my sense of belonging. I've found myself in the middle of an isolated street. How that's happened I'm not sure, but the early hours denote a false illusion that all is calm, despite an irritating clack of stilettos against uneven paving demonstrating otherwise. In fact, nothing about this moment confirms I wouldn't be better off *dead*. Nobody would notice. I doubt anyone would care.

I was attending a party a few hours ago but I don't remember much about it now, my memory sporadic, hazy. All I know is I woke up a short while ago with a vile taste of sick in my mouth and a headache that feels as if my skull has imploded. I was barely able to move, my body throbbing in

## *The Lost Raven*

places I know could *not* have been caused by the consumption of alcohol alone. I was in a bed not my own, and I didn't recognise my surroundings—shadowy grey walls, heavy bedding, male body odour, thick, like soup. I wasn't wearing any underwear.

I stare at my wrists, angry bruises already forming, grip marks around my skin. In this light, it's difficult to tell if my imagination isn't to blame, yet my hips ache too. I'm not imagining *that*. I take a moment, a breath. Despite not wanting to go to the party, I was there anyway, grinning like a demented freak, pretending to be having fun, raising a half-empty glass towards anyone who might show me enough attention to guide me through the evening unscathed. The music was too loud, my dress too short, most of the men in attendance consumed by beer goggles that heightened their attraction to me for the wrong reasons. As it is, I now feel oddly strange, as if something happened without my consent, although I'm too incensed to conclude what. I wish I'd stayed at home.

I don't realise I'm crying until I can no longer see where I'm walking. Tears burn my eyes, stinging my sinuses, thoughts I can't control pounding metaphoric fists against my skull. I remove my shoes and throw them into the road, slamming hard against the tarmac breaking a heel. I don't care. I want to claw at my face, scream aloud, race into the path of an oncoming vehicle. Instead, I shiver because I don't have a coat, my handbag dangling from my trembling shoulder.

I lean over and vomit on the kerbside, a sudden staleness

hitting me from nowhere. My privates are throbbing and there's bruising around my inner thighs that, until now, I've tried to ignore. I pull myself into a standing position, my spinning head ensuring I almost stagger backwards in protest. I don't wish to acknowledge the obvious, don't *want* to believe it's true. I manage to take several steps before it hits me, the balls of my feet taking the impact of unforgiving stones that elevates my heartbeat.

*I think I've been raped.*

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I can't keep walking, my legs refuse to cooperate, so I slide to the ground and sob. I *should* go to the police, report the crime, but I don't remember what happened. I don't even know if there *is* a crime to report. It will probably make things worse anyway, my past dealings with such people not something I want to think about right now. If I *was* attacked, surely I'd remember? I'd have fought back, kicked out, done *something* to prevent the unwanted attention? Anything would be better than what I'm left now to deal with, by myself. Alone.

A passing stranger attempts to speak to me but I don't hear them, too busy dealing with the carnage in my head, no time to worry about what's going on in theirs. When I feel a hand on my shoulder, everything becomes too much and I clamber to my feet and run. Stones and debris bite into my skin but I don't care, can hardly feel it, more important things on my mind. I race along the street, only stopping to lean against a lamppost when I'm out of breath. I already feel out

of my mind.

I'm desperately trying to think back, yet nothing logical is coming to mind. I have just left the house of a friend, *his* party I attended, the very reason I am in this street now because of an invite I should have declined. Yet again, can I even call Liam Goodman a friend? No. Probably not. He is an acquaintance, nothing more. A colleague. We've worked together at The Royal Eastcliff Hospital for the last three years, spending the occasional lunch break together, sharing a joke, my job as an A&E receptionist ensuring nothing gets past me. I can't dwell on the fact that it was *his* bedroom I woke up in, unable to recall how I got there. I merely wanted to support him, celebrate his promotion, my needs set aside for the evening to pander to his. I can't imagine he'd hurt me. I'm sure he's not that kind of person.

I suck in a lungful of air. Who am I kidding? Of course he wants more from me. Men always do. I didn't believe it mattered until now, a possibility jumping into my mind I'm not comfortable considering, the idea he'd willingly *attack* me something I can't easily disregard. Has he grown tired of waiting, taking matters into his own hands, taking advantage?

Ice is forming now, clinging to the surrounding trees, nothing to keep away the cold air that chills my bones. My bare feet ache, the freezing pavement readily rubbing blisters into my numb skin. I stumble around until I find myself in the middle of Eastcliff town centre, watching from a distance two young women leaving a club: chatting, giggling. Adjusting their clothing, checking hair and makeup in mirrors that double as mobile phones. I don't know why I'm here, I barely

know what I'm doing, yet I can clearly see what they can't. *I see danger*. I see what will happen if they're not mindful to watch each other's backs, stay alert. Keep safe.

I wish I understood the male species but the sad truth is I don't. Most of them assume they can do what they want without consequence, acting without remorse, women nothing more than a target of their impossible lust. I used to believe that, if I could remove myself from all thoughts of men, I might stand a chance of a normal life. My lesbian phase lasted an entire summer, two fumbled attempts behind me, a woman's touch something I assumed would help my mindset and ease my suffering. It didn't. It merely confirmed I'm *not* a lesbian.

I am, in fact, nothing now but a lost soul who doesn't find women sexually attractive yet equally can't abide the touch of a man. It isn't something I dwell on. I despise how testosterone is used carelessly for selfish gain, a pointed, phallic symbol of everything I loathe about the male species, the *thing* in their trousers a sad consequence of who they are. Their thoughts are never on anything other than sex, the monsters between their legs to blame for that.

I lick my lips. The copious amount of wine I drank earlier is seemingly unable to quench my insatiable thoughts, an unsupported quest for answers leaving my entire body quivering. I ignore several sideways glances from Friday night revellers heading home, musing over *my* intentions, *my* motives. It doesn't matter. I'm silently pondering how to protect my fellow females from a pain they don't yet know is coming—like a stalker, lying in wait, wondering how and

when I can make my move. I'm a coiled spring, my mind set only on saving all women who can't appreciate how much they *need* saving, these innocents forever the subject of unfettered attention. My heart is pumping, my eyes wild, irritation prickling violently.

I observe with silent frustration as an intoxicated male leans towards a potential victim, wilfully absorbed in cleavage that has been lustfully placed on display. The woman is attracting the wrong type of attention, laughing, tilting her head to reveal bare flesh, a shoulder, a leg, her heart beating swiftly in exposed neck veins that await the vampire's attack. To any outsider, this is a mutual interaction, two willing adults connecting in conversation—innocent, normal, *consensual*. Yet, I see nothing but monstrous consequences that will leave this poor thing naked, exposed and trembling with fear she will never dislodge no matter how much therapy is thrown her way. *I know*. I've been there, worn the t-shirt, still have it hanging as a painful reminder in the back of my goddamn wardrobe.

Aside from Liam (who I'm now unexpectedly uncertain about), most men disgust me. I can't help the way I feel about that. I hate how they behave, how they look at *women*, each one assuming every female desires their attention. If she doesn't reciprocate, they assume her gay, a *real* man able to show a woman what she's missing. Even gay men seek the same attention, often sleeping with those they meet on a whim, one-night stands deemed normal. But gay men pose no danger to women of course, their endless lust shared with each other instead of females who can't defend themselves

from the nightmare of heightened arousal. Everyone is looking for sex, it seems—everyone but *me*.

‘Are you okay?’ someone asks, aiming a concerned face towards me that I don’t immediately acknowledge. I stop dead in my tracks, my heartbeat quickening. I can’t think, can’t respond, this night triggering something in me I’m not even aware exists. A consistent thud of music is keeping pace with my heart, surrounding laughter engulfing my senses.

‘Can I buy you a drink?’ he queries. I don’t know what the time is but it’s assumedly still early enough for the alcohol he now wants to ply me with, still dark enough to disguise his motives.

I almost miss the question, my focus set on a woman applying lipstick, smoothing her hair, straightening her dress.

‘You okay?’

The same voice is growing louder and I turn to see a male, approximately thirty, potentially older, although I can’t tell in this light. He is smiling, beer-goggled eyes and rosy cheeks confirming he’s already consumed too much.

‘I’m fine,’ I mutter as politely as I can, stepping to one side, his proximity too close. His aftershave is overwhelming, a muted blend of musk and sweat that makes me feel sick.

‘Let me buy you that drink?’ he repeats. Louder, in case I missed him the first time.

‘No. Thank you.’ I’m still trying to be polite. He should be grateful.

‘You look lost.’ He won’t leave me alone, won’t take the hint, closing the gap I’ve readily created between us. ‘I’m Lee.’ He holds a steady hand towards mine, a simple gesture,

nothing more. He probably believes he's a nice guy. I know better.

'I'm fine,' I repeat, louder, firmer, in case *he* didn't hear *me* the first time. I try not to snap, try not to glare at him in disgust. The last thing I need is to engage in anything that might accidentally pass for conversation.

'Do *you* have a name?' he asks flatly, taking in my unkempt appearance, my bare feet.

I'm not about to tell him, not about to express the profound hatred I've held my entire life for the male species. I can guess what he wants, of course, yet I give no smile of encouragement to lead him on, tears already burning the edges of my eyes, blinking back a pain I'm unable to control. Recent events are catching up with me, the party still vivid, my body still sore. It was a mistake coming here.

'Leave me alone.' I'm biting my lip so hard I can taste blood.

'Sorry, I didn't mean to offend you.' Lee steps away, wounded now, his hands raised defensively. He looks disappointed. 'Can I make sure you get home safely?' He looks at me as if he assumes I need saving, yet all I want is for him to turn his attention to something else, *anything* other than me.

'No!' I spit the word towards him as if he's strangling me with it. 'I'll be fine.' I need to leave. *Now*.

I break into an unsteady jog, a gust of wind taking me by surprise, whipping the edge of my dress around my exposed legs.

'Are you *sure* you're okay? Can I *call* someone for you?'

Lee is behind me, his voice raised, troubled.

'People like *you* make me sick,' I scream loudly, causing attention I don't need, spitting out words I don't want in my head. So far he has done *nothing* to warrant my wrath, yet here I am offering it anyway.

'What did I do wrong?' Lee doesn't know, doesn't see what he is. Why won't he leave me alone?

'You're all the same. Delusional. Twisted. You're all *freaks*.' I can't help the words that catch the back of my throat as I yell into the darkness. I turn around, the guy already at my back now, his presence shocking, overbearing. He's a sexual predator, nothing more, a symbol of everything I despise. I'm panicking, annoyed by my decision to come here instead of going home, frustrated by my inability to think straight. The darkened street is imposing, strangers either too drunk or too far away to notice, no aid coming my way. I glance around, uncertain, nothing of my brain intact.

'I'm sorry if I upset you.' Lee is still talking, holding large hands towards mine as if he assumes I need his help. Yet, his body language is telling its own story, intent on trouble. I believe he's going to *attack* me. I can't help it, can't take the risk. Not again. I reach into my bag, grappling wildly for my phone, the bloody thing eluding me as my trembling fingers probe against a torn seam. I'm still crying. I can't help *that* either.

When Lee steps into my personal space, I see nothing beyond the opportunity for him to *rape* me, my mind unravelling swiftly. I won't allow that to happen, I can't. Liam's touch still too painful, his imposing scent still tickling

my nostrils. I stumble backwards, fumbling inside my bag for something, *anything* I can use as a weapon, momentarily shocked when I pull out a knife. I don't recall putting such an item into my bag, no idea where it came from.

Lee doesn't initially react when I stab him, neither of us registering what I've done until I see the blood, my blade plunged deep into his belly. He staggers backwards, his face contorted, shock setting in.

*Jesus Christ. What the hell?*

He should have stayed away, heeded my warning. Instead, he drops to his knees like a ragdoll, both hands pressed against his gut as angry blood spills between his fingers. He doesn't speak, probably can't, isn't yet able to register what's unfolding. His once-flushed cheeks have already turned pale. He falls to the ground, his unstable legs unable to keep him upright.

I take this as my cue to leave, racing along the street as if I'm being chased, away from unaware strangers and imminent detection. I can't bring myself to turn around or acknowledge my actions, already halfway home when it hits me, my thoughts stopping me in my tracks.

*I just killed someone.*