

BENDING FATE



REILY GARRETT

Bending Fate
Prequel to Carnal Whispers:
Mind Stalker
Carnal Series

By
Reily Garrett

Thank you for reading
Bending Fate

For information on updates,
new releases, deals, bonus content,
and other great books, sign up for
Reily's newsletter at
reilygarrett.com.

Acknowledgments

This book is dedicated to Darius, Leyna, and Raptor, the incredible trio, loyal, kind, and energetic. Three incredible beings who don't understand the words "give up." To Faith, whose love and compassion changed my life.

Special thanks to beta readers Graham from Fading Street Publishing, Siobhan Caughey, Lori Sickles. I appreciate your time and insights. To my readers, each one of you who selects and reads one of my books, thank you for the opportunity to share my work.

Table of Contents

[Bending Fate](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Carnal Whispers](#)

[About Reily](#)

[Reily's Books](#)

[Copyright](#)

Chapter One

Shadows obscured the myriad nebulous phantoms Dani's imagination conjured sliding underneath the water's stygian surface. For someone who'd lived her life under the radar, she didn't want to consider the consequences of her actions while committing criminal activity.

Choppy waves' rhythmic slapping against the decking's underbelly kept time with her quiet inhalations as the first frozen flakes of snow melted on her bare neck. An icy chill spiraled down and curled around each of her vertebrae. Tendrils of naked fear snaked outward in a labyrinthine crawl to disrupt her previously steady hands as she once again prodded her conscience with the justification for *borrowing* the small skiff.

I have to warn Jake about the foreign bastards after his girl, Callie. Deliver the message and get out. What could go wrong?

Cursed with an extraordinary intelligence and a talent any government would kill to control, Callie deserved a chance at freedom, even if it entailed constant vigilance.

Dani's trust in technology fell short of using a phone considering the limitless electronic reach of the foreigners. They didn't care who they killed in their quest to kidnap their objective.

Old-fashioned stealth was safer when many could demolish privacy with a few clicks at their keyboard. The group she intended to expose considered laws for the mass populace a bogus endeavor. She hadn't spent years hiding in plain sight to act recklessly now when her own demons, guised in the form of a previous foster family, were equally desperate to reacquire her.

Tonight, stealth included significant risk.

Gloves, a shield against the cold and from leaving fingerprints behind, made it difficult to untangle the cleat hitch securing the small wooden boat bumping against the dock. Improperly secured, the rope wrapped

each horn twice in defiance of her need for a speedy departure. Using her flashlight now might hasten her departure but also might alert someone in the nearby home to her presence.

This legal infraction signified nothing in the grand scheme of things. If the foreign asshats tracking Callie came across Dani, her life would be forfeit in the time it took to pull the trigger. If her plan succeeded, she'd bring the wooden craft back before midnight after delivering her message. A nice, quiet, unassuming life was all she wanted. Taking the small dory from a private dock had seemed to make sense at the time, with no security personnel, no gates, and no discernable alarms.

A racing heart and shaking fingers brought her sanity into question. The cold breeze swept away the perspiration dotting her brow

With the release of the last knot came a frustrated sigh. If she was late to the rendezvous, Jake would leave and her warning would go undelivered. She'd risked much in the past month in her bid to free Callie, a young woman previously held prisoner in the bowels of a think tank due to her extraordinary mind. It didn't matter that they'd never met. After learning of Callie's unique psychic abilities, so similar to her own, the compulsion to see her free had overpowered rational thought.

If all had gone well three nights ago, Callie was now free of the Institution, yet the wardens who'd raised her would go to the ends of the earth to recapture the young genius. Still, she was unaware of the foreigners plotting her abduction and deserved at the very least, a fighting chance.

Something felt off, wrong.

Why isn't Franklin answering his phone?

A hundred yards away, the house remained dark except for an outside security light. The inhabitants were probably tucked in their warm beds, dreaming of snowball fights and sledding during their snow days. A life she'd enjoyed only in her imagination.

The sky's cap was lower now than even an hour ago. Darker too. The cloud's ever-increasing burden of frozen crystals would soon smother the world in a late-season, brief visit in spite of the temperature hovering above freezing.

Her muscles protested the stretch when she stood and rolled her neck and arms to relieve the spasm spanning her shoulder blades. The sooner she finished this dangerous task, the sooner she'd go back to her uneventful life, concealing her uniqueness behind a veterinary assistant's quiet and humble facade.

After dropping the line, she stumbled over the rowlock when something nudged her thigh. Lips locked tight between her teeth muffled the scream threatening to broadcast her nefarious activities. To be caught before delivering her message would leave many lives at risk.

Precarious balance forced her to step down to the craft's slippery seat, windmilling her arms in a bid to avoid the freezing water. Fate had never been her friend, and now conspired to thwart her best efforts. Losing the battle for equilibrium, she lurched forward, sliding on the slickened floor and striking her elbow on the quarter knee in an attempt to remain inside the boat. Her waist-length braid snagged on the oarlock, bringing tears to cool on her lashes.

After several attempts and accumulating new bruises, she managed to slide onto the seat, her jeans instantly soaking up the moisture. *Great.* At least her small flashlight remained dry in her jacket's zippered breast pocket. *I'm not cut out for this crap.*

The quiet chuffing of the golden retriever that had startled her did nothing to settle her nerves in light of his subdued excitement. If he became more vocal and floodlights spotlighted her criminal undertaking, she'd make an excellent target with a watery grave already prepared. Oblivious to her desperate plight, the wide, doggy grin and weight shifting between his front feet broadcast his eagerness to join her for the late-night escapade. "Go home, boy. You shouldn't be here. This is dangerous."

Part of her unique talent insured that dogs, cats, and horses all loved her, which was great at work. Dr. Carari had hired her five minutes into her interview when one of the *problem* patients had scrambled onto Dani's lap. The dog in question supposedly hated people, especially veterinarians.

The first leg of her journey entailed defying the river's current surging in a roiling, angry tempest, threatening all but the strongest-willed to test their mettle. Her objective to hug the shoreline necessitated chancing undercut banks, overhanging sweepers, and sieve-like obstacles waiting beneath the smoother surface along the edge and had made sense in her head. Reality declared her attempt at playing superhero foolish and a recipe for disaster. She'd purposefully chosen a meeting point upriver to use the current in her favor should unforeseen circumstances necessitate a quick escape.

"C'mon, boy, go home. This water is too cold for you to survive if anything goes wrong. I can't risk it no matter how much I need someone

to listen to my ramblings.”

In keeping with her vile luck, the dog immediately hopped into the boat, skidding to slam against the far side. The resulting dangerous sway nearly toppled them both into the icy water, ending the adventure before it had begun.

“Right. Of course you’d want to come along. But when we get back, we go our own separate ways, got it?” Despite her newest friend’s inability to convey his thoughts, the false security granted by his companionship eased her tension. The canine answered her admonishment by rubbing his muzzle against her thigh.

Stray shafts of ambient light glittered on the swells and gilded the fracturing white caps while heavy, low-lying clouds released bits of their frozen tax for her trespass. The slight distance to travel gave her time to sort her thoughts and fortify her mental reserves. She was doing the right thing.

The dog settled next to her booted feet, content for the ride and oblivious to the danger. “Well, if you’re gonna ride, you have to have a name. For tonight, I’ll call you Asmin, which means protector. You should be home and snuggled up on your mama’s bed, not freezing out in this weather. Still...it’s good to have company.”

As if appreciating the temporary title, her unexpected stowaway issued a low *woof*, making her smile as she secured the oars in their locks and pushed away from the short pier. Ahead, she’d have to navigate between the piles of a low bridge, but they’d serve as a marker on the return trip if the coming storm turned vicious.

The steady lap of water against the hull calmed her thoughts as she bucked the weaker current hugging the shore. Tonight’s snow should hide any traces of her excursion. *At least there’s some good fortune in my future.*

“Who knew rowing against the current required so much strength?” Yesterday, she’d scoured the area to find a suitable meeting place and avenue of approach where she couldn’t be followed or tracked if fate kicked her in the teeth.

She’d longed to meet Callie, who held a distinct talent similar to her own. Repeated attempts to contact Franklin, acting as their go-between, had failed. Approaching his teammate, Jake, seemed like a risk worth taking.

Asmin’s thin whine echoed her worry. “What if he doesn’t show? How will I warn Callie of the dangerous men on her trail?” A dull ache in her

arms went ignored while having the unexpected companion close helped soothe her anxiety. Tomorrow was Friday and she'd have most of the weekend to rest.

Minutes passed, and the ache morphed into a burn, but she didn't slacken her pace. She should've left earlier and allowed time for inevitable setbacks. Checking the weather should've been at the top of her to-do list.

When scouting for a meeting place, she'd searched for a wooded area by the river not too far from the road since Jake's route would start at the highway. Neither had far to go.

After struggling to avoid a snarl of partially submerged branches and the river's collected detritus, she rounded the next bend and found her marker, a large cottonwood extending its graceful branches low enough across the water to suit her purpose.

"You need to stay in the boat, Asmin. I don't know what's happened, but something feels very wrong. If Callie is free and clear as planned, I'll tell Jake about the foreigners. Then I think it's time to relocate, maybe dye my hair and get some contact lenses. Clean slate." She'd done all she could and risked exposure in delivering this message. If her foster family found her, Dani's circumstances would be far worse than Callie's had been.

The cryptic directive delivered to Jake, requesting a face-to-face meeting had already tempted fate. She saw no other choice since Franklin hadn't answered her texts. He wouldn't have ignored her. The only way to know for sure what had happened was to see Jake in person. Her talent encompassed so much more than human lie detection and she'd know as soon as she met him if he'd turned traitor.

The flat-bottomed boat's grudging shore landing ushered in the next phase of her plan with a stuttering grind. Bare-limbed trees stretching skyward did little to block the cold wind's bite and would offer little camouflage in passing through the woods.

After tying the boat to a drooping, sturdy branch, she padded up the low bank, grateful when Asmin stayed behind. Despite her unique ability with animals, she couldn't convey her desperate if irrational need for stealth. The care in which she'd contacted Jake didn't negate the cold, stark fear stalking her every step and growing with every inhalation while the vicious whims of fate ensured her hands shook on what could be her final adventure. The metallic *grrr* of her coat's pocket zipper opening reverberated in her mind.

Since the closest house lay nestled in the woods a good distance away, the small flashlight's beam should go unnoticed as it cut back and forth over a layer of leaves and branches skimmed with a thin film of white. The worst she had to fear from nature now included disturbing a snake or some small predator by inadvertently stepping in its den. Deer trails carved winding paths through the forest according to the whim of the ruminant mammals. When scouting these woods, she hadn't considered snow might obliterate her trail and deny her a swift retreat if necessary. She prayed Jake was waiting for her and this last errand would be quick and uneventful.

Frozen flakes collected in the forks of connecting branches and lower, on thorns and tangled briars. Mother Nature refused to give her a short reprieve despite the unselfish venture. A glance at her digital watch forced her to step faster despite her legs beginning to shake, whether from fear or wind cutting through the butt of her wet jeans, she couldn't determine. She'd never met Jake, but Franklin had sworn his friend was trustworthy, not to mention being in love Callie.

Barbed underbrush pierced her gloves and snagged her jacket, though it was nothing compared to the fate awaiting Callie if the foreign bastards captured her. "What can go wrong?" She'd picked the place, the time, and the man. She'd even acquired a new burner cell so no one could trace her.

Cold gusts of wind shifted branches and scrubby vines to claw at her knit cap and snatch strands of hair from her braid. Cold slicing across her back after stuffing her dampened braid down her shirt prompted a full-body shudder, as much from premonition as from melting snow against her flesh. She'd thought about the danger of leaving a trail for any good scenting dog. Using the river helped in that regard but surrendering DNA from a snagged lock of hair was an eventuality she should've further contemplated.

The convoluted trail she'd scoped out held a more sinister demeanor in the dark. With fear squeezing her chest and snow masking her markers, the path was difficult to follow, but this was a last-ditch effort. The likelihood of Jake setting a trap was nil, but still doubt blossomed, filling her thoughts with images of captivity, torture, and the infinite emptiness of lost hope.

Slimy undertones of suspicion snaking their way through her mind prompted her to snap off and stow her light before cresting a small incline. Her plan seemed sound, her labyrinthine journey, a good choice.

Yet intuition or perhaps her talent warned of menace ahead. Indecision and the sour wad of dread churning in her belly pre-empted her sensing another's presence, something done with ease when fear didn't clog her thoughts.

The meeting point—the knoll's large oak now sheltering her from the wind's slicing edge—blocked her view as the click-clacking of restless limbs overhead muffled the sound of anyone's passage. She'd intended to arrive thirty minutes early but had lost that advantage by twenty-five. Maybe it was meeting a stranger in the woods late at night that had her heart racing triple time. *Franklin trusted his team with his life.*

The ridge on which she now stood gave her the advantage of seeing anything approach. In order for someone to reach her from the road, they'd have to navigate a steeper incline than what she'd ascended, plus circumvent several fallen trees and a waterlogged gully.

A twig crunching farther ahead redirected her attention. She'd never met Franklin's teammate, described only as a loyal friend.

"Claire? It's Jake. You called me and wanted to meet instead of talking over the phone." The disembodied, harsh whisper substantiated a self-assurance that allowed a deep, halting breath. She sensed no evil in this man.

Giving her old name was deceitful, but necessary since anonymity had become her closest friend. The stocky man's appearance would've induced fear, if not for her sixth sense. At a little over six feet, he would dwarf her. With proximity, her unique talent came into play, albeit dwarfed by anxiety. *This man loves Callie.*

Tentatively, he circumvented nature's obstacles and climbed the incline, not slipping despite navigating a blanket of slickened leaves. His gaze, dark and piercing, evaluating, never left her face.

"Thank you for coming and sorry for such unorthodox circumstances, but it's necessary." Considering the stakes, a few questions before divulging her information was in order. "I didn't know if your phone was bugged—or whatever. Franklin's not answering his cell and always said you were trustworthy."

Ambient streaks of light highlighted the sadness in Jake's expression. "I'm sorry. He...can't come."

She sensed his revelation before he could speak it. "Franklin's dead? No. No, no. I just wanted Callie free." No amount of mental floss could disentangle the panic rising in her chest. "This isn't the way ..." Tears blurred her vision while her throat went dry.

“We’d made it to the fence when one of the guards shot him. He gave his life to get Callie and me out of there.” Jake looked away and took a deep breath before continuing. “I wondered where he’d obtained the codes for our escape. He spoke of a very special friend. I’m so sorry, Claire.”

Guilt was an evil, icy whip lashing her mind and redoubling in her chest, twining around each lung and squeezing until she choked. Franklin, a good man, an honest man, a man who stood up for what he’d believed. Dead. Because of her.

“Oh, God. It wasn’t supposed to happen this way. I just—wanted Callie free.” Dani wiped her tear-streaked face on her denim-jacket sleeve. “Nobody deserves captivity because of a unique talent or intelligence. They wanted her to build undetectable weapons of mass destruction.”

“Yes, she is free and the world is safer. With your information, Sebastian, and I got out. I’ll take her someplace where those Institution bastards will never find us.”

“That’s why I called you. There’s a group of Koreans angling to capture Callie. They have all kinds of high-tech equipment.” Dani twisted her hands in frustration. “Who else knew of the plan? I thought getting the codes and schedules would be enough.”

“Just our team and some of the Institution’s employees. But I have a backup plan. Nate Crofton. He was part of our unit before we left the military. I intentionally kept him out of the loop as a failsafe.”

Jake’s attention jerked to the surrounding woods, his intensity magnifying her sudden perception of menace. “The only other person who knew the full extent of our goal was Sebastian, but any of the Institution’s employees could’ve succumbed to second thoughts.”

Everything had gone so terribly wrong. No amount of penance could revive the man she’d befriended in order to gain his help. His death’s burden would remain a haunting presence in her consciousness until she paid her dues in the next realm of existence.

The wind suddenly rolled out a warning. Its icy rage spitting white, needle-like flecks to sting her face and bend the smaller saplings like a petty deity throwing its weight, punishing all of nature for her failure.

A sudden low growl brought her attention to Asmin, standing in the small hollow behind her. In sync with the undefined threat, Dani’s presentiment buckled her knees. An overwhelming perception of impending demise rounded her shoulders and ducked her head at the same time a rifle’s thin whine echoed in the woods.

“Ah...” Jake’s body jerked, his lurch forward knocking her off balance. A second shot grazed her shoulder before slamming into the tree beside her. Flying bark scored her cheek.

The full weight of his mass hammered her against a tree before they fell in a tangle of limbs, rolling down the incline and hitting hard against a fallen log.

“Jesus. Go, Claire. Find Nate. He’ll protect you. Hurry.” Jake’s wheezing breath bubbled with thin ribbons of blood that appeared dark against his skin. After a coughing spasm, he pushed her away and withdrew a pistol from the back of his waistband. “Go, Claire, now.”

She froze. What good was being extraordinary if her ability failed when she needed it most? Swallowing hard kept her body from purging the bile burning her stomach, but nothing would remove the acceptance of defeat in this stranger’s eyes. A man that had risked his life so others could survive.

“I—I can’t leave you here. They’ll kill you.”

Asmin whined, gripping the sleeve of her jacket. His tug toward the river a signal to move away from the scene of encroaching death. Adrenaline charged her system and pushed her to stand. Beside her, Jake’s grunt signaled him taking a position behind a log. Knowledge of his demise had pervaded his visage, oblivion waiting like a thief to take its due.

“I’m already gone. You have to warn Nate.”

Nothing could stop the bile from rising. Bending over, she ejected the burning liquid while trying to suppress the images forming. The cast of men dying in her wake was growing.

If the bastard who’d shot Jake caught her, they could change the political, social, and economic landscape of any country. She’d risked her anonymity to come, but it was Jake who was now paying the ultimate price.

Aside from sensing the evil now swelling in her mind, she knew more than one shooter approached. Men who intended to kill her. She wasn’t a soldier and knew nothing about guns. There was no way she could carry Jake to her boat. She had no choice but to run.

There was no time to strategize. All her carefully laid plans unraveled with each murder a marker of her never-ending failure. In the distance, a twig cracked, galvanizing her into action. Without the aid of her flashlight, she couldn’t find her indicators, making her dash for survival a blind run. Crude animal paths merged in a vision hazed with terror. Thickened

brambles ripped her jeans and tore into her skin.

Behind her, a pistol barked twice.

Jake.

Another rifle shot, then nothing. *Oh God.*

Her fall amid accumulating snow and dead leaves cost precious time. Time she didn't have in her zigzag bid for safety. The zing of a bullet bit into a tree she was passing. She dodged again.

Asmin's muffled woof claimed her attention as much as his teeth gently snaring her jacket sleeve. His sight was much keener in the dark, so when he tugged, she hunched over and stumbled along beside him. A bullet would surely follow the lighting of her flashlight.

Thorns and brambles scratched her face in her frenzied dash through the woods. Nothing looked familiar with the trees thinning out and the wind driving frozen white daggers into her face. If she could make it to the boat and into the river's strong current, it would either aid in her escape or drown them.

Twice more, unseen vegetative tripwires toppled her to the ground. Each time, Asmin doubled back and nipped at her jacket, pulling until she stumbled forward. With her heart thundering in her chest and blood roaring in her ears, she couldn't tell if her pursuers were closing the distance. Without the dog, she'd have run blindly through the woods, surely missing the boat, her only opportunity to quickly put distance between herself and the snipers.

Balance was a precarious commodity as she stumbled down the slight incline to land on her hands and knees at the edge of the waterline, but frostbite of water-soaked hands was preferable to a bullet in the head. There was no time to peel off her wet gloves.

Several splashes announced her desperate attempt to dislodge the skiff's forefoot from the muddy bed sucking at her boots. After helping Asmin over the side, she sloshed another two steps and hopped in, making the boat sway precariously. When it jerked underneath her feet, she realized it was still tethered to the tree. Damp, cold fingers initially foiled her attempt to untie the knot. A final tug and it lurched south.

Panic subverted exhaustion as well as hindered coordination. Despite its grip, each stroke of her oars cut the water, pulling her closer to the deeper channel.

With her back facing the direction of travel, the risk of capsizing was greater, yet allowed her to detect possible movement along the bank. Perhaps they'd not been able to track her to the riverside. Within minutes,

nature, for once, aided her escape in throwing up its white, concealing veil.

The swift-moving current snatched her boat with several abrupt jerks. If she hadn't approached at an angle, it might have capsized and dragged them both under. The force of the current realigned the craft, which rocked in the turbulence. Visibility was minimal and hindered visualization of any natural traps in the deep water, so once again, she was at fate's mercy.

Out in the open, she heard nothing but the wind howling, each of nature's breaths conspiring to obscure any sound of her pursuers.

With all the strength she possessed, she rowed, knowing her life depended on it, each stroke filled with self-recriminations. How many would die because of her meddling? Hadn't she learned her lesson years ago when her psychotic foster father killed in cold blood just to bring her to heel?

Their supposition that she communicated with ghosts had been hysterical until they'd murdered an innocent couple for her defiance. It should've been such a simple thing to hide her talent by acting normal. Familiarity bred a loose tongue over time and that always equaled trouble.

"Asmin, if it weren't for you, I'd be dead now. Maybe destiny doesn't exist just to punish me. Maybe I'm meant to do something with my life, after all." Whispered words of desperation were whipped away by a careless wind.

No visual markers existed to define her journey with the driving snow creating a speckled, opaque curtain. The early spring storm, so unexpected, would either save her life now or prevent her from viewing impending disaster.

Fate dictated the latter.

At the rate they jolted through their ride from hell, she'd need to angle out within another minute or so or lose the strength to exit.

No whine of a rifle rose above the wind's angry wail. With zero visibility, perhaps her pursuers—though surely at the river's bank by now—wouldn't know she'd had a boat stashed. Maybe even now they were combing the shoreline upstream, buying her a little more time to escape.

A loud thump coincided with the boat's abrupt halt, throwing both her and Asmin forward. One hand caught under the boat's breasthook, securing her to the craft, while the other steadied Asmin. Since fate had seen fit to blind the world with this storm, she had no choice other than

risk using her flashlight. It took several attempts to unzip her pocket and free the light with clumsy fingers before leaning toward the opposite shore and switching on the beam while covering most of the lens. Only a small swath of light cut the darkness.

Her examination revealed a stockpile of heavy limbs and branches, which meant she must be near the low bridge. If she could dislodge the boat, she could reach her intended destination, assuming the current didn't smash them against a concrete piling. After disengaging the oar from its lock, she used it to push off the rubble. Each time her efforts slipped and they almost toppled into the water, she reminded herself of her purpose. "I haven't come this far to fail now."

Precious minutes passed as fate saw an advantage in helping instead of throwing destruction in her path. The assumption that the river's detritus had clogged around one of the small bridge's supports proved correct. The concrete cylinder gave her a solid surface to push against and the oarlock provided a fulcrum to lever the boat.

In the distance, the dull roar of an engine grew louder. A vehicle's ineffective headlights appeared as phantom eyes, cutting into the storm's furor with stark malice. The tires drone changed pitch with the transition of road surface. *They're just getting on the bridge.*

The wind swallowed her whimper. If she could just get free, the current would quickly carry her downriver.

After a precarious jolt and loud rumble of wood scraping concrete, rushing water pulled her free. She immediately angled toward shore, watching the vehicle's slowing progress. By the time they'd gained the bridge's center, she'd outdistanced their searchlight.

Lack of visible landmarks meant guessing at the location of her intended landing while icy water pelted her face and wind stiffened her wet clothing.

In her mind, flashbacks of Jake falling, urging her to find Nate, and the determination in his gaze when retrieving his weapon all repeated on a continuous, nightmarish reel. Her unjustified optimism had started this crazy adventure, wanting to right a deviant injustice. Instead, she'd signed death warrants, one at a time. Where would it end?

On top of it all, failing strength in fighting the current would hand fate the final laugh if she didn't find shelter soon. Unable to spare the moment needed to remove her gloves and warm her hands; she'd underestimated the dangerous river and prayed to reach the shore alive. A darkly shrewd imagination conjured her numb fingertips bright red and on the path to

developing the fluid-filled blisters of frostbite. Several times, the rough tide slid her along the seat, necessitating she regain her bracing by wedging her feet to either side. Silent seconds ticked by with the thudding of her heart, the roar of blood rushing in her ears. In her lifetime, she'd survived worse, a foster family bent on using her talent for personal gain, their determination turning deadly when she'd refused.

The relief enfolding her mind when the current released her from its deadly grip brought tears to her eyes. "Yes. Asmin, we're going to make it." Still, it took the last of her reserves to put distance between the worst of the malignant current and angle more sharply toward the shoreline. Without the aid of moonlight, she didn't know how far downriver the current had swept her.

Each draw on the wooden oars strained her back, the ache much less than deserved for the cataclysmic destruction left in her wake. Could she have found more information that would've saved lives?

Through it all, Asmin continued to balance himself and offer his strength through stoic silence. What felt like hours probably passed in a few short minutes of blinding snow and screaming pain.

Her sudden yelp coincided with the craft's careening and tilting sideways after striking something solid. Gravity plunged her into the freezing water. Blind terror controlled her disjointed movements. Closing distance between the skiff and the piling to her back forced her to duck underwater or be crushed. The likelihood of being squashed or drowned renewed her strength to fight.

A lifetime passed in the space of a few seconds. Using the boat's bottom as reference, she dug her feet into the muddy bottom and scrambled underneath to the other side. Briefly confounded in the freezing darkness that had swallowed her whole; she emerged with the righted skiff behind her. She'd considered her mortality before, but not connected to such folly. If peace lay on the other side of existence, she'd found no allusion to it in the raw, penetrating depths.

The air's frigid bite provided no relief as the first gasping breath pulled in cold water along with much-needed oxygen. Several, choking breaths took precious time when each second could mean the difference between life and afterlife. Her vision clouded, but Asmin's barking sounded as a beacon. Already, the cold weighed her arms and legs in sluggish hypothermia, penetrating to her marrow and giving her only minutes to escape a watery grave.

Step after painful step, she trudged toward land, guided by her canine

rescuer's whining. The water receded in frozen degrees of waterlogged folds along her jacket, allowing the wind's slice to collect its tariff for her passage.

Her previous scouting foray had uncovered only one pier along this stretch of the river, belonging to the unknown resident undoubtedly safe and warm in the distant house. Seeking refuge there would endanger their lives if the predators found them.

When her numb and lethargic strides gained snow-slickened land, Asmin waited, shaking and whining, as if knowing the increasing danger in hypothermia and relying on her to protect them.

Chapter Two

Just for a second, she needed the dog's spiritual warmth, his strength. Kneeling and wrapping her arms around his shoulders gave a small measure of both as silent tears streamed down her face, collected by the warm rasp of Asmin's tongue. Despite the setback at the bridge and the catastrophic capsizing, she'd made good time with the current's indifferent help.

The dog's fur turning to icicles along with increasing numbness in her fingers hastened her departure. There was no way to secure the craft as her fingers were losing dexterity. Water pressure had wedged and now tilted the boat against the dock, while waves breaking over the vessel's side would soon sink it, making it invisible to anyone searching. The less she disturbed, the harder it would be for the killers to track her.

"Asmin, I don't know what heavenly body set you in my path, but I thank God for your presence. You've saved my life, twice. I would never have found my way back to the boat in that condition. Hell, I probably would've drowned mere yards from the shore."

The golden retriever licked her face and wagged his tail with an enthusiasm belying his current state.

"I'm going to take you home with me tonight to get you warm and dry. As much as I'd love to keep you, I can't. But I'll always be grateful."

Giving the nearby residence a wide berth, she found the walking trail granting access to proximate businesses without risking discovery from passing traffic. To her right lay the woods, dark, deep, and full of nameless shadows where snow hadn't fully covered the brush. To her left lay a copse of Cyprus trees, shielding her progress from any night travelers, not that many ventured forth in the worsening conditions. She prayed the storm would maintain its fury long enough to obliterate her tracks.

Her hope of survival entailed prayers the lethargy of hypothermia didn't drop her before she reached the warmth and relative safety of her car.

Stinging bites of pain in nearly every inch of skin offered proof of life, which meant she still had a chance. She concentrated on lifting her legs higher with each step and pounding the ground in hopes of keeping her circulation moving. Death would come for her soon enough, if not tonight in the storm, then tomorrow or next month by a bullet. It stalked her as surely as Jake's body now rested at the bottom of the river or shallow grave. Clumsy, fumbling progress saw the gloves peeled from her hands before wedging her frozen digits under her armpits and furnishing her body with a new shock. She welcomed the stinging pain to her fingers.

Speculation over the night's events evaporated like so much vapor, her mind unable to sustain the train of thought in the sharp teeth of the storm she hadn't predicted. One trudging step at a time through the growing blanket of frozen hell consumed her stubborn resolve. A silent mantra on a repeating carousel warning of the stages of the icy descent into oblivion.

Her body beaten and battered, her emotions roiling, Dani's jumbled thoughts refused clarification or justification for risking any man's life. Time stood still for no one, so at what point was the human toll too great?

She'd parked her subcompact in the lot of an all-night country diner, another reason she'd picked this location. Three other vehicles, probably owned by diner employees, collected a deepening layer of nature's flotsam as soul-wrenching fear accompanied each anesthetized step toward the hopeful safety of her vehicle. She prayed no one lay in wait, hidden in the surrounding tree line ready to snuff out her life with the gentle pull of a trigger.

Like a gentleman walking his date to the door, her canine friend kept steady pace with pain-filled, stilted steps. Expediency and physical awareness of their danger ended the short debate with her decision to open only one car door. Ponderous fingers took three attempts to unlock and pull it wide. It took the effort of both to help Asmin scramble awkwardly over the driver's seat to the passenger's side.

A blanket from the back covered and helped preserve his body heat, his smaller size suggesting a higher risk of hypothermia. It felt like hours had passed before the vents began kicking out warm air, time spent alternately rubbing her hands together and drying Asmin. Two tries to turn the heater vent her way ended with her cry of triumph reverberating in the small confines. Welcome pain came with returning circulation.

After a moment of indecision, she pulled off her sodden jacket and realized she'd lost her knit cap during the night's calamity of horrors. It

would prove a perfect scenting item if found.

The drive home was a twisted, circuitous route designed to cross her tire tracks with the few others present. Amid the thawing of her fingers came clarity of thought and the intrusion of future necessary steps to secure her safety. Someone had betrayed them all. But who? And why?

Any number of the Institution's workers could've had second thoughts. Employees she didn't know.

The sniper's presence denoted the likelihood of a military involvement, but that could be either the Koreans or the Institution's bastards. How the hell had they tracked Jake? Her life would be forfeit if they found her. If not for the dog and her sixth sense, she might've already taken residence in a dirt grave.

"You and Jake saved my life tonight, Asmin." It sickened her to realize that life could be wiped away as easily as the windshield wipers taking snow from her windshield.

A deluge of emotions flooded her mind with the resurgence of flashbacks of the night's brutalities. Dry heaves racked her body, while the grief she'd held in check finally flowed in wet streams over her cheeks. It seemed kismet, providence, or whatever one labeled it, destroyed every life she touched, regardless of her good intentions.

Her previous foster family would kill to get her back but wouldn't have the knowledge to use or have access to a sniper rifle. They preferred to murder close up and personal, watching the last signs of life dim from eyes widened in fear as they strangled their victims or the last flush of crimson warmth drain from multiple stab wounds.

The only part of Jake's team she hadn't vetted was Sebastian since, according to Franklin; they'd trusted each other with their lives. It didn't track that Sebastian would betray his team. Franklin had died during the escape, and Jake was certainly dead by now. The only hope of Callie remaining free was Nate Crofton, the last member of the team who wasn't involved in the rescue.

A suggestive warmth invaded her mind at the memory of Marc bringing Darius, his shepherd, into Dr. Carari's office where she worked as a vet tech. Overstepping the fine line of sophisticated flirting marked his style, yet she couldn't risk her talent's exposure by accepting his offer of a date. He was the type who loved solving puzzles and had marked her with a proverbial X. Her quiet little life had to remain in the shadows, considering her foster family's proximity and the night's events.

Marc, Nate and their other brothers had been running a private

investigations firm since their military discharge. If approached correctly, Marc could pass along the warning of the foreigner's persistence in obtaining Callie along with forging her a new identity before she fled.

In light of her possible exposure tonight, she'd dye her hair black and acquire contact lenses; anything to change her appearance would help.

By the time she reached home, tears had dried while her resolution firmed. Callie was in the hands of Nate Crofton, who still had contacts to see them safe. When Jake didn't return tonight, Crofton would take appropriate steps.

The retriever nudged her shoulder in commiseration.

On Marc's occasional visits with one of his dogs, she'd attempted conversation, when her tongue wasn't twisted in knots over his mouth-watering presence. A direct attempt to warn him would likely end in disaster considering her track record. Sebastian, on the other hand, didn't set her heart racing or her mind in a tumultuous whirl. Approaching him, even though a stranger, seemed the safer course.

Through conversations with Franklin, Dani had learned the men occasionally gathered at Sebastian's house, which meant she had one more thing to do. If she could sneak into Sebastian's home and leave a message, the Croftons would know from which direction danger approached. She wouldn't risk a phone call or direct contact again.

The stinging in her fingers reminded her that she still lived as the heater, cranked on high, slowly brought feeling back to her shaking body. Napkins from her glove compartment had provided a buffer between her fingers and the cold steering wheel. A quiet gasp escaped as her tires slid in the snow, slewing the car into her driveway and perilously close to the culvert. She hadn't made it this far just to need a tow truck in the morning. Anyone monitoring the airwaves might find her.

Home. For how much longer? Soft chuffing from Asmin urged her to open her door to the howling wind and blinding snow before his short hop from the seat left the blanket behind. He escorted her around the side of her small, rented bungalow to the back door as any proper date would do. All the lights were off, except for one in the kitchen, just the way she'd left them.

Looking around in the deepening snow, no tracks betrayed evidence of a malevolent presence. With shaking fingers, she unlocked the door and nudged it open. Asmin padded in, sniffed, and then turned as if to say, "You coming or what?"

"Tonight, Asmin. Tonight you can stay. I'll dry you off and get you warm.

Tomorrow I'm going to take you back because someone loves you. You're too well fed to be a stray, which means someone is missing you."

Once she'd locked the door, fear forced her to turn on all the lights, checking each room, each closet, and underneath her bed, while a solemn Asmin dutifully stayed by her side. A spartan lifestyle made it a quick chore.

In checking her shoulder, a thin scab trimmed her flesh where the bullet, meant to take her life, bestowed a permanent reminder of the evening's folly. Some adhesive tape and gauze covered the grazing wound. After pulling on dry clothes and wrapping her braid in a towel, she grabbed another for her canine friend and sat at the kitchen table.

One hot cup of chamomile tea followed another, warming her from the inside, her thoughts churning with amazement over her survival. All because of a dog. For Asmin, thawing two boneless pork chops perked his interest but seemed a paltry reward for saving her life.

The soft cushions of her worn and faded sofa gave little comfort as tears again stained her cheeks. "Why couldn't I have just been born a normal girl?" If not for her own unique sensitivity, she'd never have known Callie existed, would never have involved Franklin and Jake in a scheme that ended in their demise and her own dubious expectations for survival.

Sleep wouldn't come that night, not until exhaustion slipped into unconsciousness. When she'd gained the courage to douse the lights and trudge off to bed, Asmin provided a warm comfort beside her, snuggling in a dark that failed to induce fear because of his presence. If only her transient lifestyle allowed room for permanent canine companionship.



The next day began in a painful haze of dull awareness with all the previous night's tragedies flooding her mind. Though little more snow had accumulated through the night, strong gusts of wind saw ankle-deep drifts against the north side of her home. Apparently, the bulk of the storm had passed them by.

Road crews had already cleared much of the frozen burden en route to the shopping center while bright morning sunshine melted the remains to run off in storm drains. Returning Asmin near the place where they'd met had lodged another mass of melancholy in her heart. From there, they parted ways, with sobs choking her goodbyes. "You have to go home

now, boy. I'm sure someone is worried sick about you." As if understanding the essence of her words, the canine rubbed against her shoulder before bestowing pup kisses. To watch him trot off reinforced the ache in her chest, but at least he wasn't another casualty of her misguided attempts to correct a gross injustice.

It was time to finish this and flee after leaving Sebastian a note. The trail of bodies leading to her door weighed heavy on her conscience, a burden she'd have to live with, alone, scared, always looking over her shoulder if the bastards last night were able to discover her identity.

Today would be a very long day at the office, knowing she'd flinch every time a stranger walked through the door, searching their eyes for any sign of recognition or suspicion. Few would venture out until the sun's rays melted the white blanket into a slippery, jumble of dirty slush and ensuring plenty of down time to plan her next illegal venture, breaking into Sebastian's home to deliver a message.

Marc Crofton was scheduled to bring his dog, Darius, to the vet tomorrow. Seeing him again would give her heart and soul one last glimpse of perfection and warmth to carry her forward in her new and uncertain life. She envied the antics of the brothers' comradery, pranks and shenanigans relayed through Franklin. Unfortunately, it was a lifestyle not meant for the likes of a situation-induced outcast.

Informing Dr. Carari of her immediate abandonment would generate an equal amount of regret in her boss, yet the time had come to start a new chapter in her life; one including freedom and safety. She'd miss working with the pure and unadulterated four-footed souls that had given her so much comfort.



Preparation was key to success in any endeavor, yet twice she'd failed despite her best efforts. Tonight, she'd see this through at Sebastian's home. After the tragedy in the woods, she realized just how far out of her league she'd waded with her lack of training and naiveté. Deciding to take a paring knife lent little comfort when the whine of a rifle's bullet pierced her thoughts, but was the best option she had. She'd never liked guns. A longer blade would've been better but her steak knives weren't sturdy. She needed the weight of a short, strong blade.

As the time drew near to leave, images of Jake's face, twisted in pain and holding on to the thin thread of life skimmed through her thoughts. If

she stopped now, his sacrifice, along with Franklin's, would be in vain.

Outside, snowplows had cleared what the day's sunshine hadn't melted, water draining down both sides of the asphalt and sluicing through the storm grates. Streetlamps, spaced too far apart for reasonable effect, cast eerie pools of an impotent wash along cracked sidewalks while her tires' drone and intermittent splash of water delineated the ongoing bleakness that was her life.

Over-locking branches blocked all but a few shafts of moonlight peeking through the low cloud cover to allow an ominous chill of impending doom to consume the darkened street. *Why the foreboding? Lingering remnants from last night?*

Moderate lots lined with evergreen hedges separated her target house, three houses down, from its neighbors. It appeared that for once destiny had deemed it appropriate to help her, yet no amount of mental preparation could quiet her nerves in approaching Sebastian's house. *Have the foreigners gone after the rest of the team?*

Metal grinding on metal announced her presence when shutting the driver's side door of her old clunker, and served to remind her of her station. Super sleuth, she was not. Her rubber-soled boots slipped on a small patch of wet grass, almost ending her spy career. *When this is over, I'm moving to some place warm.*

Snuggling the lap quilt around her head lent protection from the cold as well as any prying eyes while hopefully giving the appearance of a shawl. Bare essential living meant she only owned one winter hat, now lost and hopefully at the bottom of the river, and one winter coat and gloves.

Unlike his neighbors' homes, Sebastian's house was surrounded with wax myrtle, which increased the privacy aspect of her break-in. Large oaks standing guard along the street permitted cover to pause and bolster her nerve while evaluating entrance options if it appeared no one was home. For too many reasons to name, she didn't want to face him, probably a subconscious effort to protect him.

A modest craftsman-style bungalow with a stone porch and columns presented a welcoming appearance despite the premonition of evil to come. The closer she moved, the more her fingers shook. How could she trust her instincts when so much had happened?

No light spilled from the interior, the tomb-like atmosphere strengthening her resolve to get in and out quickly. Slipping down the hedge line, she stayed vigilant, expecting some foreign prick to launch himself at her at any second in keeping with her previous foul dates with

fate. When parallel to the rear corner, she stopped and waited, watching. Something grabbed her pant leg.

The sudden cry, locked inside by her clamped lips, resounded in her head before she choked on a gasp. A neighborhood cat twined around then between her legs, its soft meow a plea for attention. *Jeez, why now?* She always attracted animals. After a dog had saved her life, though, she couldn't complain.

Of all the spy movies she'd watched, the intruder never had difficulty gaining a quiet entrance, but what happened after that was a different story. Adrenaline flooding her system helped her move a little faster, see a little better, and prepare for whatever she'd encounter, or so she hoped.

Cedar shake siding, rough under her fingertips, lent a new foreboding to her endeavor, paralleling the pleasant view from a distance and the deceptive difference on closer inspection. Stealthy steps carried her to the back door while the glass inset offered a quick, if not quiet way inside. With her mini flashlight in hand and her fingers cupping the lens, she scrutinized the frame for any signs of an alarm. *What exactly am I looking for—a sign that says, “cut this connection and all hell breaks loose?”*

Wrapping the quilt around her hand added a buffer when her flashlight broke the small windowpane. Tumbling glass pieces shattering on contact echoed in the quiet night and brought acid to the back of her throat.

No alarm broke the ominous silence.

They make silent alarms...

Seconds passed, and she waited. More silence.

The trembling in her fingers spread throughout her body, but she didn't let that stop her. She needed to finish what she'd started, to make things right—if only for her conscience.

A deeper dark than she'd ever known filled the atmosphere with a hunch she couldn't heed. The door opened without a sound, the quiet snick of it closing behind her reverberating in her mind.

Sudden rustling from her right froze her body and spirit as she waited for the slice of a knife to burn across her throat or spill her guts. *At least it's one story...unless he has a basement, which brought to mind being buried in one.* Thinking back, she hadn't seen any windows set low in the foundation.

Her frantic heartbeat continued, expanding her anxiety over imminent dire circumstances that lacked physical expression. *Sebastian was part of their team. He'd have no reason to bring me harm.* Then why did her

entire body shake? She didn't sense another's presence, but hadn't last night until it was too late.

Thin beams of light quivered as her flashlight swept the area. The kitchen was neat and plain, the countertops bare. It didn't appear well used. Several sheets of paper haphazardly embellished the round oak table in the center with two floating silently to the floor. Behind her, the cold breeze sloughing through the broken window accounted for the rustling papers.

Instead of leaving a note, something urged her to investigate. Instincts had served her well, saving her life if not those around her. A few minutes of snooping wouldn't add a terrible burden to her conscience.

A small door to her left opened to a pantry, possessing shelf after shelf of canned goods, while off to her right lay an open living area. Two sofas formed a corner niche that allowed its occupants a view of the quiet street or the large TV above the fireplace, depending on their preference for the night. Hardwood flooring echoed her squeaking steps across the room. *I should've wiped my feet.*

Two rooms off to one side—one a bedroom, the other an office—granted a place to begin her illegal search. The workspace seemed the logical place to start. An oppressive silence closed in on her, pushing her forward to deny the possibility of retreat in case she lost her nerve.

Inside what appeared to be an office, inappreciable bars of light striped the cool glass covering the desk to remind her of the bars she might see if caught. *If last night's sniper finds me here, they'll never find my body.*

A small laptop and desk lamp were the desk's only visible occupants. No surprise that Sebastian cocked his desk to avoid putting his back to a window since a stint in the military could induce at least a little paranoia. Off to the right, a long file drawer took up half the wall space. She wondered what type of work occupied his time.

A dark shiver rolled through her when she sat in his chair and pulled open the long center drawer. She had no way of knowing how many people of various characters had sat or even owned the furniture. Pencils, a few pens, a blank pad of lined paper, and two small keys on a ring—nothing that screamed *out of the ordinary*.

Studying the brass keys, she discovered one fit the right-hand drawer. *Not unusual to lock up important items if he has visitors, especially children.* The other key probably opened his file drawer. Revealing the top drawer's contents gave her a start, making her wish Asmin sat by her side. In shocked silence, she scanned the room, feeling the ubiquitous

presence of evil yet not able to define its location.

What first appeared to be a handgun was, on closer inspection, some type of dart gun, its tapered, long barrel made to fit any of the three spare darts encased in a plastic box beside it. Considering his prior experience, she might expect to find a gun. But this? This surpassed weird and delved into the territory of *scary as hell*. Careful not to touch the trigger mechanism, she turned it over in her hand. It was loaded. *Shit*.

A poisonous snake would've received less deference than the gun as she returned it to its velveteen cradle.

Next, she opened the drawer below it, wishing she could turn on the desk lamp. Dozens of folders hung from hang rails, color-coded in neat OCD style. It would take too long to explore them, and she didn't understand the compulsion's origin in the first place.

A long squeak from the office door alerted her to a presence. How could she have been so careless? So absorbed in her snooping, she'd failed to stay mindful for another presence. She hadn't even heard the front or back door open.

Irrational terror transformed her into a statue. Sudden, bright light flooding the room illuminated her transgression with incriminating detail.

"Hello, young lady. Find what you're looking for?"

The pleasantly spoken words couldn't deny the underlying threat. In his eyes, a malicious hostility so deep and dark imbued a soul with undeniable and unquenchable lunacy, felt as a blanket surrounding her, smothering her. *Sebastian?* Arms folded across a broad chest initially gave the appearance of nonchalance. On closer inspection, arrogance etched his face, accompanied by the confidence of relaxed shoulders, and a gaze that radiated madness. The cold smile flashed an insincerity she'd never forget. *What the hell?*

Her talent surmised his character with a mental shorthand she couldn't efficiently tabulate in her fearful state. If truth, faith, and determination were the best weapons against evil, how the hell did one face-off against a psychopath?

"I knew someone would figure out I was the traitor, but I didn't think it would come in such a small, feminine package."

"You? You betrayed your own team? Why?"

"Why not? I couldn't have what I wanted, so I settled for cash. Lots and lots of it."

"I-I um..."

"Yep, I'd say that about sums it up. I was wondering if I'd ever meet

Franklin's contact. And here you are...served up on a silver platter."

"Franklin? I don't know—"

"Who else would break in and rummage through my files the night after Jake's death." A small hitch in pronouncing Jake's name was the only indication that the creature held emotion.

The image of Jake's face, twisted with pain, prevented words from forming. She'd never been able to lie convincingly.

"How convenient for disposal purposes." The nonchalant steps forward ended with him sitting in the opposite chair and crossing one ankle over his knee. The epitome of relaxation. "I thought I'd have to contact my Korean friends to track you down. They will be very, very pleased to meet you since they missed you last night. I'd like to know how you escaped them in the woods."

"I-I don't know anything." With near zero humidity in her mouth, it amazed her that thoughts gave way to audible words.

"Ahh, but I'm sure that's an underestimation. Shall I tell you exactly how I'm going to extract your answers?"

In her pocket, the paring knife suddenly seemed woefully inadequate against such monstrous evil. "Just let me go. I won't say anything to anybody."

"You mean to Callie or Nate? Where are they by the way? I left the whore in capable hands after providing her with a parting gift; only to find out she escaped later, the slippery little bitch."

"What did you do to her?"

In a slow and precise accounting, Sebastian detailed how he'd mutilated Callie's privates before delivering her to the foreign kidnappers intent on breeding her at their leisure.

"You bastard. She's done nothing wrong." With each of his spoken words, she'd realized her chances of survival dwindled.

"Ahh, but she has an incredible mind. A mind they will exploit even as they use her as a brood mare." Pushing to his feet, Sebastian took two steps forward to lean against the desk. "Now, let's see what makes *you* special, if anything." The corners of his mouth tipped up in a soulless smile.

The last sentence tightened her every muscle in preparation to flee. Nothing of this world could prevail against such malignancy. Throwing the desk lamp provided little distraction as he deflected it with one hand.

In anticipation of her move, he darted around and grabbed her arm before she'd gained two steps. His shout of triumph declared the bruises

he'd leave the least of her injuries.

Her useless struggle against someone twice her size and strength became apparent with his effortless manhandling. He'd pinned her against the desk before she could formulate a counter attack. Pain exploded in her head when it thudded against the glass.

"The Croftons will kill you when they discover you're the traitor." Her hands, soon pinned over her head despite her struggle to free them, validated his superiority. Unable to bite or head butt him, Dani twisted her body in an effort to kick him.

"Ah, but there'll be nobody alive to tell them. Besides, I've already been paid for delivering Callie and have enough money to buy a small paradise... somewhere outside the U.S." One meaty paw held her head still, allowing his filthy gaze to pierce her invisible armor.

Sebastian's sneer confirmed all the evil she suspected he withheld from the world. This was his true face, the devil incarnate.

"Now, let me tell you exactly what's going to happen."

Minutes passed as bile rose in her mouth, his descriptions accounting for the worst violations she could imagine, more horrific than her foster brother strangling her with a garrote or her foster father murdering a couple in their own beds before her eyes.

"Maybe if you show enough appreciation, I'll turn you over to the foreign shits who want Callie."

Dani closed her eyes and relaxed her arms, an outward sign of defeat. She wasn't beaten yet. Previous deadly experiences had always held a window, however small, for escape. The ploy was to calm herself enough to see and take advantage when it arrived.

Warm, foul breath whispered over her face in a triumphant huff, testing her resolve. When his mouth descended to her neck, she almost vomited. More pain, this time from him biting at her throat, gave voice to the scream she'd withheld. In the next instant, he stuffed a vulgar-smelling rag in her mouth, a handkerchief.

"Spit that out and I'll shove it somewhere else that you'll like even less."

His roughened caress drifted over her collarbone, then clamped down hard on her breast, his grip conveying his intent through the cloth of her shirt and jacket. In the next second, the metal teeth of her coat's zipper unlocked.

Struggling, though futile, was instinctual as he ripped her shirt open, the buttons plinking to the floor. A cruel wrench squeezed her cotton-clad breast, her scream as ineffectual as her body attempting to arch away

from the pain.

He stopped. And grinned. "I like the way you scream, little one."

She waited, her legs splayed open by the width of his hips and both of her wrists constricted painfully above her head. His other hand brushed her cheek in a deceptively tender graze before sliding to cover her mouth and nose in a terrifying, smothering gesture. Her thin mewl induced his smile while her tears traced a path to her ears.

"Just a taste of what's to come, little one. What's your name?"

"Claire." The muffled lie came as natural as the breath he allowed with the loosening of his suffocating grip. If she conceded control to fear, she would die.

He skimmed his lips over her forehead before nuzzling the tender junction of her neck and shoulder. Memories from the past ejected the bile from her stomach with an abdominal contraction universally recognized.

A backward flinch revealed his split second of shock. Dani lurched forward, striking his nose with her forehead using all the force she could muster. Blood spewed from his nostrils and covered his hands as he straightened and tried to staunch the flow.

His next mistake.

Youth and good flexibility allowed her enough space to bring her foot up for a swift kick in the nards. He stumbled back toward the door and howled in broken gasps of rage.

His hesitation granted her time to scramble sideways and once again put the desk between them. Still, she had no clear path to freedom.

The dart gun is loaded. Before he fully recovered, she yanked open the drawer and palmed the weapon, praying it had no safety mechanism.

"It's only a tranq gun, sweetheart. When that stuff wears off, I will find you." The harshly whispered threat came from the pit of perdition. "Know what I'm gonna do? I'll cut out your clitoris to make it impossible for you to have an orgasm... unless you're extremely lucky. Maybe I'll cut off your lower lips, too, and then sew the ends together without a tiny hole to pee. We can have lots of playtime together."

The list of mutilations progressed to the point vomit rose again, for in reality, she saw the truth of his promise in his twisted sneer and the madness radiating from every pore.

The dart hit him in the chest with near instantaneous effect. His surprise betrayed his belief that she had the nerve. Even as his body slowly crumpled, he continued with detailed descriptions of intent in a

slurred but manic delight. When a sick sort of rapture overtook his expression during the cut-by-cut specification of Callie's mutilation, she lost it.

"All these deaths are laid at your door, not mine. You're responsible for Franklin and Jake's death."

"Yes, I am. And I'll be the demise of you and Callie, too."

"No. No, you won't." The paring knife appeared in her other hand without conscious thought as if spring loaded and directed by rage. A rhythmic flash of confused if overprotective panic boiled through her blood. All this because destiny decided to experiment with two girls' DNA.

Like Callie, she was genetically different, though few knew of her extraordinary curse. What she'd called her sixth sense, fanatics such as this maniac would kill to control. Just as he'd done with Callie.

All these thoughts and more dulled her senses to the actions her body carried forth. When sentient again, blood slicked her hands and splattered her clothes.

Oh, God. No. Don't let me become like this vile beast.

A silent scream roared in her mind but failed expression in the physical world. Instead of a freak in hiding, she'd become a murdering monster, the thing she most feared and hated. Her greatest sin wasn't in taking a life since she hadn't been given much choice. No, it was the way she'd done it and her lack of mental presence she found so disturbing. For in her lack of perception, the darkness each human being harbored had sprung forth and declared her the lowest form of life.

Multiple stab wounds covered his chest and abdomen, accounting for the growing pool on the hardwoods traveling in the seams along the slightly unlevel floor. Sebastian's glassy, lifeless eyes stared at the ceiling, locked in eternal damnation.

Someday, she would join him.

The fact she'd worn gloves meant police would find no fingerprints, but their struggle on the desk had surely left some type of evidence. The only surefire way she knew to erase it was with fire. *I'm already damned, what difference does burning down a house make?*

From the bathroom, she found rubbing alcohol. In the garage, she retrieved a can of oil aerosol and paint primer, along with a torch lighter. At least that's what she believed it to be. Several pulls of the trigger validated her hope. The combination wasn't much, but it was the best flammable materials she could find. The curtains she'd yanked from the window would make a good start. *Dear God, I'll see these flames when I*

go to hell.

Back in the office, she dropped to the floor when a car backfired down the street. Dry heaves reminded her she wasn't cut out to be an assassin. In pushing to her feet, her right hand slipped in a pool of blood, a physical reprimand for her reckless and deadly depravity. Was she any better than the man she'd just killed?

Her bloody jacket would add more fuel. The thought of washing out bloodstains was too much. No human life should end this way. He may have been a monster, but the sight of Sebastian's condemning gaze was a weight she couldn't bear. She covered his face, as if that negated her culpability.

Despite the fact he was dead, she couldn't bring herself to smother his body in chemicals and light the fire, instead choosing to place the material doused with volatile chemicals closer to the door on her way out. She prayed that by the time the fire spread to the window, hence more visible to the street, she'd be safely away, all evidence obliterated.

Chapter Three

Saturday morning came with an escalating fear of the unknown, her plan B not quite solidified. She'd taken that extra minute in bed, eyes closed, breathing deeply as if she could purge the terrible memories from her mind with clean air.

Dull anticipation added a tremble to her fingers in trying to braid her hair. Finally, she gave up in favor of free-flowing waves down her back. Perhaps it was her one worthy attribute, since each shaft of keratinized cells was essentially dead and incapable of crossing any moral or ethical lines.

Her choices, spurned by good intentions, kindled nothing but death and destruction, the weight felt in every aspect of her body. The fire she'd set at Sebastian's house made the news briefly with no mention of the murder. Once more, fate deemed her continued freedom acceptable.

Marc Crofton was on Dr. Carari's schedule this morning, the appointment to check one of his dog's hips in preparation for its Schutzhund trial, a blessing in timing. Months ago when he'd started bringing his shepherds in for medical care, they'd chatted amiably each visit. Or rather, he'd chatted while her mind stuttered on the visual banquet of well-defined muscles and swoon-worthy face. The man left a trail of pheromones in his wake that could attract the opposite sex from miles away.

Her plan included charming him into a lunch date and asking for help in obtaining a fake ID, at the same time, leaving a warning note in his car. Any detailed explanation would see the entire sordid mess brought to light, highlighting her murderous activity. They might even believe Dani was conspiring with the foreign bastards tracking Callie.

She wanted a clean slate with no connection to the area. If successful, she'd disappear and leave all the craziness behind. With Sebastian dead and the connection to the foreigners cut, she could do little more. As far as the traitor was concerned, either police hadn't identified his body or

someone was providing cover. Considering the ties with his old unit, surely they'd know of Sebastian's death by now.

Avoiding breakfast was a foregone conclusion considering the bilious knots in her stomach. A little bit of milk and a breakfast bar for later would suffice.

Dr. Carari's Saturday mornings were casual and usually wound down before noon. Today should be no different with the exception of the last client, Marc Crofton.



The morning passed in a blur of anticipation, making appointments and offering doggy treats, yet the minute Marc walked through the door, the very air seemed to vibrate with an intensity that suffocated. Heat swept up her face while anxiety gripped her chest and squeezed her heart.

"Hi, Danielle." Marc's voice, as compelling as his gaze, each heartrendingly sexy, matched the perfection of his form.

The fact she forgot to breathe became evident in a large, gulping breath.

He grinned.

"H-hi, Mr. Crofton. H-how's Darius doing?"

"He's good." His grin widened. "No exciting reading material today?"

Damn it! Her love of erotic, romance novels had obviously caught his attention on prior visits. In anticipation of his arrival, she'd shoved her current book in a drawer. It would reappear during his dog's appointment with Dr. Carari.

Yeah, and just my luck I love to read the erotic stuff.

"Um, no. Life is exciting enough." *Understatement.*

"Oh? What mischief could a slip of a girl like you find?"

If you only knew...

The End

Continue reading for an excerpt from Carnal Whispers, next in the Carnal Series.

Carnal Whispers

“Thanks for closing up today, Daniele. Kevin’s soccer match starts in fifteen minutes. With a bit of luck, I can make the kickoff. Well, not make it, but see it. Kevin’s the striker.” Dr. Carari’s skirting the L-shaped counter while scrawling notes ended with a stumble-step that saw the chart’s contents spewing to the floor along with tampons from her purse and an ink pen from her lab coat. The stethoscope slid from her neck to join the odd assortment scattered on the floor. “Ahhh, crap.”

“No problem, Dr. Carari. Tell Kevin to score one for me.” Daniele turned and smiled at the client’s discreet cough as he gazed out the large window of the waiting room.

Helping her boss retrieve the items, she hid her own smile behind her long fall of black curls. Though compassionate and sincere, the veterinarian’s klutziness provoked reactions ranging from sympathetic grins to smothered chuckles, depending on the degree and form of awkwardness.

Confusion etched the vet’s brow before a sheepish grin curved the corners of her mouth. “Yes. Okay, keys already in hand, I’m leaving. See you on Monday, kiddo. Have a great weekend.”

A slight jingle pricked the shepherd’s ears standing beside his handler. Well trained and with a calm demeanor, the canine remained quiet beside his master, Marc Croften, who waited patiently to pay his bill.

Marc had requested the last appointment of the morning, which meant Daniele could savor the sizzling energy zinging through her body without answering phones or enduring other assistant’s duties claiming her time. He’d starred in her dreams for months. Safe, fanciful desires of the subconscious where her repressed libido directed graceful movements and witty conversations, and where she earned his adoration with her breathtaking beauty. *Yeah, right.* If he could see the dirt clinging to her soul, he’d run faster than a greyhound on a racetrack. A self-conscious tug on her sweater insured her neck remained adequately covered.

Despite her nonsensical longings, she harbored legitimate, ulterior motives to capture his undivided attention. Their fragile relationship meant the difference between life and death, her life. She needed a new ID. Seeing his golden eyes alight with the sharp intellect of a top-notch, ex-military, private investigator, she’d convince him of her genuine need—without getting him killed.

A burnished lock of jet-black hair fell across his chiseled features while a silent chuckle accompanied the small twitch at the corner of his mouth, not hidden by a dark brush mustache. "Thank you for seeing Darius today, Dr. Carari. His second trial includes scaling a five-foot A-frame tomorrow, and I wanted to make sure he's solid."

"No problem, Marc, and good luck. I'm sure Darius will pass with flying colors or... whatever. He's always a perfect gentleman."

A whispered *eek* signaled the door closing behind her boss, leaving Daniele alone with the tall, mouth-watering daydream whose perfect, white teeth would feel great nibbling on her neck, among other places. *Do men really do that?* Adding insult to injury, her mind supplemented the sensation of his mustache against her sensitized flesh. The man should come with a warning label attached. *Do not approach. Danger: spontaneous orgasm.*

The dog she could handle. The owner, not so much. "So, tomorrow is the second out of three tests for Darius in his Schutzhund training?" Her fingers shook slightly as she reorganized the chart's papers into their proper order. Anything to avoid a gaze which radiated thermonuclear heat projected over dominant male, both intimidating and captivating.

He exuded the charm and charisma of an incubus, making certain her body parts softened with one searing look. Tongue-tied with her pulse pounding through her brain, she realized spontaneous combustion was more likely than an intelligent conversation, delegating her to the role of a bimbo salivating over a pretty bauble.

"Yeah, at Kober's farm outside of town." Darius nudged his dad's leg in impatience.

Daniele accepted Marc's debit card over the bi-level counter, placing her other hand firmly over her book cover. One more of those panty-melting grins and she'd have no need of his assistance since she'd dissolve into a primordial goo capable of nothing higher than the basic life functions of single-celled organisms.

The brush of his fingers against hers stirred a shudder from neck to waist; each vertebra energized from the charmer's intense and focused magnetism. She prayed he didn't perceive her sudden intake of breath.

One thick brow lifted. Tiny crinkles around his eyes and slightly flaring nostrils demonstrated his acknowledgement of their fiery connection.

Damn it. "That'll be th-thirty, um, thirty-four dollars today, Mr. Crof, uh Crofton." *Please stop staring at me.*

"Call me Marc, just one syllable." The slightest twitch of his lips

betrayed the suppressed humor dancing in his gaze.

Three attempts at sliding the plastic through the card reader proved excessive but unavoidable, considering the moisture accumulating on her palms. Blotting her fingers on her jeans, she felt the wordless, guttural rumble in her throat betraying her ultimate craving and the ferocious need to appear normal in the face of an everyday situation. These humiliating reactions never occurred in her fantasies. She wiped her brow.

His grin widened.

Dear God. He's teasing me.

The quizzical tilt of his head and slow glide of his tongue along his lower lip demolished her tattered concentration. She was toast. Amber eyes darkened, reminding her of a rapacious panther, a ghost of the forest, sleek, quiet, and striking without sound.

"Have you ever been to the Schutzhund trials, Daniele?" A half grin displayed his amusement as seen with her boss, his voice edged with hope but also something darker and compelling.

"Wh-what?" Words stumbled through her thoughts, tangled and refusing to fall into a coherent order. Shaking her head was safer than trying to dislodge the failed filter of her brain. Now, he radiated a volcanic heat that thickened her blood to magma, dissolving her plans to little more than pulverized syllables splashing on the surface of his charisma and evaporating to steam.

"Do your friends call you Dani for short?"

"Um, I don't have any, well, of course I have friends. But, well, yes, they call me Dani. And no, I've never been to the trials, but I've read that they're quite exciting." *And of course, in returning his card, my hand is shaking.*

"Why don't you come tomorrow? You'd have a great time."

I'm sure I'll come tonight in my dreams. "Thanks, but I have to give my cath a bat. No, my bath a cat." *Arg.* "I'm busy tomorrow. But thanks anyway." *Please get me a muzzle.*

Before she could humiliate herself further, the front door chime offered a small semblance of relief. The *whoosh* of cool air blew in another large male dog with an equally large male handler. *Shepherds of the world, unite.*

"Hi, is Dr. Carari in? I think my boy here's getting a hot spot on his paw." The stranger's lean, muscular build accentuated his blonde and blue good looks, an allure he'd use to full advantage based on his blatant perusal.

On closer inspection, he emitted a tightly wound sense of awareness she associated with hidden agendas and subversive objectives. *This man wants something. He's slick.* Her flustered mind couldn't process anything else as Marc's presence doomed her to metaphorical drooling.

Seeing there wouldn't be a conflict between the dogs, Daniele swiveled her chair to view the computer's schedule while self-consciously tugging on her turtleneck.

"No. I'm afraid you just missed her, but I can schedule you for Monday morning if that's all right." Though handsome, his blatant interest didn't stir the heart-fluttering, chaotic beat associated with Marc's presence.

"Sure, darlin'. What time is good for you?" Leaning over the bi-level counter allowed him visual access to her organized space. "Ah... I see you read erotic romance. I have a sister that writes for a large, New York publisher."

Oh hell. Her fingers couldn't move fast enough to hide the book's cover, a leather-clad man cuffing his naked woman's upper arms behind her back as she knelt in front of a spanking bench. In her haste to hide the cover, she inadvertently skid the book off the counter, landing several feet to Marc's side. *Where else would it land?*

His swift reflexes resulted in scooping up the embarrassing material. After a quick glance at the cover, his head tilted back and forth, as if judging the merits of the scene depicted and finding it lacking in some specific way.

Something inside her dictated he'd return the book—for a price. Fiery heat blazed up her neck to engulf her face, becoming an inferno worthy of a three-alarm fire. His shaking shoulders did nothing for her composure. *Yeah, and he owns the BDSM club thirty miles away. I will not ask him to return that book.*

"I have Monday morning at ten-thirty. Uh, your name, sir?"

After fumbling the appointment card twice, she placed it on the counter and grabbed the nearby pen. Panic swelled to become a palpable pressure in her chest while perspiration dotted her forehead and spine between her shoulder blades.

"Clayton Hutson and that sounds great, darlin'. I'll see you then... Unless you'd let me take you to dinner tonight."

"Sorry, Mr. Hutson, I'm busy tonight." *I think I'll just call you slick.*

"Well, how about lunch tomorrow?"

Something in his distinct and intense scrutiny scared her shitless. A foreboding she hadn't endured for three years. The prickling along her

nape and arms never happened randomly. Blood drained from her face to leave her shaken at the sight of his rough hands on the counter; calloused hands that could wield a garrote with expertise. *Could he be the serial killer responsible for the recent murders?*

The fact he stood before her, overshadowing and transmitting such bad vibes ensured she wouldn't feel safe for a long time, even if he just saw her as a sexual conquest. Under normal circumstances, discerning someone's goals amounted to a simple exercise whether honest or nefarious, but Marc's overwhelming effect on her mindset obliterated her ability to pick up slick's intentions.

A suggestive throat clearing transferred her attention back to Marc, whose demeanor revealed no evidence of his earlier carefree banter. "No, Hutson. She's with me." Marc's expression lost all signs of levity as he crowded closer to her workspace, edging the other man out. "I'll pick you up tomorrow morning at ten, Dani. Okay?"

Darius' combination whine-growl elicited a like response in the other dog. Each shepherd's attunement to his master's emotions came as no surprise.

Hutson's face broadcast a tangle of warning signs she'd label aggressive if expressed in canine form. Non-blinking, direct eye contact, hardened jaw, and a predator's grin equaled a trifecta of foreboding that made her gut tighten.

Her well-planned intentions evaporated like seawater meeting magma, the haze formed smothering the intricate workings of her mind. At this point, mangled words were a useless commodity. She merely nodded.

"Here's your reminder." Turning back to Hutson, she handed him the appointment card.

"Have a good day, Mr. Hutson." Marc's conspicuous dismissal resulted in a low groan and insincere apology.

"Sorry, man. Didn't know she was taken. It's not as if she's wearing a ring or collar. Nice dog, by the way. I watched him track in his first trial. Good nose in bad weather and difficult cover." His calculating gaze bore into Marc as if gauging the likelihood of winning a dirty, no-holds-barred fight. The shark's grin hid nothing.

Hutson's departure allowed her to draw a slow lungful of toxin-purging air. "Thank you, Marc. He made me a bit nervous for some reason."

"Welcome. Any time. He kicked my sixth sense into overdrive, too. You all right? You turned white as a sheet. Do you know him from somewhere?" Darius whined and chuffed, pulling on his leash until Marc

let go. "What's up, boy? You never misbehave."

Barreling around the counter to rub against her thigh, Darius' chest rumbled when Dani buried her face in the long hair at his neck. "Aw, sweetie. It's all right. You're such a good boy." His fur smelled of oatmeal and vanilla shampoo, the same she used for dog baths in the office. "I've never seen that guy before, but he gave me the creeps."

"We'll hang around until you leave." More a command than offer, his statement and expression brooked no argument.

"Thanks. Something about him—I just don't know." The soft fur against her cheek imbued a soothing calm unattainable through any other means.

"Yeah, me too. Anyway, about tomorrow, give me your address and I'll pick you up."

"Oh. I thought you said that to get me off the hook with Hutson. You really don't need to bother." Miles of blood vessels conveyed scorching, liquid heat blazing a trail up her neck and across her face. Intervention via reality proved to be a bitch. She stood no chance of holding her own with this man turned demi-god.

"No trouble at all. That way I can check and make sure you're all right."

"How 'bout I meet you there." The less information she gave a man like this, the better. Dangerous in his own way, Marc Crofton embodied thoughts of lust, dreams of bondage, large wooden X's, and unspeakable toys wringing out mind-blowing sensations. *Like any man would want a girl like me.*

"Ahh, I look forward to earning your trust. Perhaps after a day at the trials, you'll join me for dinner." He didn't just set the book down on her workspace. No, he had to make a meal of it, placing it conspicuously then patting the cover.

"Oh, I-I don't eat dinner. Well, um, I eat dinner but not on weekends. No. Actually, I don't go out on weekends...Well, I go out..." Any minute, tears of humiliation would stain her cheeks. "I don't date." *Crap, just shoot me now.*

"That's fine. I'm not ready for a date, either. Good thing we cleared that up. We'll just grab a bite to eat. I'd hate to keep you out all day and return you home tired and hungry, very bad manners." The look in his gaze spoke of insatiable appetites, erotic, raw nights filled with breathless screams, and creative, salacious undertakings. Carnal whispers filtering through her mind were encouraged by a rich imagination and curious nature to form a solid wall of longing. The end product wavered when

buffeted by her long-suffering, low self-esteem.

“I-I know what you’re thinking. Y-you don't have to be a mind reader...”
How did all the air get sucked out of the room? Long-buried feelings of unworthiness burst forth, feelings she’d sought to overcome when in Marc’s presence yet failed each time he entered the office. Men that handsome only wanted one thing from genetically contaminated girls like her. Good looks, hypnotic charm, and innate confidence declared he rarely heard the word no.

“And I don't need a psych degree to know you’re curious. See you tomorrow morning, Dani. It's time to indulge.” His smile said it all, but his gaze held a challenge, daring her to step outside her comfort zone.

The damning quiet prolonged her awkwardness while accelerating the frantic pump in her chest and challenging her equilibrium. Obtaining an even keel with Marc present was a pipe dream. She should’ve known better.

He didn't say another word; perhaps he flashed Darius a hand signal she didn't see. The dog's tail wagging and jaunty gait celebrated his master’s victory, saying it all.

Holy Hell. Pictures formed in her mind from the pages she’d read earlier about leather cuffs, spankings, whips, and other toys, all dispensed by a master who took what he wanted but gave back tenfold. A tickless silence of the frozen-gear universe filled her mind and saturated her benumbed thoughts both biting and piercing in a mixture of horror and wonder. *What the hell just happened?* Had she lost both the battle and the war?

[One-click](#) to purchase Carnal Whispers.

Thank you for reading *Bending Fate*. If you've enjoyed it, please consider leaving a several word review on Amazon. It's very easy to do. Just click [here](#), and then click on the review button. You can say as little or as much as you like. It can be as short as "Loved the book," or "Fun read," anything that comes to mind. It would make my day. If you have any questions about it, drop me a line.

If you'd like free stories available nowhere else, subscribe to Reily's newsletter. www.reilygarrett.com. In subscribing, you'll receive information on new releases along with exclusives and early access to giveaways and new books.

You can visit me on [Facebook](#) or [twitter](#). I also love hearing directly from readers! Send me an [Email](#).

For Reviewers

If you'd like to receive review copies of new releases, apply to join Reily Garrett's ARC review team. (click [here](#))

About Reily

Reily is a West Coast girl transplanted to the opposite shore. Past employments as an ICU nurse, private investigator, and work in the military police has given her countless experiences in a host of different environments to add a real world feel to her fiction.

Over time and several careers, many incidents have flavored the plots of her stories as man's cruelty and ingenuity for torment and torture are boundless, not contained by an infinite imagination. Witnessing the aftereffects of a teenager mugged at knifepoint for a pair of tennis shoes, or an elderly woman repeatedly stabbed with a screwdriver for no apparent reason, left an indelible impression that will forever haunt her subconscious. In counterpoint, she has observed a woman stop her vehicle in severe, snowy weather to offer her own winter coat to a stranger, a teenager wearing a threadbare hoodie. Life's diversities are endless.

Though her kids are her life, writing is Reily's life after. The one enjoyed after the kids are in bed or after they're in school and the house is quiet. This is the time she kicks back with laptop and lapdog to give her imagination free rein.

In reading, take pleasure in a mental pause as you root for your favorite hero/heroine and bask in their accomplishments, then share your opinions of them over coffee with your best friend (even if he's four-legged). Life is short. Cherish your time.

Reily's Books

Click on a link to read the book's description.

Romantic Thrillers

McAllister Justice Series

[Tender Echoes](#)

[Digital Velocity](#)

[Bound By Shadows](#)

[Inconclusive Evidence](#)

[Carbon Replacements](#)

[Shattered Reflections](#)

Erotic Romance

Carnal Series

[Carnal Beginnings](#)

[Carnal Innocence](#)

[Bending Fate](#)

[Carnal Whispers: Mind Stalker](#)

[Carnal Obsession: His Heart's Prisoner](#)

Paranormal Romance

[Tiago](#)

[Unholy Alliance](#)

Copyright Bending Fate

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system without the written permission of the author, and where permitted by law. Reviewers may quote brief passages in a review.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Bending Fate
Copyright © 2016 Reily Garrett
Cover Art by Rylan Killian