

A LOVE BETRAYED — A DANGER UNLEASHED
CAN THEIR ALLIANCE CATCH A KILLER BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE?

PURPLE KNOT

Shades of Hope, Book 1

RAQUEL BYRNES



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Dedication

For David - My One and Only

1

I lurk in the shadows of the normal world. A recorder of sins, I dwell in the gray of secrets and lies. I capture images of infidelity, and follow the printed trails of stolen promises. Nothing stays hidden from me, no matter how deeply it's buried. I am a purveyor of all that is protected, and I am very good at my job.

That is how I came to be on the fourth floor of an abandoned carpet warehouse with my camera on its tripod and a foam cup of coffee in my hand. A client, for whom I've done numerous jobs, asked me to keep an eye on his business partner. For the last four weeks, I'd tracked balding, middle-aged, Norman Bower from his lunch meetings to his handball matches and back to the office. I'd snapped images of him buying shoes, awkwardly flirting with a waitress way too young for him, and sneaking cigarettes in the parking garage before heading home to his wife and kids.

My client was convinced Mr. Bower was passing information about their sealed job bids to a rival company and wanted proof of cavorting with the enemy to use in a take-over. Unfortunately, Mr. Bower's only vice was that he was incredibly boring. Still, I was on retainer, so I took a few more shots of Mr. Bower seriously testing the strength of his sweat suit material while trying to achieve the downward dog position in his beginning yoga class across the

street.

My phone buzzed and I answered it while packing up equipment. There's no way Bower would try to court a client while sweating like a junkie and fighting off a heart attack. I was done here.

"Reyna Cruz," I answered.

"It's me."

My heart sank when I heard Summer on the other end. I recognized the way her words sounded through a busted lip, and I gritted my teeth, willing myself not to get upset. Summer's husband was an animal.

"Yeah, Summer. How are you?" I shoved my camera into the case and rubbed my eyes.

"I'm at the hospital. Jimmy wanted me to call you."

Jimmy was her brother and the only decent male in her life. He wasn't a cop, but monitored the chatter on the sheriff's frequency whenever he could. Jimmy listened for domestic dispute calls almost compulsively. That he'd hear his sister's was only a matter of time.

I was not shocked. Summer was married to a prominent pharmaceutical executive who considered beating his wife a valid form of communication. Summer was eight months pregnant.

"Which hospital?"

"Don't worry about it. He just wanted me to give you a call."

"The name, Summer. Are you in Woodside?"

"I'm not staying," she said. "It's nothing."

"Did your lip need stitches?"

"How did you...?"

"Where is he, Summer? Did they arrest him?"

I refused to say his name. I refused to grant evil

the courtesy of the familiar.

"Jimmy made the sheriff haul him in. I don't know what I'm going to do."

Her voice cracked, and I knew she was trying to hold back tears.

"You press charges is what you do." I'd lost count of the times we'd had this conversation.

"It's out of my hands," she said. I heard her blow her nose. "Jimmy lied to them. He said he pulled up in his car and saw Parker hit me, but it was all over by then. Now Jimmy's gone and made it worse."

I said a silent thank you for Jimmy. He loved his sister and put his job on the line for her. She was always too afraid or felt too responsible for upsetting Parker to file charges against him. Maybe this time something would finally change.

"You shouldn't wait for him to use you as a punching bag to defend yourself."

"Rain, I don't want to get in another argument with you."

She and Jimmy were the only ones who called me Rain.

"I'm not trying to argue."

"I know you don't like him, but he's my husband. I had a part in all this. I fought with him, and it just got out of hand."

I ground my jaw.

"Oh, you fought with him. I see. How many stitches did Parker need? Did you crack one of his ribs?"

She didn't answer me, and then I heard her sniffing. I felt like a jerk. The last thing she needed was for someone else to make her feel like she was in the wrong. I took a deep breath and tried again.

"I'm sorry, Summer. I just...I hate that he does this to you. It will get worse. I know you don't want to hear it, but one of these days he will kill you."

"I can handle it. I don't need you barreling in here trying to fix things for me. But I do appreciate that you care. I really do."

"Whenever you need me, just call and I'll come and get you. I have plenty of space for you and the baby."

She laughed in her quiet way; like she used to do when we were kids.

"Are you at work right now?"

"Yeah, I gotta make my paycheck for the month."

I rested my head against the metal warehouse wall, a headache coming on.

"Oh sure, must be hard keeping up all those properties."

I had invested in lake-side cabins all over California when my business had taken off. A company took care of maintenance and rentals for me. I'd done well over the past four years and now took clients by referral only. My five figure retainer kept me in a nice building in the San Francisco Mission District. A brass plate with Rain Associates was the only evidence of my professional life. Discretion was my bread and butter.

"You know you could take one of them over."

I was desperate to convince her.

"I have a cabin at Lake Gregory near Lake Arrowhead. It's cozy and there's a little town a half mile down the road. I know it's not what you're used to, but..."

"I'm fine, but thank you."

Her voice was tense, defensive. Defeated, I heard

another voice in the background, and then the phone changed hands.

"Hey Rain."

Jimmy's laid back drawl came across the line, and his crooked grin flashed behind my eyes. Originally from Louisiana, he and Summer had moved with their family to Seattle when they were fourteen. They were twins and my very best friends in the world. Jimmy, at one time, had been much more than that.

"It's Reyna. Rain was my nickname in grade school," I said sternly.

He ignored my comment.

"Summer has a fat lip, and I'll bet her wrist is sprained. Talk some sense into her. Tell her to go and visit you for a while."

"I already tried that. Did they book Parker?"

"I made sure they did."

I could tell he was looking at Summer by the way he emphasized his words.

"You coming up here, Rain?"

"Probably not."

"Why not?"

"Why not, Jimmy? Are you serious?"

I said it a little too loudly. My hands shook, and I fought for control.

"I can't go and see her face all bruised up and be able to make out Parker's fist print. I just can't. Do you know how many times I've had to read her pain medication bottle for her because her eyes were swollen shut?"

"Rain—"

"I can't do this any more. I'm tired of trying to save someone who doesn't want to be saved."

I was angry. At Parker for being who he was, at

Summer for being a victim, and at myself...for thinking that way.

Jimmy was silent.

I looked at my phone to be sure I was still connected.

"You probably have to go, so I'll give the phone back to Summer."

I could tell he was mad. Jimmy never gave up on anything...ever. I had disappointed him. I could hear it in his voice.

"Jimmy, I'm still here for her. I just can't run out there every time she lets him hurt her."

"It's not a 'letting' thing, Rain. Do you really think that?"

I hesitated. I didn't want to fight with Jimmy, but then again, I did believe that.

"Jimmy, on some level, at some point, she needs to stop letting him do this to her by leaving. I have places for her to stay. I have money. I've even researched OB/Gyn doctors here. But she needs to take the first step, and she won't. Short of dragging her here by the feet, I don't know what more I can do."

"You can try again. You can be here for her."

"Like you're there? Heck of a lot of good that's done her."

Jimmy was silent. I could imagine him grinding his jaw on the other end. I sighed. This wasn't his fault.

"I understand what you're saying Jimmy. But I'm done for now. I can't take this anymore."

He didn't answer me. He said something to Summer and then she was back on the phone.

"What did you say to him? He stalked off."

My stomach twisted.

"I told him I'm not coming down."

She was quiet for a moment and then she whispered into the phone. "I'm sorry I keep disappointing you. You're the last person in the world I want angry with me."

My eyes filled, and it felt like I was stepping across this widening chasm, away from Summer and Jimmy.

"You don't disappoint me, Summer. I just love you too much to watch you self-destruct like this."

"Right as Rain."

"Summer..."

"You always did do the right thing, instead of the easy thing."

She used to say that to me all the time in high school. It still made my heart ache.

"I love you, you know that right? I'm here if you want. Anytime of the day or night."

She was silent on the phone, hopefully letting what I said sink in.

"Will you come and see the baby? When he or she's born?"

"Wild horses couldn't keep me away."

2

The next few days were busy. Grateful to have a lot to do, I tried not to think about Summer or Jimmy or the fact that I hadn't heard from either since the hospital call.

I waited for the graveyard cleaning crew to show up at the client's building so I could trick the janitor into letting me into Mr. Bower's office. I'd put on my best executive skirt and jacket and flounced down the hall in high heels with a desperate look on my face, worried about getting fired for forgetting to fax an important document for Mr. Bower. The janitor let me in, but I had to muster up some fake tears first.

The client agreed to let me install a keystroke mining program on Bower's computer. All keystrokes made on his computer would be recorded and sent to my laptop. This allowed me to read his email, memos, and anything else he typed, without him knowing. Tricking the janitor gave my client some deniability if my program was detected. I'd scoped out the company's IT department, and was pretty sure they were idiots. As for Mr. Bower, he obviously wasn't meeting anyone person to person. My hope was that he would leave an electronic trail I could follow.

I drove back to my condo and put on some coffee. Settling into my desk, I flipped through mail and listened to the cellist next door play through one of his

bouts with insomnia. I hoped the guy didn't go on sleeping pills; he was pretty good. The clock on my laptop said after two in the morning. I kicked off my shoes, curled my toes until they cracked, and pulled the cell phone from my bra cup. The ringer was off again, and I'd missed messages.

The coffee was done, and I poured a cup while listening to messages on speakerphone.

Salem, my assistant, wanted to know if I needed him to pick out a new phone for the desk he'd finally wrangled out of me. He'd hinted at becoming an official intern for the past six months, and with all the extra work coming in, I'd promoted him yesterday.

I made a mental note to get someone to make him a fancy desk placard so he'd feel official. After two years, he was the only assistant I hadn't scared off.

Next were a couple of updates on my lake house from the management company.

I licked the icing off of a week-old cupcake, my nod to dinner, as the last message in my voicemail cued up. A man's voice was screaming into the phone. I dropped my cupcake and snapped up my cell phone from the counter. I caught the tail end of the message, it was Jimmy. I navigated out of voicemail with shaking hands, and dialed Jimmy's cell. He picked up on the first ring.

"Jimmy..." I managed to croak.

"He's done it," Jimmy growled. "Parker put Summer in the I.C.U."

"How bad is it?" I was scared. I knew this was coming, but I was scared spitless nonetheless.

"I don't know yet, I'm in Oregon for a meeting. I just got us plane tickets for Seattle. I'll meet you at the airport, and we'll ride to the hospital together."

"Jimmy, what happened?" I ran around the room, throwing clothes and toiletries into an overnight bag.

"I said I don't know."

I could hear the overhead speaker calling out flight numbers. He was at the airport already.

"Well, what do you know?"

"I got a phone message from Mona, but she was hysterical. I was in a meeting, and I just got a chance to listen to my messages here at the terminal."

"I need to call her cell."

I searched about for my cell phone before realizing I was talking on it.

"Rain, just get to the airport. I sent you a text with your e-ticket number. Use it to print out a boarding pass."

"Jimmy..." This felt real. This felt like what I'd been dreading. I didn't know how to tell him that.

"Get to the airport, Rain...just get there as soon as you can."

3

I flew out of San Diego an hour and a half later. Jimmy paid for a first class ticket, and I used the large leather chair to curl up and sleep. Despite the anxiety, I'd been up for almost twenty hours and was exhausted.

Two hours later, I walked out of SeaTac's baggage claim area, and stumbled into the early morning drizzle. It was five-thirty in the morning.

I peered through the gray, wet haze at the cars lined up along the curb but didn't see Jimmy. Checking my watch, I was about to go back into the airport when a strong hand slipped over mine and suddenly Jimmy was at my side. He took my suitcase and hugged me all in one motion. He wrapped his arm around my waist and murmured next to my ear.

"Hey, Rain."

I felt my face get hot but tried to hide it.

"You have a car already?"

I turned away hoping he hadn't seen the blush. Jimmy motioned toward the black sedan parked a few cars down.

"Oh, right."

Only common folk rent cars. The Corbeau family had drivers. Jimmy was a lawyer by choice, not necessity.

"Guess I forgot about all that stuff."

Jimmy opened the door and got in after me. He looked exhausted.

"How was your flight?"

"I slept, thanks to your generosity. I'll pay you back."

"I won't take it. Besides, I didn't give you much of a choice."

"I had a choice. I want to be here."

"Thank you for coming anyway."

He took my hand and brushed the knuckles with his lips. My cheeks flared with more heat. I kept my face down and nodded. When I finally looked at him, a sad smile pulled at his mouth.

"I've missed you."

Jimmy had a way of blowing all sense out of my head when I was near him. That drawl and those eyes would not get me into trouble all over again. I pulled away and rooted around in my purse for my phone.

"I haven't heard from Mona, you?"

Jimmy looked at me a second longer, then slowly blew out his breath and reached for his phone.

"I haven't heard from anyone, either."

He leaned forward and tapped the glass partition behind the driver.

"Go on Stern, the sooner the better."

Stern drove straight to the hospital. Zig-zagging through traffic, he left the car radio on a staticky jazz station I could barely hear. I caught Jimmy glancing in my direction a couple of times, but he was silent and didn't reach for my hand again. I wasn't sure if I was happy about that or not.

When we pulled into the hospital parking lot, it was pouring like an ancient flood storm. I looked out the car window up to the top floors of the hospital and

sighed. I would not have been surprised to see lightning streak across the sky.

"Mona's message said we're up in the south tower. You can go on if you like."

"Aren't you coming up?"

I suddenly needed him to come with me. He held up his cell phone.

"I'll be up in a minute. Gotta call around for Mona."

I nodded. Mona was Jimmy and Summer's mother. Big haired and perpetually tipsy, she was a southern belle of epic movie proportions. Given to sneaking cigarettes at inopportune moments, she never seemed to be around when they needed her. Mona and I never really hit it off. The only time she ever took my side was when I announced I was moving away from Seattle, away from her son.

Once past the sliding glass doors of the lobby, I walked onto a conveniently opened elevator off to the right. My stomach did a roller-coaster flop and gurgled when I hit the button to the critical care ward. This was the epitome of my worst nightmare.

The doors slid open on the quiet, dimly-lit ward, letting the smell of fear and antiseptic fly up my nose. Overstuffed chairs arranged in conversation nooks peppered the wide open floor plan. Glass sliding doors lined the far wall of the floor, privacy curtains pulled tight against prying eyes.

I wondered which room held my best friend. Swallowing back acid, I wiped sweaty hands on my jeans, and stepped up to the nurse's counter with a forced smile.

"I'm here to see Summer Evans."

"You aren't family." The nurse looked at me and

cocked her head.

"I'm a family friend. My name is Reyna Cruz." My long black ringlets and olive skin didn't exactly scream Caucasian. I forced another smile.

"Of course, Ms. Cruz, we received the paperwork a few hours ago."

She started walking around her station, poking in the paper trays, looking for something.

"Here it is." She handed me a sealed manila envelope. I stared at the address sticker of a law firm affixed to the front.

"What is this?"

"It's your copy of the Durable Medical Power of Attorney."

"The what? What are these?"

"Ms. Cruz, you're Summer Evans's legal medical guardian. She never told you?"

"I - I..."

The room suddenly felt hot.

"We've been waiting for you to get here, Ms. Cruz. The surgeons are waiting on your OK."

A monitor went off on the nurse's station and she left.

I read through the legal jargon. Summer had made me her legal medical guardian in case of mental or physical incapacitation. She'd never said anything to me.

"You see her yet?" Jimmy said from behind my right shoulder.

"No, I haven't found her...I mean I didn't realize what..." I held the papers behind my back, feeling as if I'd been caught reading something dirty.

"What are you sayin', Rain?"

A bemused expression played across Jimmy's face.

He leaned forward, reached around my waist, and pulled the papers from my hands.

"Why do you always think that is an effective hiding place?"

"Jimmy..." I tried to form a question, but didn't know where to start.

"What's this?" Scanning the papers, his smile faded.

"I didn't know about this," I said quickly. Why did I feel like I had done something wrong?

"What's what?" Mona asked from the hallway." She stalked toward us from one of the glassed-in patient rooms, did a fake double-take, and sneered in my direction. "Oh, hello Reyna. Glad you could finally make it."

"I didn't know about this. Did you?" I turned back to Jimmy.

Jimmy shook his head. He looked at me with worry and something else...suspicion?

"What are you babbling about?" Mona snapped. She sidled in front of me and spoke to Jimmy in a whisper. "I don't think she's allowed up here anyway. She's not family."

"Mona—" Jimmy stopped when a doctor in surgical scrubs came out of the elevator. He walked over to us with his hand extended.

"Ms. Cruz, I'm Dr. Banford, Summer's attending."

I managed a nod and a quick glance at Mona, who looked shocked. She stepped forward. "How do you know this man?" Mona didn't wait for my answer. Instead, she turned on Dr. Banford and shook her finger in his face. "Have you been giving information about my daughter over the phone?"

"I don't..."