

LULLABY

Prologue

The first ring of the phone jolted Vicky wide-awake. She sat up in bed, heart thudding. Each ring was like nails raking a blackboard, but she didn't reach for the phone. Maybe he'd give up if she just let it ring. She let out a sharp laugh at the thought.

Fat chance of that. Just pick it up and get it over with.

Her heart went into overdrive as she lifted the receiver.

"I'm coming for you, Vicky," the man whispered. "Do you hear me, bitch? I am Death, and I'm coming for you." His voice sounded like the rustle of dry leaves and sent a shiver down Vicky's spine. She bit back the scathing words on the end of her tongue, resisted the urge to slam down the receiver, and instead, left it off the hook. He wouldn't bother her any more that night. But what about tomorrow night and the night after that? How long before he made good on his threats? Hugging her knees to her chest, Vicky chewed her lower lip. In the beginning, she tried convincing herself it was just some sicko who didn't have anything else to do at one in the morning. In her heart, she'd known better. This guy was serious trouble, and it was time to get the police involved. Of course, Vicky knew Frank Paxton, the chief of police, would give her twenty kinds of hell when she confessed what she'd been up to. She'd heard it all before.

"Are you out of your goddamn mind, Victoria Langford?" he'd say. "Keep your nose out of things that can get you hurt."

But she couldn't do that this time—not when she was so close to finding the truth. She'd give it another day or two—see what else she could dig up before talking to the chief. Slipping back under the covers, she lay staring at the ceiling.

I am Death, and I'm coming for you.

She sat up again and snapped on the bedside lamp. Snowball, her white Persian cat, lifted his head and blinked lazily at Vicky from the foot of the bed. He stretched, then curled back into a ball and closed his eyes.

"Wish I could go back to sleep that easily," Vicky said.

She told herself she and her little boy, Josh, were safe, but she couldn't shake the sick, fluttery feeling in the pit of her stomach. She reached under the bed for the nightstick she kept there and went through the house checking doors and windows for the third time that night. Vicky checked the alarm, too, though she had set it before turning in. As she headed back to her room, she heard her son whimpering.

Eighteen-month-old Josh was sitting up in his crib rubbing his eyes. He raised his arms and cried, "Mama."

"What's the matter, sweetie?" Vicky murmured. "Bad dreams?"

Scooping him up, she settled in the rocker beside his crib. Josh quieted instantly and snuggled against her. Vicky leaned her cheek against his downy head. She was starting to relax when she heard a soft tapping at the window. Her head snapped back up, and her breath caught in her throat.

It's only a branch from the old box elder, Vicky reminded herself, but her heart still hammered. Sensing his mother's fear, Josh began crying again.

Vicky kissed him and whispered, "It's all right, punkin. You go back to sleep now."

She sure as hell wasn't. Her gaze darted to the window once more. Uneasiness nibbled at the back of her mind. It was going to be another long night.

Outside, a man peeked through the window of Josh's room. This was his nightly ritual. He couldn't stop himself from coming here any more than he could make himself stop breathing. His dark eyes bored into Vicky as she rocked her son.

Poor Mommy. Another sleepless night? He pulled his cell phone from his pocket and punched in her number again. The sound of the busy signal vibrated in his ear. He shook with rage. Stupid bitch. Did she really think she could avoid him by leaving the phone off the hook? He should go in there right now and snap her neck like a dry twig.

"I am Death, Vicky, and I'm coming for you."

But not tonight—it wasn't time. The fun was just beginning and he would savor every moment of it. He deserved that. He stood at the window until Vicky tucked a sleeping Josh back in his crib.

Such a loving mother.

In that instant, an idea took root in his mind and he smiled. This was going to be even better than he had imagined.

Chapter 1

“Darkness and death are all around you.”

The woman who said it didn't look like a fortune-teller. Vicky had expected her to come to the table sporting a thick Slovak accent, flowing robes, and maybe a wart on her chin. Still, Madam Zoya was anything but ordinary looking. Hair that was more salt than pepper framed a chiseled face with wide-set hazel eyes and a hawkish nose. She had a linebacker's shoulders, and even with her black flats, she was well over six feet. Vicky guessed she weighed a good 240.

The Southern drawl, smooth as a bottle of Kentucky bourbon, seemed out of place with her large frame. If Vicky had heard that voice over the phone, she would have pictured a blond bombshell, not the Amazon sitting across from her.

Madam Zoya frowned as she peered intently into Vicky's teacup. “The wolves are waiting.”

The hair rose on the back of Vicky's neck. Suddenly, the redbrick walls and flickering candlelight in the Tanglewood Inn didn't seem as warm and inviting as when she and her best friend, Mary Renfield, first arrived. Vicky had hesitated when the hostess stopped at their table to ask if they wanted their fortunes told. It was Mary who talked her into it.

“You've never had it done before,” she'd said. “It'll be fun.”

Fun wasn't exactly the word that crept into Vicky's mind now. Eerie was more like it. She had never put much stock in fortune-telling, but Madam Zoya was making a believer out of her as she targeted events in Vicky's past with the accuracy of a sharpshooter.

“Wolves?” Mary twirled the straw in her glass and chuckled nervously. “Are we talking the four-legged or the two-legged variety?”

The fortune-teller shot her a hard look, and Mary's smile quickly faded. Madam Zoya picked up the gold-rimmed cup and studied the tealeaves again. Her eyes widened slightly, and her face drained of color. Vicky saw her large hands tremble as she put down the cup. "What is it?" Vicky asked, her gaze darting from the teacup to Madam Zoya's troubled face. "What did you see?"

"I'm sorry." Madam Zoya pushed abruptly away from the table. "There are other people waiting. I've already taken too much time."

She started to walk away, then suddenly turned back and looked at Vicky with frightened eyes. Clamping a shaking hand on Vicky's arm she whispered, "You must be careful. You're surrounded by death."

Vicky's heart skipped a beat, but before she could respond, Madam Zoya hurried from the table. Blowing out a breath, Vicky raised her eyebrows and glanced at Mary.

"What a terrible thing to tell you." Mary shivered and rubbed her arms.

"I thought you said this would be fun."

"It usually is. Most of them tell you good things or general stuff that could be true for anybody."

"Well, she certainly didn't do that with me." Vicky chewed her lower lip and glanced around the room. Madam Zoya was seated at a table with an elderly couple. She watched as a smile spread across the old woman's face. "Looks like they're getting better news than I did. I want my twenty bucks back."

"What she said about you being surrounded by death and darkness made me think of those creepy phone calls you've been getting. You *did* talk to Frank Paxton about them, didn't you?" Mary skewered Vicky with her gaze. Seconds went by as she drummed her fingertips on the table, waiting for an answer. "It's a simple yes or no question."

"I haven't had a chance."

"That's bullshit, and you know it." Mary balled her white napkin and tossed it on the table. "Dammit, Vicky, you promised."

"I'll do it tomorrow."

"That's what you told me two days ago. What the hell are you waiting for? What if this nut decides to skip the phone call and make a personal appearance?"

"Look, Mary, I'm onto something really big. I just need another day or two and it could bust wide open."

"I knew it. They aren't just crank calls. It's got to do with something you're working on." Mary leaned back in her chair and plowed her fingers through her coppery hair. "God, I thought I could stop worrying about you when you left the police force."

"Let's just drop this for now, okay?"

"Drop it? After everything Madam Zoya just said?"

"Oh, come on," Vicky chided, with more bravado than she felt. "You're too levelheaded to take this kind of stuff seriously."

Mary's green eyes widened. "So are you, but I wish you could have seen your face when she told you why you left the police department."

"I'll admit that took me by surprise, but let's keep this in perspective." Vicky was quiet a moment, casting around for a reasonable explanation, but there wasn't one and they both knew it. Still, she gave it her best shot. "My picture was in the paper and on the news for weeks after what happened. She must have recognized me."

"That was seven years ago, Vicky. How could she possibly recognize you?" Mary frowned harder. "This is more than a little creepy. A total stranger just gave you the condensed version of your life, for Christ's sake."

"Coincidence."

"Neither of us believes in coincidence."

"No. And we don't believe in this stuff, either, remember?" Vicky signaled for their waitress. "Let's get out of here."

"Dessert ladies?" the waitress asked, flashing them a toothy smile. "We have killer turtle cheesecake tonight."

"That's just what I need," Mary said, slapping an ample thigh. "I'll pass. Vicky?"

"Just the check, please."

As the waitress tallied their bill she said, "I noticed Madam Zoya with you. She's fantastic isn't she?"

"She's done readings for you?" Mary asked.

"Several, and she's always dead-on."

"Dead-on?" Mary repeated, giving Vicky an I-told-you-so look.

The waitress nodded and arched her brows. "Sometimes it's positively spooky."

"Jeez," Vicky said as the waitress left their table. "That's just what I wanted to hear."

Tugging on their coats, Vicky and Mary shot anxious glances at Madam Zoya again. She was still locked in conversation with the elderly couple.

Vicky grabbed Mary's arm. "Come on. Let's forget about Madam Zelda."

“Zoya,” Mary corrected, following her friend through the maze of tables toward the exit.

The next day started out with a bang—literally—for John Wexler. The snitch had gotten whacked early that morning in his bed in the Lexington Hotel. It wasn't the news that shocked Vicky so much—the Wexlers of the world didn't have a long life expectancy. It was the timing that blew her mind.

Madam Zoya's words nagged at her. *You're surrounded by death.*

This morning Vicky felt as if it were her shadow.

She'd known Wexler since her rookie days on the Westport Police Department and kept in touch with him after she changed careers. His services came in handy for her new job as an investigative reporter. While Vicky never made the mistake of counting the wiry, bug-eyed snitch among her friends, Wexler had always come through for her when she needed him.

Rain came down in a solid sheet, obscuring her vision, making the roads slick. Vicky eased up on the gas pedal and kicked the wipers up a notch. She stopped for the light on Beaumont Street and glanced at Gaffney's Coffee Shop on the corner. She had been on her way to Gaffney's to meet Wexler when she'd gotten a page from her editor, Tom McDonald.

“Meet Dalila Sinclair at the Lexington and cover a breaking story,” he'd said, when Vicky called him. “Some hooker and a guy by the name of John Wexler were killed there this morning.”

Vicky felt as if she'd gotten smacked in the chest with a two-by-four. Wexler getting whacked right now was no coincidence. He had the information she needed to finally nail Richard Blackwell. She had Wexler's money in her purse. Two thousand dollars in crisp new bills. She would have paid ten times that amount.

Blackwell probably thought he was going to get away with murder again, Vicky thought bitterly, but he was wrong.

“I'm going to get you this time, you murdering bastard,” she whispered. “I swear you'll pay for everything you've done.”

The street in front of the Lexington was jammed with police cars and news vans by the time Vicky arrived. With no place left to park, she drove around the corner, swearing under her breath. This was one of the most crime-ridden areas in Westport. Not a neighborhood to be walking around in, but she didn't have a choice.

She finally found an empty spot one block down in front of a dilapidated liquor store that had a metal accordion grate across the front. She'd have a short trek back to the Lexington, but at least the rain had stopped. That was the good news. The bad news was she'd probably get mugged on her way there.

Switching off the engine, she quickly scanned the street. A mangy old mutt trotted down the sidewalk, paused long enough to raise his leg on a rusted Buick at the curb, and then moved on. Fido was the only sign of life at the moment. All the other neighborhood residents were probably still in bed or in front of the Lexington.

She set the alarm and climbed out of her Blazer, hoping it would still be there and in one piece when she returned. The wind bit her face and she shivered. It was only October, but already the specter of winter hung in the air. Pulling her coat collar tighter, she hitched her purse up on her shoulder and hurried up the cracked and buckled sidewalk.

A few minutes later, she was searching the sea of faces in front of the Lexington for *Herald* photographer Dalila Sinclair. She wasn't usually difficult to find. At fifty-five, she had hair that was still naturally black. Cropped short, it curled around her face, accentuating sculpted cheekbones and emerald green eyes. She was the kind of woman who stood out in a crowd, if not because of her drop-dead features, then certainly for her taste in fashion.

Vicky rolled her eyes when she finally spotted Dalila leaning against the building. Today's ensemble included a neon-green floral skirt that grazed the tops of Dalila's black combat boots. Her hands were shoved into the pockets of the prized raccoon coat she'd picked up at a rummage sale over the summer. A tattered mink hat—complete with black beady eyes and bared teeth—was perched at a jaunty angle on her head.

Dalila broke into a relieved smile when she saw Vicky pushing her way through the crowd. "I couldn't wait for you to get here," she announced, shivering. "This weather is positively brutal."

"It is a little brisk," Vicky said. "Anything happening yet?"

"Just a lot of people coming and going."

"I guess we'd better get up there if we were going to scoop the *Banner*."

Dalila gave a wry laugh. "Speak of the devil, look who just showed up."

Vicky looked over her shoulder and groaned. "You know what's going to happen now, don't you?"

"I don't care. I actually get a little satisfaction out of seeing you get under Warren's pasty skin."

Mumbling apologies, they elbowed their way through the crowd and headed toward the yellow police tape that cordoned off the six-story building. Vicky cast a glance at Warren Mott, her former co-worker, as she made her way past him. His bulldog face was pinched with cold. The wind lifted wisps of a bad comb-over he'd secured beneath a pair of earmuffs. His eyes narrowed behind his glasses when he spotted Vicky.

She pulled out her press pass, caught the attention of an older cop behind the police tape, and held it up for him to see. "Can we go up, Sulley?"

Sulley waved it away. "Go on. You know you don't have to show me that thing."

Vicky and Dalila ducked under the tape and were almost to the door when a familiar voice shouted, "Hey! I thought you said no one was allowed in the building!"

The two women stopped and turned around. Warren pushed his way through the mass of people.

"She's got special clearance from Chief Paxton himself," Sulley snapped. "Not that I have to explain anything to you."

"If she can get in, so can I!" Warren shot back, his jowls quivering with anger.

Sulley drew his nightstick and slapped it against his gloved palm. Warren screwed his mouth into a defiant knot and started to duck under the tape.

"You've been warned," Sulley said. "And I don't repeat myself."

Warren paused, his gaze darting from Vicky to the nightstick.

"Don't be stupid," Sulley said. "No story is worth taking a crack from one of these."

Scowling at Vicky, Warren let the tape drop back in place and said, "It must be nice to be the goddaughter of the police chief, but not all of us have that advantage."

Vicky strode back to him, her face tight with anger. "That's not why I get to visit crime scenes, Warren, and you know it."

"If I were you I'd want to *forget* that I was ever one of Westport's finest and I sure as hell wouldn't take advantage of it, especially since you have innocent blood on your hands."

Vicky's pulse quickened and she took a step closer to Warren. "What's that supposed to mean?"

A sly smile curled his lips. "Surely you haven't forgotten poor Connie Springer. Can it really be seven years since that nasty little accident?"

"You son of a bitch," Vicky said, grabbing Warren by the lapels of his coat.

"Take your hands off me, Langford, or I'll have you thrown in jail." Warren's dark eyes blinked rapidly behind his glasses. "That's where you belong anyway, after what you did."

"Let him go," Dalila said, prying Vicky's hands away. "He's not worth it."

Warren straightened his coat and grunted. "You cost me my job at the *Herald*, but you'll get yours, Langford. You're going to be sorry you ever crossed my path."

"Get a life, Warren," Dalila said, with a short laugh. She took Vicky's arm and steered her toward the building.

Vicky trembled with anger as she pulled open the door to the Lexington. "I don't know why I let him get to me like that."

"The little weasel just knows which buttons to push, and unfortunately you let him push yours."

"It's hard not to when it comes to Connie Springer," Vicky replied quietly.

They crossed the threadbare cabbage rose carpeting to the front desk. The man behind it eyed the two women and gave them a toothless grin. His face was covered with a beard almost as heavy as the stench of alcohol and body odor that clung to him. Wearing a holey, stained T-shirt, he leaned his flabby arms on the counter and asked, "What can I do for you, ladies?"

"What floor are the victims on?" Vicky asked.

"Fourth. You two cops or something?"

"Or something," Vicky answered, heading for the elevator. She jabbed at the CALL button, waited and pushed it again.

"Out of order." The clerk smiled. "Say, you want to ask me any questions? We could have a drink together. I have a bottle in the back room."

Scowling at him, Vicky turned to Dalila. "I hope you're up to a climb."

The dimly lit stairwell reeked so strongly of urine and booze it made their eyes water. They ran up the creaking steps, coat collars pulled over their mouths and noses. By the time they burst through the door on the fourth floor, Dalila was puffing like a steam engine. Peeling off her coat she leaned against a cracked pea-green wall and wheezed, "That's it. I've had my last Twinkie. I remember when I could run up twice that many stairs and not even break a sweat."

Vicky gave Dalila a minute to catch her breath. "You know I won't be able to get you in the room, but you can get a few pictures of the guys working—maybe get one when they take the bodies out."

"That's fine by me," Dalila replied, holding up her hands. "I wasn't keen on the idea of seeing dead bodies up close and personal this morning anyway. Lead on."

Vicky knew most of the cops she passed in the hall. They smiled and nodded in greeting, but she barely noticed. Her mind was focused on what she would see in Wexler's room.

As she moved toward the yellow police tape at the end of the hall, she let the veil of indifference she had perfected on the police department drop into place. It was the only way to do the job. She had to think of the bodies in there as just empty vessels—nothing more—not as people with hopes and dreams and family and friends who loved them. And even lowlifes like John Wexler and his hooker had someone somewhere who cared about them.

She turned to Dalila. "This is where we part ways."

"I'll be waiting right here," Dalila replied, removing the lens cap from her camera.

Vicky ducked under the tape and stepped inside. The room was small, dingy and smelled of death. John Wexler's nude body lay spread-eagled on the double bed that took up most of the room. A pillow, apparently placed over his head to muffle the gunshots, still covered his face. It hid the gruesome sight, but the sheets and blankets beneath him were soaked with blood.

An evidence tech was snapping pictures of Wexler's body from every possible angle while another tech dusted for fingerprints.

One of them looked up at Vicky and grinned. "I was wondering when you were going to get here. You usually beat us to these things."

"Find anything, Myers?"

"We're gonna have a field day trying to identify all these prints. Some of them have probably been here for years. And forget hair samples," Myers said, rubbing his balding pate. "I've got enough to make a toupee for myself."

Vicky crossed the room and poked her head in the tiny bathroom. An officer kneeled over a nude woman lying on the white-tiled floor. Her hands and feet were bound with silver duct tape. Another piece covered her mouth. A clear plastic bag was wrapped tightly around her head.

The officer gave Vicky a weary smile. "Hey, what's shaking, Langford?"

"You ID her yet, Barley?" Vicky glanced away from the woman's wide-staring eyes, not allowing herself to think about what her last terrifying moments must have been like.

"We found her purse in the closet. Name's Livvie Summerfield." Barley drew himself upright and stepped back into the other room. He shook his head as he looked at Wexler. "Whoever did this was sure a sadistic son of a bitch. There are tiny cuts and what look like cigarette burns all over both of them. Neither Summerfield or Wexler were angels, but they sure as hell didn't deserve this."

"Who found them?" Vicky tried to keep her eyes on Barley's face, but they were drawn like a magnet to Wexler's body on the bed.

"A cleaning woman by the name of Gert Brinkman. She saw a man leave the room, assumed it was empty and used her key to get in. This is what she found."

"Any chance I can talk to her?"

Barley shrugged. "Fine by me, but you'll have to check it out with McCann. He's questioning her right now."

Vicky was about to ask who McCann was when the medical examiner arrived. Oliver Grant had been the ME for Westport for as long as Vicky could remember and well before that. A man of few words, he nodded a greeting to them.

He tugged a pair of latex gloves onto his bony hands and let out a deep sigh. "Let's see what we have here."

Everything stopped as Grant shuffled toward the bed and took the pillow away. Not even Wexler's own mother would have known him. There was nothing left where his face had once been. One of the cops immediately lost his breakfast. Vicky felt her own throat close and her stomach churn. She clamped her teeth together so tightly they ached.

"What the hell are you doing in here?"

Vicky whirled around and looked up into the darkest blue eyes she had ever seen, but they looked hard as chips of granite and they were glaring right at her.