

A sunset over a body of water, with reeds in the foreground. The sky is a mix of orange, yellow, and blue, and the water reflects these colors. The reeds are dark silhouettes against the lighter water.

**SAY
YOU'RE
SORRY**

**MELINDA
LEIGH**

Table of Contents

Unnamed

ALSO BY MELINDA LEIGH SCARLET FALLS NOVELS Hour of Need Minutes to Kill Seconds to Live SHE CAN SERIES She Can Run She Can Tell She Can Scream She Can Hide He Can Fall (A Short Story) She Can Kill MIDNIGHT NOVELS Midnight Exposure Midnight Sacrifice Midnight Betrayal Midnight Obsession THE ROGUE SERIES NOVELLAS Gone to Her Grave (Rogue River) Walking on Her Grave (Rogue River) Tracks of Her Tears (Rogue Winter) Burned by Her Devotion (Rogue Vows)

Unnamed

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Text copyright © 2017 Melinda Leigh All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, or stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without express written permission of the publisher. Published by Montlake Romance, Seattle www.apub.com Amazon, the Amazon logo, and Montlake Romance are trademarks of Amazon.com, Inc., or its affiliates. ISBN-13: 9781503948709 ISBN-10: 1503948706 Cover design by Damonza

For Roxy aka "Rocket Dog." We rescued each other.

Contents Chapter One Chapter Two Chapter Three Chapter Four Chapter Five Chapter Six Chapter Seven Chapter Eight Chapter Nine Chapter Ten Chapter Eleven Chapter Twelve Chapter Thirteen Chapter Fourteen Chapter Fifteen Chapter Sixteen Chapter Seventeen Chapter Eighteen Chapter Nineteen Chapter Twenty Chapter Twenty-One Chapter Twenty-Two Chapter Twenty-Three Chapter Twenty-Four Chapter Twenty-Five Chapter Twenty-Six Chapter Twenty-Seven Chapter Twenty-Eight Chapter Twenty-Nine Chapter Thirty Chapter Thirty-One Chapter Thirty-Two Chapter Thirty-Three Chapter Thirty-Four Chapter Thirty-Five Chapter Thirty-Six Chapter Thirty-Seven Chapter Thirty-Eight Chapter Thirty-Nine Chapter Forty Chapter

Forty-One Chapter Forty-Two Chapter Forty-Three Chapter Forty-Four Acknowledgments About the Author

Chapter One Darkness. Tessa had been afraid of it most of her life. For as long as she could remember, she'd gone to bed dreading nightfall, looking under the bed, double-checking her nightlight. As if a lightbulb the size of a lit match could possibly banish her nightmares. But tonight, she prayed for the blackest of nights. For the moon to stay hidden behind the shifting clouds. For the shadows to make her invisible. The darkness had changed sides. Head spinning, lungs screaming, she ran into its embrace. What had once been her greatest fear could now be her savior. Her miracle. That's what it was going to take to keep her alive until the sun rose. "Tesssssa." The voice floated over the forest. "You can't get away." Where is he? Evergreen boughs grabbed at her arms and scratched her face as she plunged through the forest like a panicked deer. Her heart beat with the frantic staccato of a prey animal. She slowed, her body protesting the abuse of little-used muscles. She passed the sco

Chapter Two He stumbled out of the cattails and stared down at his hands. Blood, slick and dark and oily, covered his gloves and the knife. He turned toward the water and squatted at its edge. Setting the knife on the bank, he stuck the gloves into the shallow water. He rubbed his palms together and washed away as much of the blood as possible. Then he stripped off the gloves and set them aside. Specks of blood dotted his forearms. He scrubbed at them, scooping a handful of mud from the lake bottom and using it as a cleanser. There'd been so much blood. He'd never wash it all off. He glanced back into the reeds. What had he done? Something that couldn't be undone. His gaze landed on the knife at his side. His stomach turned over at the sight, and he ripped his eyes away. How many times had he stabbed her? He couldn't remember. Rage had completely short-circuited his brain. The last twenty minutes were a blur. A violent, frenzied blur. He heard screaming, pleading, crying, the sounds of

Chapter Three Morgan Dane toyed with her steak salad, but the weight of the decision on her mind dampened her appetite. The waitress returned to the table. "Anyone need another drink?" Morgan shook her head. "No, thank you." She'd had exactly two sips from her glass of house red. Across the table, District Attorney Bryce Walters finished

his single glass. "Is something wrong with the wine?" "No. It's fine. I'm not much of a drinker." The truth was she had no tolerance for alcohol, and the only thing worse than a kaleidoscope of butterflies flapping in her stomach were stumbling drunk ones. "Well, that's a good thing." He smiled, his teeth even and white. She should probably be attracted to him, but she wasn't, which was for the best. This was not a date. As long as Bryce hadn't changed his mind about offering her a job since their last meeting, he was going to be her boss, not her boyfriend. He set aside his empty glass and ordered coffee. Morgan declined. The man's superior genes coul

Chapter Four Lance Kruger hunkered down in the front seat of his Jeep and stared at the one-story motel across the street. In the center of the long building, the curtains of room twelve were drawn tight. The camera on his passenger seat, complete with telephoto lens, waited. His phone vibrated, shimmying across his dashboard. The display read SHARP. His boss. Lance answered the call, "Yeah." "Catch them yet?" Former Scarlet Falls detective Lincoln Sharp had retired after putting in his full twenty-five and had spent the last five years as a P.I. "Got individual photos of each of them entering the motel room. They haven't come out yet." Photos of a lusty good-bye in the parking lot would solidify Mrs. Brown's claim of adultery. "They're still in there?" Sharp whistled. "Impressive. I wouldn't expect Brown to have that much stamina." "He probably fell asleep." Sharp snorted. "If you can't sleep, you can always take over tonight's surveillance." Lance shifted in the seat, trying to get c

Chapter Five Morgan rubbed her hand, still warm from Lance's touch. It was nice to know she wasn't dead, but the prick of interest made her uncomfortable, clearly a reaction she wasn't ready to explore. She'd intended to look for Tessa alone, but she hadn't protested when her grandfather suggested she call Lance. The fact was that she felt much safer with him. But tonight, he was acting . . . different. Interested? It must be her imagination. Like he'd said. They were friends, and friends helped each other. That was all there was to it. Her discomfort had nothing to do with the way all six feet two inches of him filled out his cargos and T-shirt, the way his blue eyes always seemed to be focused on her, or the fact that she genuinely liked his personality more than his blond buffness. But how did she reconcile her attraction

to Lance while John was still in her heart? The love ballad playing softly on the radio wasn't helping. She reached forward and turned off the radio to answer the

Chapter Six "Back up." Lance steered Morgan away from the body. Part of him wanted to take a closer look. Another part wanted to run like hell. From the brief glimpse he'd gotten of the body, it was a particularly nasty scene. Not that it mattered. He had no business getting near that body. He wasn't a cop anymore, and the SFPD was en route. Under his hands, Morgan's body shook, and her teeth chattered. Worry for her quickly wiped out any concern for himself. This wasn't his first death scene, but as a former assistant prosecutor, Morgan's experience with homicides would be one step removed. Viewing photos was not the same as seeing the body in situ. He guided her toward his Jeep. He opened the hatchback and took out a warm jacket. He helped her into it. The sleeves covered her hands, and the hem fell to her thighs. Before he could think, he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her to his chest. She fit against him perfectly. As wrong as the scene behind him was, having Morgan in his

Chapter Seven It was Wednesday afternoon. Lance leaned on the outside of his Jeep and waited for Jamie Lewis's best friend.

Seventeen-year-old high school dropout Tony Alessi worked at the bowling alley. Neither the police nor Jamie's parents had been able to get any information out of the kid, but Lance wasn't an authority figure. Somebody had to know where Jamie had gone. With teenagers, friends were the best possibility. Tony was easy to spot crossing the parking lot. On top of a lanky, six-three frame, his four-inch blue-and-red Mohawk didn't exactly blend into a crowd. He looked like a parrot. Lance pushed off the door of his Jeep. "Hey, Tony!" The teen turned at the sound of his name. He wore ripped jeans and a vintage Ramones T-shirt. "I hear you're good friends with Jamie Lewis." Lance looked beyond the nose ring, eyeliner, and twin ear gauges the size of dinner plates. Under all his facial modifications, Tony's eyes were sharp and suspicious. "Yeah. So?" "I'm looking for her.

Chapter Eight Rain tapped on the kitchen window. Morgan sipped a cup of coffee and read her emails from the DA's office and the Human Resources department. Filling out employment and insurance forms made her new job real, and the first glimmer of interest in something

outside the walls of the house flickered inside her. Next to her, Sophie ate one tiny triangle of her peanut butter and jelly sandwich and worked on a drawing. Morgan glanced at the picture. The wild arcs of color were typical Sophie. Fresh bursts of sadness and anger shot through her. Once Tessa had been a little girl, coloring at her kitchen table. She should have had a long, happy life. Morgan blinked away an image of the girl's ruined body, the same picture that appeared in her nightmares over and over every time she closed her eyes. "It's nap time," Morgan reminded her youngest. Sophie looked up from her lopsided rainbow. As usual, tangled hair swayed around her daughter's face. "I'm too old for naps." Morgan ignored

Chapter Nine What the hell? Lance parked at the curb in front of Morgan's house. Across the street, four police cars were parked in Nick's driveway. A news van had arrived. A reporter and her cameraman scurried up the grass like rats with microphones. In the center of the front lawn, a cop knelt on a man on the ground. Another man in a red shirt was lunging at the pair on the grass. Nick's dad? Morgan stood in front of him, holding him back with both hands on his chest. The reporter shook out her hair, lifted her mic, and checked her lipstick in the lens of the camera. The cop on the ground jerked the handcuffed man to his feet. Shit. That was Nick. The scene came together in one, horrible rush. Nick was being arrested for Tessa's murder. The young man stopped struggling. His body went stiff, his face completely impassive, as if he'd simply shut down. Lance got out of the car. He was not getting involved in Tessa Palmer's case, and Morgan shouldn't either. The DA wouldn't be happy to f

Chapter Ten He turned off the television. Nick Zabrowski had been arrested for Tessa's murder. His plan had worked. He should be happy, but it didn't feel real. Standing, he walked to the window, almost expecting to see a police car outside. But the scene outside was the same as always. A squirrel bounded across the grass and raced up a tree. Could he really have gotten away with what he'd done? He glanced down at his hands. No matter how much he washed them, he couldn't seem to get rid of the imaginary bloodstains. He curled his fingers into tight fists. His nails dug into his palms. The sharp bite of pain was grounding. It amazed him that he could walk around in public, and no one saw through him. He knew what he was, and it

wasn't normal. Other people would be horrified at the things he dreamed about. He worked hard to pretend he was like everybody else. All that hard work had paid off after he lost it Thursday night. He had gotten his shit back together and taken care of business.

Chapter Eleven Morgan opened her eyes to a throbbing headache. She hadn't slept much since finding Tessa's body, and Nick's arrest the day before had kept her awake long into the night. When she did manage to drift off, her nightmares were filled with images of Tessa and Nick and blood. Eventually, her subconscious got around to substituting her own girls in Tessa's place. Wasn't that part of what drove her denial? She didn't want to believe she'd let a murderer into her home. That she'd introduced Nick to Tessa. She glanced at the clock on her nightstand. Seven o'clock! She hadn't slept past the crack of dawn in years. She stumbled out into the hall and glanced in the girls' bedroom. Empty. Mia and Ava had school today. Were they ready? She ducked into the kitchen. Used cereal bowls in the sink reassured her that they'd eaten. She poured a cup of coffee, downed two ibuprofen tablets, and continued her search. Giggles drew her out onto the deck. In the morning light, the girls chased g

Chapter Twelve There was no sneaking up on the Barone family. Two large German shepherds barked from the end of their chains as Lance stopped his Jeep in front of the house. Red

Noneofyourfuckingbusiness, aka Robby Barone, lived with his parents on a small working farm on the edge of town. A small satellite dish topped the roof of the two-story basic-blue farmhouse. The lawn was mostly clover but freshly mowed. There were no flowerbeds, no wind chimes. No furniture adorned the weathered gray porch. Instead of children's toys or a swing set, two clotheslines and a neatly planted vegetable garden filled the rear yard. A barn and multiple outbuildings were clustered together at the rear of the property. A dozen chickens occupied a fenced run and large coop. A second pen held two pigs, and three cows grazed in a small pasture enclosed with barbed wire. A stock trailer and an old school bus were parked alongside the barn. Everything about the place said function over frill. There was an air
Chapter Thirteen Jail, day 1 Naked, Nick shivered as he hustled into the room, a bundle of clothes under one arm. The door behind him closed with a surreal and metallic clank, muffling the moaning and

shouting of the booking area. With almost everything made of block and steel, sounds echoed with a harsh intensity that made him jump constantly for the whole first hour at the county jail. The small room was built of cinderblock with a locked steel door on each end. There was one small, wire-reinforced window in each door. Every few seconds a guard looked in. The room smelled like bleach and piss. A puddle of urine surrounded the stainless steel toilet in the corner. Nick needed to pee but couldn't figure out how to do that without getting piss all over his feet. But, on the bright side, this holding area was empty. For the first time since he'd been brought to the building, Nick could almost draw a full breath. Even though he knew the camera in the ceiling corner was watching, the absen

Chapter Fourteen Everyone looked guilty in an orange prison uniform. Friday morning, Morgan sat at the table in a cell-sized interview room at the county jail. The cobalt blue of her suit was the sole spot of color in the gray-on-gray color scheme. She'd tried to see Nick the previous afternoon, but his official transfer from the SFPD and intake into the county jail hadn't yet been completed. Nothing was more important to the law enforcement system than paperwork. A guard escorted Nick into the room and removed his handcuffs. Rubbing his wrists, Nick slid into the chair opposite Morgan. His face was expressionless, and a bruise darkened his chin. He stared at the wall as the guard retreated. "He hasn't said much since we booked him," the guard said. Good. He'd listened. "I'll be outside the door." The guard shot Nick a warning look. "We'll be fine, but thank you." Morgan waited for the guard to withdraw to the other side of the door. Once the door had closed, Nick's gaze shifted to her

Chapter Fifteen "A knife through the heart?" Anger surged through Lance as he viewed the photo Morgan handed him. "The symbolism is clear." Morgan rubbed her biceps and perched on the second folding chair he'd brought into his makeshift office. By agreeing to defend Nick, in the neighbors' eyes, Morgan had turned on them. "It's a cow heart. I reported it to the police." Morgan shivered and crossed her long legs. "They took pictures and filed a report. I doubt anything will come of it. No one in the community except Bud is on Nick's side." She pressed a hand to her forehead. "Where can you get a cow heart? I called the local grocery stores and butcher shops. No luck." "Have you

called the ethnic markets? There's an Asian supermarket out near the interstate. Sharp goes there to buy sweet potato greens. I know they carry more than the usual cuts of meat. I've seen whole chickens and pig heads." Lance handed the picture back to her. "What about your grandfather's surveillance camera?" "It'

Chapter Sixteen Morgan couldn't imagine having one of her girls missing for two months. Just the thought of it made her queasy. In the tiny living room of a two-bedroom apartment, Vanessa Lewis sat on a plaid love seat and stared at the picture of her daughter. She wore no makeup, and her straight brown hair was cut in a short wash-and-wear cap. "I can't believe this was taken last Thursday night. Why would she still be in Scarlet Falls and refuse to come home?" She blinked a tear from her eye. "We'll find her." Sitting next to her, Vanessa's fiancé, Kevin Murdoch, reached for a tissue box on the end table and handed it to her. Morgan and Lance sat in two wingback chairs on the other side of the glass coffee table. "Did something unusual happen before Jamie ran away?" Morgan asked. Vanessa nodded. Her eyes and nose had reddened. "Kevin asked me to marry him. I was so happy. But when I told Jamie he'd be moving in with us, she exploded. She's always been difficult. Moody. Explosive. Opp

Chapter Seventeen The picture of Tessa stared back at him from his computer screen. Her dark hair was pulled away from her pretty face. It seemed like she was smiling for him. At him. He couldn't use the Internet without seeing her. She was everywhere. And in none of the photos on the news was she covered in blood. So much blood. I miss you. He looked at his hands. Clean. He closed his eyes. How was he going to get over her? He sucked in a deep breath. On the screen, a reporter talked to Morgan Dane. He turned up the volume. In a taped sound bite from the day before, she claimed to know that the wrong person had been arrested for the murder of Tessa Palmer. Impossible. Only two people had been in the woods that night, and one of them was dead. She couldn't possibly know the truth. But doubt lingered under his certainty. He'd lived in constant fear that someone would discover his game and call him out. But people saw what they wanted to see—and no one wanted to believe a killer could ac

Chapter Eighteen The next morning Morgan stepped into the storage room at Sharp Investigations. Lance and Sharp were in the process of

clearing the room out for her use. The closet door was open and stacked with boxes. The long table in the center of the room still held a few cartons. “How is Sophie’s cold?” Lance shifted a box. He wore what she’d come to consider his private investigator uniform: cargo pants, a snug tee, and a short-sleeved shirt worn unbuttoned, likely added to conceal the weapon behind his right hip. “Much better.” Morgan set a takeout tray loaded with three coffees and a Dunkin’ Donuts box on the table. “But I suspect Ava has caught it. No doubt Mia will be next.” “You brought donuts?” Lance grinned. “Also a couple of croissants and muffins. I didn’t know what you and Sharp liked.” Morgan took the lid off her coffee and inhaled. She loved summer, and this morning’s autumn chill had cut right through her. In her opinion, pumpkin coffee and her suede boots were the o

Chapter Nineteen The afternoon sun warmed Lance’s back as he and Morgan walked toward his Jeep. “Are you sure you don’t mind?” Lance asked. “I could drop this list off to my mom, and then meet you later.” He’d given Sharp a hard time, but his boss was right. His mother might be thrilled to be able to help. She had long days and nothing to fill them. But could she handle the facts of the murder case? All Lance had brought was a list of names and addresses—no photos or details of the crime. Still, his mom was fragile. Who knew what would upset her? Lance couldn’t deny that he was embarrassed for Morgan to meet her. He could sense a no-turning-back sharing moment on the horizon. But Morgan was a friend, not a date, and she was the most understanding, giving woman he’d ever known. She didn’t judge people. She’d taken a former drug addict into her home and made her part of her family. She took care of her cantankerous grandfather. She understood what it meant to care for the people she love

Chapter Twenty Jail, day 3 Nick hunched over his breakfast tray. Although his stomach pinched with hunger, he waited for the older inmates to grab their trays. Like high school, much was inferred through your choice of where to sit for a meal. At first, he’d been afraid that every inmate was forced to choose a gang, but it seemed that only a rough third of the population of D-pod were actually gang members. The Man’s information wasn’t exactly correct. If tattoos were accurate, the Aryan Brotherhood, the Bloods, and the Mexican Mafia were all represented, but they gave each other space, as if some

sort of wary truce had been achieved. Since surveillance cameras and guards watched 24/7, maybe they'd all agreed that attacking each other here was pointless. The other forty-odd inmates had their own smaller social groups. A small gathering read the Bible and prayed before breakfast. There was a study group. Nick hadn't expected that. And one popular, geeky guy gave out free legal advice, w

Chapter Twenty-One He lifted his binoculars and watched the three girls standing at the edge of Scarlet Lake. He guessed the girls were about sixteen. The sun reflected off the water like a mirror. One girl handed something to her friend. A joint? He adjusted the focus of his binoculars to zoom in on the girl's face. Yep. They were passing a joint around. He shifted his aim lower. Tight yoga pants cupped tighter asses. He licked his lips. A hand slid down to his crotch. He rubbed himself through the fabric of his pants before giving in to the urge and lowering his zipper. But it wasn't enough. Frustrated, he zipped up. There was no doubt about it. He needed to replace Tessa. He'd thought coming back to the place where she'd died would help with his self-control by reminding him that all actions had consequences. And that he absolutely had to stay out of trouble until this whole mess blew over. But he hadn't counted on those girls and their skintight pants. He'd wanted to be alone at th

Chapter Twenty-Two In the passenger seat of the Jeep, Morgan blinked the tears from her eyes. Her grief was ramping up this week. Lance was still holding her hand. The gesture was simultaneously comforting and terrifying, and she fought both the desire to snatch her hand away and crawl into his lap. She shouldn't be surprised that she wanted some comfort. She'd thrown away her job. Her neighbors hated her. After two years in a holding pattern, she'd turned her entire professional life into a train wreck in the course of a single week. And Lance seemed to want to be there for her. In high school, he'd kept his emotional distance, and she hadn't pressed him for a deeper relationship. They'd been young, and she'd had her own family issues. But the adult Lance was harder to resist. The more time she spent with him, the more he opened up to her. The more she liked him. He put his mother's welfare ahead of his own desires. He made real sacrifices to care for her, and he did it freely and wit

Chapter Twenty-Three Lance drove toward the Barone place. He still didn't like taking Morgan there, but he was going to have to put a leash on his inner guard dog. She'd been a prosecutor for six years. She knew her business, and the Barones wouldn't be the first hostile witnesses she'd interviewed. "What do we have in background information on the Barones?" he asked. Morgan took a file from her giant bag, flipped through some pages, and began to read. "I'll summarize. No one at the Barone house has a criminal record. Robby, or Robert William Barone, is the second of six kids. He turned sixteen four months ago. His license was issued on his birthday. He has one older sister and four younger ones. The oldest is eighteen. The youngest is eight." "Six kids in ten years?" "My kids are two years apart," Morgan said. "But you don't have six of them," Lance pointed out. "We talked about having another." "Did you?" Why was he surprised? She was only thirty-three, and she clearly enjoyed her ki

Chapter Twenty-Four As Lance drove away from the Barone farm, Morgan set down her phone. It was four p.m. Where had the day gone? They'd made so little progress. She needed to regroup, to go back to the beginning and look at the crime anew. "Let's visit the crime scene before it gets dark," she said. "Do you have a camera?" "In the console." Lance lifted his arm. Morgan retrieved the camera. Though the police had already photographed the scene, they were viewing the case from an entirely different angle. When she'd worked on homicide cases for the Albany County DA, she'd always visited the crime scenes to make sure she had an in-person perspective. Photos and diagrams weren't enough to visualize how the crime played out. She'd caught more than one criminal in a lie because he'd gotten slight details wrong. Lance pulled onto the road and made the next left. Morgan reviewed her notes on the crime scene during the drive out to the lake. Lance turned down the same dirt lane they'd used the

Chapter Twenty-Five Lance's hand automatically went to the Glock at his hip. The sound had come from deeper in the woods. "Let's go back to the Jeep." He steered Morgan down the path toward the clearing, keeping his body between her and the origin of the noise. He should have listened to his instincts when they'd first gotten out of the car. But he'd thought they were both spooked by the scene itself. Oh hell, they still could be. Morgan pointed toward the impromptu shrine.

“Looks like plenty of other people have been here. It’s probably just someone who wants to pay his respects. Or satisfy his curiosity.” “I’m sure you’re right,” Lance said. Was their visitor Jamie Lewis? She’d been at the party, and no one seemed to know how she’d gotten there. Could she be hiding out here in the woods? “Should we call the police?” Morgan asked as they stepped back into the clearing. Out of the underbrush, they turned and headed for the grass and dirt tract where they’d left the Jeep. “And say what?”

Chapter Twenty-Six Morgan got out of the Jeep as soon as Lance parked behind her minivan in front of Sharp Investigations. Her scraped leg ached as she detoured to her van and removed a gym bag from the cargo area. The sun had set, and dusk settled over the quiet street. They went up the walk and climbed the steps of the dark duplex. Lance unlocked the front door. “I didn’t know you went to a gym.” “Two months ago, I bought a two-week trial membership. I went twice. The gym bag has been sitting in there since.” Morgan followed him into the office. “Sharp must be out.” Lance closed and locked the door behind them. “You obviously work out regularly.” She scanned his muscles on top of muscles. He shrugged. “My physical therapy regimen is intensive.” “It’s helped you recover?” “Yes. It’s also good for releasing endorphins and purging stress.” “That was my intention with the trial membership.” She had plenty of excuses about the kids taking up all her time, but in reality, she just hadn’t b

Chapter Twenty-Seven “How was your Sunday?” Lance asked Morgan as he walked into the war room. By mutual agreement, Lance, Sharp, and Morgan had all used the previous day to catch up on personal commitments, read files, and let Lance’s mother get a jump on the research. Lance had taken his mom to therapy. He’d mowed her lawn, done her shopping, gone through her bills, and filled her medication organizer for the week. “Quiet. I took the girls to the park and finished reading through the police interviews.” Standing behind the table, she set down her bag and a stainless-steel travel mug and draped her jacket across the back of her chair. Easing into the chair, she crossed her legs, the cuff of her navy slacks rising enough to show her shiny black heels. Dark smudges under her eyes told him she’d spent the daylight hours with her children and worked well into the night. “What did you

do yesterday?” “The same.” After he’d finished with his mom, Lance had read through files until his eyebal

Chapter Twenty-Eight Lance blinked hard, but it didn’t change the sight. The farm looked deserted. Morgan lowered her window. She tilted her head to the opening. “It’s too quiet.” He turned past the mailbox into the driveway. There were no vehicles parked near the house. The chicken enclosure and pigpen were empty. No cows grazed in the pasture. The stock trailer and school bus that had been parked alongside the barn were gone. They got out of the car. Lance led the way to the front door. Who knew what kind of surprises Dwayne Barone, with all of his WSA paranoia, would leave behind? Standing to the side of the doorway, he tucked Morgan behind him and knocked on the door. Nothing but eerie silence greeted them. Lance walked to the window and peered inside. “The furniture is still here, but they took everything else.” Wire hung from holes in the wall where the TV and other electronic devices had been installed. Lance went back down the steps. Backing away from the house, he scanned the

Chapter Twenty-Nine Morgan’s heart dropped into her stomach as the stairway crumbled in front of her, and Lance plunged to the ground in a cloud of smoke and dust. “Lance!” She rushed forward. The structure had broken apart. Lance landed in the middle of the rubble. The small cloud of smoke dissipated in a few seconds in the breeze. Had Voss set a small explosion as a booby trap? Morgan climbed over a pile of wood. He was on his back with several boards piled on top of him. He wasn’t moving. Her heart stuttered. He had to be all right. He just had to be. Fear turned her hands clammy and her belly cold as she crouched next to him. “Can you hear me?” He stirred. “Yes.” Thank God. Morgan exhaled. Her head swam with relief. She put a hand on the ground to steady herself. “Don’t move.” She lifted a board off his torso. “Does anything hurt?” “I’m all right.” He tried to slide out from under two joined steps pinning him across the thighs. “You shouldn’t be moving!” She squatted and picked up

Chapter Thirty Lance shifted into drive. He locked the doors. The thought of Voss running loose made Lance want to put Morgan on a plane to Australia. “No!” Morgan turned to stare at him. “How did Voss escape?” “He slipped out of his restraints, knocked out an orderly, and stole his uniform and ID. The man might be insane, but

he's very intelligent." Lance drove onto the road. "Did he escape before or after his booby trap went off?" Morgan asked. "Just after. He must have set it before he shot at us at the lake." "Where do you think Voss will go?" "Since he set his own place to self-destruct, I'd bet either to his wife or to hide in the woods. In case he picks his wife, we'd better catch up with Mrs. Voss before he does." Mrs. Voss wasn't at home, nor was she at the bank branch where she worked as the assistant manager. The branch manager told them she'd just left. Lance saw no sign of Voss at either location. If everyone was lucky, he'd head for the wilderness to hole up. "Is she afra

Chapter Thirty-One Jail, day 5 Nick retrieved an evening chow tray from the cart. As he turned, Shorty gestured to him. Nick walked over, and Shorty motioned to the empty spot on the bench next to him. "You can eat here if you want." No one had bothered him much since his beating two days ago. Nick had added staying far away from cell doorways to his growing list of habits. He'd also spotted other blind spots and avoided them as well. Nick sat down, hoping no one would attack him in full view of the surveillance cameras. "I'm not that hungry. You want an extra biscuit?" Shorty asked. Nick hesitated. Trying to analyze the subtext was giving him a headache. If he took the biscuit, did he owe Shorty something in return? If he didn't take the offer, would Shorty be offended? If there was one thing he'd learned since he'd arrived here, it was that jail operated on a system of respect. The worst thing a man could do was show disrespect to another. Every man had a place on the hierarchy, a sp

Chapter Thirty-Two Morgan sailed out of the municipal building, her step brisk, her mind whirling. "I can't wait to tell Nick tomorrow. We finally have a break in his case. I'll stop by Bud's house and give him the good news tonight. He needs some encouragement." Nick's dad needed hope, and she couldn't wait to give it to him. "I wouldn't build his hopes up too much." Lance fell into step beside her on the sidewalk. Since they'd gotten word of Voss's escape, Lance hadn't stopped scanning their surroundings. "This won't mean much until the DNA test comes back." At six thirty in the evening, the visitors' lot was mostly empty. "It'll mean one of the prosecution's key witnesses lied, and the video with Nick fighting Jacob just took on a whole new meaning. Nick's account looks a lot more truthful than Jacob's now.

Bryce might not want to admit it, but between those photos and Voss's camp near the murder site, I can poke a hundred holes in his case against Nick." At the end of the walk, Mor

Chapter Thirty-Three Lance woke to a dark house. He'd worried about Nick in the ICU, crazy Dean Voss on the loose, and Morgan falling apart in his arms. Especially that last part. His hand brushed the empty, cold pillow next to him. It was a freaking miracle he'd resisted taking her to bed. Beyond the physical desire, she was everything he'd ever wanted in a woman, a beauty that went soul deep and an irresistible combination of strength and fragility. He didn't know how she handled the amount of stress and responsibility on her shoulders. Looking after just his mother overwhelmed him at times. His joints felt like rusty hinges after a night of very little sleep. All he wanted was a cup of strong coffee and a hot shower. There was no way in hell that Sharp's green tea would cut through Lance's brain fog. But as he got out of bed, he sensed the place was empty. He pulled on a pair of shorts and went to the guest bedroom. The door was ajar. He peered inside.

Morgan was gone. Damn it. Ther

Chapter Thirty-Four Morgan walked through her front door. Sophie was already up. She stood on a stool in the kitchen "helping" Gianna make pancakes. "Morning." Gianna caught Morgan's eye. "Any new updates?" "Nick is doing better." Morgan nodded. She'd talked to Bud in the car. She'd also left a message for the county sheriff. He needed to provide her with the details on Nick's attack. "Mommy!" Sophie leaped from her chair and raced to Morgan. Morgan caught her in midair and kissed her on the forehead. With her daughter's thin limbs wrapped around her waist, she walked toward the hallway. "I'll wake Ava and Mia." A chatty breakfast with her girls was exactly what Morgan needed to regroup. She helped them dress, brushed and braided their hair, and walked them to the bus stop. Sophie refused to let Morgan touch her hair, saying she would wait for Gianna to make her kitten ears. As the bus approached, she took Sophie's hand, kissed Mia and Ava, and watched her two oldest girls climb the bi

Chapter Thirty-Five Mrs. Voss lived in a development of small homes on postage-stamp lots. Upkeep was a mixed bag. Some lawns were mowed and raked, others overgrown. Lance parked at the curb of a small bungalow. No peeling paint or dangling shutters, but the grass

needed mowing. He surveyed the surrounding houses but saw no sign of Dean Voss. Across the street, a police car sat at the curb. Lance recognized the young cop in the driver's seat. Really? Horner had put the rookie on duty to watch for an ex-special forces soldier? Lance scanned the property. "I guess Mrs. Voss hasn't had time to mow the lawn." Morgan gathered her tote. "If one of my neighbors had grass that high, Grandpa would be at their door asking if everything was all right. Then he'd have seen to the grass." "Either this isn't that kind of neighborhood or Mrs. Voss isn't that kind of neighbor." Two doors down from the Vosses', a garage door opened and a man emerged to fetch his garbage can from the curb. "Let's find ou

Chapter Thirty-Six Morgan's heart stuttered as she recognized Dean Voss. His face was thin, his eyes feral. She kept both of her hands on the table in front of her. Voss jerked the gun at Lance. "Put your hands on your head. Interlace your fingers." He shifted his gaze to Morgan for a second. "You too." "Dean, they were just talking to me," his wife said. "No." Voss shook his head. "They want to take you away. They want to hurt you. The only way you'll be safe is if you come with me." "I won't go," she said. "You need me. You need help." "The only kind of help I need is the kind that'll make me disappear. They want me to pay for what I did." Voss's voice softened. "I have to pay." He lifted his chin. There was too much white around his eyes. They blazed with a crazy light. "Dean. No one wants to hurt you. They want to help." "No," he shouted. His grip on the rifle tightened until his knuckles were as white as his eyes. "That's just what they told you to make you cooperate." Dean Voss w

Chapter Thirty-Seven Lance showered and dressed in clean clothes before heading to the office to give Sharp all the details on Voss's self-destruction. Today's incident was another unwelcome reminder of his own shooting last fall. Sharp was at his desk typing on his laptop when Lance walked in. Lance dropped into a chair, his foot tapping as he gave his boss a complete rundown of the incident at Voss's house. Sharp closed his laptop. "Was the shooting justified?" Lance replayed those few pivotal seconds in his mind. "Voss had put down his rifle in the kitchen. He had Morgan's weapon on him, but his hands were empty. He was running away. I was chasing him. He turned at the last second and the rookie shot him." Sharp's jaw tightened. "The officer

could have shot you.” “But he didn’t. His aim was true, and I won’t be the one to judge him.” Lance tried to stop his leg from bouncing, but the adrenaline rush at the Voss house had left him twitchy. “I don’t know what the rookie saw from his a

Chapter Thirty-Eight Rage pulsed inside him. It grew and fed on itself until it had a will of its own. Morgan Dane was going to ruin everything. Someone else had been arrested. The evidence he’d planted had been solid—until Ms. Dane stuck her nose into his business. There was no question that she had to be stopped. But how? Her sidekick, the former cop, was always at her side, and he acted like her personal bodyguard. He’d spent all night devising a plan to stop her investigation. Step number one: finish what the county jail had left undone. She couldn’t defend a dead client. He entered the hospital through the main doors. This wasn’t the city. The medium-size community hospital had little need for security. There were only two people behind the reception desk in the lobby. An elderly woman sat at a computer, looking up patient room numbers and handing out visitor passes with a polite smile. Seated behind her, a security guard in his mid-fifties drank coffee and talked over the counter

Chapter Thirty-Nine Consciousness tugged at Nick. He resisted. The last thing he wanted to do was wake up. He’d done that earlier, and pain had slammed into him with the force of a bus. On one hand, the pain had assured him that he was alive when he’d been certain he wasn’t. On the other, the agony had been so intense, he’d considered the advantages of being dead. As he floated from the heavy depths of drugged slumber, the fire in his belly encouraged him to stay asleep. He was flat on his back, tethered to the bed by wire and tubes. Why be awake when he couldn’t move anyway? Sure, the nurse had told him earlier that movement would aid his recovery, but really, what was his motivation to get better? The sooner he healed, the faster they put him back in jail. What was the point? Even if Morgan managed to convince a jury that the prosecution hadn’t proven his guilt, the whole town had already tried and convicted him. He would never be innocent in their eyes unless Tessa’s real killer was

Chapter Forty Morgan stepped out of the elevator. She couldn’t wait to tell Nick the DA had dropped the charges against him. She followed the signs to his room and walked inside. A doctor was on top of Nick.

At first, she thought maybe he was administering CPR, but then she saw the pillow over Nick's face. Oh my God. He was trying to kill Nick. She shook off her shock. "Hey," she yelled, grabbing the man by the back of his collar and pulling him off Nick. The man had been focused on smothering Nick, and she took him by surprise. He tumbled backward off the bed and onto the floor. His glasses flew across the room and his dark hair fell off, revealing a blond-and-silver head. But Morgan had no time to stare at the wig on the floor. Nick! She lunged to his bedside. "Help!" she screamed, hoping her voice would carry to the hallway. "Somebody help me in here." Without turning her back to the man on the floor, Morgan snatched the pillow from Nick's face. Is he breathing? She jabbed the call

Chapter Forty-One Lance raced down the hallway. An orderly shouted at him. "You can't go down there. The floor is closed off. There's a hostage situation." Lance ignored him. He skidded around the turn and pulled up short. Emerson was backing down the corridor. Dressed as a doctor, he dragged Morgan along the hallway, hiding behind her body and holding a knife to her throat. Lance wasn't a violent man, but at that moment, he wanted to kill Phillip Emerson. Lance reached for the weapon on his hip, then realized the SFPD hadn't returned it yet. Fuck. Thankfully, he still had his backup piece. Nobody had asked for it and he hadn't volunteered. His heart knocked against his ribs. He couldn't let anything happen to Morgan, but he could see the desire to hurt her in Emerson's eyes. A security guard had his weapon drawn and pointed at Emerson and Morgan. The guard was obviously out of his element because his hands were shaking hard. Terror filled Lance as he imagined the security guard shooti

Chapter Forty-Two Morgan held her bandaged arm against her body as she slid into Lance's Jeep. "What time is it?" "Almost midnight."

Lance closed the car door, rounded the vehicle, and got into the driver's seat. "Are you in pain?" "Nope. Not yet." The painkillers the hospital had given her made everything fuzzy. Her mouth tasted like she'd eaten cotton balls. "I'll have you home in fifteen minutes."

Morgan didn't remember the drive. She must have dozed off. The next thing she knew she was home and Lance was helping her into the house. Her grandfather held the door open. Gianna was waiting in the hall. "She's fine," Lance said. "Just a little spacey." "If you can get her

to her room, I can take over from there.” Gianna followed them down the hall. “I only hurt my arm. My legs are fine. I can walk.” But Morgan wobbled more than walked. Lance half carried her to her bed. “Looks like she doesn’t tolerate painkillers any better than alcohol.” She stretched out. “I can hear you.” But she co

Chapter Forty-Three Lance walked into the ice arena. The kids were already warming up. Coach Zack leaned on the half wall and watched as they circled the rink. Zack turned. “Hey, Lance. Are those your skates?” “They are.” Lance sat on the bench and exchanged his athletic shoes for the black hockey skates. “Does your therapist know about this?” “I’ve been approved for some light skating.” Lance tightened the laces. “So don’t expect anything exciting.” But it felt damned good to step out onto the ice. The kids raced over. He had a brief moment of panic that he’d get body slammed, but they gave him room, zooming around him and shouting encouragement. “Coach Lance!”

“Awesome.” Lance grinned. A year and a half ago, these same kids distrusted cops so much they’d barely speak to him. Their trust had come slowly. But when he’d been shot, every single one of them had visited him in the hospital. He followed instructions and kept his ice time short, hanging up his skates to help Zack coach from

Chapter Forty-Four Two days later Lance went into the office late Friday morning after stopping to check on his mom. Sharp was on the phone. The dog was curled up in a bed in the corner. Lance waved as he passed the doorway. Then he settled at the card table in his office and stared at the single file in front of him: his father’s case. He still hadn’t opened it. Yes, he wanted to know what had happened to his dad, but if Sharp hadn’t found any clues in twenty-three years, what were the chances any existed? What were the chances that Lance would get sucked into a past that he’d thought he’d made peace with? He also considered the effect any digging into the past would have on his mom. The front door opened and closed. Morgan walked past his doorway. Surprise pulled Lance to his feet. He hadn’t seen her since he’d dropped her at her house Tuesday night. The dog bolted from Sharp’s office to greet her, and Lance wanted to do the same. He listened to her talk to the dog in a ridiculous hi

Acknowledgments As always, credit goes to my agent Jill Marsal, and to the entire team at Montlake Romance, especially my managing

editor Anh Schluep, developmental editor Charlotte Herscher, and author herder/tech goddess Jessica Poore. Special thanks to Leanne Sparks for her patience and help with some of the procedural elements of this story. She saved me weeks of research.

About the Author Photo © 2016 Jared Gruenwald Wall Street Journal bestselling author Melinda Leigh is a fully recovered banker. A lifelong lover of books, she started writing as a way to preserve her sanity when her youngest child entered first grade. During the next few years, she joined Romance Writers of America, learned a few things about writing a novel, and decided the process was way more fun than analyzing financial statements. Melinda's debut novel, *She Can Run*, was nominated for Best First Novel by the International Thriller Writers. She's also earned three Daphne du Maurier Award nominations and a Golden Leaf Award. Her other novels include *She Can Tell*, *She Can Scream*, *She Can Hide*, *She Can Kill*, *Midnight Exposure*, *Midnight Sacrifice*, *Midnight Betrayal*, *Midnight Obsession*, *Hour of Need*, *Minutes to Kill*, and *Seconds to Live*. She holds a second-degree black belt in Kenpo karate; teaches women's self-defense; and lives in a messy house with her husband, two teenagers, a couple

**SAY
YOU'RE
SORRY**

ALSO BY MELINDA LEIGH

SCARLET FALLS NOVELS

Hour of Need

Minutes to Kill

Seconds to Live

SHE CAN SERIES

She Can Run

She Can Tell

She Can Scream

She Can Hide

He Can Fall (A Short Story)

She Can Kill

MIDNIGHT NOVELS

Midnight Exposure

Midnight Sacrifice

Midnight Betrayal

Midnight Obsession

THE ROGUE SERIES NOVELLAS

Gone to Her Grave (Rogue River)
Walking on Her Grave (Rogue River)
Tracks of Her Tears (Rogue Winter)
Burned by Her Devotion (Rogue Vows)

**SAY
YOU'RE
SORRY**

MELINDA
LEIGH



Montlake
Romance

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

Text copyright © 2017 Melinda Leigh
All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced, or stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without express written permission of the publisher.

Published by Montlake Romance, Seattle
www.apub.com

Amazon, the Amazon logo, and Montlake Romance are trademarks of Amazon.com, Inc., or its affiliates.

ISBN-13: 9781503948709
ISBN-10: 1503948706

Cover design by Damonza

*For Roxy aka "Rocket Dog."
We rescued each other.*

Contents

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Two](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Three](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Four](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Five](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Six](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Seven](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Eight](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Nine](#)

[Chapter Thirty](#)

[Chapter Thirty-One](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Two](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Three](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Four](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Five](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Six](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Seven](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Eight](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Nine](#)

[Chapter Forty](#)

[Chapter Forty-One](#)

[Chapter Forty-Two](#)

[Chapter Forty-Three](#)

[Chapter Forty-Four](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

Chapter One

Darkness.

Tessa had been afraid of it most of her life. For as long as she could remember, she'd gone to bed dreading nightfall, looking under the bed, double-checking her nightlight.

As if a lightbulb the size of a lit match could possibly banish her nightmares.

But tonight, she prayed for the blackest of nights. For the moon to stay hidden behind the shifting clouds. For the shadows to make her invisible.

The darkness had changed sides. Head spinning, lungs screaming, she ran into its embrace. What had once been her greatest fear could now be her savior. Her miracle.

That's what it was going to take to keep her alive until the sun rose.

"Tesssssa." The voice floated over the forest. "You can't get away."

Where is he?

Evergreen boughs grabbed at her arms and scratched her face as she plunged through the forest like a panicked deer. Her heart beat with the frantic staccato of a prey animal. She slowed, her body protesting the abuse of little-used muscles. She passed the scorched carcass of a burned tree. Its blackened branches pointed upward like a charred hand reaching for the sky. She ducked behind the shelter of a towering oak. Bark scraped her back as she pressed against the trunk and listened.

Where did he go?

A mosquito buzzed around her face. To her right, she could hear the sounds of the forest that surrounded Scarlet Lake. The stillness of the night sharpened her senses. Frogs croaked. Crickets chirped. An animal, small and light, scurried through the underbrush nearby. The air was thick with the scents of pine, lake water, and fear.

Not for the first time, she wished she could shrink and disappear into a rabbit hole.

Hoot! An owl landed on an overhead branch.

Tessa startled, a gasp slipping from her lips. She covered her open mouth with a hand. Liquid dripped over her fingers, and when she lowered her hand, it came away wet with tears—and blood. She touched the corner of her mouth, where his fist had split her lip. Other parts of her face and body ached from what he'd done in the clearing before she'd managed to land a kick to his groin.

Then he'd dropped her, and she'd run. Blindly.

The owl took flight, slow flaps of its wings sending it soaring through a break in the canopy. The clouds parted, and moonlight shone through the opening. For a few seconds, the raptor was silhouetted against the inky sky. And then it was gone.

Sliding down the tree trunk, she sat on her heels and huddled.

Despite the coolness of the September night, her lungs burned as if she'd inhaled gas and swallowed a flame. She panted; the sound echoed in her ears and seemed loud enough to carry a mile through the trees.

Quiet!

He was going to hear. She was out of shape, and her mad sprint had taxed her lungs. She hadn't gotten far. He had to be close.

“Tesssssa.”

The drumming of her heartbeat muffled his voice. She couldn't tell which direction it was coming from.

She pressed her lips together, but her lungs demanded more air. Red rimmed her vision as dizziness enveloped her. Opening her mouth, she kept her breaths shallow, hoping, praying her ragged gasps weren't as loud as they sounded echoing in her own ears.

Minutes passed.

Nothing happened.

Maybe he'd gone in the other direction.

Her breathing eased. Her legs began to tremble from the cramped position. She'd partied in the clearing countless times. But everything looked the same in the dark.

She'd lost track of her location.

She glanced around the trunk. Twenty feet ahead, moonlight cast a trail in silvery shadows. Was that the path that led to the main road? Beyond

the narrow break in the foliage, the trees closed in, and darkness smothered the forest.

Sweat ran down her spine and pooled at her lower back, soaking the waistband of her jeans. She squinted. What choice did she have? She couldn't stay here long.

He'd catch up with her.

He'd kill her.

But in order to run, she'd have to come out from behind the tree.

Where is he?

No matter. She had to keep moving. If he hadn't caught her yet, he soon would. There was no way he'd let her go now. Why had she trusted him? Because he'd said he loved her?

Stupid.

He wasn't capable of love. She'd known it in her head, but her heart had wanted to believe.

And now the truth would kill her.

At the beginning of the evening, she'd considered walking into the cold lake and putting an end to her misery. But now that death was breathing down her neck, terror had taken over. Her survival instinct overrode any fears about her future.

I don't want to die.

Her last words to her grandparents had been angry. She'd lied to them. If she didn't make it out of this, that argument would be their final memory of her. They weren't perfect, but they loved her. Now there'd be no way for her to say she loved them back, that she hadn't meant what she'd said, that she'd been upset about the mess she'd made of her life and she'd lashed out at them.

She wouldn't have a chance to say she was sorry.

She had to get away. She had to live. To apologize for hurting the two people who loved her the most. She pushed to her feet. Her thigh muscles shivered, and her head swam. Instead of running all out, she picked her way to the trail. With no idea where he was, the less noise she made the better. If she didn't know where she was, maybe he didn't either.

Underbrush snatched at her bare legs as she stepped onto the path and eased into a slow jog. The packed dirt under her sneakers felt familiar. She rounded a bend and quickened her pace. A twig snapped, and she bolted like a rabbit. A cloud drifted in front of the moon, dropping a shadow across her

path. Tessa's foot caught, and she fell. Pain zinged through her kneecap as it struck an exposed tree root. On hands and knees, she paused, catching her breath and swallowing the terror that clogged her throat. Tears ran down her cheeks.

Keep going!

She got one foot under her body and stood. Forcing her shaky legs to move, she stumbled up the path and drew up short as she recognized the scorched tree. She'd run in a circle. She stumbled as she realized she was headed back toward the clearing.

Toward him.

The rustle of dead leaves echoed, loud as a crack of thunder.

Please. Please, don't let him catch me.

Tears blurred her vision. Swiping a hand across her face, she cleared her eyes, then broke into a weak run.

A shadow stepped out from behind a fat tree. She skidded to a stop, the worn soles of her canvas high-tops sliding in the dirt.

Her bones trembled as she stared up at him. He wasn't panting or sweating or the slightest bit out of breath.

And she knew. The truth struck her like an open hand against her cheek.

She was going to die.

Panic wrapped around her neck and tightened its grip until breathing was as hard as sucking air through a straw.

"Did you really think you could get away?" He shook his head.

She turned and ran, blindly shoving at the branches in her way. She couldn't outrun him. She was tired, and he was fresh. Her breaths dragged in and out of her lungs in ragged gasps. Behind her, his footfalls were even and sure.

She burst from the woods. The lake glimmered in front of her. At the edge of the dark water, a thick patch of cattails waved in the breeze. The ground was soggy underfoot as she bolted into the thick stalks. One thought dominated her brain:

Hide!

The wet ground pulled at the soles of her sneakers, the squishing sound betraying her. A hand shot out and grabbed her bicep. He dragged her toward him.

"No." She pulled back, dropping her butt toward the ground.

But resisting proved as futile as it felt.

She opened her mouth and let out a wild scream.

“Shut up!” He struck out, the movement of his arm quick and sure.

The fist connected with her jaw. She blinked. The cattails around her blurred.

She’d been right all along. The dark was not her friend. It would not save her. It was an abyss from which she’d never emerge. Never again.

This was the end.

She fell to the marshy ground. Above, cattails waved against the night sky. Then a figure was silhouetted. Something metal glinted in the moonlight and pain sliced her into pieces.

The world faded into a cold and dreaded darkness.