

**Prologue**

*Thirteen, fourteen, fifteen.*

She ticked the seconds off silently in her head. Her heart hammered painfully, the desperate waves of panic making it impossible to think. *Stay calm. Stay calm*, she repeated, as she rifled through the drawers of what once had been her mother's dresser.

*Twenty-two, twenty-three, twenty-four.*

Shit. It had to be here. This is right where her mother always kept it.

She slammed the drawer closed. The clap of cheap wood echoed in the quiet house. The jarring noise was a dead giveaway.

It didn't matter though. She was out of time.

His boots rang hallow on the stairs. He was coming. She pushed back the waves of panic and tried to focus.

*Thirty-three, thirty-four, thirty-five.*

It took a total of forty-five seconds for him to climb the stairs and reach her bedroom door. She should know. She'd counted it enough times, lying awake in bed listening to the heavy tread of his footsteps and dreading what would come next.

He passed the top of the landing and headed down the narrow hall. She could feel the reverberation of his boots on the bare hardwood floors as he drew closer. *Maybe five more seconds, if he's drunk.* Maybe. And then he would burst through the door.

Panic overwhelmed her defenses and struck her full force. She knew hiding was futile. She knew he would find her. Unable to stop herself, she ducked into the closet.

The dark welcomed her, and she slid through the curtain of her mother's clothes. Her back softly collided with the wall. Inch by inch, she sank down until she sat hunched on the floor. Waiting.

"Ready or not, here I come," her stepfather, Master Sergeant Samuel Morris, called out in that creepy, singsong voice, like this was some kind of sick game.

Her hands shook, and she clasped them in a tight knot under her chin. Her mother's scent—baby powder and cinnamon—filled the small space, enveloping her like a warm cloak, and she wished she could hide here forever. Safe. Untouched.

Tears stung her eyes. God, she missed her mother. It was bad before. His punishments had always been harsh, but since her mother's death, everything had changed.

Hot tears poured down her cheeks. She brushed them roughly away with trembling hands and cursed herself for being weak, for giving into her fear. She had to be strong. She must not cry. If there was one thing Sam liked more than the chase-me game, it was her tears, and she had no wish to give him what he wanted. He could take, but she would not give.

She bit the inside of her cheek until the rusty tang of blood filled her mouth. Sometimes the pain helped her focus. She couldn't win, of course. He was too powerful,

too relentless. But she refused to give up. There had to be a way out of the trap. There had to be. She just had to live long enough to find it.

Heavy footsteps stopped outside the door. The light bulb overhead clicked. Harsh yellow light filled the closet. She pulled her knees close, shriveling back into the shadows.

“Time’s up, Jill,” he said in his rumbling baritone.

Despite her steely resolve, thin tendrils of fear unfurled in the pit of her stomach, and she knew he was right. The game was over. And he had won. Again. Hatred burned in her eyes as she stared at the heavy beige boots encasing his size-twelve feet.

Sam parted the clothes. The hangers squealed against the metal rod, reminding her of fingernails on slate. The sound made her teeth ache.

She could smell his sour mash breath, and a wave of nausea rolled through the pit of her stomach. Tears threatened, and she forced them back behind a frozen wall. Like a caterpillar, she withdrew inside her icy cocoon to a place far beyond, where he couldn’t touch her.

“Were you looking for this?” he asked.

Master Sergeant Morris dangled a twenty-two caliber sub-compact pistol from a thick finger. Jill’s gaze shifted from the gun to the grotesque smile on his broad face and back again.

The gun. Yes. Every night as he opened her bedroom door, she’d thought about the gun, and pictured a bullet hole centered between his thick black brows. But as usual, he was two steps ahead.

Like Jesse James, he spun the pistol around his finger and tucked it neatly into the back of his fatigues.

“You like games, do you?” he asked.

“Not as much as you,” she said, in a voice that sounded steadier than she felt.

His cruel lips flattened into a thin line. Jill remained perfectly still, her face a stony mask. Sam hunkered down. His meaty hands snaked toward her. Hot fingers slithered around her neck. She shuddered and waited for them to constrict, squeezing off her airway. But they didn't tighten. Goosebumps dimpled her icy skin as he caressed the long column of her slender throat. Their eyes locked, and as much as she wanted to, she refused to look away.

Never again, she promised herself. Never again would he touch her like this. He would pay. Somehow this sick game would end.

And no matter what the cost, she would win.