

# CHAPTER 1

Rubi Lee sprinted away from the screaming sirens, away from the carnage in the garage. She struggled to think clearly. Behind her, red and blue swirling lights dotted the night sky. No way was she going to do time—again.

Branches scratched and tore at her party dress. Her bare arms and legs pumped in unison. Falling snowflakes blinded her. She propelled herself over the frozen ground, not feeling the cold. Violent, bloody images from the garage rolled through her mind like fat storm clouds. *Don't think about the garage! Don't think about it!* Rubi Lee forced the horrid images out of her scrambled brain.

Through Margaux Ford Park she ran to the south gate. Breathless, she stopped and was relieved to see it—the white van—where earlier, she and her now-dead brother Zeke had left it. *Don't think about him! Stop!* She knew the police would put an APB out on her and the vehicle. The sirens sounded closer and closer. *I gotta get my stuff from the van!* Twenty yards stood between her and where her phone and backpack waited. Headlights eclipsed the entrance to the park.

Sucking in as much air as her nicotine-ravaged lungs allowed, Rubi Lee raced to the van. She threw open the passenger's side door and fumbled for her backpack. The slam of car doors and voices cut through the night.

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Flashlight beams cast bright streaks across the snow. The voices grew louder. She glanced through the driver's side window and saw, in the distance, two officers jogging toward the van. The crunch of snow under their boots echoed through the night. She grabbed her backpack and sprinted hard and fast in the opposite direction.

Rubi Lee ran until she thought her heart would erupt out of her chest. "Oh God!" She bent over and vomited. She stood up slowly and placed one pale hand on a tree to steady herself, then wiped her mouth and shook her head. *Breathe, just try to breathe.* Wet coughs wracked her body.

Once the coughing subsided, she rooted inside the backpack and pulled out leggings, a sweatshirt, and sneakers. She pulled the sweatshirt over her dress, yanked up the leggings and kicked off her tattered, filthy flats. She shoved her cold feet into the sneakers and thrust the flats into her backpack. She found her phone, but kept it turned off to avoid being tracked. She rummaged in the side pocket of the backpack for her beloved, trusty knife. *Ah, here you are Timmy. Thank God.* The moonlight reflected off the blade. She smiled, dropped Timmy back into the pocket, and hustled out of the park to a road. There, she'd begin a long walk, away from the lights of Washington, DC.

Rubi Lee, frozen to the core, trudged down the deserted street through the snow. She had no choice. *I need a car. Walking is gonna kill me.* In the distance, a dimly lit sign for a motel stood out among the falling snow. She hustled up the darkened driveway and took refuge under a clump of trees. A rest was needed.

A few cars were parked in front of the doors of the no-tell-motel. From her hiding spot, she checked for video

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cameras. None were anywhere she could see. Rubi Lee attempted several doors, but all were locked. She waited outside the squat, decrepit motel when a car skidded to a sideway stop in the parking lot. *Oh shit! Hide!* The coarse bark of a snow-covered pine tree scraped her face when she pressed herself up against it. Peering around the tree, she calculated the car was roughly twenty yards to her left. Watching and shivering, she thought, *This could be my chance to get my hands on a car.*

The driver killed the lights and clumsily hefted himself out of the vehicle. He threw his bearded head back, taking one last swig of beer, and threw the bottle into the darkness. She sized him up and smiled. *Short, skinny, and drunk—the best kind*, she thought as she watched him stumble toward the light of a room. He favored his left side and fought to keep his footing in the snow. He held his keys up to the light before finding the one to his room. Like a lion stalking prey, she padded closer to him. He bobbed back and forth and struggled to insert the key into the door. Fifteen feet stood between her and the man. Rubi Lee clenched her teeth against the cold and closed in.

“Got it!” He unlocked the door and returned the keys to his pocket.

He was barely inside when Rubi Lee charged him. Caught off guard, he fell hard when she shoved him and landed face down, yelping, on the filthy shag rug. She jumped on his back, straddled him, and pinned his arms with her knees. He struggled under her, but she overpowered him.

“Get offa me!” he slurred.  
Rubi Lee wrenched his head up by his stringy,

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unwashed hair. She whipped out her knife and laid the sharp blade against his throat. “You make *one* move, and you’re dead,” she whispered into his hairy ear. “Understand?”

His foul breath came out in spurts. “Oh God! Don’t—” “Shut up!”  
The cold tip pricked his neck. “Please,” he whimpered. “Where are your keys?”

“Um, in my...ah...my pocket, the...the...jacket pocket.”

“Good boy.” She slid her hand into his pocket. She jingled the keys and tossed them on the bed.

He begged for his life. “Please, please don’t hurt me. I gave you my keys. I won’t tell no one about this.”

Rubi Lee sighed. “I know you won’t. You won’t have the chance.” And in one quick movement, he became her first victim.

She stepped outside, but the blast of cold stopped her. *Clothes*, she thought, but knew her chances of finding anything were slim. She looked around the room for things to take. She grabbed a pillow off the bed and headed into the bathroom. Off went the damp sweatshirt and clammy party dress, which she stuffed into the pillowcase. Towel wrapped around her, she grabbed a washcloth and used it to pull open the top drawer of the crooked dresser. Nothing. The second drawer held what she wanted: a sweater and a hat. *Bingo*. She changed quickly, careful to touch nothing. She used her elbow to flick off the light switch.

Pillow, wash cloth, and towel in hand, she slipped through the door and jogged toward the car. She opened

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the door to the still-warm vehicle. An aroma of beer and tobacco wafted into her face.

“Time to get the fuck outta here.” She started the engine.

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As she drove away from the motel, Rubi Lee checked the fuel gauge. *Good, a full tank. I can go for a couple hours*. The snow had relented but cars crawled along. She itched to punch the gas and escape. Speeding was out of the question, given the snowy interstate and the fact that she just murdered someone. Having grown up in Louisiana and Texas, driving in the snow was something she never experienced. She glanced to her left and noticed the bright red blinking of hazard lights on other vehicles. *Guess I should put them on too—wherever the hell they are*. She punched the dashboard until she heard the rapid *click click click*.

Nerves on high alert, she stared into the blackness through the windshield. The rhythmic swooshing of the windshield wipers eventually helped calm her raw nerves. *Breathe evenly. You're far enough away from that hotel. And you left no clues you were there. Be calm*, she thought. Her death grip on the steering wheel loosened. The muscles in her neck and shoulders soon unwound themselves from painful knots. Rubi Lee nestled into the car seat and drove. Something crept across her face, something she had not felt in a long time—a smile.

*BANG!* A rock spewed from a salt truck grazed off the windshield, ruining her feeling of tranquil safety. “What

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the hell?” she screamed. “Fucking truck!” Rubi Lee jacked up the volume of the radio and focused on the lyrics of the song playing. Something about freedom and how the clothes do not make the man. The beat and vocals were catchy, like many songs from the early '90s. The heat pumping through the floor vents felt glorious on her frozen feet.

Images of her Uncle Victor lying in his wife's arms, blood pouring from his chest, crept into her head. These images were pushed aside by a more unbearable vision: her beloved brother, Zeke, lying bloodied and dead on the cold cement floor of the garage. Her handsome, loyal, younger brother was dead.

*Zeke is dead. Victor is dead. And I'm on the run, driving some dead guy's car in the middle of a fucking snowstorm. And all because of one person,* Rubi Lee thought. She used her sleeve to wipe her runny nose and damp eyes. One. One whom Rubi Lee would hunt down and avenge her brother's death.

*I'm coming for you, Daisy fucking Taylor. Just you wait. I don't care where you are. I'll find you and your family. You'll feel pain like I do.*

Her heart began to race, and her mind tingled with thoughts of revenge.

*Stop, Rubi. You need to focus on driving,* she told herself. Her hands shook and her head hurt.

"Christ do I need a drink," she mumbled. Ahead, she saw the white, black, and yellow MARYLAND WELCOMES YOU sign. A few miles in, she pulled off to take care of her fix.