

Chapter 1

The dead don't talk, but Zane's voice was still screaming in my head. It was the first thing I noticed, even before the chill of the room or the blinding light above me.

My eyes fluttered open, squinting against the harsh glare, and for a second, I didn't know where I was. The cold crept up my spine, sharp and unforgiving, and I shivered, reflexively pulling my legs closer to my chest.

Gray walls. A metal cot beneath me, its thin mattress offering no comfort. The faint scent of disinfectant mixed with something sour lingered in the air. The realization hit me like a punch to the gut.

I was in jail.

My stomach churned as everything came flooding back—Zane's lifeless body, the blood on my hands, the shouts of officers telling me not to move. My breath quickened, shallow, and erratic. I pressed my palms against my knees, grounding myself against the cool fabric of my pants.

It wasn't real. It couldn't be.

But it was.

I squeezed my eyes shut, but the images kept flashing in my mind. Zane's wide, unseeing eyes. The way his body had crumpled against the rocks. My hands were trembling, stained red. The memory was so vivid I could almost feel the stickiness on my skin again, even though my hands were clean now.

I leaned forward, resting my elbows on my knees and burying my face in my hands. My head throbbed, and the cold from the cot seeped into my skin. I wanted to cry, but the tears wouldn't come. They were trapped somewhere deep inside, tangled up with the shock and confusion that had taken over.

A sharp sound broke through the silence—footsteps echoing down the hallway. My body tensed, and I instinctively looked toward the cell door. The footsteps were deliberate, slow, and steady, growing louder with each step. A jangling sound followed, and then the unmistakable clink of keys.

The door creaked open, and a woman stepped inside. "Mahogany Sinclair?" she said, a slight southern twang in her voice.

I blinked, taking her in. Tailored navy suit, dark hair pulled back into a bun so tight it probably hurt, and a badge clipped to her blazer that read: Dr. Annabelle Kline, Forensic Psychologist.

"I'm Dr. Annabelle Kline, the on-site psychologist here," she said, stopping just outside my cell as the officer stepped forward and unlocked the door.

I stayed frozen on the cot, my legs pulled to my chest.

"She's here to talk with you," the officer explained, his tone clipped and uninterested. He swung the door open just enough to let her step inside, then stood by the frame, his hand on the radio at his hip.

"Talk?" A weak laugh slipped past my lips. What do we have to talk about?

She nodded. "I understand you've been through a traumatic experience. My job is to evaluate you and help you process the event."

A bitter laugh almost escaped my throat, but I swallowed it back. Process it? How was I supposed to process something I couldn't even fully remember?

"What's the point?" I muttered. "Nothing's going to change. I'm here. He's... gone."

Dr. Kline didn't flinch. If my words hit her, she didn't show it. Instead, she pulled a chair closer, sitting just outside the bars. "Sometimes, it's not about changing what happened," she said. "It's about understanding how to move forward from here."

I stared at her, skeptical. "And how am I supposed to do that?"

Her expression softened, but there was still a firmness to her voice. "One step at a time. It starts with letting yourself feel, even when it's hard. How are you feeling right now, Mahogany? Not about the past—just in this moment."

I hesitated, surprised by the question. How was I feeling? Angry, violated, anxious—I had a million reasons for feelings, but at her simple question, my heart constricted, and something inside me shattered.

But her gaze didn't waver, and somehow, that steadiness made me want to try.

"Lost," I said finally. "I feel... lost and broken."

She nodded as if she'd expected that. "That's okay. It's normal to feel that way after everything you've been through."

She leaned forward slightly. "Walk me through that night. Mahogany. What happened?"

I drew in a slow, unsteady breath, my hands tightening into fists as I looked down, the memory crashing over me like a tidal wave. "I was at the river," I whispered. "Zane was there... we argued. He grabbed me, I fought back... and then..."

My voice broke. "I ran. That's when I heard the yell. But when I came back... he was on the ground. The knife was in his chest."

Dr. Kline remained quiet, letting me sit in my thoughts before finally saying, "And you pulled it out?"

I nodded.

"And that's when the police arrived."

I could still hear the sirens in my head, see the flashing lights, feel the icy grip of the handcuffs. All that blood smeared across the rocks, staining Zane's shirt, dripping from my hands.

"Do you know why you would pull the knife out?"

A memory suddenly rose to the surface, unbidden, and I tried to shove it away, but it didn't work. Zane's wide eyes stared at me in the reflection. I jerked, looking down at my hands and flexing my fingers, almost expecting to see them stained.

It was like reliving it all over again. I started breathing faster, each gasp of air barely keeping me above water.

"Talk to me, Mahogany," Dr. Kline urged, her voice rising a notch with concern.

"Look, I didn't kill him, alright?" I burst out, unable to hold it together anymore. "I didn't want him dead! I didn't want any of this!"

I tried to suck in more air, but a sob escaped instead, leaving my lungs so tight it felt like I was suffocating. This time, the tears came streaming down my cheeks until I could taste the salt on my lips. "Someone fucking framed me for a murder I didn't commit."

Dr. Kline didn't react, but I saw something shift in her eyes.

"You believe someone else did it?" she asked.

I swallowed hard. "I don't know what to believe anymore."

She studied me for a moment before speaking again. "Sometimes, when things feel overwhelming, it can help to focus on something grounding. Something that reminds you of who you are outside of all this. Do you have anything that you can relate to?"

Her words stirred something in me, a faint memory I hadn't thought about in what felt like years. Butterflies. "Maybe," I said.

"What is it?" she asked, her tone gentle but encouraging. I glanced down at my lap, my fingers fidgeting with the edge of my shirt. "Butterflies," I mumbled.

Dr. Kline tilted her head slightly, curiosity flickering in her eyes. "Butterflies?"

I nodded, a small smile tugging at the corner of my mouth despite myself. "My grandmother used to talk about them all the time. She said they were symbols of transformation. She believed they proved that even when life feels unbearable, you can still come out on the other side as something beautiful."

Dr. Kline's expression softened, and she leaned forward. "That's a beautiful belief. Did you ever see butterflies with her?"

I nodded again; the memory becoming clearer now. "She used to take me to this park when I was a kid. There was this butterfly garden—it was her favorite place. They were everywhere, all these bright, beautiful colors, flying around like they didn't have a care in the world. She used to tell me they were our guardian angels, watching over us."

The words spilled out before I could stop them, and for a moment, the weight in my chest felt just a little lighter.

"She sounds like an incredible woman," Dr. Kline said. "And it seems like her words stayed with you, even now."

"They did," I admitted. "But... I don't know. It's hard to hold on to things like that when everything feels so... dark."

Dr. Kline's face remained unreadable, but her hands were folded together, listening intently, her gaze unwavering. "Mahogany," she whispered. "Sometimes the way we react to things now is tied to what we've been through before. Tell me about your childhood. What was lifelike before all of this?"

I hesitated, my fingers curling into my palms. Why did that matter right now? But the way Dr. Kline sat there, waiting, made me feel like she already knew there was more beneath the surface—more that I hadn't said.

"You mentioned your grandmother," she continued, her voice steady but not intrusive. "She raised you?"

I exhaled, nodding. "Yeah, we lived in Philadelphia... my mother wasn't really around, and I never met my dad."

Dr. Kline didn't interrupt, just watched, giving me space to speak. And before I could stop myself, the words started flowing. "My mother wasn't exactly the nurturing type," I continued. "She was.... reckless. Selfish. And absent, most of the time."

Dr. Kline nodded. "And your grandmother, tell me about your relationship with her?"

I released a slow breath, my fingers digging into my palms as I thought back. "She saved me... from things I don't like to think about. She was different. Strong. She believed in things like hope and change. She was everything my mother wasn't. She made me feel safe. Loved. Like I mattered. She always told me I was strong, even when I didn't believe it myself."

Dr. Kline studied me carefully. "You miss her."

I nodded. "Every day."

"You were a child," she finally said. "And you've been running ever since, haven't you?"

I exhaled, my gaze shifting away. "I guess I never really stopped."

Dr. Kline shifted slightly toward me. "Maybe it's time to stop running."

A long silence settled between us. There was more to say, so much more—but I wasn't ready to say it. Not yet.

Dr. Kline seemed to sense it. She leaned forward slightly. "You're carrying a lot, Mahogany. Much more than just what happened with Zane. And when you're ready, we'll talk about it."

I swallowed hard but said nothing.

Dr. Kline stood, smoothing out her suit. "I'll check in on you again soon," she said. "And remember—you're not alone in this. You've already taken the first step by talking today. That takes strength, Mahogany."

Strength. The word felt foreign like it belonged to someone else, but as I watched her leave, a tiny part of me wanted to believe it could belong to me again someday.

The cell door closed with a soft clang, and I was alone again. The silence returned, pressing against me like the weight of the world. But this time, it didn't feel as heavy.

I stayed on the edge of the cot, staring at my hands. They were steady now, not trembling like before. The memories of Zane—of the chaos, the darkness—would always be with me. But so would the butterflies, a reminder that love, real love, had existed once upon a time.

I wouldn't let this destroy me. I couldn't. I was Mahogany, and no matter how dark things got, I would keep going.