

WHISPERS IN THE DARK

EXCERPT

THE BEGINNING

The cock and pump of the shotgun barrel sliding into place echoed through Dominique's head. A cold shiver skimmed across her arms making the hairs stand as the uncontrollable need to shoot someone crawled up from deep inside and twisted her gut. But not this time. This time Dominique refused to lose it. It happened too many times in the recent past. The blood of her partner stained her hands while unspoken words stained her heart and her soul. As each day ticked by the pain wouldn't go away. It had imbedded itself deep into her core, rooted there. Dominique took a deep breath and cleared her mind of the memory. Enough was enough.

She pulled the door shut and heard it reverberate for several seconds. Her teeth gritted together as she flinched. She hadn't wanted to slam the office door. Hopefully, no one noticed, but as she turned she caught a glimpse of gazes following her and heads shaking, grimaces. Her back tightened. Regardless of what they said, they didn't understand. Never could. Never would.

Dominique slid herself into her car, shifted into gear, pulled out of the parking garage and headed toward the highway. Five miles, ten, fifteen, twenty, maybe even thirty. It seemed like she'd been driving forever. She may have. She'd lost all sense of time. Cars, buildings and people came in and out of focus. She didn't slow the car until she saw the bridge rise in the horizon.

She veered the car off the next exit, made a quick left turn and got immediately back onto the highway to head back in the direction she'd come. *I really gotta think this one out.* She was disgusted, fed up and past exhausted. Nothing had gone right the past year. At least that was her take on it. If she looked at her hands the blood she'd seen all year was still there. Bright, vibrant, death ridden.

What I really need, this very second, is Ricco. Dominique pulled off the highway and another two minutes veered the car into the nearest parking slot next to a large brick

building. Her gaze perused the lot. It was sparse of cars and people. The corner of her mouth lifted in a soft smile and she nodded. She wasn't in the mood for crowds.

"Where's Ricco," she yelled and stormed into the Day Spa. The two women sitting at the desk looked up at the same time. Dominique strutted past them before they could answer. "Ricco, are you here?" She pushed open the next door.

"Back here," echoed from the end of the hall. "Yo, what's up, beautiful? How ya doing?"

She rolled her eyes and strolled past him. Dominique pushed open the door to the first quiet room she came to and walked towards the portable steam room. She pulled off her jeans, tee shirt, panties, bra and shoes, grabbed the large plush terry cloth bath towel from the hook and stepped into the steamer. Dominique closed her eyes and leaned back against the cool tile.

"Rough day, huh," Ricco stood in the doorway, his voice calm and smooth, like chocolate ice cream on a hot summer day. Sometimes just hearing his voice relaxed her.

Dominique opened one eye, leaned forward and turned the dial to thirty minutes. The hot steam permeated her nostrils and constricted her lungs. Within seconds she felt the sweat drip from her pores and roll down her taut skin.

"Times up," Ricco whispered. He reached in and turned the timer to the off position fifteen minutes later. He knew the routine. Regardless of what she said, fifteen minutes in the stream room and then another sixty on the massage table. Sometimes deep tissue, sometimes relaxing, sometimes both. Ricco knew her like an old well-read book and with one look at her face he knew this was a relaxing day. He waited for Dominique to relax onto the table before dimming the lights and warming the aromatic oil between his hands.

He kneaded each muscle gingerly, paying close attention to the knotted areas on her neck and shoulders.

Dominique closed her eyes, buried her face in the small pillow resting under her arm and submitted to his touch. Within twenty minutes, he'd turned her muscles and reserve to mush.

She began to mumble something to Ricco. He shushed her and continued his assault on her muscles.

“Your muscles are entirely too tight,” he commented, as his hands glided up her back, down again. “You’ve got to learn to relax.” He bunched her muscles between his hands and smoothed them. Again and again he repeated this movement. Rolling her skin, bunching the muscles, and then relaxing them between his skilled fingers. “If you don’t learn to take it easy this job is going to be the end of you.”

Her voice slurred as she floated on a cloud of staid tranquility.

“It already has.”

CHAPTER ONE

Two months passed. Seven weeks, five days and eleven hours to be exact. Dominique's captain refused to accept her resignation, something about too many years to throw away and he wouldn't allow it. Captain Perkins walked in behind her, slammed the door and sat down.

"I don't know what I need to say to you to convince you what happened to Wesley was not your fault. Each and every cop takes the same chances. Makes the same choices. It's not your fault he was killed."

Murdered.

He leaned back in the chair. It creaked against his weight. Tapped his large beefy fingers of one hand on the desk and cupped his chin with the other. "That's something we have to live with. You just need some time off. Take a vacation. Some personal time."

It was more than that. The gnawing in her gut reminded her every day, every second. Unlike so many other women, she'd surpassed her ten-year anniversary in the police force and with several accommodations under her belt. Now, her life was at a standoff.

Wesley, her partner for almost ten years was dead. He took the bullet intended for her. No prejudice, no regret on his part. There was nothing the captain or anyone

else could say or do. His blood was on her hands, she knew it was her fault and only she could reconcile it.

“Damn-it Rue.” He slammed his fist onto the desktop. “Don’t do this. You’ll regret it later. I promise you.”

Dominique stared at him, but didn’t answer.

“How about a leave of absence?” He rubbed his hand across his face, then folded his arms tight across his chest.”

Regardless of the argument, the only thing Dominique could do to convince her captain was to agree to a personal leave of absence. Agree to think about what she was planning to do.

Six months, maybe a year. He promised her as soon as her head cleared and the grief was gone or at least subsided enough for her to see straight she would be back. She pulled her badge out of her pocket and placed it on top of his desk. He shook his head and handed it back to her.

“Hang on to them. You’ll need it when you come back.” Back to do the job ingrained in her blood.

Dominique smiled as she extended her hand for what she knew was one last handshake.



Dominique sat on the floor of the small cottage and unpacked the few boxes sitting around the room. The house had two bedrooms, one that now acted as a storage shed until she could get everything put away, but then would make a perfect office. She didn’t expect any overnight guest so she convinced herself other uses of the space would work fine. The kitchen was spacious enough for anything she needed, which wasn’t much. Cooking was never her forte. Her oversized sofa fit perfectly in the living room and the huge front and back porches fit her mood just right.

On a whim and a prayer, she emptied out her 401 and most of her savings, packed what she wanted from her personal belongings and headed towards the small town the real estate agent found for her. The agent told her if she wanted to escape it was perfect. No one would find her. No one would know her. St. Agnes. Quaint and quiet. Nestled along the Chesapeake Bay on the Eastern Shore of Virginia. Large enough where people

would not get in her business and small enough so she could get the much-needed peace and solitude she yearned. If everything went well, she pondered the idea of writing a book. Maybe a cop book or thriller. She'd talked about doing it all her life, but as a cop's life goes, never found the time.

But first, she knew she had to unpack, at least enough so she could function. She pulled each object out of the box and placed them on the floor beside her. Opening the old, tattered, stationary box, visions of the past flowed through her mind. She pulled what used to be a small delicate white feather from the box. Now it was thinned and jaundiced. Within seconds tears welled in her eyes. She drew it to her nose and took a long slow breath to capture some of the fragrance still lingering between the quills. No matter how it looked today, it was a part of Wesley. His soul was captured in it and what made her into who she was.

Dominique remembered it like it was yesterday.

Wesley slid the feather in a card on the morning of their first ride together. When no one else wanted to partner with her, he did. Hand scribed in the card, the words, 'like a feather'. She understood what he meant.

Her first few weeks on the force were rough. She tried too hard to fit in with the guys. It got so bad no one wanted to ride with her and they began to call her the Dom, Nick and Nicky. But not Wesley. He was the only one to speak up and volunteer to be her wingman.

"I don't have all day. Are you gonna lean up against that wall the rest of the shift or are you coming with me?"

"Coming," Dominique murmured as she pushed away from her spot and fell into step behind Wesley. "I thought I'd be riding solo."

"You wish." Wesley smiled at her. "No way would they let someone as dangerous as you alone in a cruiser."

She knew she'd blown it with everyone else. She wondered what he did to be punished with her.

"Here's the deal." He paused on the steps of the police station. "You do as I say, when I say and how I say. Screw up and I kick your ass right back to meter maid." He

stared into her eyes, trying to read her mood, thoughts. His expression chipped with ice for a second and then warmed. “Capish?”

“Do I get any say in it?” Dominique stopped a couple of steps behind Wesley.

“As a matter of fact-no.” He peeled his lips back into a smile and exposed a perfect set of teeth. Wesley took a few steps toward the curb and his cruiser. “Heads up.” He pitched the keys through the air.

Dominique grabbed them before they hit the car, tossed them between her hands and nodded. “I take it, I’m driving.”

“I *always* ride shot gun.” He stared back into her eyes. “You got a problem with that?”

Dominique shook her head, then folded herself into the car, checked the adjustments to fit her frame and buckled in. The white envelope dropped from the sun visor and fell into her lap before she could grab it. She flipped it in her hand inspecting it, trying to decipher what it was without opening it.

Wesley clicked his seatbelt across his lap and turned his head to look Dominique in the face. “I read your file. You were top of your class at the academy. I saw you the first day you walked into the station. All spit and polished.” Wesley didn’t look at her, but kept his gaze settled on the notebook on his lap. “There’s no one here you’ve got to convince you’d make a good cop. I’m sold, so stop trying so hard.”

Dominique slid her finger under the loose edge and opened the envelope. The delicate, white feather spoke a thousand words.

Lighten up.

When she received the feather, she knew she needed to be cool, take it easy. Breathe. That was the beginning of it all. They rode together for the next ten years. Inseparable. They were each other’s partner, wingman, and family. They understood the most important things about each other...Except the obvious.

Dominique pushed herself up from the floor and walked over to the bookshelf. She withdrew a small journal off the shelf and placed the feather within its pages, tucking it away in a safe place.

She turned and paused. After scanning the surroundings for a brief minute she walked back to her spot on the carpet and continued to unpack.



Two weeks passed and taped boxes still cluttered her living space. The cupboards were bare and she was in dire need of several personal items. As much as she hated to do it, she knew eventually she would have to go into town. St. Agnes so far had proved to be exactly what the realtor said. She wasn't even sure if the local people knew she existed. She hoped she could breeze in and back out again without much drama.

She glanced around the cluttered room one more time. *Maybe if I got some decent food in here I would have the energy to do this.*

She took one quick look in the mirror at herself, drew her hand up and finger combed the short curls molding her head. Dominique smacked her lips together and decided she was not going to put on lipstick. After all, it was only the store and she was not trying to impress anyone.

She grabbed the keys to the Jeep and pulled the door shut. The realtor was right. St. Agnes was the perfect place to run away to. She'd never been to the Eastern Shore of Virginia and had no idea any place like this even existed. She was glad it did. It was the first time she had actually been to a drug store with a functioning soda fountain and a real life jukebox. Her only memories of one were from the television. She walked back in time as soon as she saw it, ordered up a root beer float and for a few minutes was in heaven.



Jericho had only gotten into town a minute ago. Knowing there was no food or anything of use at home he drove past his house and headed straight to town and the grocery store. Parking along the curb he hoped to run in and out with the few items he needed.

"Hey, I heard you were back in town." Donald extended his hand, grabbed Jericho's and pulled him into a manly hug. Two pats on his back and he released him.

Jericho hoped to get into the store, get what he needed and out before Donald or anyone else saw him. They just missed slamming into each other as they maneuvered their carts around a blind spot in the grocery store.

"When did you get in?"

“Just now.” Jericho glanced beyond Donald at the rows of food. “I haven’t even been to the house yet.”

Jericho taught English Literature at Thomas University. He thought it would be fun and a change of pace. The one thing he looked forward to was his summers in town.

Five years ago he started coming out to the cottage for a little peace and solitude after a grueling year of teaching. Even though he always wanted to teach, education had changed over the past years. It was no longer fun and fulfilling as it had been. The students today were not like the ones he had when he first started. In the beginning their minds were wide open and like sponges, greedy for knowledge. Now they were bored stiff and acted as if the world owed them something. He guessed he had changed too. At the end of each year he needed the summer to build his energy stores back up. Recoup and re-think.

“So, have you met your new neighbor?” Donald asked, breaking the silence that enveloped them.

“Didn’t know I had one. When did this happen?” Jericho paused and settled his gaze on Donald. “I heard the Davis was selling, but I didn’t know they found a buyer.”

“From what I understand, she moved in a couple of weeks ago. Haven’t seen her in a while. I got a glimpse of her when the moving truck got lost. She doesn’t come into town much. No one has talked to her.” Donald scratched his jaw. “She doesn’t speak.”

“She?” Jericho’s eyebrows arched. “How old?”

“Didn’t you just hear me say I don’t know anything about her?” Donald stared at Jericho and shook his head.

“Right, right. I was just asking. Do you know her name?” Jericho relaxed his arms across the cart handle. “What does she look like?”

Donald tilted his head upward and motioned for Jericho to turn around. “Like that.”

Jericho’s eyes widened. “Whoa, she’s hot.”

There she was, only a few feet away from him. Jericho scanned her from foot to head. She wore a pair of shorts cut mid-thigh, a tee tied at the waist that gave a nice glimpse of her tight abs and a pair of hiking boots. She was medium height, 5’6”, maybe

5'7". Short curls framed her head. Solid build. Her face void of makeup, but she didn't even need it. She had a glow about her, he knew came from inner beauty.

"That's my neighbor?" Jericho whispered.

"Yup." Donald's gaze volleyed between Jericho and Dominique. He chuckled and settled on staring at Jericho's reaction to his new neighbor. "Nice, huh."

Jericho nodded, a slow movement of the head as his gaze followed Dominique move through the store.

She pushed the grocery cart through the produce department. Her pace slow, she scanned the food as though she was not sure what she wanted to buy. Her cart was nearly empty. Microwave dinners and easy to prepare foods monopolized the space.

She stopped at each produce table, picked up a piece of fruit and gave it a sniff. For several seconds she stood in front of the small table and stared at the mangos. She lifted one to her nose, inhaled its scent, arched her eyes brows and placed it back on the table.

Jericho seized the opportunity to talk to her.

"In order to pick a good one you really have to squeeze it," Jericho pushed his cart alongside Dominique's. "It should feel fleshy like this one." He handed her a ripened mango.

She mumbled, "Um hmm," turned her cart and walked away from him.

Jericho hunched his shoulders and looked back toward Donald, a small smile curved up his lips.

Donald laughed. "I told you man. I don't think she's said two words to anyone since she moved into town. Very snobby if you ask me."

Jericho plucked three ripe mangos from the pile and balanced them in his hand.

"Mangos, huh? Since when do you eat mangos?" A soft laugh escaped Donald's throat.

Jericho was already intrigued. "Yup, mangos. So we don't know anything about her?" Jericho kept his gaze on the fruit, finding three he especially liked, he did just what he told her not to do. He brought one up to his nose and inhaled, deep, then rolled it around in his hand and examined its firmness.

"Nope, not a stitch. She just popped up from nowhere."

Jericho reached past Donald with a grunt and snatched a plastic bag from the hanger.

“Don’t you think that’s odd? What does she do?”

“Are you deaf or just being stupid?” Donald laughed and slapped Jericho on the back.

Jericho tilted his head toward Donald and frowned.

“I told you, man, no one has any info on her. I’ve asked around. She used an outside Realtor to do all of the work. As far as I’m concerned, she’s a ghost who just blew into St. Agnes from nowhere.”

“Well, I don’t know if I like this. This town is too small. Especially if she’s going to be living next to me.” Jericho nudged Donald out of the way. “S’cuse me.” He dropped the mangos in the bag and tied a knot in the top. “The best way to a woman’s heart is not with flowers.”

“Sure you’re right.”

“You should try it sometimes. The best way is through her stomach. Educated woman, they just melt when a guy feeds them. Especially mangos.”

Donald glanced at his watch. “Look man, I gotta run.” He turned his cart toward the front of the store. “Call me later after you get settled. We can grab a bite to eat.”

“Yeah, let’s do that.” Jericho swung his cart around and headed towards the checkout counter.

A few minutes later, Jericho was through the checkout line and piling his groceries into the back of his Nissan Pathfinder. He drove his vehicle through town, slow. Dominique was two cars ahead of him. He strained his neck to get another look at her. Just one small tiny glance was all he wanted. She stirred something in him and he didn’t know why. Curiosity?

I don’t like this at all. We’ll see who won’t talk.