

PROLOGUE

Seven years earlier.

Hope Harper had just won the biggest victory of her life in the courtroom. After weeks of fiery and often heartbreaking testimony, her client had been acquitted. The problem was, Hope suspected Julius Leech was truly the vicious serial killer the police and District Attorney's office had accused him of being.

Her stomach clenched. She closed her eyes and laid her head against the warm steering wheel in the quiet parking garage attached to her firm's downtown building.

It wasn't her job as a defense attorney to make a judgement regarding her client's guilt. Only for her to vigorously defend them and focus on the government's failure to legally prove their case.

The cops had fucked up.

Worse, they'd lied. Perjured themselves on the stand.

Last night, one detective had tragically taken his own life. His partner, a junior detective, was now under investigation.

She raised her head. Glanced at the text her husband had sent her a few hours ago.

We need to talk...

And didn't that sound ominous.

They hadn't spent a lot of time together recently, this case consuming every minute of her time since Jeff Beasley had dangled a partnership in front of her like a carrot on a stick if she took Leech on as a client.

Partner before thirty?

Amazing.

With a kid?

Unheard of.

Hope liked to win. Liked to prove she was as good as any of the arrogant, self-righteous prosecutors in the DA's office. Her goal had always been a partnership at Beasley, Waterman, Vander & Co., so she could have job security and some say in what cases she took on in the future. And, so she could ultimately spend more time with Danny and Paige.

Well, now she had it.

Now she was officially one of the "Co."

And even though her insides churned with unease she wasn't the one who'd fucked up this prosecution. The cop who'd planted the evidence was the reason Julius Leech was once again free to wander the streets. She was good, but she wasn't that good.

She couldn't bear to think about Leech any longer. She'd been forced to sit next to the guy for weeks and pretend he didn't make her skin crawl every time they accidentally brushed against one another. She'd had to pretend the obvious admiration in his pale blue eyes wasn't something that made her want to retch.

She was taking next week off. God knew, she'd earned it.

We need to talk...

Anxiety gnawed along her nerves. She missed her husband and she missed her daughter. She started the car and began the drive out of the city. She contemplated calling to see if they needed anything picked up from the store but dreaded the idea Danny might tell her not to come home at all.

They'd argued last night to the point where for the first time in their lives together she'd slept in the spare room and left before the sun was up.

She hated when they fought. Danny was her safe place, her rock, and usually backed her.

Not last night.

Last night, Danny had begged her to walk away. To walk away from the case and the firm.

It had been an impossible ask after she'd worked so hard and the trial was almost over. Why couldn't he have seen that? Instead, he'd said she was a workaholic who was selling her soul.

That had hurt.

It was okay to work tirelessly on the Innocence Project and help get wrongly convicted people out of jail, but it wasn't okay to vigorously defend people the public had decided were guilty, whether the facts backed them up or not?

That was bullshit.

Criminal justice was not necessarily about right and wrong. It was a game of legalese chess and she was damn good at it, even if her morals were a little bruised from some of the people her firm represented—but no more than the experienced detective who'd planted DNA or the rookie who'd let him.

Her jaw hurt from clenching her teeth so hard, but she had to let it go.

She loved Danny. Had loved him since the first day they'd met. They'd figure it out.

Hell, she'd quit if it meant that much to him. Deal with corporate law or entertainment contracts instead. Even though she loved trying cases in court, she'd quit for the man she loved.

It was after seven p.m. and the rush hour traffic had died down. Getting out of the city only took twenty minutes. She arrived at their beautiful, leafy, suburban craftsman-style house and parked in the driveway. She stared at the building that Danny had turned into a wonderful home for them all. It was deep blue and had white-painted shutters. Flowers bloomed in the planters they'd set up that spring. That was the extent of her gardening skills, but Danny enjoyed being outside. He'd planted a flowerbed at the side of the driveway and a small vegetable garden at the back where he and Paige were growing lettuce and carrots and a pumpkin to carve for Halloween.

He'd made the choice to stay home with Paige while Hope went out to work. He was a crime fiction author and managed to squeeze out pages in-between playdates and kids' movies. She and his brother, a Boston Police Department detective, served as his legal advisors for his plots. One of his novels had been optioned for a movie although Danny had told her not to get excited because most options expired before the movie was ever made. But Hope was secretly planning what to wear at the Oscars and mentally helping Danny prepare his acceptance speech.

She smiled, tension from the last few months seeping away. She was done with Leech now.

She loved her husband. She believed in him. Up until yesterday, she'd thought he believed in her too.

Lawyers often didn't like their clients. Clients were often bad people. They still deserved a solid defense.

She and Danny had both said things in anger but maybe the real issue was the fact she'd been absent so much lately. She didn't want to be absent anymore.

She opened the car door and met the muggy September air. The fact Paige didn't immediately throw open the front door and run to greet her was a bad sign. Aged five now, her daughter was usually allowed to stay up late if she knew her mom was going to be home in time to tuck her into bed.

Hope grabbed her heavy briefcase and suit jacket off the passenger seat. Got out and stretched her neck.

The sun was starting to drop in the sky, casting long shadows from the detached garage into the yard. It was unseasonably hot. A bird sang in the tree and a kid rode his bicycle down

the sidewalk followed by a girl on a skateboard. Cars were parked all along the street. The house opposite was having an addition built on the back and Danny had been cursing the noise and distraction from his writing.

The workers were gone now. The Dumpster at the front of the house full of sheetrock and rubble, mud all over the sidewalk.

Hope brushed her hair from her forehead and went in through the side gate to see if her family were in the back yard.

It was so *quiet*.

Her heartbeat sped up in sudden apprehension.

What if he'd left her?

"Danny?" She hurried up the back steps and inside. "Paige?"

She dumped her bag and jacket on the kitchen island, pulled out her phone. No messages. She texted him before slipping it back into her pocket. Danny's car keys were hanging up beside the door which made the awful tension that had gripped her chest ease. No evidence of dinner being made though. Where the heck were they? Maybe they'd gone to pick something up. Or to grab an ice cream from the convenience store at the end of the street to celebrate the end of summer.

She kicked off her heels and absently leaned down to stroke the kitten, Lucifer, who'd come running through from the family room meowing for food as usual. She noticed blood on the floor.

"Did you cut yourself?" She picked up Lucifer and checked his paws. There were traces of crimson on his feet but he didn't seem to be injured.

She walked through the house to the family room, clutching the kitty to her chest. Her heart stopped dead.

She dropped the cat. Ran toward her husband who lay on the floor in front of the TV. "Oh, God. Oh, God. Oh, God."

Paige lay next to him. Still as a rock. They were holding hands and a chill stole over her.

"No, no, no."

She felt for Danny's pulse. Belatedly noticed the blood drenching his dark blue graphic tee that had a tiny hole in the center. The faint flutter beneath her fingertips took her by surprise.

He was alive.

He was *alive*.

The slight rise and fall of his chest told her he was breathing. Just.

She fumbled for her phone and called 911 and put it on speaker, yelling her address and begging for help.

She turned to Paige and frantically searched for a pulse, internally recoiling from her daughter's cool skin while checking to see if she was breathing. She wasn't.

"Baby, come on."

Danny's eyes flickered as she started CPR on their child. She couldn't lose her. She refused to lose her. She repeated the thirty compressions to two breaths five times, ignoring the lack of response in Paige's bloodshot blue eyes.

She turned to Danny to make sure he was still alive, still with her. She pressed a kiss to his cheek. "I love you, honey. I'm so sorry we argued last night. I'm so sorry."

He tried to open his mouth, but nothing came out. His eyes flicked to their daughter and Hope began CPR again, knowing it was almost certainly too late and their beautiful, amazing daughter was gone. But she was called Hope for a reason.

She refused to give up.

The doorbell rang. The paramedics were here. Thank God. She stumbled to her feet and crashed into the coffee table on the way out of the room, barely registering the knock. She threw open the door and suddenly, it was as if she'd slipped into a surreal dream. It wasn't the paramedics standing there, it was Julius Leech and he held a bunch of flowers and a bottle of red wine and wore a big smile.

"I wanted to thank you—"

Hope ignored him. Blinked and looked around. An ambulance was racing down the street toward her and she raised her hand, pushing past Leech to stand on the cool grass in her bare feet, frantically waving her arms.

The paramedics had arrived.

"This way," she urged as they jumped out of their rig and grabbed their heavy bags.

"Quickly. My husband is alive. I did CPR on my daughter but she isn't breathing." She broke off on a sob as she led the way inside. She eased into a space between Danny and Paige as the paramedics began to work on her family. Stroked her daughter's silky blonde hair.

"Her name is Paige."

"What happened?" One of the paramedics asked.

"I don't know. I arrived home a few minutes ago and found them like this."

The paramedic glanced away and she refused to accept what she could see on the woman's face.

“Please keep trying.” Terror gripped Hope’s throat. “Please don’t give up. They are *everything* to me.”

The woman nodded and began inserting an IV while another medic worked on Danny.

Hope touched his hair. “He was breathing and had a pulse when I came home. His eyes were open and aware.” She didn’t know how coherent words were coming out of her mouth when all she wanted to do was scream.

More medics arrived and she was forced aside as the two teams worked side-by-side.

“Please help them. I don’t know what I’ll do without them.” She’d die. She’d cease to exist.

She glanced up and saw Julius Leech standing on the threshold of the family room. A smile flickered around the corner of his mouth as his eyes shone with what looked like glee.

Realization hit her like a shotgun blast. “You son of a bitch.”

Hope launched herself at him and Leech looked startled. He scooted from the room and out through the wide-open front door and she chased him, grabbing the neck of his suit jacket, jerking him off his feet. He lay there in the grass, smiling up at her.

“What did you do to them? What did you do!” she screamed.

Another figure rushed over and threw himself on top of Leech and started pummeling the guy.

Danny’s brother, Brendan.

“You bastard. You fucking piece of filth.” Brendan slammed his fist into Leech’s face, over and over again.

Hope wanted Julius annihilated. Wiped off the face of the earth. He’d come to her home and hurt her family, to toy with her, to torture her. The fact she’d gotten him released from jail would only add a nice twist for the sick bastard.

But Brendan wasn’t stopping and none of the other cops who’d rolled up in their squad cars looked as if they planned to prevent her brother-in-law from beating Leech to death on her front lawn. As much as she wanted Leech to suffer, she couldn’t allow that kind of mindless slaughter. Nor allow Brendan to risk his freedom.

She grabbed Brendan’s arm. “Stop it. Stop. We need to go with Danny and Paige to the hospital. We need to be there for them.”

“I want him to pay for what he’s done.” Brendan sobbed.

“He will. We need to be with our family.” She dragged Brendan to his feet. The guy looked shattered. News of the attack had spread fast through the Boston PD.

Leech lay unconscious on the lawn, face battered and bloody. The medics came out of the house with two gurneys and she dashed toward them, dragging Brendan with her.

“Reap what you sow, bitch,” one of the cops snarled at her.

Ice flashed across her skin.

Was this her fault?

She tried to climb into the ambulance but the paramedic blocked her. “No room.”

Brendan grabbed her arm. “We’ll follow. Come on.”

She ran barefoot to his car and got into the passenger side. Brendan pulled away behind the ambulance, riding in the slipstream with just a few feet between them. Hope stared at the back of the ambulance as it raced through the city, lights and sirens blaring, willing Danny and Paige to survive. She wrapped her arms around her middle, rocking back and forth.

“What the hell happened?” Brendan’s knuckles were raw.

“I came home and found them. Danny was bleeding. Paige—” She sobbed. “Paige wasn’t breathing.” Her hands trembled as she raised them to cover her mouth. “I did CPR but her lips were blue, Brendan...”

“She’ll be okay. The EMTs have her now. Did Danny say anything?”

“No.” Hope felt her lungs seize and had to close her eyes and will her muscles to give enough to enable her to draw in air.

“They were holding hands,” the words croaked out, their import not lost on the police detective.

Tears coated her cheeks.

“That fucking bastard.” Brendan growled.

Leech.

Leech, who always left his victims in pairs, holding hands.

Crimes she’d persuaded a judge he wasn’t legally guilty of. And he hadn’t been. The cops had fucked up. She’d done her job and won because those cops had fucked up big.

This *was* her fault. “If I hadn’t been his lawyer, he would never have targeted my family. Danny and Paige...”

“They’ll be okay.”

“Yeah.” She needed to hold on to that thought. Modern medicine could accomplish miracles.

The ambulance pulled up outside the Emergency Room and she threw open the door and jumped out before Brendan stopped the car.

She took Danny's hand as they wheeled him past her, heading inside through the glass sliding doors. She felt the warm skin and the faint pressure from his fingers squeezing her back.

"I love you, Danny. I love you so much. Please hold on for me. For us." They forced her away as they whisked Danny through the doors into the OR.

Hope looked around, grabbed a nurse. "Where's my daughter, Paige? The little girl who just came in?"

The nurse led her to a small room. Hope saw her daughter lying on the stretcher as she pushed open the door.

Brendan sat beside her crying. He held Paige's hand.

"Why aren't you helping her?" Hope shouted at the doctors who looked as if they were already leaving. "I started CPR on her as soon as I found her. The paramedics worked on her the whole time. She could be resuscitated."

A female doctor shook her head. "I'm afraid it's too late to save her. She's already gone." The doctor looked at the clock and declared time of death.

"No!" Hope pushed past and began to close her daughter's small nose and tilt her chin up. Pressed her lips to her child's to fill her lungs with air.

No one said a word. They watched her go through the motions for what felt like hours. Then she felt strong hands gripping her arms, firmly drawing her away.

"She's gone, Hope. She's gone." Brendan pressed her face to his chest.

Hope sagged against him as her knees went.

Grief immersed her, submerging the denial for long enough for the truth to finally penetrate. She gripped Brendan's shirt as emotion took over, and simply gave in to it.

CHAPTER 1

Present Day.

Julius Leech sat half-frozen to death in the transport vehicle, manacled at the wrists and at the ankles. It was snowing outside, which he might have appreciated had his toothache not been excruciating and his extremities numb from cold.

Not only did his orange jumpsuit assault his eyes and sense of style, it was thin polyester that did nothing to keep him warm. His shoes were worn, grimy, old-fashioned plimsolls. The socks that had once been white were now dishwater gray. The strong smell of body odor that emanated from him and his fellow prisoners made him want to gag, but no one wanted to take too much time in the shower—especially if you were a convicted child killer.

At least the constant death threats and beatings meant he had his own cell. His rat bastard lawyer had, at least, seen to that.

Rage seethed inside him at the unfairness of it all.

Who said he was a psychopath who didn't have feelings?

Well, that bitch of a criminal psychologist for one. The fantasies he'd had about getting her alone for a few hours...

He had plenty of feelings. Plenty of emotions. He was hoping for a way to express them in a manner which everyone would appreciate.

The freezing temperatures made him shiver but he refused to be the first one to show weakness. Weakness was exploited. Weakness would get him killed.

It was difficult to concentrate on staying alive when he was in constant agony. The pain from his tooth was incessant. Throbbing along every nerve, so bad he'd tried to pull it out himself but it wouldn't budge.

It was all that bitch's fault. Hope Harper. If he hadn't been in prison, he'd have all the dental care he needed. He'd offered to fly in his personal dentist but the warden refused. Instead, Julius had to rely on the Bureau of Prisons to provide someone and, for some reason, being a dentist to maximum security inmates wasn't high on most graduates' list.

He wondered if the guy he'd seen last week was even qualified. He'd performed a root canal but had run out of time to conduct the second one. If Julius hadn't been shackled to the bed, he would have shoved that shiny stainless-steel drill right up the guy's nose—which was presumably why he, and all the prisoners, were restrained.

But it was a harmless fantasy, that was all. A way to get through the boredom of endless monotony. Every day the same. Every day dull and gray as mud.

Seeing people's fear of him gave him a buzz. Fear was power. Power was a drug.

He fantasized seeing fear in Harper's eyes.

He fantasized about killing Harper every night before he closed his eyes and went to sleep. But even in his dreams she plagued him.

Bitch.

Last time he'd seen her she'd been staring at him across a courtroom, her strong jaw clenched. Her eyes cold with hate and loathing.

Bitch.

Rage that was his constant companion warmed him from the inside, but his flesh felt as if snowflakes were dancing on his skin. A shiver wracked him. His teeth began to chatter.

Purgatory was real.

He was living it.

"It's fucking cold back here," Perry Roberts complained.

Thank God.

"Turn up the heat. You ain't supposed to torture us this way," Michael Herbert yelled.

"Too right," mumbled Reggie Somack, sitting behind and across from him.

"Quit your whining." The guard at the front of the van was wearing a heavy jacket and decent boots. But he fumbled with the heat settings, thank Christ.

It was early afternoon but looked almost dark out. Overcast, gloomy, the snow growing so thick he could barely see out of the window. They were driving on a road in rural Massachusetts, heading toward Worcester and the nearest medical clinic.

"That's the radio not the heater." The driver, Protection Officer Byron, took his eyes off the road for a fraction of a second and Julius watched everything unfold in slow motion. The minibus drifted across the divide on a corner and the driver overcorrected. The minibus started to skid onto the other side of the road and there, out of the snowy darkness, came the faint glow of headlights. Byron jerked the wheel the other way and only succeeded in making the skid worse.

Everyone braced by holding onto the bottom of their seats. The irony of dying in something as mundane as a car accident made Julius laugh despite the situation.

Byron fought to control the vehicle as the other guard, Pedrós, was flung violently against the passenger door. An awful grinding impact seared the air as they hit the guardrail

and went straight fucking through it, like a sharp knife through flesh. Roberts and Somack both screamed. Julius opened his mouth in horror but no sound came out.

It felt as if they were flying right through the snowy night. Tree branches rushed past the windows, scraping the sides of the vehicle like giant, boney fingernails. Then the minibus smashed into the side of a hill and the windshield shattered as they came to a shuddering halt. The side of Julius's face bashed against the seat in front of him even as chains held him in place. His wrists and ankles burned from yanking on the restraints.

After the shock and suddenness of the accident, the dark silent cold was jarring.

"Everyone okay?" The driver asked shakily.

Julius started laughing again.

"You are one messed up motherfucker, Leech," Somack huffed out.

Metal groaned. Branches cracked. Someone cried out in pain.

Byron, a guard from the correctional institution, turned on the light from his cell phone and swung it over the prisoners. The other guard, Pedrós, was nowhere to be seen.

Julius watched the driver stare dazedly around as if looking for the missing man. Julius flinched when Byron shone the light in his eyes.

"E-everyone stay calm and I'll call for help."

Herbert rasped out, "I'm hurt."

The cell phone's light swung back to the man and Julius winced as he saw a branch from a tree had speared the guy's chest.

Fuck.

That had to hurt.

"I think my arm's broken." Reggie Somack cradled his right arm awkwardly as the driver swung the light toward him while still trying to make a call.

Julius had no idea whether or not Somack was telling the truth but it was a miracle they weren't all dead.

"Goddammit," Byron bit out. "I don't have signal."

The vehicle gave a sudden, terrifying lurch and they all screamed. The driver scanned his beam over to the right and the ground seemed to drop away into the icy river below. The minibus was propped against a group of large saplings that strained under the weight.

The minibus jolted again, metal screaming against wood.

"Get us out of here!" Reggie yelled.

The driver was sheet white with blood dripping from his forehead as he looked through the wire screen that separated prisoners from the cab. He seemed to come to a decision and

quickly unlocked the divider. “I’m going to come back there and release you all. Those that can will climb back up to the road with me and I’ll call for help. Get the emergency response team out for Herbert and Somack, if they can’t make it up the hill. Search and rescue team will have to come out here to look for Officer Pedrós.”

Julius was pretty sure Pedrós was dead at the bottom of the ravine.

Byron unlocked the chain that looped through Perry Roberts’s cuffs and undid the shackles so he could move. Byron stood back with his hand on the butt of his weapon. “Go on now. No funny business. People are hurting.”

Roberts uncurled his large frame and staggered forward.

Byron unlocked Herbert next although the guy wasn’t going anywhere with the branch sticking out of his chest. Byron rested a hand on the injured man’s shoulder. “Hang on, Michael. Help’s coming.”

“Hurry it the fuck up.”

Byron unlocked Julius next. He scooted forward, the sense of hope suddenly piercing the shock of the accident.

Perry Roberts had his feet pressed against the buckled door, trying to kick it open.

“It’s stuck.”

Julius peered over the man’s massive shoulder. “I think there’s a tree in the way. Let me get out of the front window and pull from the other side.”

Perry shoved him aside with his handcuffed hands. “I’m first.”

Julius held back his seething resentment.

Perry cursed as broken safety glass cut into him as he crawled over the steering wheel. Julius went to follow, but Reggie Somack knocked him aside and awkwardly crawled like a big orange caterpillar over the wheel and across the hood.

The minibus lurched and Julius launched himself out after Somack.

It was so damn cold.

With numb fingers, he pulled himself over the slippery hood and tumbled to the ground. He rose to his feet, then stumbled over the broken roots in the darkness and clung onto the slick trunk of a young sapling that bent under his weight but held.

Julius could just make out the orange-clad figures of his fellow convicts through the snow. As Officer Byron began to climb out of the window, Perry and Reggie started rocking the bus.

“Stop that! Stop. Herbert’s in there.” Byron lost his gun as he used both hands to hold on.

Perry and Reggie didn't stop. As the guard tried to pull himself through the window, the back end of the bus began to slide, taking poor Officer Byron with it. A few seconds later, the sound of the minibus crashing into the water reached them.

The two men turned toward him and Julius shrank away. Was he next?

"That never happened. Got it?" Perry shook his fist at him.

"I didn't see a thing," Julius agreed quickly.

"Don't follow us, you little freak," Reggie warned.

They set off east and Julius stood there frozen for a few seconds until he realized he was free. He was *free* and this was his big chance. The fact he was more likely to freeze to death as the snow immediately soaked through his pathetic plimsolls and the tangerine jumpsuit was more irony in play, but he wasn't about to sit here and die. He slipped and staggered up the rugged bank, through the snow, back toward the road. Terrain was steep and he was breathing heavily when he slipped and landed on something bulky and warm.

His numb fingers reached out and felt cloth.

Shit.

It was a body.

Pedrós?

Was he dead?

Julius didn't care. He searched through pockets until he found the guard's cell phone. He turned on the flashlight and saw the man's head was at an unnatural angle, dead eyes staring. Those eyes made Julius pause for a second but he didn't have time. He found the officer's keys next and unlocked the handcuffs, rubbing his wrists as he removed the metal bracelets.

He leaned back for a moment, then figured fate had put *Pedrós* in his path. Julius wrestled off the guy's coat, jacket and shirt. Julius stripped off the hated orange jumpsuit before slipping on the guard's clothes. They were too big but that was okay. He did the same with the man's boots, socks, pants. He skipped the underwear because he still had standards.

Julius finished dressing, patted the gun he now wore on his belt and the cuffs resting in his pocket. It felt odd to be dressed like the men and women who'd controlled his every move for the last seven years. He straightened his spine and rolled his shoulders. Good though. He gathered his jumpsuit under one arm because leaving it behind would be a giant orange flag.

Nothing he could do about the body but the authorities wouldn't know who had taken the guard's clothes.

He kept the cell phone. He'd get rid of it as soon as he got his bearings.

Freedom. It was as precious and wanted as a baby to a barren couple, as gold to a greedy man.

He clambered to the top of the hill, breathing hard, cautious in case the authorities had already missed them. When he got there, he peered out through the trees. Nothing. No one.

He tried to check the map on the cell but didn't have the passcode. Piece of shit. He flung it overarm toward the river.

A car approached and Julius took a risk. He stood at the edge of the road and flagged down the driver. He had to get away from here as fast as possible—that was the only way he'd escape for good. The car skidded to a halt and Julius strode confidently to the passenger window and bent down.

It was a young man, mid-twenties.

He slipped the gun into his pocket.

“There's been an accident. I need a ride to the nearest town.”

“Sure, man. Get in.”

Julius got in, knowing suddenly that this was all meant to be. This was fate. He finally registered something else too. His tooth didn't hurt anymore. He'd knocked it out during the crash.

The day just got better and better.

He pictured Hope Harper's face when she heard the news. She couldn't ignore him now, could she?

Bitch.

She'd know he was coming for her. And she'd know why.