

Chapter Three

Tuesday, August 9, 2011

9:40 am

At any given moment, the demons could descend upon Mira Gallier. Sometimes, she marshaled the strength to fight them off, denying their dark, tormenting visions. Their taunts and merciless accusations.

Other times, they overpowered her and left her scrambling for a way to silence them. To obliterate the pain.

Last night they had come. And she had found a way to escape.

Mira lay on her side on the bed, gazing blankly at the small rose window she had created in secret, a wedding gift for her husband-to-be. In the tradition of the magnificent gothic windows, she had chosen brilliant jewel colors; her design had been complex and intricate, combining painted images within the blocks of color. For her, the window had been a symbol of her and Jeff's perfect love and new, beautiful life together.

She had never imagined how quickly, how brutally, that life would be ended.

It hurt to look at it now and Mira rolled onto her back. Her head felt heavy; the inside of her mouth as if stuffed with cotton.

Eleven months, three weeks and four days, shot to hell by one small, blue, oval tablet.

What would Jeff think of her now? Even as she wondered, she knew. He would be deeply disappointed.

But he couldn't be more disappointed in her than she was in herself.

On the nightstand, her cell phone chirped. She grabbed it, answered.

“Second level of hell. The tormented speaking.”

“Mira? It’s Deni.”

Her studio assistant and friend. Sounding puzzled.

“Who’d you expect?” she asked. “My husband?”

“That’s not funny.”

It wasn’t, she acknowledged. It was angry. And sad. Jeff was dead, and she had fallen off the wagon. Neither of which had a damn thing to do with Deni.

“I’m sorry, I had a really bad night.”

“You want to talk about it?”

The roar of water. A wall of it. As black and cold as death , brutal and unforgiving. Jeff’s cry resounded in her head. Calling out for her to help him.

But she hadn’t been there. She didn’t know what that last moment had been like. She didn’t even know if he’d had time to cry out, to feel fear, or if he had known it was the end.

And she never would.

He was dead because of her.

“No. But thanks.” The last came out automatically, what she was supposed to say, even though gratitude was far from what she was feeling.

“You used, didn’t you?”

No condemnation in Deni’s voice. Just pity. Still, excuses flew to Mira’s lips, so familiar she could utter them in her sleep. They made her sick. She was done with them.

“Yes.”

For a long moment Deni was silent. When she finally spoke, she said, “I take it I should reschedule your interview?”

“Interview?”

“With Libby Gardner. From Channel 12, the local PBS affiliate. About the Magdalene window. She’s here.”

Mira remembered then. The interview appointment. Her work on the Magdalene restoration being included in a sixth anniversary of Katrina series the station was planning. “Shit. I forgot. Sorry.”

“What should I tell her?”

“How about the truth? That your boss is a pill head and basket case.”

“Stop it, Mira. That’s not true.”

“No?”

“You suffered a terrible loss. You turned to--”

“The whole city suffered that same freaking loss. Life goes on, sweetheart.” She spoke the words harshly, their brutality self-directed. “The strong thrive and the weak turn to Xanax.”

“That’s such bullshit.” Deni sounded hurt. “I’ll see if she can reschedule--”

“No. Get started with her. Explain how the window ended up in our care, describe the process, show her around. By the time you’ve done that, I’ll be there.”

“Mira--”

She cut her assistant off. “I’ll be in shortly. We can talk then.”

Mira ended the call and hurried to the kitchen. She fixed herself a cup of strong coffee then headed toward the bathroom. When she caught sight of her

reflection in the vanity mirror, she froze. She looked like crap. Worse even. The circles under her hazel eyes were so dark, her pale skin looked ghostly in comparison. She was too thin--her copper red hair like the flame atop a matchstick.

She wore one of her husband's old tees as a nightshirt: *Geaux Saints* the front proclaimed. Mira trailed her fingers over the faded print. Jeff hadn't lived long enough to see his beloved NFL team win the Super Bowl.

It's your fault he's dead, Mira, the voice in her head whispered. *You convinced him to stay. Remember what you said? "It'll be an adventure, Jeff. A story we can share with our children and grandchildren."*

The air conditioner kicked on. Cold air from the vent above her head raised goosebumps on her arms and the back of her neck. No, she told herself. That was bullshit. Isn't that what her shrink, Dr. Jasper, had told her? Jeff had been a fifty percent partner in the decision. If he had felt strongly they should leave, he would have said so.

His family blamed her. Her and Jeff's friends had been subtle in their accusations-- she read condemnation in their eyes.

She stared helplessly at her reflection. The problem was, she blamed herself. No matter what her shrink said or what the facts were.

She moved her gaze over the destruction of her bathroom--drawers emptied, make-up bags and carry-ons rifled through.

As if thieves had broken in and turned her home upside down in search of valuables.

But she had done this. She was the thief. And the eleven months, three weeks and four days she had robbed herself of couldn't be replaced.

Her cell phone went off. She saw it was Deni--no doubt calling to say the reporter had taken a hike. "Pissed off another one, didn't I?" she answered.

"Something really bad's happened, Mira."

She pressed the device tighter to her ear. "What?"

"It's Father Girod, he's . . . dead. He was murdered."

An image of the kindly old priest filled her head. He had approached her after Katrina about his church's stained glass windows, decimated by the storm. In the process of restoring the twelve panels, she and the father had become friends.

Grief choked her. "Oh, my God. Who could have . . . When did--"

"There's more, Mira." Deni's voice shook. "Whoever did it also vandalized the windows."