

Chapter 1

Of all my fantasies of Brock's demise, my first choice is for him to be killed in the line of duty. After all, he's the *Ace*, a case-maker in the Drug Enforcement Administration. He'd have a big send-off. I'd be the grieving widow, wearing a thick black veil so no one could see my dry eyes. Win-win.

I'm stopping at the supermarket on my way home from the DEA Washington, D.C. field office, where my husband and I are both employed, to pick up ingredients for his favorite dish. My hope is to counteract his certain anger over the Exceptional Performance award I received at work today. I'm afraid my efforts won't dispel the rage.

I pull my old, dependable Toyota into the driveway of our townhouse and carry the groceries to the front door. Leaving the bags on the doorstep, I walk over to the common mailbox area. Brock wants the mail on the table next to his chair when he comes home. As I look up, the brilliant colors in the sky as the late November sun sets give me pleasure. Beauty before the beast? I shiver as I rush inside to prepare dinner.

I have to clasp my hands together to stop their shaking before I can arrange pots, pans and ingredients on the counter. My black-and-white cat jumps onto the laminate-top table in the breakfast nook of our dreary beige kitchen. She will keep an eye on me in hopes of a treat. I love this cat, and I stop what I'm doing to pet her. "He'll be so pissed, Kisa. You know he will." I press my hand over my mouth. Hearing the words out loud makes them real. "I'll tell him Tiffany pulled it off because we're friends. He'll never believe I *earned* the award." Kisa's lemon-yellow eyes blink at me, making me smile. "And you better not let Brock catch you on this table."

Droplets fly over the stove as I whisk flour into the melted butter. I lean over to turn down the boiling chicken. Lately, it seems as if Brock is angrier than usual. He's "Mr. Personality" at work, but the minute he comes home, he's mean and combative. I know he'd never let his guard down on the job, so he comes home and releases his tensions on me. He tells me I ask for it. Do I?

While I'm cooking, I'm listening for the hum of the electric garage-door opener, which will herald Brock's arrival. What will it be tonight? Will the chicken divan be enough to stave off the anger? My hands are shaking again.

He's very late. I cover the casserole with foil and put it in the oven on the warm setting. I walk through the house, around and around, in search of something out of place, or anything Brock will consider I've done wrong. But I know tonight it will be the award, and *that* I cannot clean up.

No stranger to the ritual of Brock's homecoming, as soon as she hears the garage door open, Kisa jumps down and heads for her safe place under the bed, among the winter blankets and extra pillows I've stored there.

My chest is so tight I can hardly breathe. Even though Brock has never hit me, the fear of physical harm is always near me.

He's muttering when he opens the door, and I can hear the unsteadiness of his gait when he bumps the wall on his way up the stairs.

"Where's my little award-winning secretary?" His slurred voice turns my heart to ice. It will be bad tonight. I blink to hold back the tears that will only add fuel to his fire.

He enters the kitchen. I have a death grip on the handle of the oven door. I don't dare answer him.

“So, you just can’t go through one day without pissing me off. You had to show me up, didn’t you, bitch? Thanks to you I took a lot of shit at work. ‘Oh Brock, your better half got an award today. She’s going to leave you in the dust,’” he mimics in a falsetto voice. “What the hell could you have done that was so damn important?” He takes a few clumsy steps closer to me.

“Brock—”

“Did you type a report without a mistake? Part-time fucking *secretary*! Someone else’s hard work, and you get the credit?”

“No, no—”

“Maybe you gave a blow job to someone high-up. Or old Tiff lied for you, you poor pathetic wanna-be.”

He moves closer and I pivot away, still squeezing the oven door handle, until I feel the stove knobs jab into my hips.

“Brock, it was no big deal. I thought we’d have a nice dinner and plan how we could use the extra money. It’s about time I contributed a little more.” I hate the plaintive tone in my voice; the pleading, begging weakness I despise in myself.

He laughs; the sour alcohol odor of his breath nearly gags me. I try to tamp down the resentment I feel roiling at the surface. He always steals my joy! I hate him!

And then I do something I’ve never done before. The words fly out of my mouth before I can stop them. “You *shit!*” I yell into his face, “I *earned* the award, *earned it*, and there’s nothing you can do to change that.” For a few seconds, the words I couldn’t control reverberate around the room.

Brock grabs the front of my shirt and slaps me on the head, jarring my teeth together. He throws me crashing into the breakfast nook, shoving the table and chairs helter-skelter as I flail

my arms to regain my balance. I am too stunned to get my bearings. He grabs my shirt again and smashes his fist into my face. He's screaming drunken words I can't understand.

I feel myself slipping away.

Slowly, his voice breaks through my haze, along with terrifying pain on the right side of my face. He's going to kill me. I drag myself up until I'm standing in front of him. His face has morphed into a grotesque caricature of himself. It's blood-red.

"You ungrateful bitch! You fat cow," he says through clenched teeth. I'm too slow to move. He punches me in the stomach, knocking me down again. I retch as I roll into a tight ball. He kicks me hard in the back. The unbearable pain carries me toward welcome blackness.

When I open my eyes, awake again, I'm staring at his boots. Those famous trademark suede hiking boots he wears to work every day. I gag again, too sick to care if he's finished with me. I hope he *will* finish me.

I am ready to die, happy to; but with fading focus, I watch the boots turn and leave.