

Chapter 1

The nightmare always begins with a laugh.

She has a polite laugh, the dark-haired woman, a country-club laugh to match her designer sunglasses and the dainty way she sips her lemonade. The kind of laugh you keep on a shelf behind glass and only dust off when strangers come to visit.

It should be a lovely scene, a sunlit sitting room in shades of white and blue. We're surrounded by plants, beautifully rebellious and wild against the room's straight lines and symmetry. There's a smiling face on the wall, a framed portrait of a young woman with dancing green eyes. The dark-haired woman is across from me on the other side of a little cafe table, wearing white linen pants, a dark blouse, and pearls. They look expensive. It all looks expensive.

Everything about her is curated like a portrait gallery, I think. Wall after wall of beautiful, two-dimensional facsimiles.

If it weren't for the strange hum of tension in the air, I wouldn't realize anything is wrong. Maybe there's something in her smile, or the way her knuckles have turned white around her lemonade glass. Maybe it's that I can't see myself in her dark lenses, only a blackness so thick it looks like two deep holes that go down, down, down forever.

But even so, it isn't the kind of nightmare that announces itself with shadowy alleys or blood-soaked walls.

At least, not yet.

I never see what makes her laugh, or at least I don't remember when I wake. I just hear that practiced little *ha-ha* from her crimson lips, see her sip her lemonade with an amused smirk slicing across her face under the sunglasses. We share a few meaningless exchanges, different every time. Sometimes we discuss the weather, or I ask what she thinks of the new roundabout they put in by the hospital. Never anything personal, and never more than a few sentences before she puts down her glass.

That's when it begins.

The first time, she uses a knife. It's quick, at least, though not painless. Not painless at all. She stabs me right in the heart.

I should have known, I always think. I should have guessed.

I never can figure out, when I wake, what clues I felt I'd missed.

The next time I have the nightmare, it's a gun. She gets me right between the eyes. The time after that, there's something in the lemonade. She just sits there, watching from behind those impenetrable lenses, as I writhe around on the floor, choking.

No matter how I die, the nightmare always ends the same way. She leans in towards me until her face is just inches from mine. And then she asks the same question:

How did you think this was going to end?

I reach my arm out into the darkness, fumbling on the nightstand for my phone.

4:23, it reads.

Not bad. At least I got a few hours in.

The ceiling fan is doing its best against the July heat, but the room is still sweltering, so I push my sheets down around my ankles.

I want to text my boyfriend Noah, tell him it happened again, but it's four in the morning and at least one of us should get some sleep. Besides, we've already been over the contents of my nightmares a thousand times, and there's nothing new this time except the method of death. A garotte. I shiver at the recollection of it pressing on my windpipe.

The restriction of breath felt too close to the feel of Felipe's hands on my throat as he tried to squeeze the air out of me, driven by the old memories of the Sugarwood Strangler.

A phantom smell fills my nostrils now, my mind tricking me into thinking I can smell the reek of whiskey and gasoline. I gasp for air, kicking the sheets away from my feet and stumbling out of bed.

I head for the back door, stealing through the hallway with light steps. Dad's been sleeping better the past week or two now that his treatments are over, but sometimes he's still restless at night.

Cool air would have been a nice refresher for my clammy, flushed skin, but it's even more stuffy outside, the air thick and humid. Incredible how Minnesota can go from freezing chill to swampy humidity in no time at all. There isn't even a breeze, but despite the heavy air, the open night sky is soothing, and I sink into one of the deck chairs on our back patio.

The scream of the cicadas is just invasive enough to crowd out the sounds trying to press in, the dark, silvery river of my cousin's melody and the last words he said to me as his hands closed around my neck: "I can't. He's too—"

He's too strong, I finish for him. Another way of saying *I'm not strong enough*.

My father's voice cuts into my dark thoughts. "How'd our mysterious dark-haired woman do it this time?" he asks from the doorway.

"Strangling."

I can't look at him, can't bear to see his reaction, but I hear the sharp intake of breath.

"You shouldn't be up, Dad. You need your sleep."

"I also shouldn't be eating cake at four in the morning, but here we are."

I look back to see him balancing two small plates in his hands, both laden with a piece of chocolate cake. He's wearing a pair of plaid pajama pants and a Backstreet Boys tee I once gave him as a joke, a knit hat on his head despite the heat. Even after all these months of treatment, it's still strange seeing him without a beard.

He sets down the cake on our little patio table with its oversized umbrella and sits down in the other deck chair.

"Where did you get cake?" I laugh.

"I *might* have purchased it for your birthday on Thursday. It's your birthday week, technically, so early cake consumption is allowed."

"Hand it over," I say, and he passes the cake to me.

"Take this one. I dropped the other fork on the ground coming out here, so I'll take that one."

I didn't even hear the clang, caught up in my thoughts as I was.

He shoves a huge forkful of cake into his mouth and closes his eyes. "Ah, taste buds, how I missed you."

I take a bite before speaking, and with a mouth full of chocolate and frosting, my next words come out muffled: "They don't feel like nightmares. They feel like memories."

“From one of your soldiers?”

My soldiers. He makes it sound like I lead my own battalion. For the last few months, I’ve been volunteering at the VFW, using “music therapy” to help soldiers with severe PTSD. Siphon out the worst memories, the ones that clamor through their heads like alarm bells, and they can actually get some sleep.

It can’t make up for the harm Felipe did, or wipe my own conscience clean, but if there’s something *good* I can do with our family’s ability to steal memories, I’m going to try.

It would make sense, with the vivid, raw nature of the dreams, that they were tied to those tormenting moments I’d sung away from my veterans, but I shake my head.

“I’ve tried searching specifically for a memory of the woman, just like... like Felipe taught me, but she’s not in there.”

“Want me to check the memories you’ve offloaded onto me?”

I’ve been singing my memories into him, both to keep his strength up during the clinical trials and so I don’t have those wartime horrors knocking about my head.

I shake my head again. “If I’d given you the memory, it wouldn’t be in my head anymore. It wouldn’t show up in these nightmares. Speaking of, I know I’ve been handing off a lot of memories recently, and from what I’ve caught glimpses of, these ones are bad. Still no homicidal urges, right?”

“Does murdering this piece of cake count?”

I let out a groan, and he flashes me a smug smile, proud of his terrible joke.

“Honestly, Bug, I’m guessing these nightmares are nothing to worry about, just the echoes of what happened this year with your cousin. That benefit for his victims is coming up, probably stirring up a lot of feelings and memories.”

As though they needed stirring. Honestly, I haven’t even begun to process everything that happened in December, when my cousin lost his battle to a serial killer’s memories and killed three girls. All I know is that my volunteer hours at the VFW are helping to patch little pieces of the hole Felipe’s death left inside of me.

Maybe Dad’s right, and it’s the upcoming benefit that’s got me so anxious. Thrown by Sugarwood’s community leaders, the banquet is to raise money for the families of the girls Felipe killed. Posters have been hung up everywhere around town, even in the school hallways. Though they don’t even mention Felipe’s name, they feel like accusations, wanted posters showing my face. The banquet has already raised thousands of dollars.

Some people in town don’t care that I’m the one who caught him, or that me and Hen almost died. They only care about my last name.

Dad leans forward, elbows on his knees. “Things are looking up for us, Bug. I’m done with treatments and almost ready for surgery, I even tried painting again yesterday, and things are going well with you and Noah, from what I can see.”

“Right,” I say. “Things are good.”

“So why does it feel like you’re holding your breath?”

I don’t have an answer for that one.

“Staying underwater,” he continues, “you might be safe from the storms above the surface, but eventually you run out of air. Just make sure not to sink so deep that you can’t get back up.”

I don't think he meant to trigger memories of strangling with the analogy of struggling to breathe, but I slip back into the feeling of Felipe's hands around my throat again, the garrote pressing into my windpipe in the nightmare.

"You know what would make me really, truly happy?" I ask.

"What?"

I hold up my empty plate. "Another piece of cake."

"We do need *some* left for your birthday barbecue on Thursday."

I frown at my plate, empty but for a few chocolatey crumbs. "I guess it *is* four in the morning."

"You make a good point. Four a.m. is the perfect time for a second piece of cake."

Chapter 2

The next day, I head to the VFW outpost around 10:00. On the way, I shoot Noah a quick text: *It's 1000 degrees out here. Make sure to drink water during practice.*

I get his return text as I'm entering the VFW outpost: *Thanks, Mom.*

The VFW is cool and retro in the least intentional way, like a fifties diner with its wooden bar and pool table. I imagine it hasn't changed much since Vietnam, except the addition of a TV and wi-fi. It's pretty obvious the green couches, at least, haven't been replaced since then.

One of the guys I've helped, Martin Lopez, nods at me from a barstool, and I smile back just as my phone pings again with another text from Noah: *Sorry. Grumpy in the morning.*

I roll my eyes, leaning back against the wood-paneled wall as I text a quick message back. *I get it was a joke, weirdo. I do occasionally have a sense of humor.*

Kyle Lockwaite, the most recent soldier I've helped, is playing pool with a few other men and one woman. I hold up a hand in greeting, and he smiles. "Hey, Rosie!"

Turning, he lightly jabs his pool cue into the side of one of the other men, a shorter veteran with stubbly red hair and a beard. "Connor, this is the girl I was telling you about, who does the music therapy stuff. She just puts a hand on your arm and sings, but I swear I've felt a thousand times better since she worked her magic."

Connor scrunches up his nose. "She can't be older than twelve."

A female veteran to his right doesn't even look up from her pool shot as she responds: "So pretty on par with you maturity-wise, right Myers?"

"It's the only way he'll ever get a female to touch him," another guy says, laughing.

"Sorry about them," Kyle says to me. "I'm pretty sure they were hit on the head a few times out there." Despite being covered in muscle and tattoos, Kyle reminds me of a puppy dog, even when he tries to look stern and reprimanding to his friends. He has big eyes and an easy grin, and if I squint I can almost see his tongue lagging out at the sight of a stick to play fetch with.

"You didn't believe I could help you at first, either."

"No, definitely not. If it hadn't been Austin recommending you, I would never have even tried. But I've felt a difference these past two weeks. Whatever you did, placebo effect or not, thanks."

“Can’t be the placebo effect if you didn’t believe it would work,” the woman corrects him. She takes another beautiful shot with her cue, and the whole group groans as she knocks two balls in. She’s clearly the one to beat.

“You didn’t say Austin recommended her,” Conner says. “Not exactly a ringing endorsement.”

Kyle suddenly becomes very interested in the tip of his pool cue. No one else seems to have a response.

“Shut up, Conner,” the woman says finally.

“I still don’t get it,” Frank Renner, the VFW commander, calls out from his wheelchair nearby. “What does your singing to ’em *do*, Ms. Canto?”

“It does magic,” Kyle says quietly.

Well, he isn’t wrong.

Frank shakes his head. “Still don’t get it.”

It isn’t the first time Frank has said something like that. He was leery at first when I showed up, a girl with the same last name as the local serial killer wanting to sing to his veterans, but I finally managed to convince him to give me a chance.

“Probationary status,” he relented. “I think it’s weird, but we’ll see how the men and women feel.”

Of course, I blew it. My first time there, I chickened out. The man he asked me to sing to was an old Vietnam vet who’d spent most of his adult life on the streets, homeless. He was an amputee, like Frank, who’d lost both legs to an IED. Frank sent me and the man to two lounge chairs at the side of the room, where I was out of his hair but he could still keep an eye on me.

My ability required me to touch the person I was stealing memories from, and I couldn’t bring myself to ask a grown man to hold my hand, or let me place my hand on his shoulder. I sang a single patriotic song without looking at him once and then bolted out of there as fast as I could, swearing to never go back.

That afternoon, Noah invited me to visit Agatha with him. He brought her usual purple flowers and asked her to tell us about her brother who served in Vietnam.

“Ah, Harvey,” she said, her eyes clearer than they had been for weeks. “My brother, the artist. He never lost that, even during the horrors of fighting the Viet Cong. Our military tried their hardest to squeeze the dreamer from that boy, but Harvey... He kept dreaming anyway. He once told me that from the first time they put a gun in his hands, a paintbrush no longer seemed to fit. But did he stop painting? Let me tell you about the self-portrait that almost killed him...”

Leaving the care center that day, I punched Noah in the shoulder.

“What?” he asked, rubbing his shoulder. “Such violence.”

“You did that on purpose, asking about her brother.”

“She was really *here* today, don’t you think? She remembered the whole story. *And* she called me ‘Alexander.’”

“Your name is Noah.”

“Yeah, but it’s my dad’s name, which is closer than she’s been in a while.”

I took his hand and squeezed. “It was a good day.”

He squeezed my hand back. “But yes, to your point, I absolutely did that on purpose. There are men and women in pain, Rosie, soldiers who fought for this country. For us. You helped my

grandmother by taking away her worst memories. I think helping these veterans in that same way could help you deal with everything that happened this year.”

“Helping a few soldiers won’t erase the fact that I was oblivious that my cousin was strangling girls in his spare time.”

“You never know unless you try.”

So I tried again. Frank sent me to the same chairs with the same Vietnam vet, but this time, I tentatively asked him if I could put my hand on his arm.

“It helps with the music therapy,” I said.

He agreed, and I placed my hand on his arm. “Can I ask you a question before I begin?”

“You just did, but you can have another one, too. They’re free.”

I let out a slow breath. This question was important to me: I wasn’t going to steal this man’s memories without his consent. “If you could forget the moments that cause you the most pain, the horrible things you saw and did as a soldier, would you?”

“In a heartbeat, sweetheart.”

Not exactly consent, but as close as I was going to get. “I’m going to start by humming a song, if that’s okay.”

He nodded, and I began to hum.

Felipe had taught me how to look for specific memories in people’s minds. *Think in words, not pictures.*

I want just the very worst memories, I thought as I hummed. The ones that broke him.

I tried to ignore the flickers of pain and cruelty as I siphoned the memories, keep control so I wouldn’t see what I was taking. But I could feel them rattling around inside me, ready to explode like an IED.

I left quickly, but I got a call the next day from Frank, the same VFW commander. “You gave us your number on the volunteer form. I don’t get how your little songs do anything, but maybe there is something to this music therapy thing. Bob says it really helped. You’re officially off probation. Feel free to come volunteer here whenever you want.”

And so I started volunteering at the outpost every week, singing to soldiers. Sometimes they tell me they don’t want to lose the memories that have become such a part of them. For those men and women, I just sing them a song or two, then talk with them for a while if they seem open to it. But for others, I hum a different song, the melody it took me so long to find. I sing away their nightmares, and it feels good to help them. I can make a difference for these people.

All but one.

As I walk to my usual chair at the side of the room, I look up at a black-framed picture on the wall memorializing deceased VFW members. This one is new, just added last month. He’s around twenty-five, thick reddish brows over deep set eyes. He had a beard, when I sang for him, but in his military portrait he’s clean-shaven.

All but one.

No one today is waiting to be sung to, so I pull out a book, planning to stay for a half-hour or so to see if anyone wants me to sing.

After a few minutes, puppy-dog Kyle plops down next to me.

“So are you going to tell me your secret?”

“No secret. Just music.”

“Ok, but it’s not like I haven’t listened to some incredible music since I’ve gotten back. I mean, a good song can definitely keep the demons away. But this is different. It’s like all of a sudden the memories that were killing me slowly just vanished. I’m sure they’re still there, of course, but they aren’t playing in my head nonstop, or ambushing me late in the night.”

“I’m glad to hear it.”

“Nia, my fiance, says she’s seen a change in me, too. No more train whistles.”

I lean back in my chair, hooking my finger into my book so I don’t lose my page. “Train whistles?”

“Mm-hmm. You know, I grew up right next to the train tracks here in Sugarwood. We used to joke that the conductor would fall asleep while holding the whistle down, so it just kept blaring all through town. I could sleep through those suckers whistling right outside my window.”

“But that changed after you got back from deployment?”

“Sure. Tinkering with a car at 2 am, pacing the kitchen at 4 in the morning, it doesn’t matter. Always the train whistle that woke me.”

“Four a.m.? When does the last train come through?”

“Oh, about eleven at night.” He grins, and it finally dawns on me what he’s saying. “But like I said, since last week, the conductors have been a lot more decent about blowing that whistle.”

“I’m glad you’re feeling better, Do you think the nightmares will stay gone?”

He reaches over and puts a hand on my arm. “Even if they don’t, a short reprieve is miracle enough. Maybe what you did didn’t last for Austin, but you helped him, Rosie, and that matters.”

I close my eyes against the crush of guilt.

I hummed for Austin a little over a month ago. Stormy, troubled Austin Whitlock, dishonorably discharged from the army, whose violent memories had tossed inside me like a lake in a storm. I slipped into one of them by accident, just before giving them to Dad. It wasn’t from his deployment, but from when he was young. He’d robbed a convenience store at knifepoint with some friends.

In the memory, I felt the rush of power, the drunken thrill of violence he had that night. He’d enjoyed it. My father saw me trying to act out the memory with a kitchen knife, threatening to cut the refrigerator’s throat, and shook me back to reality.

Apparently the humming helped Austin at first, because he convinced his army pal Kyle to come see me.

Two days later, he shot himself in the shed behind his parents’ house.

Now his picture is hanging on the wall of fallen veterans.

“I know this is hard for a high school student to understand,” Kyle says, “but some things can’t be fixed with a song.”

“Not so hard for a high school student to understand.”

He winces. “Forgot who I was talking to for a second. I’ve seen the benefit posters around town. Nobody could have fixed your cousin, either. Sometimes people are just broken.”

I have to believe that isn’t true. Felipe wasn’t beyond saving, it’s just that no one noticed he needed saving until it was too late.

“I’m sorry about your friend,” I say.

“I wasn’t lying earlier when I said it’s been a good few weeks. Even losing Austin last month, I feel hope, Rosie. You gave me that. And you gave it to Austin, too, even if just for a little while.”

He lifts his hand from my arm, settling back into his chair. “Now. How about a song for the road?”