

## Chapter 1

The third time I died was early on a Monday morning, a week after Labor Day.

I was working third shift at the Flatiron Depot on Arapahoe Ave, one of a small chain of 24-hour convenience stores in my hometown of Boulder, Colorado. It was just after three in the morning, and I had spent the last two hours building an elaborate promotional display out of twelve-packs of soda, pushing the boxes in or out to spell the word Welcome. I'd used brands of soda that came in black, silver, and gold for the lettering. The whole thing was a not-so-subtle attempt to kiss the asses of the incoming UC Boulder students, who would be stopping in for school supplies and all the weird little objects you find yourself needing whenever you move: box cutters and screwdrivers and lots and lots of chargers for assorted electronic devices. We've got it all at the Flatiron Depot, or at least that's what my boss makes me say when I answer the phone.

I was just standing back to admire my work, hands on my hips, a little sweaty from hauling the twelve-packs around, when I heard two people bickering in the baby aisle.

"Why would I have any idea what brand to get?" a female voice whined. "You think just because I've got tits, I know everything about diapers?"

I winced at the florid use of the word "tits" at such high volume, although it wasn't like there were a lot of minors in the store in the middle of the night. An exasperated male voice replied, "I dunno, let's just get the generic, then. What size do you think she needs?" Their accents sounded East Coast to me. Tourists, probably.

"She's what, like a year old? Is there a one-year-old size?" she said, frustrated.

No, there is not. I sighed as I left the soda display and trudged toward the voices. How do you have a one-year-old baby without knowing what size diapers to buy? They were probably used to using cloth diapers or something, I decided.

I was still an aisle away when the male voice said, "Look, it goes by weight. How much does she weigh?"

"Um . . . maybe like twenty-five pounds?"

I rounded an endcap display of neck pillows and saw them: a huge man and a woman about my size, both of them a couple of years younger than my thirty-one. They were huddled around a box of diapers, and sure enough, there was something distinctly non-Boulder about them. If cities were high schoolers, Boulder would sit at the trendy-hippie table in the cafeteria, along with Madison, Berkeley, and Portland. But the people in front of me were dressed in expensive jeans, black leather jackets, and leather boots. The woman's golden hair was highlighted six ways to Sunday, and the man had a tighter buzz cut than I'd seen since I was discharged from the army. Yes, they definitely looked new to Boulder.

Behind the man's legs I spotted a baby carrier, the kind that clips into a base that you leave in the car. They'd set it sideways so the baby was facing the wall of diapers too, which I found kind of funny, like they were hoping he or she might recommend a brand.

"Can I help you?" I said, keeping my tone polite.

The couple looked up, both with startled expressions on their faces like I'd conjured myself out of the air. "We're fine, lady," the woman said sullenly, at the exact same time as the guy said, "We don't usually buy diapers, is all . . ."

"No problem," I said, glancing between them. I was trying to sound sympathetic. My manager, Big Scott, had recently criticized my "approachability," suggesting that in the last ten months I had begun to give off a "hermit vibe." "Cloth diapers can be great," I continued, "but it's definitely worth it to have a couple of disposables on hand too, for emergencies." I stepped closer. "Do you know how much your son or daughter—" I automatically glanced down into the baby carrier, and just like that there was a pained roaring in my ears, as though everything in the store had been suddenly sucked into my chest. The baby in the car seat was about a year and a half old, dressed in warm fleece pajamas, and covered with a light cotton swaddling blanket. Uneven tufts of dark brown hair stuck out in funny whorls all over her head, which was crooked to one side, practically resting on her left shoulder. Her eyes were closed, but I knew they would be bright blue.

Just like her mother's. And just like mine.

"That's not your baby," I said almost absently, taking an unconscious step closer. Was I nuts? It can't be Charlotte, I told myself. That was just stupid. My niece was two miles away, fast asleep at her father's house. I had to be imagining the resemblance. Lots of babies look alike, don't they?

But even though it seemed impossible, I knew I was right. I had bought her those pajamas myself, and the swaddling blanket had a purple stain from when my mother had given her grape juice. I remembered myself and stood up straighter, glaring at the couple. "That's not your baby," I said, iron in my voice now.

"Of course it is," the woman insisted. "This is our daughter, Sally."

"No." Currents of fear for my niece were racing through my body like rats in a maze with no exit. There was so much space between them and me, and no space at all between them and Charlie. Without realizing it, I had loosened my stance, readying myself for a fight. "Her name is Charlotte Allison Wheaton, and she's my niece. Turn around and walk away from her. Now."

They both stared at me with empty, alien eyes. They didn't look outraged by my kidnapping accusation, or even all that concerned. Instead they gazed at me with cold, distant curiosity, like I'd just performed an interesting card trick.

"Bettina!" I hollered, loud enough for my coworker at the cash registers to hear. "Call 911!"

"Um . . . really?" came a small voice from the front. Bettina is a twenty-five-year-old single mother of two. She's so passive that our store manager forbids her from working on Black Friday, for fear of a riot.

"NOW!" I screamed.

The couple exchanged a glance. The man nodded, and the woman took a few steps backward, slinking away. Then she abruptly vanished. It was startling, but I didn't bother to process it. I kept my eyes trained on the baby. On Charlie. My scream had caused her to stir a little, but she was still mostly asleep. I edged closer.

The man reached toward me quickly, and I braced myself, ready to flip him on his ass. Instead of striking me or restraining me, however, he curled one hand around the back of my neck, bringing me in close, as if for a kiss. That surprised me

enough that I was off balance when he tangled his fingers in my hair and dragged me backward, farther away from the baby.

Yelping with pain, I instinctively raised my hands to where he was gripping me. Then I remembered my combat training and relaxed my arms, trying to ignore the pain so I could pull together a strike to his solar plexus. Anticipating the movement, he gave my head a little jerk and arched it up so I would meet his eyes. He was handsome in a hawkish, angular kind of way.

"You never saw us," he whispered, his voice suddenly a soothing arc of honey and promises. "We were never here, and neither was the kid."

He was giving me the weirdest look, which I can only describe as significant, like he was trying to imply something I wasn't getting. Acting on some instinct I didn't really understand, I let myself slacken in his grip, my eyes unfocusing, my face relaxing. A small smile played at the corners of his mouth.

And then I kned him as hard as I could in the testicles.

The blow should have floored him, but he just released me and bent over a little, wincing. Fine. I pulled back my leg to knee him in the face, but before I could do more than shift my weight, he looked up at me and snarled. I almost fell over at the sight.

His face wasn't human.

I don't know how else to describe it; it was like all the life had fled his face, replaced by a monster that now glared at me through the thin barrier of his eyes. I didn't really register his moving, but suddenly my back was smacking into the linoleum floor, and the guy had my wrists pinned on either side of my head. He straddled me, snarling again, and all of a sudden I felt split in two: part of me was so frightened I couldn't feel my limbs, while another part of me was oddly pleased. The more this guy focused on me, the less attention he could pay to Charlie.

But now the woman had returned, abruptly appearing behind the guy with an impatient look on her face. "Hurry up, Victor," she complained, as though he was lingering over coffee. "We gotta get out of here before someone else shows up."

"She won't press," Victor growled, keeping his eyes on me. I tried wiggling my wrist, hoping to break his hold, but his grip was like a piece of steel rebar bent around my limbs. Even for a big guy, he was freakishly strong.

"Then just kill her," the woman said in a bored voice. "We're leaving this shithole anyway."

Victor darted his head down toward me, moving faster than should be possible, but the woman broke in. "No! It should look like a robbery or something. We'll get the other one on the way out."

I understood that "the other one" was Bettina. They were going to kill her too.

"Right," Victor grunted. He released my left hand to reach into his pocket, pulling out a wicked, very illegal switchblade. He hit the button to release the weapon.

But now my left arm was free. And I happen to be left-handed. I reached toward the shelf next to me and grabbed a thick glass jar of baby food, swinging it as hard as I could to brain him in the temple. The jar cracked in my hand, sending liquid peas spurting through my fingers. Victor dropped the knife and recoiled slightly, but then he just gave his head a little shake and batted the ruined container from my hand with an easy swipe. He collected my wrist with another snap of movement, like

grabbing a fly out of the air. I stared in surprise. That had been a perfect shot; it should have dented his skull and maybe even knocked him out. Who . . . or what . . . was this guy?

“Stop fucking around, Victor!” the woman said sharply. I risked a glance and registered that she’d been thrusting her hand into various boxes of diapers, taking handfuls and shoving them into her purse. “Kill her and let’s go.”

Her raised voice finally woke baby Charlie, who began to squall in her car seat. Both Victor and the woman turned to glance behind them at the baby, and I saw my opportunity: I twisted my wrist toward the weakest part of the guy’s grip, where his thumb and forefinger met, and managed to slip my right wrist out of his iron hold. His head snapped back around toward me, irritation in his eyes. Moving as fast as I could before he grabbed me again, I held my first two fingers as rigid as possible and thrust them into his eye sockets. I don’t care how hard your skull is: everybody has eyeballs, and nobody’s eyeballs are made of granite.

I jammed my fingers, spraining the joint with the force of the strike. It worked, though: Victor screamed and scrambled back, toward the baby. Then he screamed anew, like being near her had somehow wounded him further. He lurched back farther, toward the woman, wailing in pain.

I ignored both of them and scooted as fast as I could toward baby Charlie, keeping my injured left fingers off the ground. “It’s okay, pumpkin,” I crooned to her over her crying. She gave a startled hiccup and looked up at me, recognizing my voice. “It’s Aunt Lex, babe. Let’s get you out of there,” I whispered. I undid her car seat straps with my working fingers, which was easier than it sounds because I knew exactly where the buttons were and how they worked. They’d kidnapped Charlie in her own goddamned car seat.

The couple had disappeared around the corner of the aisle, but I couldn’t hear their footsteps over the whimpering baby. I picked Charlie up and gathered her to my chest—and then I felt the thrust of the knife into my back. It was followed by another. And another.

I screamed, upsetting the baby all over again, and turned my head just enough to see my attacker. The woman had circled the aisle and crept up behind me, picking up the knife on her way. She shot me a wicked, triumphant smile as she flicked my blood off the blade.

Shock kicked in, dulling the pain. I could still move my right arm, but the left felt damaged. She’d sliced some tendons, and definitely punctured at least one lung—my breath was coming in hard-earned jags. I fought just to keep breathing. The woman was screaming something at me, and there was movement in my peripheral vision—the man?—but my whole world narrowed to the baby in my arms. I hugged Charlie to my chest, whispering nonsense into her hair and ignoring the fingers that tried to pry her away from me. I felt the warm blood running down my back, into my khaki work pants, but I ignored it.

I was gonna die. For good, this time.

The knowledge filled me with a creeping, acidic calm, but it was replaced by fear for my niece. When I was dead, they could just take her from me. I had no idea what they wanted with Charlie, but it couldn’t be anything good. And I couldn’t save her.

Then I heard the sirens.

Bettina must have hit the alarm button before the woman got to her,, bless her passive little heart. Behind me, the woman cursed loudly. The man had stumbled away from Charlie and me, and I heard him say something to her from fifteen feet behind us, calling her Darcy. I didn't bother trying to fight anymore. I didn't have to beat them; I didn't even have to live. All I had to do was keep Charlie safe until those sirens got here. I locked my arms around the baby without squeezing, curling my body to cover as much of her as possible. It probably should have hurt, but my body was in shock by then, and I didn't notice any pain. All that mattered was Charlie.

I slumped sideways, managing to control my fall enough to keep the panicking baby from hitting her head on the floor. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see the couple arguing. As Victor spoke, the woman held the knife up to her lips and absently licked the blood that had run down her hand. My blood. She looked at the hand for a moment, then back up at me with confused surprise.

The last thing I registered before passing out was that although there were streaks of blood and other fluids running down his cheeks, Victor's eyes had almost completely healed.

