

Chapter One

Mist rose from the ground in the dark park on Green Market Square, enveloping Lily Reid up to her knees. She shivered on the bench under the yellow spotlight of a lamppost. Heavy clouds moved in front of the moon. The loss of light should have made the South African night blacker, but in Cape Town, the evening sky always had an artificial glow that reflected the vastness of the manmade illumination below.

A searchlight reached up from afar, a beam cutting wedges into the heaven. Another crime had been committed somewhere. Another trespasser was being chased. Lily clutched her backpack to her chest. It held her meager possessions—a change of clothes, a passport, a flashlight, a toothbrush, and her empty purse.

The brittle winter air penetrated her denim jacket and jeans. A sudden gush of wind shook the leaves around her and bent the treetops low. Its iciness told her it came from Table Mountain's side. Biting her nail, she considered where to shelter from the imminent storm. Already she could smell the earthy odor that served as warning of the rain. Soon, the city would be drenched and howling with gale force winds. The shopping malls were locked at night, and the train stations were too dangerous. She'd be gang raped and have her throat slit in no time if she didn't find someplace safe.

It was hopeless. She couldn't even protect herself from the rain. But the real problem wasn't the rain. It was her inexperience at being homeless. Today was only her seventh day without a roof over her head. So far, she managed to hide her embarrassing status. During the day she pretended to be just another girl walking somewhere with purpose. She barely fed herself by stealing leftovers from street café tables. At night, she washed under a garden tap and slept behind the bushes in the park. She had no means of contacting her dad. For safety reasons, he never left a number or an address when he traveled to Europe. She had tried her stepmom, who lived in the States, but the phone had been disconnected. That meant her dad knew about the attack. He had warned his wife, and she had disappeared. As long as she was on the street, hiding and running for her life, her dad had no way of finding her. There was no one else to turn to. Adam, her stepbrother, had left with her dad. Going to her only friend would only put Clara's life in danger.

Since the armed attack on her home that had forced her to flee two months ago, she had managed to find work as a waitress in Camps Bay and a room to rent in an old lady's house. It hadn't taken long for the men from Sky Communications to find her. They showed up at the restaurant, dressed in civilian clothes instead of the habitual blue uniforms, but she recognized the blue-green globe tattoo on the back of their necks. Luckily, she was late for her shift that day, and saw them through the window before they noticed her. Once again, she had to run.

How did they find her? The only explanation she could come up with, was that they monitored her identity card. She couldn't use it any longer. Without an ID, it was impossible to get a job. Her looks counted against her. Everyone always said she looked younger than her eighteen years. No one was going to risk employing a minor.

It had all started with the visit of a man who possessed a supernatural power. Paranormals were everywhere, these days. But this was something new. Stronger. Scarier. His name was Lupien, and he wasn't a vampire or shifter or werewolf. He was a firestarter. She knew her father was somehow involved with paranormals and acquiring shares in communication companies, and that Sky Communications, her dad's major competitor, was unhappy about it. So unhappy, that they were willing to

kill. Her only chance at survival was running, and hoping that they'd never catch up with her. Now she just had to figure out how to stay safe and warm and fed ... without any money.

The fog seemed to roll in thicker from the sea, the fragrance of salt mixing with the musty odor of the rain. Her nails had turned blue. Cold was a constant part of her now, as was hunger and fear. She deposited the backpack next to her and sat on her hands in an attempt to warm them. She tried to think. When her fingers started to go numb from the weight of her legs, she buried her hands under her T-shirt. Maybe she could hide in a twenty-four hour McDonalds. But she had never walked through the city alone, didn't even know where the fast food restaurants were. At home, there was always a chauffeur to drive her wherever needed. Still, she couldn't stay here. It was better to walk until she found a bridge or alcove not already inhabited by other homeless people or the gangsters the city was known and feared for.

About to get up, the crunching of gravel set her heart racing. A man appeared on the path, his body manifesting through the fog. Lily snatched up her bag. It was too late to run. He was already too close. Hugging her backpack tightly, she sat dead still. If she didn't move, maybe he'd walk past. She ducked her head. Her heartbeat sped up when the footsteps slowed. Two black boots stopped in her line of vision. She looked up, taking in the black jeans and parka. Tall with a broad chest, the man stared down at her. His head was tilted to the side, his dark hair falling over his brow. In the light of the lamppost she could make out his eyes. The irises were a very pale green, making them seem to glow against the dark tan of his skin. His face was angular; the lines of his high cheekbones and straight nose hard. There was nothing soft about his features, except for the long lashes that framed his eyes. The kind of handsomeness that defined him was rugged, giving his appearance a rough edge. It was the kind of bad-boy look that should make a woman run. It was downright dangerous. But his expression wasn't menacing as she expected. It was curious.

"Hey," he said in a deep voice, "are you all right?"

Lily cleared her throat. "Yeah."

He glanced at the sky, but instead of saying something about the weather, he said, "It's not safe, you know, for a young woman out here alone."

She started bouncing one leg. "I'm waiting for someone. He," she made sure to put emphasis on the male gender, "will be here soon."

"I can wait with you. I'm not in a rush."

"No," she said quickly, "that won't be necessary."

The man seemed to hesitate, but then said, "Fine. Be careful." He carried on toward the exit.

Lily swallowed her sigh of relief when he stopped, turned and walked back.

He pulled a hand through his hair. "I can't just leave you here like this. It's cold, and it's going to rain. Not to mention what could happen to you."

"Please," she begged, "just leave me alone."

The man crouched down so that they were on eye level, resting one arm on his knee. "I don't know what kind of trouble you're in, but I promise you, staying here is only going to make your problems bigger."

Lily kept her hands from shaking, but inside she trembled. She shouldn't trust anyone. "Go away, or I'll scream."

He sighed. "You're right not to trust strangers. In fact, that's good. It's a good philosophy to keep safe." A fine drizzle started falling. The man looked at the sky again and straightened. "I'm Jacob. Jacob Miller. What's your name?"

"Just go."

“Not until you tell me your name.” When she looked away, he said, “I’m not going to hurt you. I just want to help.”

What difference would telling him her name make? She only wanted him to leave her in peace. “Lily. Now go.”

“Lily. That’s pretty. Look, Lily, I know a girl in trouble when I see one. You’re not waiting for anyone, and you’re not going anywhere, and we both know it. I live nearby. It’s nothing fancy, just a small flat, but you’re welcome to stay there for the night. It’s dry and warm.”

People who offered favors wanted something in return. “Thanks, but as you said, I don’t know you. Please, leave me alone.”

“I can’t. I won’t be able to live with my conscience if I walk away, leaving you here on your own.”

She turned her head back slowly to study him. In a crime-riddled city, it wasn’t normal for anyone who valued his life, big muscled guy or not, to roam the streets after dark. “Why are you walking alone through the park at night?”

He threw his thumb over his shoulder. “Had two beers at the pub up the road. Since I’m over the limit, I had to leave my car there. In my kind of business, I can’t risk being caught. I’ll lose my business license.”

Public transport was non-existent in Cape Town at night, except for the minivans that taxied in and out of the dangerous townships, and the train that connected the city to the outlying towns. Even if his explanation was believable, his presence still made her nervous. She knew better than to go home with a stranger. She shook her head, about to tell him so, when raucous laughter sounded from a short distance. Lily tensed.

Unfazed by the nearing voices, Jacob said, “Will it make you feel safe if I invite a female friend over to stay with you?”

Before she could answer, four men appeared from behind the trees on the green lawn. When they spotted Lily and Jacob, they stopped.

“Hey,” one of them said, jamming his friend in the ribs, “check that out.” He pointed in Lily and Jacob’s direction.

The four fell quiet. Slowly, they made their way to the bench. As they entered the circle of light, Lily noticed they were young, maybe even younger than she was. There were two white guys, a black man, and a colored kid. They each held a bottle of beer.

One of the white guys stepped forward, his head cocked. His black leather jacket glistened with raindrops. His eyes trailed over Jacob. “You.” He lifted the hand that clutched the beer and pointed at Jacob. He wore a gold watch with a big face and a chunky ring with a black onyx. “I’ll have your phone and your wallet.” His gaze turned to Lily, cutting a path over her. His lips pulled back in a grin. “And the girl.”

His friends snickered. Lily held her breath, her heart beating in her throat.

Instead of showing fear, Jacob turned to the men and said in a flat voice, “You have three seconds to get out of here.”

The guy with the gold watch sneered. He went down on his haunches, and when he slammed his bottle down on the ground, Lily jumped. The sneer turned into an ugly smile as he slowly straightened, lifting the broken bottle by its neck like a weapon. The others had dropped their bottles and pulled knives. They were taking up attack positions. The soft drizzle continued to sift down on them, but Lily hardly noticed. Her attention was focused on the broken shard of glass shining brown like a sepia portrait in the washed-out lamppost light.

“Four against one?” Jacob said with a glint in his eyes. “You’re a pack of cowards.”

“Come on,” the man with the broken bottle said, “show us what you’ve got.” His tongue flicked over his lower lip. “I’m going to do you first, and then make you watch as I do your pretty little girlfriend.”

Jacob chuckled and shook his head. A rivulet of water ran down his temple. Without removing his eyes from the men, he reached behind his back, under his jacket, and pulled out a gun. The minute he waved the weapon at their attackers, the four men started to back up.

“Knives on the ground,” Jacob said.

They dropped their weapons in the dirt.

“Whoa, man,” the colored guy said, “take it easy.”

Jacob kicked the knives away. He pointed at the pine trees next to the bench. “On your knees. Over there, by those trees.”

“I’ve got a family,” the black man said, hiding behind his hands, shuffling toward the nearest tree.

When they were kneeling on the gravel, Jacob said, “Two against each tree, on opposite sides. I want you hugging those trunks.”

“What the fuck, man?” the guy with the gold watch said. “You want me humping a stump?”

Jacob’s boot collided with his side, causing him to grunt. “Keep up the back-chatting and I’ll have you strip, too. Grab your buddy’s hands, nice and cozy.”

The man swore, but pushed his face against the bark and reached for the hands of his crony who was kneeling on the other side of the tree. With the size of the trunk, it was a stretch to grab each other’s wrists. Lily watched dumb-founded, frozen in shock, as Jacob took a bundle of tiebacks from his back pocket. The minute his intention became clear, the blond guy farthest away from Jacob lifted to his feet.

“Jacob!” Lily shouted, pointing at the man who launched into attack.

He only took one step before Jacob pulled the trigger, the bullet shooting up dust next to the man’s shoe. The blond stopped and lifted his hands above his head.

Jacob clicked his tongue. “Damn. I missed. I was aiming for your knee.” He pointed the gun at the man’s leg.

“No. No.” The man pinched his eyes shut and cowered. “Not my knee.”

“Back to your tree, there’s a good dog,” Jacob said.

The man scurried back, fell to his knees, and wrapped his arms around the pine.

“Lily,” Jacob said, “come here.”

Lily couldn’t move. She could only stare at Jacob, the scene triggering the horror of a different attack she couldn’t forget.

“Lily,” he said with a firm, but gentle voice, “I need you to come over here, sweetheart.”

His tone of voice got her attention. She looked between him and the men. They were outnumbered. If she didn’t help him, they were both dead. She got to her feet and made her way to Jacob on shaky legs.

“That’s it, sweetheart. Good girl.” When she stopped in front of him, he said, “You’re going to tie their wrists together with these.” He handed her the tiebacks. Her fingers trembled when she took the plastic cords from him.

“Start with him.” Jacob nudged the man with the gold watch with the tip of his boot.

Lily worked as fast as her cold hands allowed. Jacob made it easy, treating her like a small child, commanding one simple step at a time—‘move over there’; ‘put the

cord around their wrists'; 'pull it tight now'—until all four pairs of arms were secured. The men scoffed and swore, pulled at their restraints, and spat on the ground. With a satisfied nod, Jacob pushed the gun into the waistband of his jeans, and covered it with his parka. He walked to the bench, picked up Lily's bag and wordlessly offered her his hand. The men shouted outraged threats and obscenities.

Looking at his outstretched arm, Lily said, "What about them?"

Jacob shrugged. "They'll be discovered tomorrow morning when the park cleaners come on duty." When Lily still hesitated, Jacob said, "You can't stay here. The city's crawling with scum like them."

Still shaking, Lily walked to Jacob and placed her hand in his. If he wanted to attack her, he would have done so by now. He led her a distance away from the men, until they were out of earshot, and pulled a smartphone from his jacket pocket. He flicked his finger across the screen.

"Kyle's a good friend. She lives nearby. She can stay with you at my place tonight."

It was raining harder now. Lily's clothes were soaked, and her feet freezing in her trainers. His proposal was becoming more attractive by the minute. He had protected her, and risked himself to do so, but could she trust him? It wasn't unusual for people to own firearms in Cape Town. Most people carried them for self-protection from the brutal attacks that took place around every corner. But the tiebacks were downright weird.

"You have a gun. And tiebacks," Lily said, voicing her thoughts.

"Regarding the gun, I'm in the security business. I have a legal license and I know how to use it responsibly. As for the tiebacks, I'm doing DIY at home. I just happened to be shopping at the hardware store this afternoon before I met a buddy in the pub." He chuckled. "Can't say they didn't come in handy."

"How do I know this isn't a set-up?" she said. "You can pretend to be calling your friend but talking to no one. Or it could be someone else."

He put his phone in her hand. "Ask her yourself."

Lily stared at the screen. The name that showed above the number was for Kyle Fords. The phone was already ringing and a reply came from the other end of the line, loud enough for them both to hear.

"Hello, Jacob," a perky, female voice said. "What's up? Isn't this way past your bedtime?"

Lily glanced back at the cold, dark park. It was either that, or Jacob's place. Surely, he wouldn't have offered to invite his friend if he had sinister intentions. Slowly, she brought the phone to her ear. She couldn't believe she was doing this. "Um ... hi, this is Lily. I'm using Jacob's phone. He said I could call you to..." She glanced at Jacob.

He gave her an encouraging nod.

"To ask if you could go to his place, and spend the night there. With me." She frowned and pinched her eyes shut. "That came out all wrong. Not with me, like in..." When she opened her eyes again, Jacob regarded her patiently. "It's nothing like that. I mean..." She paused. This was hard to say. "I've got nowhere else to go, and I don't know Jacob."

She flushed at her admittance of being homeless, but also at the bluntness of her words. Jacob seemed like a considerate person, and she felt bad for insinuating that he could be a rapist or serial killer.

"Wow, okay." Kyle gave a laugh that sounded as uncomfortable as what Lily was feeling. "That's a first. Er, yes, all right. Fine, I guess."

“Thanks,” Lily mumbled, casting her eyes down.

Jacob took back the phone. “Hey, Kyle. Thanks for agreeing. Lily doesn’t know me, so another female presence will help her feel more at ease. We’re five minutes away from my place. We’ll wait outside. Oh, and bring some dry clothes.”

After disconnecting the call, Jacob put his phone away and shoved his hands into his pockets. He lifted his shoulders to his chin and dipped his head. Drops clung to his lashes.

“Shall we go?”

Despite the fact that he was now soaked because of stopping to help her, his lips curved with the ease of someone who smiled a lot. It made it easier for her to give a small nod. She wrapped her arms around her waist under her jacket, and followed Jacob down the path to the road.