

## CHAPTER 1



*Johannesburg, South Africa*

*Zoe*

*M*y gaze is trained on the pavement to keep from stepping in the dog poo that litters the four blocks from the sweatshop to my apartment, but I'm not present in the glorious summer afternoon. My thoughts are where they usually dwell, dreaming up fantastic plans of escaping the hellhole I'm living in. Dreaming makes my existence more bearable. Dreaming *is* my escape.

Near the flea market, the air is thick and heavy with the smell of carbon from the coal train tracks. Everything underneath the train bridge is gray, covered in layers of soot and smog. I glance at the sky. Up there, the air is blue and clear, pure and unobtainable.

With a sigh, I fall in line at the fresh produce stall, using the waiting time to stretch my sore muscles. My back aches from being bent over a sewing machine all day. In my head, I count how far the coins I have left in my purse will go. The end of the month is always the worst, but on the upside, payday is around the corner. When it's my turn, I take a banana and two tomatoes.

I drag myself the last two blocks home, weary to the bone. I'm eager to feed my empty stomach and soak in a warm bath. Then I'll collapse into bed with my new stack of library books.

At my building, I curse under my breath. The door that gives access to the street is ajar. The lock is broken again, and it will take ages before it's fixed. The landlord doesn't maintain the building. That's why the façade is black with years' worth of grime and the inside walls moldy from permanent damp.

With my gaze trained on the floor so I don't step on one of the cats always begging for food, I push the door open with a shoulder while balancing my tote in one hand and my shopping bag in the other. The gloomy entrance is quiet, strangely absent from meows and furry bodies rubbing against my legs.

My eyes are still adjusting from the bright daylight to the somber interior. The light switch has been broken for years. I frown, scouting the stairs in the sliver of light that falls in from outside before the door swings shut with a creak and basks the space in semi-darkness. The weak glow from the single bulb on the upstairs landing is the only light preventing the inhabitants from not tripping on the stairs.

I'm about to call for the cats when something crashes into me from behind. My mouth opens on a scream, but no sound escapes as a large hand clamps over my mouth and an arm

knocks the wind from my stomach as it wraps around my waist and lifts me off my feet.

The bags in my hands drop to the floor. Fear slams into my chest. In a distant corner of my mind, I notice the tomatoes that roll to the foot of the stairs, and a logical, detached part of me worries about the spoiled food even as I start fighting for my life. I twist and buck. With my arms constrained at my sides, I can only kick. I try to bite, but I can't force my lips apart. The hold over my mouth is too tight. It feels as if my jaw is about to snap. A button on my blouse pops from my efforts. It drops on the floor with a clink and bounces three, four, five times before it finally surrenders quietly in some corner. A smell of spices and citrus invades my nostrils—a man's cologne. My senses are heightened. In the life that passes in front of my eyes, everything seems louder and clearer.

"Shh," a male voice says against my ear, only making my terror spike.

I want to twist my head to the side to evaluate the threat, but I can't turn my neck. Two men manifest from the shadows. One has long, blond hair and the other is bald with a beard. They move quickly. The blond one snatches up my bags while the bearded one goes up the stairs. He looks left and right before giving a nod.

At the signal, my captor follows with me. I have to breathe through my nose as he climbs the single flight of stairs to my floor. Like this, the smell of the urine on the stairs and the mold on the walls is stronger. It makes me gag. Or maybe it's how our bodies are pressed together, and what he has in store for me.

The blond has taken my keys from my bag and has the door to my apartment open by the time we hit the landing. I glance at my neighbor's door, praying to God Bruce isn't playing his X-Box with his headphones on, but the sounds of

his favorite game hits me before the stranger carries me inside.

Lowering me to the floor, he keeps his hand over my mouth. "My men are going to leave." His voice is deep and his accent strong. The way he rolls the R makes the dangerous words sound sensual. "I don't want to hurt you, Zoe, but if you scream, I'll have to. Understand?"

Dear God. He knows my name. I pinch my eyes shut, my chest heaving with every breath. How does he know my name?

He speaks softly, pressing the words to my ear. "I asked you a question."

I give a tight nod. What choice do I have?

He removes his hand slowly. "That's better."

The minute he releases me, I spin around and back up to the couch. "I don't have money. I have nothing valuable."

He smiles. "Do I look like I need to steal money?"

I take him in. His face is square with sharp lines, his nose slightly askew as if it has been broken many times. Thick, black hair is styled with fashionable sideburns. The tone of his skin is warm, but his eyes are cold, their color the gray of an overcast sky. He's not a handsome man, and the broken skin of his knuckles tells its own story.

Swallowing, I drop my gaze to his body. He's taller and broader than anyone I've seen. His chest and legs fill out every inch of his suit. It's a gray pinstripe—pure wool, judging by the thread—but it's the perfect cut that differentiates him. He screams money and power. No, he wouldn't have broken in for money. The alternative makes me break out in a cold sweat.

He advances on me, his gaze slipping to my chest. "However, you do have something of value I need."

I look down. My blouse is flaring where the button tore

off, exposing my bra. Clutching the ends together, I ask through trembling lips, "What?"

When he nods at the two men, I look over at them. The blond one has a model-pretty face. He's lean and tall. The one with the beard is stockier with eyes so black the pupils bleed into the irises. Both are dressed in dark suits and carry guns.

The bearded man goes through my tote, unpacking the overall I use for work on the table with my purse and hairbrush. The bag with my banana lies next to it. He picked up my tomatoes, the split skins visible through the transparent plastic. When he finds my phone, he hands it to the man who grabbed me. The man pockets it. Then, like my captor promised, his men leave. The key sounds in the lock. I'm locked in with the stranger.

Fear heats me from the inside, making me feel nauseous. Even my hunger disappears. "What do you want from me?"

The man doesn't answer. As soon as his accomplices are gone, he turns his attention from me to inspecting my living space. His gaze moves from the ratty couch with the broken springs to the framed photos on the wall and finally to the daisy in the vase on the table. His evaluation is invasive. I know what he sees, but I refuse to be ashamed of my poverty, especially in front of a man with an expensive suit who snatched me off the street.

He walks to the daisy and touches the stem. "Nice touch."

"What?"

"The flower." Meticulously, he strokes every petal. "Where did you get it?"

What the heck does that matter? "From the pavement."

He gives me a doubtful smile. "You didn't take it from someone's garden."

Despite my fear, my anger blooms. "No, I didn't *steal* it. It grows wild."

He doesn't react to the silent accusation. He only continues to watch me intently. After a moment, he asks, "A boyfriend didn't give it to you?"

"No." Where is he going with his line of questioning? Why doesn't he tell me what he wants?

"No boyfriend, then."

"No." I watch him as he moves to the wall to study the photos, my heart pounding like a pendulum against my ribs.

"Your family?"

"Yes."

He points at the tallest boy on the yellowed Polaroid picture. "Who's this?"

"Why do you care?"

He looks back at me with a quiet warning in his eyes. He doesn't need his foreign-sounding words to instill fear.

"That's Ian," I say reluctantly, "my oldest brother."

"The others?"

"Next to him is Leon, then Damian, and me."

Leaning closer, he studies the girl with the pigtails and too short dress. "You were cute. How old were you?"

I grip my blouse tighter. "Ten."

He motions at Mom and Dad. "These are your parents?"

"Late parents."

"My condolences."

He picks up the book about Venice from the couch and turns the cover. I don't want him to touch it. I don't want this man who stole into my privacy to also invade my dreams. My dreams are mine. They're private, but I'm helpless from stopping him as his gaze skims over the table of contents and the library stamp before he drops it back onto the couch and opens the book on the coffee table. It's on loan from the library, too, about the same topic, just like the book next to the bath and the one on my nightstand. When he's done inspecting that one, he goes to the bookshelf and tilts

his head to read the titles. Shelf by shelf, he goes through them.

Losing interest in the books, he makes his way to the kitchen. He stops in the doorway and assesses the shelf with two chipped glasses and a dented pot, the only inherited items that haven't yet broken or rusted. His attention moves to the geranium on the windowsill. The sturdy, green plant is my pride and hope. I found it in the trash and managed to save it. Whoever discarded it must've thought it was dead, but there was still a tiny bit of green in the stalk. It was dry, neglected, and I felt sorry for it. The fact that it fought and survived to bloom and thrive is a reminder to myself to never to give up.

He looks at the darker square on the lanoline floor where the fridge used to stand. I long since sold it when I couldn't pay the rent, just like the rest of the furniture and everything else that were worth a few bucks. Without groceries, I don't need a fridge. A few minutes ago, where tomorrow's dinner was going to come from was my biggest problem. I never imagined my life could get worse.

Suddenly tired, I hug myself. "Look, just tell me why you're here and then leave me alone."

He doesn't acknowledge me. He's staring at the food cupboard. Instead of a door, it's covered with a curtain, which I left open, exposing the almost empty jar of peanut butter and crust of bread.

"I suppose an introduction is in order," he says when he finally turns back to me. "Since I already know your name, it seems only fair."

"I don't want to know your name," I blurt out. The less I know, the better my chances of survival.

He extends a hand. "Maxime Belshaw."

My shaking gets worse. This doesn't look good for me. When I don't move, he strides over, grips my fingers, and

presses his lips to my knuckles. The gesture seems taunting instead of chivalrous, and I yank my hand away from his touch.

“Now that we know each other, *Zo*, we’re going to have a conversation.”

“Don’t call me that.” Only people who care about me call me *Zo*.

He raises a brow. “Isn’t that what your friends call you?”

The fact that he knows is disturbing. “Exactly. They’re *friends*.”

Rather than upset, he appears amused. “Zoe, then. Your older brothers, they left town a long time ago. Am I right?”

“If this is about Ian or Leon, I haven’t heard from them since they left.”

“No.” Reaching out slowly, he drags a thumb along my jaw. “This isn’t about them.”

The gentleness of the touch catches me off guard. I have to bend backward to escape the odd caress because my calves are pressed against the couch.

“This is about Damian,” he says.

When he drops his hand, I straighten, trying to hold his gaze without letting him see the fear in my eyes.

“This is how our talk is going to work,” he says. “I’m going to ask you a few questions, and you’re going to answer them.”

“Never.”

I’m not ratting on Damian. Of all the people in our dysfunctional family, he’s the only one who cares. Damian is only five years older than me, but he single-handedly raised me. He looked out for me when no one else did. He’s suffered enough. He didn’t deserve any of the terrible things that have happened to him.

Maxime looks me over. “You’re tougher than I expected. The poor ones usually break easily.”

My anger makes me forget to be frightened. “Fuck you.”



“Did I hit a nerve?”

“Go to hell,” I hiss.

“Fine. We’ll play it your way.” He takes his phone from his pocket and swipes over the screen.

My heart pumps so furiously I feel every beat in my temples. He rests the phone against the book on the coffee table with the screen turned toward me. A video call connects. The video and audio functions on his side are deactivated. Whoever he’s connecting to can’t see or hear us.

A second later, an image fills the screen. I freeze. A chill runs down my spine. Maxime’s cronies are next door with Bruce, and my neighbor is tied up in a chair.

“Bruce!” I jump for the phone, but Maxime easily grabs me, holding me by my arms. I struggle in his hold, but I’m no match for his strength. “What are you doing to him?”

“Quiet,” Maxime says.

I try to kick him, but he easily restrains me.

“Why are you doing this?” I cry out, fighting to free myself while his fingers dig harder into my flesh.

The bald bastard pulls back his arm and plants his fist in Bruce’s face. The chair topples over, Bruce landing on his back.

“No!” I strain forward, trying to reach the phone, but Maxime holds me tightly.

The guard picks up the chair. Bruce spits blood, his eyes filled with venom as he glares at his assailant. The bastard hits him again, this time with a blow on the jaw that sends his face flying sideways.

“Stop it,” I scream. “Leave him alone.”

Bruce grunts as fists fall on his stomach and ribs. A vicious blow splits his eyebrow open. I can’t watch any more. My legs buckle. Sobbing, I fall to my knees. Maxime’s grip moves to my hair. His fingers fasten in the bun I always wear to work. Pulling my head back, he forces me to meet his eyes.

“Are you ready to have a conversation now?”

“Please, stop,” I say through my tears. “I’ll tell you what you want to know.”

He picks up the phone, flicks a finger over the screen, and says, “Give it a break.”

After pocketing the phone, he takes my elbows to help me to my feet. Gently almost, he wipes the tears from my cheeks. “It doesn’t have to be like this. It can be as easy or difficult as you make it.” He pushes me down onto the couch.

Teeth chattering, I scoot into the corner, getting as far away from him as I can.

“Stay there,” he says.

He goes to the kitchen. The pipes creak as he opens the tap. A moment later, he returns with a glass of water, which he pushes into my hand.

“Drink,” he says.

I take a sip on autopilot, even if I’m not thirsty.

He sits down so close to me our bodies touch. “Let’s have that little chat. Are you and Damian close?”

I nod, unable to stop the tears running down my cheeks.

“Shh.” He threads his fingers through my hair, massaging my scalp. A pin comes loose and drops into my lap. “Do you visit him in jail?”

I shake my head.

“Use your voice, Zoe.”

The word comes out on a croak. “No.”

“Good. You’re doing well.” He twists a lock of hair that came free from my bun around his finger. “Why not?”

“He doesn’t want me to visit.”

“Why’s that?”

“He doesn’t want me around the people doing time with him. He says they’re dangerous, and they won’t hesitate to use me against him.”

It’s tough surviving on the inside. Damian doesn’t tell me

what happens, but one of my friends dated a warden. The stories she told me gave me nightmares.

“Wise guy.” He takes the glass from me and leaves it on the coffee table. “A prison full of hard, unscrupulous men is definitely not a place for a beautiful, young woman.”

“Damian is innocent.” I look into Maxime’s cool gaze. “He didn’t deserve that sentence. Whatever you think he did, he didn’t do it.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“He told me. I believe him. I *know* Damian. He didn’t steal that diamond. Someone planted it on him.”

“What kind of contact do you have? Do you call?”

“He says the phones are bugged. I write.”

He lifts a brow. “Letters aren’t monitored?”

“Damian knows the wardens in charge of reading the letters. They’re safe. Besides, I don’t share personal information.”

“What do you write about, then?”

“My job.” I shrug. “Everyday life.”

“You mean your lack of a life.”

My cheeks heat with more helpless anger. “You’re an asshole.”

“If you’re so close, why doesn’t he take care of his little sister?”

I glare at him. “How is he supposed to do that from a jail cell? Besides, I’m capable of taking care of myself.”

He casts a glance around the room. “I’ve noticed.”

“Times are hard for everyone.” Dragging my gaze over his expensive suit, I add, “Well, not everyone. The thugs seem to thrive.”

“Don’t be so defensive, and it’ll be wise to watch your tone with me. Do I need to remind you of the consequences of bad behavior?”

Tears choke me up when I think about Bruce. My answer is bitter. "No."

"Has Damian mentioned his plans for after his release?"

"He still has six of the ten-year-sentence to go." My heart hurts when I say it. "What plans can he make?"

"He never told you anything about acquiring a mine?"

"Are you joking? A mine must cost millions."

"Billions." Almost absent-mindedly, he rubs the stray strand of my hair between his fingers. "Did Damian tell you about money making schemes he's running in jail?"

"No." Unease starts digging into my gut. "Why? What is he involved in?"

He drops my hair. "Nothing. Just checking. Have you met any of his fellow inmates?"

"I told you, he doesn't want me to."

"Does the name Zane da Costa ring a bell?"

"He's Damian's cellmate, but that's all I know."

Getting up, he extends a hand. "I think you're telling the truth, but I'd like to see his letters."

I let him pull me to my feet. "There are no letters. Damian never writes back."

"Why not?"

"The wardens who read the outgoing letters aren't the same ones in charge of incoming mail. Damian doesn't trust them. He doesn't like them to know about my existence."

"What about photos? You must have some more of your brother."

I don't want to give him more information he can use against Damian. I don't want him to witness our poverty growing up. "Those are private."

"Zoe." He cups my cheek. "You need to understand that the only choices you have from now on are the ones I give you. I advise you to make those choices carefully. Don't

waste them, because you'll have little enough. More importantly, don't test me. I'm not a patient man."

Gripping his wrist, I move his hand away. "Don't touch me."

His lips curve into a lazy smile. "I have a feeling you're going to swallow those words."

"Never," I say through clenched teeth.

"We'll see." He points at the hallway. "Get a move on."

I hurry away from him as fast as I can, but he follows close on my heel down the short hallway and into the room I once shared with my three brothers. Opening the dresser drawer, I take out the box of old photos and hand them to him. Doing so guts me, because those rare moments of our lives captured on film aren't meant for his hateful, emotionless eyes.

"Thank you," he says, accepting the box.

"I've given you what you want. Let Bruce go."

"What's Bruce to you?" He says the name with disdain.

"A kind neighbor." My look is accusing. "He's only ever been watching out for me."

"There's nothing romantic between you?"

I cross my arms. "No, not that it's any of your business."

"Do I need to remind you of your place?"

I avert my eyes, resenting him for taking my power. "You got what you wanted. Please, go."

"I'm not here for the photos."

Sick with fear, I look back at him. "What more do you want? You said you'd let us go."

"I never said that."

I take several steps back until my body hits the wall. "Did you lie? Are you going to kill us?"

"No."

"What then?" My whole body is shaking. Even the hem of my skirt is trembling.

“First things first. We’re going out for dinner.” His gaze drops to my gaping blouse again. “Make yourself presentable.”

I stare at him. “Dinner?”

“You know,” his tone is dry, “the meal you have between seven and nine.”

“I have to go see Bruce,” I exclaim. “He’s hurt.”

He opens the top drawer of my dresser and starts going through it. “He’ll survive.”

Dashing forward, I grab his arm. “Hey! What are you doing?”

He stops and looks at where I’m touching him.

I loosen my fingers and remove my hand. “That’s mine, and it’s private.”

He sweeps aside my underwear and socks and checks underneath my sweater. He does the same with every drawer, and then pulls away the curtain to check inside the closet.

Without another word, he walks from the room and goes through the broom closet in the hallway before searching the closet in my late parents’ room.

Satisfied that there’s nothing of interest, he pulls out his phone. “We’re leaving in five. This is one of those precious choices I’m allowing you, Zoe. You can either fix your clothes, or we go as you are.”

“If I go with you, will you let Bruce go?”

“You’re not in a position to bargain. You *are* coming with me, but don’t worry about your neighbor. My business isn’t with him.”

Lifting the phone to his ear, he asks for a table for two while making his way back to the lounge. My chest is tight and my breathing shallow. Who is this arrogant man? What does he want? Is Damian in trouble? Is Bruce all right?

My tears are useless, but they flow anyway. Slipping into

the bathroom, I lock the door. The window is too small to climb through. There's no backdoor. I'm trapped in my apartment with a dangerous man, a foreigner with cruel eyes and unknown intentions, but Bruce is even worse off.

I stare at my face in the mirror. I'm a mess. My mascara is smeared under my eyes. The neat bun of this morning is partly undone, my hair wild. I open the tap and rinse my face, washing away the mascara. The pins drop to the floor as I undo my hair with shaky fingers. I don't bother to pick them up. My brush is on the table in the lounge, and I'm not going there because *he* is there. Using my fingers, I comb through my hair to tame the tangles. Both my spare blouses are in the wash. I get a safety pin from the box with my needles and thread and pin the edges of the blouse together as best as I can. It takes longer than what it should because of how much I'm shaking. By the time I'm done, a knock falls on the door.

"Open the door, Zoe."

For a fleeting moment, I consider not complying, but I can imagine how that will go. It won't take much to kick down the door, and Bruce will suffer again because of my resistance. With my heart in my throat, I turn the key, but I don't push down the handle. My brain refuses to obey the command. It takes me a moment to search for the courage, but before I find it, Maxime opens the door.

"Let's go." He takes my arm and leads me to the lounge.

The blond man must've been standing just outside, because Maxime only has to knock once before the door is unlocked. When Maxime drags me through it, I know my life as I knew it has ended.