

Chapter 1: Life and Death

IF THIS WAS HEAVEN, it was a major disappointment. Where was everybody? Hello? Anybody? I'm freezing my butt off over here . . . *anyone?*

Silence.

Wrapping my arms around my chest, I rubbed them for warmth. Wasn't being dead supposed to be, uh, more comfortable? I mean, really, dying was bad enough, wasn't it? The afterlife was supposed to be rainbows and sunshine . . . and warmth—glorious warmth. Looking around again, I sighed long and hard.

Well, this place sucked. There wasn't anything here besides me standing in an empty white space. Could it be any worse? In response, the Keepers of Paradise tossed a handful of heavy snow down on my head. Really? I tucked my chin and huddled in the blizzard. After a minute or so, I saw a faint light. The glow coalesced into a golden ray that speared the fog to illuminate a path.

It was so pretty . . . so pure.

Stupid bitch! You ruined everything.

Oh, my God! Where was he? Where was *Scott?*

My eyelids burned. The sensation drew me from the medicated sleep I swam in. Like the sun popping out from a cloud bank, the sudden brilliant light heated my skin. By the time I blinked the room into focus, it was gone. I peered between my bandages, but there was no other light. The hospital room was dark with the exception of the dim radiance of the machines sitting near my bed. Huh. I *thought* I saw a light . . .

A nurse bustled into the room when she noticed my eyes were open. Cocking her head, she chided, "All right Miss Mica, what are you doing up? You were sleeping a minute ago."

Her name tag read *Lillian*. She was an older woman, with a healthy rack and several braids pulled back in a ponytail. She had a motherly way about her that made me feel better.

I cleared my throat and reassured her, "I'm okay. I woke up hungry, though." I gestured at the IV bag, and added, "This isn't doing it for me."

She smiled, and muttered, "Mm hmm," as she read my chart and checked my vitals. She asked me about my pain and other official nurse questions.

Yes, I was feeling better. Well, I didn't feel *dead* now, so I guess that was *better*. Yes, I'm still feeling some pain. Was she kidding me? I was one big bandage! Everything hurt if I moved. I couldn't take a normal breath without pain. Did I want more pain meds? Well, of course I did! This woman was hilarious. I snorted out a small chuckle which hurt my nose. I ended up laughing and gasping in pain at the same time. Bless Lillian, she stuck a needle in my IV, and the pain went away in a warm wave of bliss. She was awesome. I told her I loved her—right before the room went black.

The next morning I had a visit from Dr. Strakowski. His bedside manner was nonexistent. I couldn't get a question out of my mouth. He was rushing through a list of doctor questions like he had a hot date waiting somewhere. When he finally asked how I was feeling, the answer was *peevish*.

“Let’s see . . . my entire body hurts—no one has told me what part of me is *not* broken—and I have no idea how long I’ve been a guest here at this Holiday Inn.” I was sulking. As an afterthought, I added, “And I have no idea what happened to the psychopath who tried to kill me. Other than that, I guess things are just peachy.”

Mouth open in surprise, he raised an eyebrow and peered over the top of his glasses as if Nurse Lillian could shed some light on my snarky attitude.

With one hand on her ample hip, she enlightened him in a tone that sent a flush over his cheeks. “No one was supposed to upset her until she was stabilized—*your* orders from the ER. She’s been here for two days now, and today is her first day of real interaction. She’s been sedated most of the time. I’d say she’s been remarkably patient, considering.”

After scrutinizing my chart again, Dr. Strakowski sat down next to the bed and settled in. “Okay, you’re right. You do need some answers. The nutshell is you were dropped off outside of the ER two nights ago. You were unresponsive. In addition to numerous cuts and a broken ankle, you had a lacerated spleen, a punctured lung, and a major concussion. We rushed you into surgery to repair the spleen. You’ve got a long recovery ahead of you. But you *will* recover. You’re very lucky.”

He made some notes, gave Nurse Lillian new orders for meds, and then left to finish his rounds. Five minutes later, a detective took his vacant chair. She was a brunette with wide brown eyes and a kind face. She must have been around thirty or so.

“Mica, I’m Officer Halliwell with Plattsburgh P.D. I’ve been assigned to your case. Do you feel strong enough to give your statement today?”

For the next hour, I recited everything I could remember about Scott Flynn before he lost his friggin’ mind and tried to kill me two days ago:

I was out cruising around with my best friend, Ricki. I was focused on switching lanes when a distraction popped up. Braking with a jolt, I pointed to a familiar guy idling at the curb who was staring in our direction.

“Hey, isn’t that Scott Flynn over there?”

“Yeah, that looks like him. Who cares?”

“He’s waving at us. Let’s see what he wants.”

She shot him a glance and frowned in disapproval. “I don’t know, dude. He’s kind of a jerk.”

“True. But he’s a cute jerk.”

Ignoring her warning, I studied him through my Oakleys as he sauntered over. It was hard to make out his expression in the shadows. There was something about him that attracted and repelled me at the same time. It might have been the motorcycle that tipped the odds in his favor. In my mind, that made him one hundred percent more attractive. I was dying to go for a ride, but he hadn’t offered. I’d been flirting with Scott all summer. It was now officially fall. At this point he was on my last nerve. He was hot and cold. He was annoying. He was hot. Sometimes hotness overruled annoying so I was keeping my options open, but so far we hadn’t gotten past the flirting stage. He was an enigma. Half the time he ignored me, half the time he tried to get me alone for a hook-up. I’d say no thanks. He’d laugh and leave with someone else. The whole situation was getting old.

He leaned into the window like he owned the car. My toes curled as I breathed him in. It wasn’t fair that he should be so gorgeous and smell amazing too.

He barely nodded at Ricki, dismissing her completely. “So, Mica, you got time for a ride?”

This was unexpected. I searched his face for clues. Well . . . he didn't *look* like he was up to anything . . . Why not? "Okay, I guess that would be cool. Who all's going?"

He flashed a devastating grin. "It's just you and me, babe. Scared?"

"You wish."

It was a perfect day for a ride. Once we were on Route 9, I settled my cheek against his back and held on tight. The orange and yellow trees were a blur as we raced through the countryside. The colors were incredible. Mother Nature had outdone herself.

The bike roared like a living animal. Part of me was terrified that we'd go sliding off the road and die; the other part of me was . . . not. What a rush! The wind in my hair, the vibrations from the engine, the awesome thrill of speed—so cool! I was a little disappointed when we reached The Rocks. The wooden boards creaked as we rolled slowly across the decrepit covered bridge to get to a parking area. The Rocks were really just a place in the river where people hung out. The river was usually low, so there were huge slabs of granite lying all over the place. They were flat enough that you could sit chairs on them if you wanted to. We grabbed a blanket and claimed our space. We were completely alone in the middle of the river.

I leaned back on my elbows, eyes closed against the sunlight, taking it in with all of my senses. The gurgle of the water, the warmth of the sun, the earthy scent of dying leaves . . . Everything was perfect; peaceful.

"Comfortable?" Scott drawled from behind dark sunglasses. He sat cross-legged on the opposite side of the blanket.

"Pretty much." I smiled up at him from behind my own lenses.

He was so gorgeous sitting there, dark bangs brushing his forehead, sexy mouth set in a half-smile, eyes impossible to read. I still couldn't believe he had invited me today. It was kind of strange. I didn't completely trust him, but I didn't think I had anything to worry about. What was the worst thing that could happen? He'd try to kiss me? I could deal with that.

Unable to resist the urge to commune with nature, I hopped to my feet. "God, it's too beautiful to sit still!" I jumped from our rock to the next one over, and then to the one next to that one.

He jumped up to chase me and the race was on. Caught up in the game, I slipped and ended up in the river. It was only ankle deep, but it was ridiculously cold. Still playing, I kept splashing through it to the next rock, when suddenly Scott grabbed my arm and I lost my balance. I fell back against his chest, laughing and flailing my arms. He was laughing too as we stood catching our breath. And then he stopped. Our faces were inches apart, and I suddenly realized how close he was holding me. I was molded against him so tightly I could feel the snap on his jeans. Something creepy flashed in his eyes. Flushing, I tried to step back. Rubbing his thigh against mine, he tightened his grip on my shoulders. His smile didn't quite reach his eyes. The creepy expression was back.

"Scared yet?" he murmured, a watchful fixity in his face.

I stuttered an uncomfortable laugh as I tried to put some space between us. "There are people walking up. Let me go. This is embarrassing."

He didn't relax his hold, but he looked towards the people who had just pulled up. There was a group of about six men and women. Two of the bigger men were eyeballing us with interest. Surely they would step in if things got out of hand? Scott released an insincere chuckle as if he was just playing around.

"Come on. Let's go." All sense of play evaporated as he snatched up the blanket.

Heavy grey clouds buried the sun, the temperature plummeted, and I shivered with more than cold. Scott was pretending to look at me, but I could see he was still watching the two big guys. His stance was not protective, but more territorial. I didn't like it. It didn't feel right. Scott's face seemed different to me. His hooded eyes didn't seem deep or sexy now; they seemed cold and calculating. His hard mouth didn't seem mysterious; it just seemed cruel. The first trickles of fear skittered down my spine. This wasn't fun anymore.

I tried to keep my voice casual as I said, "I think maybe we should leave. I'm soaked and freezing my butt off. Let's head back."

Expression stony, he shrugged. "Sure, babe. I don't like the looks of those guys anyway."

As I settled on the motorcycle, I realized I had a big problem. I really didn't want to touch him now. The earlier feeling of adventure was gone. I just wanted to get home—preferably in one piece. Scott took the curves at a ridiculous speed. The sky was dark with a building storm. It was getting more and more ominous. We were going so fast my lips were numb. I was pretty sure he was going to kill us. I yelled for him to slow down, but he just pushed the bike harder. At this point, prayer seemed like a good idea.

Oh, please, God! If you get me out of this, I would be so grateful. I swear I won't go near this guy again. He's crazy! Please get me home alive!

The bike slowed enough for us to turn onto a gravel road that I didn't recognize. I didn't know what to think until I saw an old house looming up in front of us.

"What are you doing?" I yelled over the roar of the engine.

He ignored me.

Where were we? What was he doing? All my instincts were screaming that this was *BAD*. Running through escape options, my brain went into overdrive. There weren't many. Could I jump off and run? No, we were still going too fast. I didn't see any other signs of people. No place to run to. Shit. This was not good.

Fat drops of rain pelted us as we rolled up to the wraparound porch. On cue, Mother Nature unleashed her fury. Screaming winds drove the rain against the house like a hurricane. Before I could object, he yanked me through the door. Thunder boomed so close I jumped out of my skin. Lightning lit up the windows, turning Scott's face into something sinister, demonic. Visions of horror movies raced through my head. This was so, so bad.

"Looks like we made it just in time. Lucky for you I knew about this place." He smiled, teeth gleaming whitely in the darkness. Another flash of lightning turned them into fangs.

"Get away from me." I was trying to sound fierce, but my shaking voice probably wasn't convincing.

He chuckled before wagging his head slowly as though I were a disobedient child. "Mica, Mica, Mica. You've been hot for me for months. Don't try to deny it. Now's your chance to see what you've been missing. We have privacy here."

I *had* been hot for him—sort of—that's true. But that was a different Scott. *This* guy was creeping me out. Between his mood swings, the violent storm, and my overactive imagination, I was almost convinced he was Satan himself. Storm or no storm, it was way past time to get the hell out of here.

"I didn't know you then. I didn't want to hook up with you. I just thought you were cute. There's a difference, genius!" I snapped, backing away, edging towards the door.

"Oh, really? All those looks you gave me? The flirting? I know what you were doing. You were doing what all girls do. You were reeling me in. And now, you've got me." He'd been slowly stalking me while giving that little speech.

I lunged for the door, but he blocked it with his body. Cursing, I yanked at his arm. It was like trying to move a tree. He crossed his arms and refused to budge.

Between my teeth, I ground out, "Let me *out*."

He shook his head, amused. "No."

Crossing my own arms, I glued my eyes to his. "Get out of my way, you dick."

"Sticks and stones."

Before I could move, he fisted my hair, dragging me across the room. Struggling to break loose, I screamed bloody murder. He dropped me so hard my head bounced. I was still seeing stars when I felt him doing something with my wrist. Was he tying me up? Oh, hell no! I went insane, twisting my body, kicking, slapping, biting—anything to make him stop. He hesitated long enough for me to kick him in the face. His nose broke with a crunch. I staggered away, lunging for the door. Something hard hit me in the middle of my back, and I fell forward against the corner of a table. The pain was shocking. I couldn't move, couldn't breathe. My vision dimmed to black. When I came to, I was tied to a table leg by one arm, every breath a knife in my side.

"Okay, you stupid bitch. I know you're awake. Stop playing around. We have things to do." Leaning down, he glared into my eyes, nose dripping blood onto my face. "You're going to pay for breaking my nose."

"Get off me, you pig!"

In answer, his mouth crushed mine. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't draw a breath. I tried to struggle, but every movement shot pain through my body until I just collapsed. He ripped his mouth away to bite my neck, his breath harsh in my ear, his body tense with fury and just plain insanity. With a satisfied grunt, he pinned me to the floor, groping at me in the dark.

"That feels good, doesn't it, slut? You girls are all the same. Oh, yeah, this is what you wanted from me, isn't it? Well, we've got all night." He bit me until I cried out.

Running on an adrenaline boost, I swung a fist at his temple. The connection vibrated all the way down my arm. It was a weak effort, but I wasn't just going to lay here and let him rape me. That was clearly what he was working up to. I had to do something to stop him.

He didn't appreciate my efforts and lost it completely. Screaming obscenities, he punched me in the face again.

Burning pain shocked me into consciousness. My head swam in circles as I tried to make sense of things. Where was I? What happened? I shifted position and pain knifed into my ribs. Sucking in a gasp of air, I tried to blink to clear my head. There was nothing but blackness in front of me. No, no, no! I tried again but still nothing. Scott! Did he take my eyes? Oh, my God, no! Vicious fingers gripped my chin. The pain made my eyes water.

"Oh, good, you're alive. I was hoping you weren't dead. I've had some time to think about this while you were sleeping. Don't worry. It'll be fun for you too." The caressing tone sent my heart into spasms.

Now what?

The tears loosened the dried blood that had sealed my eyes shut. I wasn't blind after all. His face shimmered like a mirage, and all four of his mouths grinned evilly down at me. My ears rang like church bells; my head throbbed viciously. His face swam in front of me again. I couldn't focus. My thoughts were scattered. *FOCUS!* I have to stay awake to get out of here.

"I found a few things in the basement."

There was a screwdriver, a flashlight, a piece of wire, some duct tape, and a hunting knife gleaming in the faint light. He was lovingly stroking the knife with glazed eyes. I have got to get

out of here. I tried to get up, but my body didn't want to cooperate. Gasping at the shooting pain, I stomped down the urge to cry. Escape was impossible. I couldn't get up, let alone walk away. There was no hope. No one would save me. I would die here after he was done with me. He certainly couldn't leave me alive.

Totally into his new role as psycho, he was playfully rubbing the heavy flashlight over my legs. Up and down he rubbed, humming thoughtfully as he moved. Without warning, he smashed the end of the flashlight into my ankle. Shrieking with agony, it was all I could do to hold back the bile that rose in my throat. I didn't want to give him any more satisfaction than he was going to get.

When I finally looked at him again, he was considering the knife with unconcealed anticipation. Shit. Here it comes. I couldn't look away. Like a mouse watching a snake, I watched my own personal nightmare plan my murder. Turning the blade one direction then another, he was feeding my terror, enjoying it.

He was unsnapping my jeans when an idea hit me. I could stop this! Clenching my teeth against the agony, I thrashed my legs to the side, trying to push him off, but I couldn't move him. Instead, he ground his crotch against me so I knew exactly what he was planning. Getting off on my pain, he toyed with me, making my stomach heave in protest. The bile was still trying to find its way out. I swallowed hard. It wasn't time yet.

More horrifying than any nightmare, Scott loomed over me, blood running from his nose splattering onto my chest. The smell churned my stomach even faster. My ribs screamed as he jammed his hand over the break, the blast of pain sending waves of nausea swamping me. His eyes gleamed with an unholy joy as lightning flashed outside. Gasping for air, I inhaled a mouthful of his blood. The sharp metallic taste was the last straw.

There was no way I could miss. He was too close to escape. By the time my stomach was empty, his face, chest, and most of my body were covered in vomit.

Absolutely crazed, he started kicking me while screaming, "You disgusting fucking bitch! You ruined it!"

The last thing I heard was, "Stupid bitch! You ruined everything."

"And that's what happened," I added to fill the heavy silence that came with the end of my statement.

Officer Halliwell pressed the off button on the tape recorder and sat back to take a few notes.

By the time I finished recounting my story, I was thoroughly pissed. I had been in too much pain the last few days to be mad. I felt a little better now. My head was beginning to clear. Now there was room for anger. Hell, yes, I wanted to press charges! Yes, I would be glad to testify. Yes, I would identify the items they had found at the abandoned house. I would do whatever they needed to get that psycho off the streets. He was a lunatic. I wanted some payback.

I had a few questions for the detective before she left. "How did you know about the house? Did I talk to you before today?"

"No, you didn't. We got an anonymous tip. Someone called the station right after you were brought to the ER."

Really? An anonymous tip? Was there a witness? If there was, why didn't they help me? The pain meds made me a little groggy. I shook my head to clear it. "A lot of things are fuzzy right now. How *did* I get to the ER?"

Her pale nose wrinkled in thought, she said, "You know, that's a funny thing. Someone brought you here. We know that for sure; *you* didn't call 911, and you sure didn't walk here by

yourself. The hospital keeps a record of everyone who comes in. We've talked to them, but they don't have a name for us. Apparently someone carried you in, yelled for a doctor, and then left before anyone could get his name. And now, no one can agree on what this person looked like. It's like he doesn't exist. Weird, right?"

I was stunned. This went way beyond weird. "Did you show them a picture of Scott Flynn? Was it him?"

"No, it wasn't him. We showed his picture and no one thought it was him. He's in the wind right now. We've got an APB out on him. Don't worry, we'll pick him up. He's a kid. He won't get too far." She seemed very confident about that, but she hadn't looked into those unholy eyes.

I shuddered at the thought of him out there . . . waiting. He wouldn't be done with me yet. He'd want to finish what he started, wouldn't he? "He's a freakin' lunatic! Probably he'll be back to break the rest of me! Oh, my God! You have to find him!" It was too much to deal with, and I started to cry.

When I woke up again, I was in a new room. The doctors were happy with my progress and felt I didn't need to be in ICU. My face was bandage free and freaktacular. I was a beautiful collage of black, blue, green, yellow, and red. My eyes were less puffy, but I was still squinting out of the left one. My face was mostly heart-shaped, but it would be a while before my nose would be pert again, or my cheekbones would be defined. People used to say I was pretty; now, I was just pretty hideous . . . Ricki and Dani were perched on the end of my bed, oohing and ahing over my bruises as good friends should do. I'd just finished giving them the short version of my close encounter with Satan.

"You look like hell, girlfriend." Ricki was ever so tactful. That's what made her so awesome. She also had no filter, so interesting observations popped out of her mouth from time to time. She was trying to keep my spirits up, but she was worried. She'd peeled the red polish off of her thumbs again. The thumbs were the first to get whacked when she was stressed. Every few seconds, she smoothed the curly red strands that made up her hair color this month. No one knew what her real color was—I'd assumed brunette like mine, but this dark red was pretty good on her. She was making bad jokes and telling me all about her sexcapades with a hot stud she met on vacation.

It wasn't totally distracting, so in spite of her antics, I was becoming more depressed as the numbing haze of pain meds wore off. I was physically healing well, but emotionally, I was still teetering. I was trying to hold onto the anger to keep from falling into despair. It was a battle that I was losing inside, but I put on a strong face for my visitors.

They were my buds. They didn't need to know about the handprints bruised into my arms or the perfect teeth marks left on my neck. They would be horrified—make that *more* horrified—and I didn't want that much sympathy. Those marks seemed so much more . . . personal, somehow. Like a brand of sorts. I didn't want anyone else to know.

That evening I had a new visitor. I was finishing up the dinner that Nurse Stephanie had brought in. Tonight I was having red Jell-O and a chocolate protein shake. Whoohoo! Thanks to that freak, I would be on baby food for another month. Stabbing the Jell-O with a fork, I yearned for a cheeseburger. I was simmering in my own anger when the chaplain came in. He introduced himself as Father Murphy before asking if I'd like to talk.

"Not really." I sat the fork down with a clink. I was done murdering the Jell-O for now.

He made small talk for a few minutes, and then said, “I can’t begin to know what you are feeling right now, Mica. But I always feel better when I pray. Would you like me to pray with you?”

Definitely not. I had no interest in praying to a God who had let my life go to hell. I had *tried* prayer when I needed His help the most. I thought of my dead mother and Scott Flynn. Yeah, so where was God then? As far as I was concerned, it was useless to pray. No one was listening.

“No thank you, Father. Your God has forsaken me. I’m on my own.”

That night I dreamed again. I was replaying the night with Scott in my sleep. But my mind was ad-libbing here and there, and the dream wasn’t exactly the same as my memories. Now I was running through endless hallways, doors on both sides, some open, some locked. A storm raged outside, and I ran for my life while blue flashes of lightning cast terrifying shadows, and wind howled through the eaves. Behind me, Scott was a dark shape, more beast than human, relentlessly pursuing me through hallway after hallway. I ran panting, starved for oxygen, but never slowing, never stopping. He would butcher me if I did. I ran until I finally stumbled and fell. Scott was on me before I hit the floor. I was screaming as he pulled the hunting knife out and gutted me with it . . . So much blood; so much pain.

“Payback, bitch!” Scott’s eyes captured mine just before he vanished into smoke.

I should have been dead, but the dream didn’t let me die. Instead, I laid there bleeding and screaming in terror. I begged God to help me . . . sobbing and praying.

Oh, God, please! I’m begging you. Please let me die!

But He didn’t answer me. I didn’t die, and the horror didn’t stop. I could feel my blood flowing out—my life slipping away until only drops remained. My breathing gradually grew shallow before slowing to nothing more than a wish. I gave in to despair and willed my soul to let go, my body to die. And then, in the strange way of dreams, I rose above my body, watching as the last drop of blood joined the puddle below. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a familiar light. I lifted my head to see it moving closer to me. Too weak to do more than widen my eyes, my plea was more thought than sound.

“Please . . .”

The light dimmed. A golden hand reached out and touched my face. The dream went black.