

# THE RESENTMENT

A THRILLER

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## CHAPTER ONE

LAUREN

My husband's life flashes before my eyes. He hangs from the Cedar River bridge, grasping my wrists, and I've got to pull him up. I've got to save him, but—

I close my eyes and pull.

He's thin as ever but still too heavy for me.

His life—our life—our history won't stop flashing before my eyes.

I see him leaning against a keg at the college party where we first met. Tall, skinny, British geek. Mr. William Kaine. He wasn't my type, but he became my everything. Oh, God.

Without him, I have nothing. Tonight's our twenty-second wedding anniversary, and he's going to die.

He squeezes my wrists. I squeeze back. He dangles above the raging torrent.

Darkness hides the rain, but I feel it on my face.

Fear grips me. I can't focus. Too many memories. My anger swells, but I push it away.

Our wedding day rushes into my head. The insidious Ryan Kaine, my brother-in-law, is there. He raises a wine glass, makes a toast, and stumbles off the stage.

Focus.

I've got to pull William up. Save him, but I can't. He's going to fall. He's going to die and make me a widow, and Mason—Mason's only sixteen. Mason needs his father.

I try to open my eyes, but the stress of holding onto William is unbearable.

I pull.

The rain falls.

William.

I see myself sitting in a bathtub surrounded by flowers. Yellow petals float on the surface, clinging to the edges of the tub. William poured the bath for me a few weeks after Mason was born. He did it so I could have a break. So I could relax. It was maybe the last time I relaxed, and—this can't be happening.

What do they want? Why were they chasing us?

I open my eyes.

The look of terror on William's face ignites my rage. He never learned to swim.

I can't let go.

I won't let go.

His wrists begin to slip through my fingers. I lean farther over the concrete barrier and pull with both hands, but gravity

is winning. The river rushes through the darkness below, but I won't let it take him. I teeter on my toes. I let go with one hand and brace myself against the barrier.

I pull.

His wrist slides free, I lean over the edge, and our fingertips catch long enough for me to grasp his forearm with both hands.

He kicks his legs.

I hang onto him with everything I have.

He's my world.

*Help.*

Looking over my shoulder, I strain to see if anyone has come to help, but there's only the sedan that chased us. It sits mangled against the bridge abutment. The passenger side headlight is destroyed, but the driver's side headlight comes on, sending shivers down my spine. Steam pours over the crumpled hood, obscuring the windshield. Someone's in there. The bridge didn't budge when the car slammed into it, and William barely escaped being crushed by leaping over the edge.

I waste precious energy scanning the riverbanks below for someone. Anyone. It's so dark down there. Lights from the apartments across the way penetrate the trees, but there's no movement. The units are too far away. No one can hear my screams. The rain runs into my eyes, making it hard to see, but I won't wipe it away. I won't let go. I sniff, and I struggle, and the smell of motor oil sullies my senses.

I'm losing my breath.

There's a clicking behind me.

The car's headlight turns off, then on again. It flickers. The engine turns over, sputters, then stalls. The dome light comes on for a split-second, but I can't see who's inside.

"Are they coming?" William asks. His eyes are gray in the darkness, his free arm flailing over his head, his shoulders

twisting.

“No, I don’t think so.” Steam obscures the car’s windshield.

“They want the card,” William says. “They’re after me for the card.”

He slips.

I lunge forward and grab his shirt with my left hand. I manage to lock my other hand around his wrist. “Pull. I’ve got you.”

“The card,” he says. “They want the card. It’s in St. Croix.”

“Pull!”

“St. Croix!”

The engine turns over, bursting to life.

I startle and lose my grip.

William reaches for me, grasps at my fingers.

My feet slip off the ground, and I lose hold of his shirt.

He strips the wedding ring off my finger as he falls, backstroking through the night air. The drop is short, but the raging river pulls him under, and he is gone.

Instinct says jump in after him, but my rage takes over.

Everything turns red.

I race to the driver’s side window and beat my fists against the glass. The engine revs. One strike after another, I pound. My knuckles bleed, and I scream, but everything sounds far away like I’m trapped in a tunnel.

The engine whines.

The gears grind.

Tinted black glass, black paint, black tires, black hubcaps. I plant my palms on the window, trying to see inside. Steam pours over the hood, burns my cheek. Blood from my knuckles runs down the glass.

Hot tears course down my face.

The driver—nothing but a shadow—leans away from me,

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grips the steering wheel, and jerks his knee up and down, pumping the gas. He shifts the car in and out of gear, over and over. The transmission howls. I can't see his face.

“Open the door, you bastard. I'm going to kill you!”

The rear wheels spin.

I jerk back.

The car reverses, and the front-end swings out wildly, then rocks to a stop.

The license plate—torn and twisted—dangles from the bumper.

It's unreadable, but the trunk lid has five rings and an A8 emblem.

The driver guns the engine, and I stand there, helpless, watching the taillights vanish into the night.

# CHAPTER TWO

## RYAN

Ryan Kaine settles into his office chair with his lucky blanket wrapped around his shoulders, his cup of coffee on his desk, and the heat turned all the way down. His computer hums like a defiant child. He has all evening to make the code compile, and if he can do it, he can move on to chapter four, “Conditionals and Control Flow.”

Ryan presses the F5 key, but an error message bursts onto the screen.

*java.lang.NullPointerException on line 19.*

Line nineteen?

The file with the error message has thirty-two lines of code, and this null pointer exception isn't the only error. Other errors stack, one on top of another, filling the output window.

Ryan scoots back from the monitor and puts his Java programming book down. He gazes at his HTML book—*Web Design with HTML*. Creating web pages with HTML is far simpler than learning to write code. When a web page is messed up, it just looks bad. It doesn't rattle off meaningless error messages. How frustrating.

What a way to spend a Saturday night, but it's better than getting drunk.

The blanket slips off his shoulders, and the draft from the window hits him in the back of the neck. His landlord said the window couldn't be sealed—something about the wooden frame not butting up against the sixty-year-old bricks correctly. It costs a fortune to run the heater, and it barely works. The

building owners refuse to replace anything. In fact, they've threatened to raise the rent, and if that happens, his salary as a truck driver won't cut it.

Downtown Seattle must have less expensive places to live, but he's entrenched here, trapped by his own circumstance. He sobered up a few blocks away, and everyone here knows him. They know his past, and it keeps him honest. Living near his homegroup meeting keeps him honest. And sober.

Thank God he's sober.

A chill hits him, and he shivers. He should be grateful for what he has, but gratitude doesn't make the studio apartment any warmer. Top computer programmers live in four-bedroom lofts. If Ryan could learn to write code, he would settle for a two-bedroom condo. No. He'd settle for one bedroom with a big furnace.

But he'll never have a better place if he can't make this damn program compile.

He punches the F5 key again, and the error reappears. He flips through the Java book and reads about object references. Everything points to something. Everything must point to something, or it's null. But this object isn't null. It can't be. He's checked every line of code, and it matches the example in the book.

Screw this.

He opens Firefox and navigates to a real estate website and searches for apartments near his. The rents have gone up. Bored, he browses to a job website and types in *Java Programmer*. The starting salaries are three times what he makes. He could easily afford to move if he could just learn how to program this damn—his pocket vibrates. It's a call from Juan, his sponsee.

Between work and AA, Ryan never has enough time to learn computer programming. Sure, he's sober. Sure, he's got

his eight-year chip—one of the most dangerous years, the year most people get complacent and relapse—but he deserves a break.

*No.*

He can't get complacent. Like the *Big Book* says, he can't rest on his laurels.

He's made it this far because he's worked the program, sponsoring alcoholics like Juan. Yet, things aren't getting better. He's sitting here freezing, trying to save a few bucks on his electric bill, wrapped in his lucky blanket like old times. Like he's homeless again.

His phone vibrates.

"Hello?"

"I'm at the Squire, man. I don't know what I'm doing here. I—"

"I know what you're doing there. Come on, Juan. We both know what you're doing."

"Hey, I haven't been drinking, man. Honest."

"I'm glad you called, but the question is . . . what's next?"

"I went inside, man. I just wanted to say hey to the guys, you know? But I—"

"Are you still inside?"

"No. I'm in the parking lot. I—I think I'm going to be alright. I shouldn't have called."

Beneath Juan's smooth, nothing-much-matters tone swims a trembling forgetter. Ryan can hear it plain as day. Juan has forgotten the misery that brought him to AA. The misery of waking each day, wishing for serenity, but finding nothing but a craving.

Ryan swivels in his chair, presses the phone to his ear, and gazes at the crooked window beyond his ragged brown couch. It's cold in here, but it's colder outside. If the rent goes higher,



he'll be forced to move, and then he remembers what it was like living on the streets with nothing but his lucky blanket. His reindeer blanket. The silver, deer eyes staring up at him each night in the park. The golden ribbons tying the deer together as they bound off rooftops, unifying them for some purpose, holding them together while the world tries to tear them apart by selling mini shooters for ninety-nine cents and throwing them in jail as if they were evil. As if they didn't suffer from a disease.

It's cold, but life's not so bad. Ryan has a desk and a computer and a future.

"I'm going to get off the phone now, man," Juan says. "I got to go."

"Hold on, Juan. You didn't answer my question." His keys lie next to his HTML book, and he picks them up. Ryan is grateful he owns a car and never lost his license. He's not only allowed to drive, but SPD Delivery trusts him with an expensive truck. Most alcoholics aren't as fortunate. Most don't have a chance.

But his sponsee, Juan . . . he has a chance. He came into AA on his own, out of desperation. He hit bottom, but there is always lower to go. His next binge could kill him.

*We alcoholics are not cats. We don't have nine lives.*

"Juan, you didn't answer me. The question is, what's next?"

Silence.

"I'll understand if you want to go back inside, get drunk, and start all over, but you know where that will lead, right? You've been there before."

"No, man. I'm not going back in. I'm off that shit, for good. I just thought, you know, I thought I should call you. *No importa.*"

"The Squire? Over there on Fourth Avenue?"

“Yeah, but don’t worry, *güey*. I—hold on. I’m getting a call. It’s my girl. I gotta go.”

It’s a lie. No one’s calling Juan’s cell phone. His girl stopped speaking to him months ago. “Call her back later. I need you to stay on the line, okay?”

“No, man. I—”

“Juan, listen. Things have gotten better since you stopped, right?” Ryan grabs his jacket and rushes into the hall, pulling the door closed behind him.

“Yeah, man. But—”

“Don’t throw it away. Don’t let your forgetter take over.” Ryan stops and looks at the cracked paint in the hallway. He goes back, rams his key into the deadbolt, and locks it. The corridor smells like rotten leaves. “Life’s gotten better, right? Do you want to throw it all away?”

“I know. I know.” Juan breathes into the phone. Ryan can almost smell the alcohol. “And I know what you’re doing, man. Don’t worry. I’m not going back in there.”

Ryan runs down the hall, wondering if he should use his honesty speech. No one can stay dry if they can’t be honest, but telling Juan life will continue to get better in sobriety is a lie. Ryan’s been sober in this hell-hole apartment for the last eight years.

Sober and cold.

“What are you doing, man?” Juan asks.

“Are you still outside the bar?” Ryan hits the stairs.

“Yeah.”

“Okay. I’ll be there in fifteen minutes.”

Ryan can get there in ten if his old Civic doesn’t break down.

“You don’t have to come, man.”

“I know.”