

Chapter 1

Lily May

The stink of weed lingered in the dark room, trapped by the summer heat and humidity. Lily reeked of it, t-shirt wet with sweat, even though she shook her head no when Sheree tried to pass her the blunt. She wanted to get high. Damn, did she want to. But this baby— She glared at her rounded belly, wanting to beat her fists against the writhing, unwelcome thing inside her.

Her body tightened in a wave of pain that took her breath away.

She didn't want to say anything. Franco was having a good time, joking around with the others. Tag had scored a G of weed from somewhere— no one wanted to question how—and he was sharing it with the other kids in the squat they called home.

“Come on, MayBe,” Tag teased Lily again. “That kid won't mind a puff or two. Even babies need to chill out once in a while, yeah?”

But Franco told Tag to leave her alone and that was that. Everyone thought the baby was his. Sometimes she thought even Franco believed it, though she'd already been big as a house when they met. They'd both been pretending, then, that she wasn't pregnant. Until everyone started asking.

Franco had proudly claimed it as his, despite the many jeers and disbelief. He enjoyed taking care of her: stealing healthy food, insisting she not stay up all night, giving her back rubs. He'd even started walking the streets much earlier than usual. Longer hours and more johns meant more money.

She worried about that, but not enough to tell him to stop. It felt good to be taken care of. She could stay all day in the squat if she wanted, or sit on a park bench like a normal girl, watching seagulls pick through discarded food wrappers.

She could forget for a while sometimes.

“Jack the Ripper been preaching to you again, Franco?” Tag asked. “I went to the Night Moves Center to play basketball the other day and he asked me if I seen you. He tryin' to win you over to the dark side?”

Lily froze. She was pretty sure Tag was talking about Jack Prescott. Franco had told her about him, but he hadn't said anything about him being a preacher. The way Franco put it, Jack had sounded like a good thing, but if he was a man of God— Lily's pulse beat loudly in her ears. Her breath struggled to get past the knot in her chest and she began shaking.

“Repent, girl, repent. God will not harbor a sinner. Ask for forgiveness before His wrath rains down and drowns you, filling your lungs with the water of retribution.”

Water cold as ice. Filling her mouth, her nose. His hand holds her under, his words muted by the water closing over her head, by the gurgle of bubbles as her final breaths shoot toward the surface.

“Jack-man ain't no reverend, Tag,” Franco argued. “He don't talk that God crap or whatever. He just checks I'm doing okay. Handing out condoms, shit like that.”

Lily's heartbeat slowed to normal. She winced and shifted her position until another pain shook her so hard she cried out, startled. She was sitting in a tub of water. No, that wasn't real. Was it?

“Lily!” Franco shot up and came over to her. “What's wrong? The baby? Is something wrong with the baby?”

“I think...” She was sitting in a pool of liquid that had suddenly gushed from her. “I think I peed myself,” she whispered, embarrassed.

“Eww.” Sheree pulled away, even though she was nowhere near Lily.

“I think your water broke.” Franco started to pull her to her feet. “We got to get you to the hospital.”

“No.” Lily pulled away from him. “I'm not. It's nothing. Please, Franco, just take me upstairs. I'm tired, that's all. I'm tired.”

Then she doubled over, holding onto him, crushing his hand with her fingers. For a second, she couldn't breathe, then she gasped, “Please.”

“Let her sleep,” she heard Tag say. “We'll get out of your hair. Night's still young, yeah? Come on,

Sheree, Iceman. We gone.”

Lily leaned on Franco all the way up to the second floor, practically letting him carry her over the one broken step. The corner room they’d claimed as theirs was littered with crumbled plaster, peeling wallpaper, and rat turds, but they’d put a mattress in one corner and made it cozy. It even had a pillow, a stinky, stained pillow that she pulled close and curled around as another pain buckled her.

Mud, wet and stinking. Filthy hair clinging to her cheeks, to the tears and rain on her face. Roots drip from the earthen hole that surrounds her. She shudders, curled protectively around her belly, gasping for breath. Thunder. Lightning. The sound of them calling her name far in the distance.

“I’m a bug,” she whispers. Just a doodle bug rolled into a small ball in the black dirt. Hard shell outward to ward off enemies. Soft underbelly sucked in close to her spine.

The creek rises outside of her hole in the earth, past the tree roots that curtain her refuge. Water reaches the opening, trickles in. If she stays, she will drown. If she leaves, she will die. If she dies, her baby dies.

More contractions. Franco’s voice. “We’ve got to go. Come on.” She pushes him away and writhes with pain.

“You have to,” Zara says. “You have to be brave for the baby. I’ll be fine. Tell the police. They’ll get me out. Go, now, quickly. Go!”

Shots echo, a bloody mouth blooms beneath Zara’s breasts, and Lily is running, running. No one would believe her. Not the police. Not Zara’s friend. No one. And it was all her fault. All of it. If she’d been a good girl, then ...

“Be a good girl,” her father whispers, his voice reaching through her pain. “Let Jesus into your heart again and he will cleanse you of this sin. He will forgive you. I will forgive you. But you must repent.”

Pain ripped from her spine through her abdomen, spasmed through her legs to her toes. Lily screamed and sat up. She wasn’t in the hole by the creek, nor in the dark basement. Was this hell? No, just hot as hell. She was in a crumbling ruin of a room, slick with sweat yet shivering at the same time. Franco knelt over her, his face gaunt and worried.

“What do I do?” he asked. “What do we do now? Should I get her? You said not to, but I don’t know what else to do.”

And she nodded. Avril wouldn’t want to help her if she knew. Would hate her. But to stop this torture, Lily would have to pretend. To lie. She was good at that.

Lily tried to catch her breath when the pain retreated again, but it was like breathing in something rancid and thick. She felt lightheaded. Franco left her, but she barely noticed. She lay back. Her ears were ringing. God, she was going to die here, wasn’t she? Die alone in a dark room with a dead baby spilled out between her legs in a pool of blood.

She sucked in a breath as another pain corkscrewed through her. Above her scream of agony, she heard a crash then a shriek from somewhere in the house.

“You call this a stairway, hon?” The high voice had husky undertones. “This here’s a death trap, that’s what it is. Worse than plastic pieces snapped together like that Mousetrap game. You know what game I’m talking about, boy? Of course you don’t. You just a baby, you.”

Then the speaker was standing in the doorway, the form outlined by the flickering light that spilled in from the alley. Short skirt, long hair, seven inch heels, and broad muscular shoulders.

“My word, girl,” the creature said. “You making me risk life and limb to get up here just ’cause you scared of some hospital? What’s wrong with you?”

Avril. The thought of the woman brought a fear even greater than knowing she might die. What would Avril do if she knew? Then another contraction ripped through Lily and all thought fled.

“Lily? You okay, Lil?” Franco dropped to his knees and took her hand in both of his. She squeezed his fingers so hard he yelped. She didn’t care, though. It wasn’t him had a knife tearing its way out of his body.

“Avril, damn it,” Franco yelled. “Do something. Do something.”

“Darlin’, I don’t know what makes you think I can help here. You forget I don’t come with standard female equipment? I know I look all Xena Warrior Princess on the outside, but you do remember there’s a

surprise tucked up under my skirt here, now don't you, hon?"

Lily screamed as she pulled her knees up and gave in to a need to push, to shit this baby out of her no matter the cost, no matter what happened after. The only thing that mattered was push, breathe, push, breathe, push.

"You can do it, hon. Good girl." Zara? Avril?

"Mom?" Lily sobbed. "Mom, I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

You have to be brave for the baby. But she wasn't brave. She was a liar, and a murderer. A sinner. The only person who'd ever tried to help her was dead because of her. Blood dripping from her fingers, surprise on her face.

"It's a girl," someone said.

"Her name," Lily breathed as blessed darkness washed over her. "Her name is Zara Rose."