

Chapter 1

Daddy used to say to me, “When it’s raining, God’s crying. What did you do to make God sad, Nattie?”

My name is Natalie McMasters. I’m twenty-two (today is my birthday!), short and blonde (OK, it’s bleached), a pre-law student at State and a former private detective trainee at my Uncle Amos’s 3M Detective Agency. And I’m standing in a soaking rain at my best friend’s funeral (which is getting to be a habit) wondering WTF I did to bring it all about.

Dr. Rebecca Feiner was my therapist, my friend, and in many ways, my surrogate mother. She helped me discover who I am, got me over a buncha Catholic baggage and comfortable in my own skin, when I discovered I liked girls as much as guys. And she helped me through the crisis when I fell in love with my best friend while married to my wife. But like others in my life, she paid a price for her friendship with me. Last year, she became the victim of a vicious sexual assault perpetrated by an asshole who wanted revenge on me. That ultimately drove her back into a sick relationship with a former zaddy, a serial killer dubbed the Marquis by the news media, named for the Marquis de Sade, because of the way he tortured his vics before killing them. He vowed vengeance on me too, because he blamed me for snatching his wig. Did he murder Rebecca as a part of that revenge?

The WOAT is that today is my birthday. Last year on my birthday, a stan of mine burned my Uncle Amos’ house to the ground. Now this shit happens!

Rebecca had no fam, so I decided to bury her in College Cemetery, a historical graveyard affiliated with State University in Capital City. I checked to see if there was room—I thought it would be an appropriate final resting place since she so loved counseling State students. Turned out that she had a plot there bought and paid for. State said they could provide a funeral service for a small fee, and as I did not know Rebecca’s religious leanings (if she even had any), I agreed to that, too. By a happy coincidence, the Unitarian minister they engaged was the same dude who married me and my husband Danny—the Reverend Reilly.

Danny is here in his Marine uniform, as is his partner at the 3M Detective Agency, Leon Kidd, a tall, strapping black man who could be mistaken for a retired NFL player. Danny and Rebecca dated for a while, and Leon was instrumental in rescuing her from the predator who assaulted her last year.

My wife Lupe, our eight-year old son Eduardo, and my mom are also here, and about a dozen others have also come to pay their respects; some of Rebecca’s colleagues from the Psych department, and students whom she was counseling. My Uncle Amos, the founder of 3M, sent his regrets—after all, he is in a wheelchair and didn’t know Rebecca all that well anyhow. But I’ve noticed that he’s been keeping his distance since Danny, Lupe and I decided to become a throuple. That just frosts his Southern Baptist ass.

Rebecca’s shiny, dark wood casket is closed and sitting on a brass-railed platform above the open grave, protected from the elements by a canopy. There’s room for the Reverend to stand underneath, but the rest of us have to be out in the rain. The air is what Uncle Amos would call pee warm, but no umbrellas or waterproof garments can truly keep the chill out of our souls. I can’t help but remember that the last words Rebecca and I had before she was shot were in anger. I don’t think for a minute that either of us really meant it, but the time for apologies is gone forever.

Reverend Reilly clears his throat as a signal for attention. When we’re all looking at him, he begins, “At this hour, let us remember our beloved Rebecca, a beautiful and gracious lady who loved us all and gave of herself, to give us the strength to live our lives fully. She helped us cope with the adversities of life and allowed us to dwell in God’s light, which shines on an imperfect world. She is not here now to help us with perhaps our greatest challenge—our struggle against the forces of despair and hatred that

threaten to overwhelm us, because of the cruel and unjust manner in which she was taken from us. But remember that she is not truly gone—we carry her still with us in our minds and hearts. Let the courage and love she displayed in her life evoke our own, and let it strengthen us in the face of the evil which threatens to consume us. I speak not of the one who so cruelly and suddenly took her life; rather, I mean the anger, dejection and thoughts of revenge in the face of this perceived injustice that will poison our souls, causing us to overlook the beauty and dignity of Rebecca’s life as well as our own lives, and ultimately drive us into a darkness from which there may be no return. Let us call upon Rebecca’s beautiful soul to strengthen us, and remind us of the deeper path of life, the path that leads us into the light of love, not into the darkness of hatred. Remember what Rebecca would want for us, and pursue that noble goal in her memory. So let it be, amen, amen!”

“Amen!” we all respond.

The reverend beckons me forward. “Ms. Natalie McMasters has agreed to deliver the eulogy.”

I’ve been dreading this. I refused when the reverend first asked me—I mean, I knew that talking about Rebecca would make me cry, and I’m so not into showing emotion in public. Over the last few days, I tried several times to write something down, but I couldn’t even. Finally, I realized that I’d just have to wing it. We’ll just see what comes out.

“Thanks, Reverend Reilly, for your beautiful prayer. I’m sure that we all realize that what you said is true. It’s so what Rebecca would want for us…” My words begin to choke me. WTF am I saying? “No!” I blurt. “That’s a total crock! It’s true that Rebecca was a beautiful person who wanted to help others live better lives, but just look at what it got her! I, for one, welcome the anger and hatred that her murder has caused to burn in me, to focus me on what’s really important—finding her killer and bringing him down!”

“Nattie!” Danny hollers, shaking his head.

“STFU, Danny! You know it’s facts! Why the hell did you join the Marine Corps if not to fight evil and right wrongs? That goes for you too, Leon. And Lupe, you know better than anyone else what happens when we let bad people do whatever the fuck they want.” Did I just say *fuck* at a funeral service? “I’m going to take a vow right now, and I’d like all of you to join me. I’m going to hunt down this Marquis, however long it takes me, and make that shitheel pay for what he did to my friend! If you people don’t want to help me, fine! I’ll do it myself.” A sudden rush of energy drains out of me like air escaping from a punctured tire, shutting off my voice. Everyone’s standing there slack-jawed, looking at me like I’ve just peed on the casket.

After a moment, Lupe says, “Nattie’s right. I do know what bad people will do to you if you let them. I tried to hide from them, but I could not. I think we should all help her do this thing.”

Another beat, and Danny says, “I think so too. We can’t let him get away with this.” A rumble arises from the crowd, but I see more approval on faces than disfavor.

Words cannot describe the emotions that fill me, seeing this support from my fam. I have never loved them as much as now. I’m not naive enough to believe that this feeling will last, though.

Poor Reverend Reilly’s face tells me he knows that his service has been totally carjacked and his lofty ideals stomped on. “I’m afraid I can’t agree with you all,” he says, “but it’s ultimately your decision. I think there’s nothing else I can do here.” He walks off into the rain.

My eyes track the reverend as he wends his way among the scattered gravestones, making for the gravel road where the cars are parked. I notice a figure standing between two of the vehicles, observing our gathering. It’s a man wearing dark hoodie against the rain. He’s relatively short and broad; his form is eerily familiar.

I suddenly know who it must be... “It’s him!” I holler. “The Marquis! He’s here!”

I take off like a bat out of hell, and Danny follows. It doesn't take long before he's abreast, then ahead of me. Our stan dashes across the road and vaults the low stone wall on the other side, artfully dodging among the tomb stones.

Try as I will, there's no way I can keep up with a Marine. Danny reaches the road five yards ahead of me, hurdling the wall without stopping, pursuing the Marquis (it has to be him!) into the graveyard on the other side. As I clamber over the wall, Danny is now a good 50 feet away. Damn it! It's begun raining harder, and I've totally lost sight of the Marquis! I have to struggle now, just to keep Danny in sight. He's making for a group of trees about fifty yards ahead in the center of the cemetery—the Marquis must have gone in there. Shit! I'll lose both of them for sure in those woods! Of course, Danny goes in. I have no choice—I just keep running towards the spot where I last saw him, hoping to pick up his trail again.

Reaching the trees, I hear crashing ahead, followed by shouts. Small limbs whip across my face, lighting my skin on fire as I push through the brush; I have to slow my pace to avoid going down because I'm sliding on the damp leaves, vines snatching at my feet. Up ahead, it's a little brighter. I run into a small clearing where Danny is on the ground, his hand on his throat, struggling to rise. WTF happened?

There's crashing in the woods ahead of me, but the deadening effect of the thick brush makes it impossible to know exactly where. Conflicting choices tear at me—I want to continue chasing the Marquis, but Danny is down, fighting for breath. Has that motherfucker seriously hurt him? Danny's face is red and bruised, his mouth agape, his breath a rattling wheeze. I reach down and offer him a hand up, but he waves me off.

“Let me...get...my wind,” he croaks.