

CHAPTER ONE

Breath stuck in her throat, muscles rigid, Marigold Hartnett pressed her back tight against the wall. Her heart hammered in her chest, her neck, her ears. The towel bar dug into her shoulder blades, but her eyes remained fixed on the bathroom door.

Heavy footsteps vibrated down the hall, came to a stop, and a pair of large feet blocked most of the light spilling under the door. The flimsy, chrome knob jiggled.

“Unlock the fucking door!” her boyfriend, Cliff Barnum, shouted. The hollow door shuddered under the assault of his powerful fists.

She jumped and sucked in a breath. Her insides clenched as if held tight in one of his large hands.

“You don’t actually think this door will keep me outta there, do you?” He continued pounding. “Open. The. Door!”

Marigold’s arm flew up to grip the towel bar. Could she pull it loose? Even if she could, the flimsy plastic tube would never be enough to stop someone his size. It would only anger him further. Her gaze scanned the small space for anything she could use to defend herself. There was nothing.

The drubbing ceased, and she could hear his heavy breaths. Could almost feel his rage and frustration vibrating off the thin barrier.

“I’m going to meet the guys. You better fucking be here when I get back,” he snarled. “And clean this place up.”

Something jangled—his keys maybe—footsteps shuffled, and once again a solid stream of light spilled through the narrow opening. She heard the muted squeak of the floorboards from that one spot where the hallway opened into the front room.

Marigold knew that sound well, had memorized it from all the times he'd come home late after a night out at his favorite bar. It had become her warning to be on guard, to feign sleep and hope he'd just pass out. Unfortunately, that didn't always happen and she would suffer a much worse type of abuse. The kind of abuse you couldn't see from the outside, but inside it etched scars deep into her soul.

He cursed again, and the heavy front door slammed. The apartment's thin walls shuddered as if sharing her terror, and something crashed to the floor in the other room.

Frozen in place, she dared not make a sound. Dared not move. He'd tricked her before.

Please, please make him leave, she silently prayed to a deity she was sure abandoned her long ago.

Marigold strained to hear even a whisper of sound over the rhythmic drips from the showerhead and the high-pitched ringing in her ears that set in the first time Cliff smacked her.

Several long moments later, a heavy silence settled over the apartment. Air exploded from her burning lungs. Her grasp loosened, and her knees gave out. Like a balloon losing its air, she collapsed to the floor of the tiny bathroom. Her head might've bumped against the bar on her way down. Insignificant, compared with what she'd just suffered.

She landed on her side and whimpered through tight lips as she carefully pulled her knees up as much as the pain would allow. The urge to make herself as small as possible was intense.

The cold from the tile floor seeped into her cheek, and she gazed across the space at the band of light. She thought about what had upset Cliff this time.

All she'd done was meet her best friend, Dulce Houldcroft, for a quick drink. Actually, thanks to Cliff, she was her *only* friend.

Knowing how he felt about her spending time with anyone else, especially Dulce, Marigold had spent the last few months coming up with lame excuses for why she couldn't see her friend. She'd resisted as long as possible, speaking to her only while at work so Cliff wouldn't find out, but her friend was smart, tenacious, and worried. A powerful combination fueled by the fact Dulce knew about *some* of the things Cliff had done to her. Her bestie's dislike for him was powerful and unforgiving.

Marigold had been careful to schedule their meetup at a place near her apartment and during a time he would be working. That would ensure she made it home before he got there.

During their visit, she continually checked the time on her phone—even though she'd set an alarm. At one point, she'd reached across the table to pull a napkin from the dispenser, and her sleeve slid up, revealing a bruise on her wrist. She'd quickly covered it but not before her astute friend noticed.

Dulce gently took her hand and turned it to get a better look at the injury.

“Dickweed did this, didn't he?” Her eyes lifted to Marigold as she used her nickname for Cliff. “He hurt you *again*.” Her emphasis on the word hovered between them.

“Things have just been really hard for him at work lately.” As always, Marigold made excuses for his abhorrent behavior.

“Who gives a shit?” Dulce released her hold. “That doesn’t give him the right to hurt you.”

“He’s not always like that. Sometimes he’s very loving and sweet.” Although she hadn’t seen that side of him in a long time.

“This is not okay, Marigold.” Dulce dug her purse from her designer tote. “I’m calling my dad.”

“No, wait.” She reached out to stop her. “Please, don’t.”

Her best friend’s dad, Sebastian Houldcroft, was an extremely powerful senator who’d always treated Marigold like one of his own. If he knew even half of what Cliff had done, he would take swift action against him.

“But, Mari—”

“Please,” she pleaded. “I’m going to leave him, I promise. I just need to take care of a few things first.”

Dulce hesitated. “Fine, but if he lays a hand on you again, I’m calling in the big guns.” She dropped her phone back into her tote bag.

Marigold’s alarm chimed, and she flinched.

“I’ve got to go.” She turned it off and grabbed her purse.

Her friend reached across and touched her forearm, then laid a dose of brutal honesty on her.

“You are my best friend, and I love you like a sister. But it is getting harder and harder to be your cheerleader. The pom-poms are getting too damn heavy.” She gave her a sad smile. “Only you can make things better for yourself. You know I’ll help in any way

I can. But honey, it's very difficult for me to sit by and watch what's happening to you. It hurts too much."

She gripped Marigold's hands tight and looked her straight in the eye.

"You are one of the strongest people I know. I just wish you knew it, too."

"Thanks. I love you, too." Marigold gave her a quick hug and a forced smile. "I'm going to be okay. I promise."

They walked outside, said their goodbyes, and, as she watched her only remaining friend walk away, a looming sense of finality settled over her. If Marigold lost Dulce, she would have absolutely nothing left.

She checked the time and hurried to her car. Cliff wasn't due home for at least two hours, but she wouldn't be comfortable until she was inside their apartment.

She climbed in her car and pulled away from the curb. About ten minutes later, she turned in to her apartment complex, wound her way through the parking lot until their building came into sight, and her stomach dropped.

Cliff was already there, backing his truck into their reserved spot. He parked, turned, and his angry gaze connected with hers.

She stopped the car, frozen in place, her grip painful on the steering wheel as she stared into his furious eyes. For a split second, she considered driving away and never coming back. But he would find her. Of that, she had no doubt.

Cliff narrowed his eyes and, as if he could read her thoughts, gave a slow shake of his head.

Like a trained dog, she lifted her foot off the brake, rolled forward, and parked in the nearest empty spot.

He climbed out of his truck, slammed the door, and stormed over to her car. He yanked on the door handle, but it was locked, so he smacked his hand flat on her side window and leaned close.

“Get the fuck out of the car and get inside.” His breath fogged the window, his face was red, and that scary vein in the center of his forehead bulged. “And don’t even fucking *think* of looking at anyone.” He growled the words, straightened, and scanned the parking lot.

Painfully familiar with that particular tone, she shut off the engine. The second the lock clicked, he yanked open the door, wrapped his fingers around her upper arm and jerked her from behind the wheel.

“Get your fat ass inside.” He shoved her ahead of him.

Marigold kept her eyes down, but in her peripheral vision she saw one of their neighbors walking his dog. The older man stopped and watched them.

“What the fuck you lookin’ at, asshole?” Cliff made a move toward him.

The man bent down, picked up his little dog, and hurried back to his building across the parking lot. Everyone knew Cliff was a bully, and no one dared to tangle with him.

She continued straight up the single flight of stairs and into their apartment.

The second the dead bolt slid into place, he rounded on her, grabbed her shoulders and shoved her back against the door. “Where the hell were you?”

She found out later that he was home early because he’d gotten fired from his job. Whatever the reason, it must’ve been really bad, because the owner of the company was a good friend of his parents.

“I ... I met ... Dulce for ... for a drink. But I only had a soda.”

“I told you how I feel about that little bitch. She’s a bad influence, and I specifically said I didn’t want you around her anymore.” He stepped closer, so close she could smell beer on his breath. “I’ll bet you and your whore friend were flirting with guys at the bar, too, weren’t you?”

“Dulce is not a whore!” She refused to let him talk that way about her best friend.

Fast as a snake strike, his palm connected with her cheek.

Her continued denials seemed to fuel his rage. A slap led to a shove, which led to a kick, which led to a punch, which led to her current state—curled up and cowering on the floor in a locked bathroom.

Marigold lay there, waiting for tears to come. They never did. It was as if her body had grown accustomed to the abuse and knew they were a waste of time.

Eyes closed, she performed a quick mental inventory of her injuries.

Pain pounded through her left arm with each rapid beat of her heart. There’d been a scary *crack* when he shoved her against the tall, secondhand dresser in their bedroom. She was pretty sure he’d broken it this time.

Marigold winced when she laid her hand over her swollen and battered left cheek. Her vision was blurred, too. Had it been from his first punch or when she’d been slammed into the doorjamb?

Blood soaked into the white bath mat. Cliff would be upset about that.

She set aside the thought. *A concern for later.* Right now, her main worry was the terrifying pain that had ripped through her abdomen when she fell against the kitchen table.

Instincts Marigold had too-long ignored screamed at her to get out, that this was her last chance to escape. She knew with certainty he would kill her next time. It had been there, in his eyes, with each blow delivered.

She tried to focus, to calm her breathing the way she'd learned from the yoga DVD Dulce had given her a few years ago.

Palm flattened on the floor, she huffed and puffed as she levered up sideways to a seated position. The room spun. Her eyes slammed shut, and she swallowed back the bile clawing its way up her throat.

She rested against the bathtub. A few deep breaths and she risked opening her eyes. Well, her right eye, anyway. She just ... needed a minute to catch her breath.

Keep going, a voice inside her said. She had to get the hell away from here before he came back.

Marigold placed her good hand on the toilet seat lid and managed to shove up to her knees. Her nostrils flared, and sweat broke out across her forehead. One arm hung limp, and her swollen fingers were starting to look like overstuffed sausages.

“Come on, Marigold.” She gritted her teeth. “You can do this. Pain is only temporary.”

A little pep talk couldn't hurt, right? A light chuckle burst forth. Clearly, she was hysterical.

“One. Two. Three.” In one awkward motion, she flattened a hand on the edge of the tub, shoved herself up with a low groan, and stood.

Her mouth began to water, and nausea, powerful and unrelenting, barreled down on her like a Mac truck. She bent forward over the toilet in case she threw up, and pain

screamed through her midsection. Eyes squeezed tight, she wavered and planted her hand on the edge of the counter to steady herself. She bit back a scream and somehow managed to breathe through the pain and queasiness.

Moments later, fairly confident she wouldn't pass out, she straightened and prepared herself for what she would see in the mirror.

Some of her curls had come loose from her ponytail and fallen to hang over one side of her face. She lifted her uninjured arm to tug and drag the elastic band free. Hair snapped and pulled as it tangled in the long strands. She dropped it on the counter, then carefully tucked her hair behind her ears.

Slowly, she turned her head one way, then the other. *Good grief.*

It looked like she'd just gone three rounds with a prizefighter ... and lost. Badly. Only her right eye stared back at her—her left was concealed under a disturbing, dark purple puffiness. She hoped there was no permanent damage. Below that, her bottom lip had begun to swell. Swaths of blood marred her forehead and cheek and oozed from a gash on the bridge of her nose, which now had an odd slant to it. And an intense burning sensation radiated outward from an odd lump in the middle of her left forearm.

Heavy makeup and dark sunglasses won't hide this mess.

Marigold filled a cup with water and carefully rinsed out her mouth. Blood mixed with water and swirled down the drain. She snagged the washcloth from the rack and soaked it. Halfway to her face, she hesitated. As desperately as she wanted to clean herself up, she could hear Dulce's voice so clearly in her head, it was as if she was wedged in that little bathroom with her.

"If it happens again, for God's sake, make sure you get pictures."

A twist of her wrist and the water shut off. The only sound in the small space was the *drip drip drip* from the faucet. As she turned from the mirror, she noticed blood on the front of her favorite T-shirt. She'd bought it during a field trip to Washington, DC, her sophomore year of high school.

For the first time, a tear slipped from her eye. How silly was that?

Sure, she loved the shirt and hated the thought of throwing it away. But the sob trapped in her throat was for what the shirt symbolized. She'd had it since before meeting Cliff. It was one of the few things that truly belonged to her.

Marigold's sorrow was swiftly shoved aside when pain tore through her abdomen again. She cried out, her hand flew to her midsection, and she doubled over. That's when she saw it—a small, dark, pinkish spot about the size of a quarter darkening the front of her lavender skirt.

Oh, God.

Hospital. She had to get to the hospital, but Cliff had smashed her cell phone.

She remembered the phone Dulce had given to her the second time she noticed bruises on Marigold's arms, called it a burner phone, and said it couldn't be traced. She'd programmed her number into it and said, "Call me when you're ready to leave that sonofabitch, and I will be there. No questions asked."

It had seemed a tad dramatic at the time—very cloak-and-daggerish. Fortunately, she'd acquiesced, and her friend's forward thinking could very well be what saved her life.

She thought back to Dulce's final words to her earlier. Her friend was right. Not about Marigold being strong but about her being the only one who could change things.

Fragile confidence flickered to life deep within. She drew back her shoulders.

Time to take back control of my life.

Ear to the door, Marigold stilled herself, tuned in to the sounds of the apartment.

Nothing.

She disengaged the lock on the doorknob with a soft *click*. Hinges silent—she'd had the foresight to oil them after the last time—she opened the door just enough to peek down the short hallway.

The small apartment was eerily quiet. As if it, too, held its breath.

How long had it been since Cliff left?

Don't think about that. Just move. She swung the door open and moved across the hall to the closet in the bedroom. Each step sent pain shooting through her body.

Heart racing, injured arm tucked close over her tummy, she cast a quick glance over her shoulder and then slid the closet door open. Frantic, no time to waste, she scraped hangers across the wooden rod, sending shirts, sweaters, and pants fluttering to the floor.

A car door slammed outside. Her gaze flew to the window, and her fingers wrapped tightly around the hanger. She couldn't breathe, couldn't move as multiple sets of footsteps rumbled and vibrated up the steps outside. She closed her eyes and listened carefully until she recognized the muffled voices from her neighbors just before their apartment door closed.

Every scintilla of breath exploded from her lungs, and she nearly collapsed.

Marigold returned to her search and glanced down at the growing pile of clothes. She gnawed the inside of her cheek but resisted the impulse to rehang them the way Cliff insisted and focused on finding the phone.

Where is it? Where is it? There!

After a last hasty look toward the door, she dug it from where she'd hidden it in the lining of her old coat. Before she could change her mind, she powered it on and pressed "1."

One ring.

What if her friend didn't answer?

Two rings.

What if Dulce had given up on her?

Three rings.

Did she have the guts to leave on her own?

"Marigold?"

She nearly broke down at the sound of her friend's voice.

"I—" She cleared her throat. "Please help me."

"Are you safe?" Her friend called out to someone in the background, "We need to go!"

Marigold nodded, then remembered Dulce couldn't see her. "Yes, but I'm not sure for how long."

"Dad and I are on our way, honey." The sound of doors closing and a car starting came through the phone.

"Dulce, thank you." She didn't give a thought to who was coming with her friend. All she cared about right now was getting as far from this place as possible.

"Don't hang up," Dulce rushed to say. "I want you to stay on the phone with me until we get there." She instructed someone to drive faster. "It's going to be okay, Marigold. Just hang on."

“Okay,” she whispered.

It's done.

An uncontrollable tremor rippled through her. Adrenaline or shock. Maybe both.

Marigold looked around the room, and her eyes lowered to a scarf on the floor.

“I need to put the phone down for a minute.” No matter how hard she fought it, she couldn't prevent the quaver in her voice.

She set the phone on the bed, cradled her arm in front of her, and made her way across the room. Her tennis shoes crunched over something, and she lifted her foot. Cliff's smiling face stared up at her from inside a broken frame. She kicked it aside with the toe of her shoe and slowly leaned down to snatch the scarf up.

Marigold managed to tie a knot and created a makeshift sling for her arm. Sweat trickled down her temple and her head pounded as she looped it over her neck and nestled her arm inside.

She took a couple of deep breaths and picked up the phone. “Okay, I'm back.”

Battered and bleeding, she made her way to the front room. Her mouth dropped open, and the hand holding the phone fell away from her ear as she took in the destruction around her.

“Oh, my God,” Marigold whispered.

She'd been so busy fighting for her life, she hadn't noticed how much damage had been done.

The small kitchen table was tipped partially over and rested against one of the chairs. Only one of the two prints that usually hung over the couch was still there—crooked, precariously teetering on its hook. The other was nowhere to be seen. Must've fallen into the gap behind the sofa.

A splotch of mud and a large dent marred the wall next to the window. Below it, soil, chunks of a terra-cotta pot and her grandma's mangled African violet littered the floor. Marigold loved that plant, had nurtured it and watched it grow and flourish. It was the one tiny hint of beauty in her otherwise miserable existence.

Her tough-as-nails grandma never would've let a man hit her.

She weaved her way around pieces of a shattered light bulb and a bent lamp, its shade dented beyond repair.

"Good. I never liked it anyway." Saying it out loud, even if only to an empty room, was strangely cathartic.

Cliff's mother, the woman Marigold secretly thought of as the Dragon Lady, had chosen most everything in the apartment. Such a pitiful mama's boy, he had insisted they keep all of it. Said it would be rude since she'd been nice enough to pay for it. With the exception of the African violet, Marigold hated all of it. Every single thing. She wasn't allowed to have an opinion, though. She wasn't allowed to have a *lot* of things.

And whose fault is that? Well, no more.

As if from a distance, she heard Dulce shouting her name.

She raised the phone to her ear. "I'm here ... I'm here. Sorry."

"Okay." Her friend heaved a sigh. "We're pulling into your complex now."

"I'll be out in a second." She could already hear the *click click click* of her friend's heels as she hurried along the walkway in front of the building.

Marigold squeezed around the overturned table and picked up the basket they used for mail and keys and stuff. With great care, she scooped up what she could of her

mangled African violet and gently set it in the basket with her small purse. No way was she leaving the abused plant behind.

She tucked the basket in the crook of her good arm, swung open the door, and, as Cliff's lingering malevolence threatened to close in on her, she made a vow to herself.

Never again will I let him or any man ever lay a hand on me. Never. Again.