

Roseland Park

Chapter One

Sabrina Alia Matthews woke twenty-one minutes before her alarm was scheduled to go off at 6:30 a.m. She could lay her weary head down again and try to rest her body a little longer, or she could muscle-through, jump up and get started with the day. What to do? Oliver was snoring rhythmically. Clearly her buddy on the doggie bed next to her was thinking later would be better.

Brina stole another glance at the clock. Fifteen minutes left. Oliver was on his back, all four paws in the air. It would be cruel to wake him now, wouldn't it? He's going to be alone for twelve or so hours before I get back home. She plumped the designer brand pillow that had billed itself as "goose down like" purposefully. She should have known the claim was shorthand for 'I'm going to be really extremely uncomfortable'.

When a chill began to circulate through the room, Brina pulled the covers up around her neck.

The "Hollow" demons had entered. She knew they were there the instant the air in the room cooled to 60 degrees Fahrenheit. They always waited for moments like this when she was in an almost-awake cycle of sleep and her fortitude was frailest.

Infidelity, betrayal, chicane were in full bloom, engaged in a tug of war with Brina's heart. Her pulse raced, sweat poured from her clammy brow as each tried hardest to pull her in.

Knowing the signs of a full-blown panic attack, Brina sat up quickly, grabbed the small paper bag on the marble night stand next to her bed and took measured, slow deep breaths. When the worst of it was over, she found the bottle the doctor had prescribed for anxiety, broke one of the tiny pills it contained in half and swallowed.

Brina didn't like having to rely on medication. Until nine months ago vitamins B-12, C and D, were her only regimen but as the fallout from the divorce continued to surprise her, and the magnitude of the treachery unfolded, the anxious moments increased and became more intense. She bowed to her doctor's advice and accepted the little pink pill into her life temporarily.

[Damn Hollow], she thought.

Oliver turned back over. Brina watched as he opened one eye and then the other to inspect her more intensely. Finally he spoke. "GRRRR," he said.

It was the perfect sound, made with just the right measure of hunger and need that got her up off of the bed moving purposefully.

Don't let anyone ever try to debate her golden retriever's I.Q. Oliver was one brilliant doggie and now he belonged to only her. Thank God and the lawyer she used to spar with Hollow.

Hollow, the name she had come up with for her ex, who over time espoused to be a rigorously devoted atheist never grasped the fact, that you can't buy love.

"There's only one thing you can take when you leave this Earth," Brina used to tell him, hoping he would take her seriously. He always rolled his eyes when the subject came up.

"You can't take money, you can't take things . . . you can only take your soul."

Her words spoken, Hollow's blue greens would roll over some more. In the latter years, when he really stared at her, Brina swore his tiny, slitted pupils made his eyes eerily snake like. Her husband of fifteen years had not grown to be a kind or a nice man.

During divorce proceedings Hollow put up a fight to keep Oliver. Brina knew it was a "straw issue". Hollow didn't care whom Oliver lived with but he knew Brina did. It would be something he would give up during arbitration in trade for her signature on a clause.

Financially she was strapped. Hollow had seen to that with measured precision. But at least, with sole custody of her precious lab she still had some measure of normalcy in her life.

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As she was making coffee, and setting out breakfast for Oliver, Brina's cell phone rang. The caller's name was running across the screen. Please don't let this be something bad she thought, as she held the phone up more closely to read the name.

Jeff.

[Just like him to call when I'm running late and trying to get ready for work. Man has no sense of responsibility and no sense of timing.]

Brina thought about not answering but then she realized the consequences. Jeff would 'follow-up call' every ten minutes from now on until she picked up and responded to him.

"Do you know what time it is," she said when she hit the connect key. "Is this an emergency? Did something happen to someone I love, excluding you, of course? I'm trying to get ready for work."

"Peaches, good to hear your voice, too."

"You do realize you are the only person on the face of the earth that calls me that."

"Of course, that's because you and I have a very pungent relationship."

"What's up?"

"This is just a social call. I wanted to see what's going on down there. Anything new with Hollow man?"

"Ugh, your sense of timing is perfect. I almost just had a nightmare about him. It scared me awake."

"Bout time you stopped letting him get to you. The man was never any good. I told you not to marry him from the get go."

"Yeah, yeah, so what's up? I have to get ready . . ."

“Aren’t managers allowed to show up late every now and then, especially when they’ve been working for the same company since the early dark ages?”

“Nice dig. By the way, I am going in late because I have a doctor’s appointment that I need to get ready for like now.”

“Everything okay?”

“Jeff, is there a point here other than your normal intent to annoy me?”

“You’re just jealous because the voices only talk to me.”

Brina suppressed a giggle. “Jeff, make a point, any point but do it quickly.”

“Peaches, you are always so sensitive. It’s heart warming to talk to you. Makes me throb in places . . .”

“Jeffrey Allan Greene, put up or shut up.”

“You know how you’ve asked me from time to time over the years to invite you to Homecoming so you could see some of our old classmates? In two weeks we hit the first weekend in October and you know what that means?”

“It’s homecoming.”

“Yeah, wanna go?”

“Why now? You’ve never wanted me to tag along before. By the way, this is very weird. I was going to call you later on tonight, after work,” she emphasized the last two words, “to tell you I’m coming up to Mass for meetings at corporate. Gonna be there a full week, and if I’m calculating correctly, that’s the week right before Homecoming.”

“Great! Tell your admin to fly you back out on the following Monday morning. We’ll have a fun weekend, and your flight will be free.”

Brina was very quiet.

“Peaches you there? What’s going on in that head?”

“I have a lot on my plate right now.”

“What plate? You’re divorced. It’s just you and Olie. I doubt you’re doing a whole lot of cooking for yourself.”

“Let me think about it. I’ll call you back later tonight.”

“If you want to chat some more, after work,” Jeff emphasized the last two words just as Brina had, “that will be great, as long as you’re up beat, and talk nice to me. However I’m not accepting no for an answer.” He hit the red button on his cell and ended the discussion abruptly.

Brina couldn’t help thinking about Jeff as she poured a cup of coffee. The man used to have a handle on life. She knew the date the hour and the minute of the day, when Jeff’s handle got broken forever. May 24, 1994, 9:29 a.m., the moment when Heather Carmelita Greene left her body in the hospital and took her beautiful soul away for a long visit with her Lord.