Chapter One

The voices were back. They whispered words I didn’t understand, groaned and screamed their pain out into the world. Except I was the only one who could hear them. Within a few seconds they escalated into a screeching that rang in my ears and felt like a red-hot needle behind my forehead.

“Everything okay, Rayne?” I could hear Mrs. Bowens’ voice, but it was distorted.

I clenched my teeth together, opened my eyes, and forced my face into a smile. “Yeah,” I claimed, as I gripped the sales counter so tightly that the edge cut into my skin. The sensation at least distracted me a little from the shrieking that no one but me seemed to perceive.

Sometimes pain brought a brief respite from the screams, but to be honest, I didn’t have the slightest idea how I was supposed to get rid of them. Or why I heard them. Again. The last time had been a month ago, and my panic that they had returned threatened to suffocate me.

“That’ll be twenty dollars.” Somehow I got the sentence out and handed Mrs. Bowens her bag of books.

“Thanks, honey.” The worry lines in her forehead relaxed. “Come by the bakery next week when I’ve tried the new recipes. Have a nice evening, and say hello to your mom for me.”

“Thanks, I’ll do that. Have a good night, too.” I walked Mrs. Bowens to the exit, pressed the door closed behind her, and turned around the metal sign to indicate that we were closed. My breath left a little trace of condensation on the glass and the weak reflection let me know that I looked terrible. Probably just the way I felt.

The ringing of the church bells penetrated the noise in my thoughts. I closed my eyes and breathed deeply. Once. Twice. Three times. With every rise and fall of my chest my heartbeat slowed down a little more. The hammering of my pulse faded and the screeching grew quieter. But it was still there, hidden in the furthest corners of my consciousness. Ready to emerge again at any time.

Only now could I pay attention to the other sounds around me again. Cars drove by and there were voices outside, muffled music came from the store and a rumbling from the stockroom. My boss rearranged the inventory every few weeks, as soon as some new system for keeping
everything organized occurred to her. Books were Mariella’s life, and she dedicated every minute of her time to them.

I glanced at the antique clock that hung on the wall deep between two shelves. Quitting time. As I walked by I grabbed my purse and shoved my cell phone into it.

“Mariella?” I stopped in the doorway to the stockroom. I couldn’t see her anywhere among the rows of shelving. “I’m leaving for the night. Should I lock up?”

“No. I’m just about finished and I’ll do it then.” Her deep, raspy voice came from the other side of the storage space and cast an echo on the walls.

“All right. See you tomorrow!” My own voice echoed back. Clear and soft, with a raw note.

Without waiting for an answer, I went to the coffee machine in the back room and filled two cups. With that I left Butterfly Books and pulled the door shut behind me as the bells attached to it rang.

Outside the sun was just going down. The warmth of the September day was still in the air and made a jacket unnecessary. The leaves on the trees were just beginning to turn fall colors, but the sky was clear and the clear blue seemed to burn in the orange-red of the setting sun. With every breath, something nippy and moist filled my lungs, as if the approaching autumn was already making itself known.

I walked past the cars parked along the sidewalk, crossed the main street, and followed the path to the comic store on the corner. With its brightly colored logo and modern design, it stood out from the rest of the storefronts. Instead of a bell above the door, the theme song from Batman announced my arrival.

Barry stood behind the high counter with both elbows propped up on it, his chin resting in his hands, and looked up as I entered. His face brightened when he saw me and I could have sworn he suddenly looked twenty years younger. “It’s about time,” he grumbled, stretching a hand out towards the coffee, as if it were a life-saving elixir.

“I’m happy to see you, too,” I said dryly and set his cup on the glass in front of him. Beneath it were the oldest and most valuable editions of his beloved comic books. “How are you doing?”

“Oh, the usual. The hip aches and my knees don’t work right anymore, but as long as the sun is shining…” He flashed me one of his famous smiles above the rim of his coffee cup. Half a century ago he must have broken a lot of girls’ hearts with that smile. “Thanks for the coffee.”
“Anytime.” Ever since the day Barry showed up in Butterfly Books and bought more books than he could carry, we had been friends. Although at 76 years old he was four times older than me, we shared the same taste in books. “Mariella says hello.”

Barry squinted his eyes together behind his narrow glasses. “Liar,” he muttered, looking to the side, but the little twitch at the corner of his mouth gave him away. As did the wave of healthy red color that rose in his cheeks. “What are you reading right now?” he abruptly changed the subject.

He asked me that question more often than my high school English teacher ever had. I had always been an avid reader, but thanks to Barry’s suggestions my pace had almost doubled. As had the pile of unread books, which would soon reach the ceiling of my bedroom.

“Still the third volume of that new fantasy series,” I answered between sips of my coffee.

He began to beam, but I raised a hand in warning. “Don’t you dare tell me how it ends or who dies. Let me find out for myself!”

“The whole world will know how it ends when the film appears.” He rubbed his bearded chin. “As you please. But the ending is fantastic.”

Of course it was good. Barry was the one who had given me the series. By now I was addicted and spent every free minute with my nose stuck in the current volume, instead of straightening up the shelves in the bookstore or decorating the display windows. Not to mention the bookkeeping.

My cell phone vibrated in my purse. I pulled it out and read the new text message. “Nora is stuck in traffic. I’m supposed to pick up Emma from school,” I informed Barry, and finished my coffee.

“Tell her I say hi. And take care of yourself.” There was a strange undertone to his words.

At the door I turned around to face him. “Why that?”

Surrounded by countless Daredevil, Wonder Woman, and Batman figures Barry furrowed his brow. “Someone disappeared again.”

“In Chicago? People disappear and then reappear a few days later all the time there,” I reminded him. Things like that happened in a big city, but not in a little town like Divine Creek.

“This is the fourth person in the past two weeks. And I’m not talking about Chicago. Just take care of yourself, Rayne. Especially in the dark.”
It was on the tip of my tongue to protest his concerns again, but the worry in his face gave me pause. This wasn’t just some conspiracy theory. He was serious.

“I’m just walking across the street to my car. You don’t need to worry.”

“Good.” He nodded briefly. “See you tomorrow?”

I smiled. “Same time, same place, fresh coffee.” As I left the store, the same shrill nananana that had sounded when I entered accompanied me.

The sun had gone down by now and cold was spreading through the town. With it came mist from the river that wound through the streets. The hairs on my bare arms stood up.

I hadn’t lied to Barry. My old Hyundai Tucson stood in the parking lot behind the bookstore. But before I had taken a single step my purse vibrated again. Surprised, I pulled out my cell phone. On the display was a picture of my little sister, with a head full of brown curls and big red cheeks. “Emma? What’s going on, sweetie?”

“Rayne!” She sounded breathless for some reason. “Miss Miller was sick today and we got out early. I’ve already left.”

I closed my eyes and suppressed a quiet curse. How often had Nora and I impressed on Emma that when something like this happened she should call us right away and wait for us inside the school? This wasn’t the first time Emma had set off by herself. And it probably wouldn’t be the last time, either. Just the thought of her walking the streets by herself at dusk gave me chills.

“Emma, where are you? Stay right there and I’ll come pick you up.” I crossed the main street and waved apologetically to a car that had to brake for me.

“But I’m almost at the bookstore!” she protested on the other end of the line. “I’m…” but her words got lost in a sudden rustling.

My heart pounded as I stopped and stood outside the bakery. “Emma?”

Silence.

“Emma!” Silence. The connection was dropped.

I stared at my cell phone. The battery was nearly drained, as usual, but my phone wasn’t dead yet. The reception was miserable, though. I got moving again and called Emma back. Holding my breath I listened hard, but was immediately directed to her voicemail. “Dammit!”
Emma had said she was nearby, but in Divine Creek everything was close. Not to mention that I didn’t really trust a seven-year-old’s estimation of distances.

A clatter to my left made me flinch. The sound had come from a small alley where there wasn’t much besides garbage cans and delivery entrances. The locals used these back ways as shortcuts, while tourists probably didn’t even know they existed – and if they did, they would hardly have strayed here.

I took a step toward the alleyway. The light from the streetlamp only illuminated a small area. “Emma?”

My sister was very familiar with our town. It would be just like her to run through the darkest streets to get here as quickly as possible. With concern I looked down at my phone. No new messages, no call.

A quiet whimper reached my ears. I looked up. It could have come from an animal, maybe a homeless cat or a puppy. Or a little girl.

Inwardly I cursed Barry and his warnings. Even though I hadn’t made anything of it at the time, now I was terrified through and through. Not for myself, but for my little sister.

I peered down the street. There was a long row of shops, with cafés and restaurants scattered between them, all filled with people all day long. Divine Creek might be just a typical small city like many others, but the picturesque houses in the downtown area, the red brick buildings with white balconies and decorative facades, and the history of the town drew a constant stream of visitors.

The lights inside Butterfly Books were turned off, so Mariella had already gone home. On the other side of the street, a couple strolled by the shop windows arm in arm and stopped underneath a fancy sign announcing “Pottery” in cursive script to check out the display. A bike rider turned at the intersection at a break-neck tempo. Otherwise everything was calm and still. No trace of my sister high and wide.

Slowly I walked into the alley. Every bit of reason in me screamed that I should turn around on the spot. After watching more than enough horror films with my best friend, I knew only too well what happened to idiotic women who entered dark alleys alone and called out “Hello?” As if the murderer would reply with a friendly “Here I am!”

But if something had happened to Emma and she was lying just a few steps away from me in the dark, I would never forgive myself for not having the courage to look for her.

“Emma?” I called again. My voice got lost between the walls of the buildings, but I didn’t get any answer. If she was actually here she would make herself known, wouldn’t she? But what if
She was unconscious? She might have tripped on a cobblestone, fallen and hit her head. That’s exactly what happened to a boy in her class three weeks ago as he was running through the streets in the rain.

I held my cell phone to my ear again as I moved further into the alleyway. There was no ring on the other end of the line. The clicking of my boot heels on the stones and my ragged breath were the only sounds to be heard. I winced when the computer-generated voice again instructed me to leave a message.

About halfway down I stood still. Behind me were two delivery entrances, ahead of me at least a dozen gray garbage containers. Next to them stood old boxes and a box spring. Something furry rushed past me and disturbed a broken bottle. For a moment the glass clattered on the cobblestones, then it was silent again.

I could keep going and turn at the end of the alley, go around the block and return to the main street. Emma would have to come from this direction, no matter which shortcut she took. But every fiber in my body warned me with a cold prickling sensation not to proceed.

Although the moon brightened the night sky, it seemed to relentlessly grow darker with every passing moment. The shadows grew deeper, impenetrable, and crept across the walls like wisps of mist. I blinked several times, but the picture before my eyes remained the same. The shadows were actually moving.

Shaking my head, I retreated. I must be imagining things. I should just go to the bookstore and wait for Emma there, and then give her a serious talking-to about not walking all over town by herself.

I turned around – and stared at an unfamiliar face.

I shrank back, faltered, and stumbled. My hand reached out to touch the cold wall for support, damp from the cold.

The man who had suddenly turned up behind me was at least a head and a half taller than me, and at five foot six, I’m not the shortest of women. He had his hands on his hips and wore a black t-shirt that fit his torso like a second skin. Just above the neckline was a thick scar, as if someone had tried to cut his throat.

My stomach turned at the thought.

Slowly a smile spread across his face. It was more of a crooked grimace, because his lips were also marked by a scar. But that wasn’t what was setting off every alarm in my being – it was the expression in his eyes. An absolute void in which only one instinct glimmered, one sole purpose: greed.
Panic overtook me. I recognized this expression, and knew only too well what it meant.

Moving slowly, I pushed myself away from the wall and took a wide-legged stance. My knees were trembling, as were my hands, but I did everything in my power to not let that be noticeable. I had learned early on to appear cool and aloof, even though I was wracked with mortal fear on the inside. It was the only way to survive.

“You scared me,” I managed to say, desperately trying to keep my composure in spite of the fact that every cell of my body wanted to run away. But running would have been an invitation for him to chase me.

I straightened my shoulders and tried to move past the man, but he stood in my way. Slowly I raised my gaze from his chest to his face. What I saw there still terrified me, but this time I didn’t flinch in the slightest.

“Let me get by.” Four words, clearly spoken. Instead of complying with my request, he curled his lips and cut me off a second time when I tried to walk past him.

It was suddenly hard to breathe and my heart began to beat so loudly that I was sure he could hear it. I fought back the panic. My sister was out there somewhere and I had to find her.

Instead of doing this guy the favor of trying to get by him again, I turned on my heels – and froze.

Out of nowhere, there he stood in front of me again. The same man in a black t-shirt, with the same scars on his neck and mouth.

I stumbled backwards. “What the...?”

His hand came towards me as fast as a striking cobra. Reflexively I dodged it. The panic threatened to overtake me again, tried to paralyze me and keep me rooted to the spot. I wanted to run away but my feet didn’t move; they seemed to be attached to the ground under the stranger’s hypnotic gaze. His eyes fixated on me without flinching and drew closer, inch by inch. My body froze, as if he had flipped a switch inside of me. I wanted to run, scream, beat my fists in the air, but he didn’t allow it.

Instinctively I tried to make myself as small as possible until I melted into my surroundings, invisible and impossible to perceive. It was the desperate notion of a child who doesn’t know any other way to help herself. As if it could protect me from any more suffering if I just believed in it strongly enough. And sometimes it had actually worked. But this time it would not. Not with this man staring at me as if he knew exactly who I was. But still, I tried it. It was like a reflex I couldn’t influence.
The man abruptly stood still. Something changed in the expression on his face. Confusion and hostility carved folds in his face. I should have used that moment of surprise to push past him and disappear from here. Or even better, to turn around and sprint in the opposite direction. But my limbs still seemed to be frozen stiff.

Behind me something flashed. The headlights of cars driving by? Probably no one who would take the trouble to stop. No one would ever suspect what was happening in this little street in the middle of Divine Creek. Barry’s words came to mind again. Four people had disappeared. Was I about to become number five? Was it possible that the horror that you hear about daily in the news was actually lurking around the next corner?

Before I realized what I was doing, my hand had slid into my purse and was feeling for the pepper spray. The man before me still hadn’t moved. He studied me as if he was waiting for my next move. Why didn’t he attack?

My fingers felt the cool metal can in my purse. In the same moment I felt a draft of air behind me, closely followed by the smell of forest and rain.

“Preying on innocent women again?” The deep voice caused a tear in my imaginary protective shield. For a heartbeat I couldn’t breathe. My attention turned from the assailant in front of me and focused solely on that voice. Something about the way he pronounced the words unleashed a feeling in me that I couldn’t recognize. I gathered all my will power, took control of my paralyzed body again, and spun around.

Without making a single sound, two more people suddenly stood in the narrow lane. The one further away caught my attention first because he was so tall and broadly built. With sandy colored hair, a grin on his face, and massive upper arms, he was built like a tank. Nonetheless, I knew instinctively that his companion was the more dangerous of the two. Black hair framed his face and fell over his forehead. He stood closer to me and was quite a bit shorter than the other man. But I probably only came up to his nose.

He didn’t pay any attention to me, didn’t even seem to know I was there. His concentration was completely dedicated to my attacker, whom I could still sense behind me. But when the dark-haired man wanted to pass me to get to him, he suddenly stood still, as if an invisible barrier held him back.

I held my breath as our eyes met. Just like his voice a few moments earlier, his gaze seemed to unleash something in me that I hadn’t known about. There were countless times in my life when I had felt lost. Alone. This feeling was as familiar to me as the face I saw in the mirror every morning. But now I felt something different. Something so new and unusual that I couldn’t make sense of it at first. I didn’t feel lost, or like I was in the wrong place – I felt like I had arrived.
Maybe the adrenaline was clouding my thoughts.

My heart pounded so loudly that everyone must have been able to hear it. I grabbed my pepper spray and pulled it out of my bag. I didn’t know any of these men and every one of them seemed threatening.

A rumbling caught my attention and I turned around again. The shadows I had imagined between the walls before were back, and surrounded the man with the scars like a protective cloak. They crept over his shoulders, moved down his arms, and seemed to meld with him.

I raised my hand but when he looked at me, every thought in my head died. As it had before, a single gaze from his eyes seemed to paralyze my will power, because as much as I wanted to, I couldn’t press the button to use the pepper spray. As if he knew exactly what was happening to me, one corner of his mouth turned up.

“Oh, no, you’re not going to do that,” snarled the black-haired man next to me. His voice had a dark tone that echoed in my head and pulsated off my skin.

My eyes were still fixed on my attacker. By now I didn’t even see the scars on his neck, because he seemed to blend into the shadows more and more. The darkness swirled over his face and enveloped him like a protective cocoon. Lightning fast, the dark-haired man rushed past me and rammed his opponent into the wall of the building so hard that I flinched. Plaster rained down and a few chunks of brick fell to the ground.

The scarred man got to his feet with unhuman speed and drew back his arm. I didn’t see the motion, but heard the crack of his fist against the jaw of the black-haired man. His head flew back and a split second later the rest of his body followed. Like the scarred man had just done, he slammed into the opposite wall, but landed on his feet. A dark trail flowed from one corner of his mouth, which he wiped away with the back of his hand.

I followed his gaze, but instead of my attacker, saw only darkness.

“Get out of here.” It was an unfamiliar voice. It must have belonged to the third man, the giant with the short, sandy hair, who rushed past me to help his friend.

Without any warning my limbs came to life again and my arm dropped. I had been counting on a fight, bloody noses and broken bones. Maybe knives being drawn, or in the worst case, guns. What I hadn’t expected were shadows that crept along walls.

Or the brilliant light that suddenly appeared right in front of me. Reflexively I turned away to protect my face from the brightness. When I stood up straight again, the alley was filled with shimmering light. And both of the other men had disappeared.
Suddenly the shadow bored into the light, as if it wanted to make it burst. But the light reared up and repelled the darkness. For an instant, I saw a flash of something like figures before they were submerged back into the light and darkness. They moved so fast that I couldn’t follow them with my bare eyes. A breeze made me whirl around.

The shadow on the ground behind me took form and became the same person who had just been staring at me a few moments earlier as if he were a snake and I were a rabbit that had wandered into his hunting grounds. Someone kneeled over him. The light grew dimmer and I recognized the slim outline of the guy with the dark hair. He drew back one arm as if to hit the man lying below him.

That’s when the blade glittered. Within seconds several things happened simultaneously: the knife in his hand plunged downward and a scream filled the alley. Only when I clapped my hand over my mouth did I realize that I was the one who had screamed.

The black-haired man hesitated only for a split second, irritated by my interference, but that was enough. The guy with the scars rammed his fist into his ribs. The force threw him to the ground, and in the same instant the scarred man disappeared into the darkness again. Like threads of fog he glided above the ground and disappeared into the night.

When I lifted my gaze, I was alone with both of the men, who fused with the light before my eyes.

Suddenly the dark-haired man stood in front of me and pushed me back against the wall. Before I could react, he pressed his forearm into my throat. “What the hell was that?”

I stared into the face of my rescuer, who had almost just killed a man. A murderer who transformed himself into light?

His eyes bored into mine as if he wanted to nail me to the wall through his gaze alone. “Why did you interfere instead of running away? Do you have a death wish or are you just stupid?”

I couldn’t utter a sound, I could only stare at him. I could see now that his eyes were a mixture of green and brown. A warm, radiant color that didn’t quite fit with his distinctive face with high cheekbones and a pronounced chin. His chin was covered with stubble and gave him a slightly sinister look. Just like his eyebrows, which sat low above his eyes. A furrow had formed between them.

In spite of the thing with the light, there was something dark about him. Something merciless. But although everything about him seemed hard and unapproachable, his lips were surprisingly full and sensual.
Oh my god. Full and sensual? Was I already suffering from oxygen deprivation, or what? I grabbed his arm at my throat, but I couldn’t push him away from me at all.

“Did you think nothing would happen to you in a sleepy little town like this one?” he snarled, so close to my face that I could feel his breath on my skin. “How wrong you were.”

The second man stepped closer. “Colt…”

The word penetrated the buzzing in my ears only with a delay. It took a few seconds before I realized that was a name.

“Colt! You’re hurting me.” My instinct was faster than my thoughts. Again I imagined myself simply melting into my surroundings, disappearing into the wall behind my back, until no one could detect me anymore.

A surprised expression appeared on his face. I didn’t understand why, but I didn’t need to. This time I used the opportunity. I brought my boot down on this Colt’s foot hard, then grabbed his finger and twisted his hand until the pressure on my throat released and he had no choice but to let go of me. I dodged to the right, pressed myself away from the wall, and instinctively ducked before he could take a swing and hit me.

My throat burned and I had to cough. Nonetheless, I felt around the cobblestones searching for something, anything, I could use to defend myself. The pepper spray had fallen from my hand a long time ago. My fingertips brushed against something cool and smooth. The broken glass bottle still lay next to the garbage can. I took hold of the neck of the bottle and stood up again.

My heart raced and every time I drew a breath it left a trail of flames in my throat. Every muscle in my body trembled and my voice refused to cooperate, as if this guy had damaged my vocal chords when he had pressed me against the wall. I held the bottle protectively in front of me. It was ridiculous, when you took a good look at the two men. Tall, fit, and with a grim determination to mow down everything and anyone who got in their way. But whoever they were, whatever they were, I wouldn’t just admit defeat without a fight. Not after everything I had been through. Not when Emma was somewhere out there and needed me.

“Let’s go.” The man with the sandy hair cuffed Colt on the shoulder, but without taking his eyes off of me. They had a strange expression that I couldn’t decipher. Was he just as angry with me as this Colt? Was he surprised? Or were my presence and what I had seen utterly insignificant to him?

But what had I actually seen? A man who was swallowed by shadows, and two guys who could transform themselves into pure light? Did they have a clue that no one would believe me? Why
else would they seem to not care in the slightest if I ran straight to the next police station, or the next newspaper reporter?

“Wait!” My voice obeyed me again, but I could only manage a croak.

The two had already started to move away, but turned around again to face me. I recognized a questioning expression in one of them and sheer impatience in the other. Of course Colt was the impatient one, and I wasn’t eager for him to unleash his temper on my body again.

My thoughts raced. What did I want to say, anyway? All kinds of things swirled around in my head, from “Thank you” to “Who are you?” or even “Stay away from me!” Just as I started to say something – anything – I noticed the unnaturally dense darkness behind them. No human and no animal could move like that. Slowly and stealthily it spread out further and further.

Again, my instinct took control of my actions. Without thinking about it, I drew back my arm and threw the broken bottle. It spun through the air and flew past Colt and his companion. Those two didn’t even flinch, but merely stared at me. Then they turned around, just as the sharp edges of the neck of the bottle bored into the dark mass and got stuck in it. A second later the figure materialized before our eyes.

It was the man with the scar on his neck. Without batting an eye, he pulled the bottle out of his shoulder and let it fall to the ground. The shattering of glass echoed in my ears as his bloodthirsty gaze fixated on me.

All the air escaped from my lungs. I stumbled backwards, but I had hardly taken a step when his face lost all color. All at once Colt was in front of him and draw a dagger out of his chest. I could hear the smacking sound as if I stood right next to them. Blood flowed over the black blade and dripped onto the cobblestones. It didn’t take long for a small puddle to form. The man crumpled, but before he touched the ground, he had disappeared.

He simply vanished.


I stared at Colt, who was wiping the blade on the leg of his pants as if that were something he did every day. And maybe it was. A serial killer made of light, who chased shadow monsters.

“Good throw.” The words came not from Colt, but from his companion. Was I imagining it, or did I hear a hint of admiration in his voice?

I tried to control my trembling. I felt for something to hold on to, found the rough wall of the building, and leaned against it.
This wasn’t really happening. This couldn’t possibly be real. Light and darkness and a man who killed someone before my eyes?

“Rayne?”

A familiar voice tore me away from this nightmare. Emma. She must not see this – whatever it was that was going on – under any circumstances. Without paying any further attention to the two guys, I ran to the end of the alley and pulled my sister into a hug before she could take even one more step.

“Rayne!” Emma’s little arms wrapped around my neck. She yanked on my hair in the process, but the tugging at the back of my head was a welcome pain. Something real, just like the warm little body close to mine.

With my sister in my arms I stood up again. But when I turned around and looked back into the alley, both of the men were gone. Without a word, without a sound, and without leaving a trace.