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*Twisted Innocence*

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# CHAPTER 1

Holly Cramer pulled to the curb of the condemned apartment building, her yellow taxi grinding gears and threatening to die. Though the sun hung bright overhead, the street was colorless, oppressive, with moldy, rotting houses and garbage festering in yards. Men loitered on the road up ahead in front of another boarded house. She shouldn't have accepted this fare, but the customer had called her cell phone personally instead of going through the agency. She must be a repeat customer.

Holly tapped her horn and looked out her passenger window. The house showed no sign of life, but it wasn't the wrong place. The girl had clearly said it was the green house on the corner of Burke and Darby. Holly checked her phone for the caller's number and called her back.

It went straight to voice mail.

Holly sighed. Maybe this was a prank, some kid trying

to yank her chain just to see if she'd come. She had done that enough herself as a kid. Back when she was still Panama City's party girl, she'd done things under the influence that had been even more childish, like calling a guy fourteen times when she knew he was with his girlfriend, just to create trouble in paradise. She and her friends would giggle hysterically at the fight they imagined ensued, but the next day, as she nursed the punishment of a hangover, she would hate herself for it.

Not ready to give up on this fare just yet, Holly honked the horn again. The men up the street turned to look at her. Getting nervous, she reached into the pocket of her door, but of course her pistol wasn't there. It was against the law for a cabbie to carry a firearm inside the car while they were on duty. It was locked safely in her trunk.

She thought of bucking the law and getting it out, but that would call more attention to her. This was stupid. She was a mother now, and the last place she should have been was in the slums, waiting for someone to blow her head off just for target practice.

But what if the woman who'd called wasn't a kid at all, but someone stranded here who desperately needed a ride?

"Two minutes, then I'm leaving," Holly whispered.

The loiterers up ahead were showing too much interest in her, and two swaggered toward her. *That's it. I'm outa here.* She shifted into drive.

"Wait!"

Holly pressed a foot on the brake and looked back, saw a man and woman coming out from behind the abandoned house. They were both skin and bones, and as they hurried closer, she noted their rotting teeth and the sores on their faces. Meth addicts, no doubt. She hoped they had cash.

“I almost left you,” she said as the wispy girl slid into the back. “We came when we heard you.” The girl had an irritating smoke-scarred voice.

The guy opened the front door and thumped into her passenger seat. “I’d rather you sat in back,” Holly said, moving her money bag and purse to the center console.

“I like it up here,” the man said.

“Stevie has a phobia,” the girl added, as though that explained it. Holly decided it wasn’t worth fighting.

Body odor filled the cab, along with the acrid smell of their habits. Breathing through her mouth, Holly set her meter. “Where to?”

“How much to take us downtown?” Stevie asked as Holly pulled away from the curb, past the dealers.

“Where downtown?”

“Just anywhere.”

Holly sighed. She hated nonspecific destinations. “Probably about ten bucks, give or take. Depends on traffic and whether I have to take detours, and where I drop you off.”

“Okay, whatever. Just get us out of here.”

That didn’t sound promising. The man jittered as she turned off the street. “Have I driven you before?” she asked, glancing at the girl in her rearview mirror. “You didn’t call through the agency.”

“Yeah, you drove me once. Few months ago, you picked me up when my boyfriend ditched me. I still had your card in my purse. Not too many chicks driving cabs.”

Yes, she recognized the girl who had run out in front of her cab when Holly was following a subject. She’d had no choice but to give her a ride. The girl had deteriorated since then. Her habit was slowly eating away at her.

Holly didn't try to figure out why they'd wanted a woman driver. Tweekers were always paranoid, so maybe they considered a woman to be safer. Relieved to be out of that neighborhood, she breathed easier and pulled onto a road where businesses had long ago closed. She would be glad when she got back onto more populated streets.

Just as Holly's sense of security returned, Stevie slid up his dirty T-shirt and took hold of something in his waistband. She gasped as he pulled out a .38 revolver, cocked it, and pointed it at her.

"Are you kidding me?" She swerved and almost ran off the road. "What are you doing?"

"Keep both hands on the steering wheel and pull over!" He jabbed at her temple. "Do it!"

That would make as much sense as driving off a bridge. Pulling over would ensure that they stole her car and killed her, leaving Lily to grow up without her mother. Holly slowed and pretended to pull over, then stomped the accelerator, swerving hard to make the man lose his balance as she tried to knock the gun from his hand. Shrieking, the girl leaned forward and threw a belt over Holly's throat, threatening to choke her. "He said pull over!"

Holly groped at the belt but kept her foot on the accelerator. "Are you brain dead?" she choked out. "I'm driving!" The car picked up speed . . . sixty . . . seventy . . . "You kill me and you're both dead too!"

The girl loosened the belt, leaving it around Holly's neck, and the man steadied his aim. Holly deliberately ran off the road, then swerved sharply back onto the asphalt. This time she knocked the gun from his hand. He groped for it on the floorboard, found it, then swung it up into her face, its metal splitting her lip.

Tasting blood, Holly swerved again and stabbed her fingers into the soft tissue of Stevie's eyes. He cried out in pain, and she knocked the gun free again.

The girl jerked the belt, forcing Holly's head back against the headrest. Holly clawed at it and slammed on the brakes, throwing her passengers forward. The girl lost her leverage, and Holly got her fingers between the belt and her throat and ripped it away, then slammed the accelerator again.

The crazed man grabbed the wheel and pulled, forcing her to turn into a parking lot. She stomped to a screeching halt just before ramming into a building.

Holly dove for the gun on the floorboard, but the guy kned her in the face, then thrust a knuckle punch to her eye. Recoiling, she tried to grab the gun, but he came up with his finger on the trigger. "Give me your cash! All of it!" he shouted.

"I don't have any," she lied.

The girl bent over the seat, snatched the money bag and Holly's purse, and bolted out the back door. Holly watched, astonished, as the girl left Stevie behind and ran behind the building.

Cursing, he flung the door open, lunged out, and ran after the woman. Holly stumbled out, wiping the blood from the bloody gash over her eye. She opened her trunk, grabbed her gun, and aimed at him over the hood. "Stop or I'll shoot!" He disappeared around the building.

"I have to pay my mortgage!" she cried, knowing it was useless.

She couldn't run after them. She'd only given birth four weeks ago. She dropped back into the car and pulled around the building, looking for them. The girl had scaled a fence and dropped to the other side. Now she was running into the woods. The man was almost over the fence.

Holly slammed her fist against the steering wheel and tried to calculate how much money they'd gotten. She would have to start all over . . . be away from Lily twice as long.

She pulled her phone out of her jeans pocket and called the police, then looked at herself in the rearview mirror. Her lip was already swelling and blood was smeared across her cheek. The gash over her eye dripped blood and her lid was puffing shut.

She looked like someone who belonged here. Someone like them.

## CHAPTER 2

Holly stopped at a convenience store on the way home and washed her face in the dirty bathroom, splashing away her tears. She looked like she'd been in a drunken fight with a no-good boyfriend. Her sister Juliet would come unglued.

In fact, Holly didn't want to let anyone see her, but the police had encouraged her to go by the bank to cancel her credit cards. She hoped it didn't take long—she needed to see her baby. Maybe then she'd stop shaking. Breathing in strength and trying to look strong, she took care of business, then headed home.

Juliet sat on the floor in Holly's small living room, holding Lily against one shoulder as little Robbie slept in her lap. Only Juliet could pull that off.

"Hey." Holly dropped her keys on the counter, keeping her face down and hidden.

"Just in time. I think Lily's going to want to be fed soon."

“Yeah, sorry I’m late.” Holly couldn’t keep her face away from Juliet forever. She needed to hold her child. She crossed the room and took Lily from Juliet.

Juliet gasped. “Holly! What happened?”

Lily nuzzled against Holly’s neck, and Holly held her for a moment, breathing in the calming scent of her.

“Are you all right?” Juliet said. “Do I need to take you to the hospital?”

“No, I’ll be okay. I got mugged.”

Juliet came to her feet and laid Robbie on the couch. “Mugged? Holly!”

Holly burst into tears again. “They cleaned me out. Two dopeheads that I should have realized were bad news when I picked them up.”

“Oh, honey.” Juliet rushed into the kitchen and searched through the cabinets. “We have to clean that. Come here. Did you call the police?”

“Yeah, I called them. They came, but it was too late. The dopeheads had gotten away. I had to go by the bank to cancel my debit card. Real classy, going in with a bloody lip and eye.”

Juliet found hydrogen peroxide and poured some over a paper towel. Wadding it, she dabbed at Holly’s lip and eyebrow.

“I feel so stupid.”

“Holly, I’ve worried about this very thing happening.”

“Well, it finally did. Are you happy? You can say I told you so. But I have to make a living, Juliet.” The baby started to cry, and Holly pulled away from Juliet and went to the couch to feed her.

“How many were there? Can you identify them?”

“I’ll recognize them if I ever see them again, but the chances of us finding them are pretty slim. They were meth

heads. Skinny as toothpicks and pocked with sores. One of them was named Steve or Stevie, but who knows if that was his real name. I doubt the other one would have called him by his real name, knowing they were going to rob me. The money's gone. I'll just have to earn it back."

"Thank God you're okay. That's the important thing. Oh, Holly. I wish I could help you."

Juliet had financial problems of her own. Holly's oldest sibling had once been rich, the wife of an orthopedic surgeon. Now she was a widow with three children and had to live on a budget. She couldn't bail Holly out of her messes anymore.

But that didn't mean she wouldn't try. "Maybe it's time for you to work full-time for Michael. Business is getting to be more than we can handle working part-time."

"You'd think the fact that he's in prison would've put a damper on business, wouldn't you?"

"For any normal guy. But Michael's not a normal guy."

Holly smiled. Everyone in the area knew Michael's whole felony conviction was a farce.

"Anyway, what if you gave up driving the cab and just did that?"

Holly couldn't believe Juliet would suggest such a thing after loaning her the cash to buy the cab. It had been a way for Holly to hold down a job she couldn't be fired from—unlike all the other jobs she'd had. Juliet had a friend from church who owned a taxi service, and they'd agreed to add Holly's cab to their fleet in exchange for a commission when she was on the clock. By the time she paid them, bought gas, maintained her vehicle, paid taxes, and made her loan payment to Juliet, she could barely pay her personal bills.

Welcome to the adult world—a world she had studiously avoided until her pregnancy.

“How would I pay you back?”

“You could sell the cab to the agency and buy a normal car.”

Holly sighed. “I can’t live on ten bucks an hour.”

“Maybe we can raise your pay.” Juliet poured more hydrogen peroxide on the paper towel and dabbed at Holly’s eyebrow again. “Are you sure you don’t need stitches?”

“I don’t know. Maybe I’ll go to the doctor after I feed Lily. I just don’t know how I’ll pay for it. I have a huge deductible.” How was she going to pay her mortgage, utilities, diapers, babysitters . . . ?

While Holly nursed, Juliet sat on the coffee table across from her. “Holly, what if I can get Michael to raise your pay to fifteen dollars an hour? Could you give up cab driving then?”

“What am I going to do with Lily if we’re both working the same hours?”

“We can go in together and get a babysitter. Somebody who can keep Robbie and Lily at one of our houses. And sometimes we can have the babies there at work with us. Robbie has a little separation anxiety, so maybe at first the babysitter can just hang out with us at the office, until the babies are used to her.”

“I don’t know. That place is moldy.”

“It’s not moldy. I already had it checked. It’s just old.”

Holly looked down at the peaceful face of her nursing child. She wanted to cry again, but it would just upset Juliet more. If only she could stay home with her baby and focus on her all the time. But when you had a baby without involving the father . . . well, staying at home was a luxury you couldn’t afford.

At least it would be years before Lily knew that her mother was an idiot who always did things in the wrong order.

“It’ll be hard for me too, Holly,” Juliet said, leaning toward her. “I stayed home with Zach and Abe. It feels all wrong to leave Robbie, but most mothers have to work, and the kids turn out fine.”

Holly shot a look at her. “Please don’t give me that quality over quantity stuff. I don’t want to hear it.”

“We can interview babysitters together. Bottom line, I don’t want you driving a taxi anymore.”

Holly thought about the investment she’d made in the car. She would be way happier working as a PI full-time than as a cabbie, but she had responsibilities, and it didn’t really matter what would make her happier. She had to support Lily. “Like it or not,” she said, “I make more driving a cab. If Michael will raise my hourly pay, I’ll drive less and work for him more, but I can’t afford to give up the cab driving altogether.”

Juliet clearly didn’t like it. She touched Holly’s pink-tipped hair. “I guess you’re making a mature decision, even though I hate it. You’re growing up.”

“Twenty-eight years old, it’s about time, right?”

Lily looked up at her, her round eyes unfazed by the bruising, bloody wounds. Holly would never get used to that unconditional adoration. That gaze had the feel of God in it, and it calmed her spirit more than anything ever had.

Whatever motherhood cost her, it was worth it.

## CHAPTER 3

The doctor, another of Juliet's friends from church, saw Holly right away. He gave her six stitches over her eye, but her lip would have to heal on its own.

Back home, after Juliet and Robbie left, Holly sat in the rocking chair her sister Cathy had bought her. Lily was awake and alert as they rocked, her big eyes focused on Holly as she sang. Holly wasn't a good singer. She'd often taken a turn in karaoke bars when she was loose enough to have flattened inhibitions, but once a friend had videotaped her. She'd watched it later, horrified that she sounded like a bad audition on *American Idol*—one that left crass judges in stitches and was played in mockery on all the morning shows. Still, Lily seemed soothed by her voice.

Holding her daughter was the biggest endorphin rush Holly had ever known.

She dreaded leaving her with a babysitter. None of Holly's

friends was reliable enough to watch her. She knew. She had been just like them.

The doorbell rang, and Holly felt a flash of panic. Her house . . . it was a mess. Who would show up without calling? She stood and glanced in the mirror next to her front door. She looked like she'd just been in a drunken brawl. In the adjoining kitchen, dirty dishes sat piled in the sink. Why hadn't she washed them when she finished eating this morning? The place had a faint odor of dirty diapers. She should have changed the diaper pail.

The bell rang again, followed by an aggressive knock. Whoever it was, they weren't going away.

Reconciling herself to embarrassment and humiliation, Holly raised Lily to her shoulder and headed for the door. She peered out the peephole as more knocking shook the door. Two police officers stood there, looking intimidatingly official.

Worried, she opened the door. "Hi."

"Are you Holly Cramer?"

"Yes. Have you found the muggers already?"

The men looked puzzled. "Muggers? What are you referring to?"

She shrugged. "The robbery today. That's not what you're here about?"

"No, but we'd like to talk to you. Could we come in for a minute?"

Her heart sank. What had she done now? Since she'd found out she was going to be a mother, she'd tried to live a good life, no longer on the razor edge of right and wrong. Had some old choice come back to haunt her?

The taller cop, who identified himself as Sergeant Petri, was dark and somber-looking, a little like Hotch on *Criminal*

*Minds*. The other one—named Tynes—looked younger but still authoritative. “Can I see your identification?” she asked.

They showed her their badges.

“Southport Police Department? I don’t even think I’ve been to Southport lately. What is it? What do you want to talk to me about?”

“Creed Kershaw,” Petri said. “He’s not the one who roughed you up, is he?”

She sucked in a breath and pulled Lily tighter. “Creed? No, I haven’t seen him in months. I hardly know him.”

“If we could come inside, you could sit down.”

She glanced back at her living room/kitchen combo. She doubted she could convince the cops to just go away. “All right,” she sighed. “It’s just . . . it’s a mess. With a new baby, only four weeks old . . . and it’s been a bad day.”

“We won’t take long,” Petri said.

Sighing, she stepped back and let them in. “I know what you’re thinking. How does a person live in this mess? It’s just that I’m not getting much sleep, so the dishes aren’t really a priority, and the laundry’s piling up . . .”

Tynes spoke in a softer voice, surprising her. “I have a three-month-old baby, so I get it. We just want to ask you a few questions about Kershaw.”

His smile helped her relax. If they had come to accuse her of some long-forgotten infraction, they would look a little more guarded, wouldn’t they?

She moved the blanket draped over the back of the couch, the diaper bag she had thrown there, the vinyl changing pad . . . Cradling Lily in one arm, she moved the vibrating seat on the floor blocking their path. “Here,” she said. “You can sit on the couch.”

They sat, and she took the rocker again.

Tynes spoke first. “We understand that Kershaw is the father of your baby.”

Holly’s mouth fell open and she stopped rocking. She hadn’t told anyone. Not her sisters, not her best friends . . . nobody. “How is it that you understand that? I haven’t identified the father. He’s not on the birth certificate. I haven’t told anyone who her father is.”

“Let me start at the beginning,” Petri said. “We’re investigating a murder that happened over the weekend in Southport. Creed Kershaw is a person of interest in the case, but he’s disappeared. Do you have any knowledge of his whereabouts?”

She let that plunk into her psyche, the ripples moving through her brain. “A person of interest? So you think he’s the killer? Great. I’ve always had amazing taste in men.”

She saw a glint of amusement in Petri’s eyes. “So you did have a relationship with him?”

“No,” she said. “I haven’t seen him in almost a year.”

“Ten months, to be exact?” Tynes asked.

How did they know all this? “What would make you come looking for him here?”

“When we learned he had just become a father, we thought he might be here with you. Are you sure he isn’t the one who hurt you?”

“Positive. Do you honestly think I’d defend the person who did this to me?”

She got to her feet, found Lily’s pacifier in her swing, offered it to her daughter. Lily took it, her little shoulders hunched.

Tears misted in Holly’s eyes as she strapped Lily in her swing, but she wasn’t sure if the tears were from anger or fear. “You’re barking up the wrong tree. He doesn’t know about

her. I never told him. I didn't remember his last name until you said it just now. I don't even have a phone number for him. Does he live in Southport?"

"Yes." Their narrow stares indicated they didn't believe her. Petri's gaze broke, and he scanned her living room, registering her pictures, clearly looking for a shot with Creed in it. There weren't any.

She flicked the music button on the swing. "You Are My Sunshine" started playing. Lily seemed content. Holly stood straighter and faced the two men. "Look, I hate this . . . I met him in a stupid bar when I'd been drinking too much, and I made mistakes. But this guy . . . I don't know him. I don't know anything about him. I've never seen him since. He has absolutely no idea."

"Well, that's where you're wrong," Petri said. "We learned of you through a message on his voice mail, left several days ago. It was from a man named Rio, telling Kershaw that you'd given birth, and that he had a daughter."

She felt the blood draining from her face. "You've got to be kidding."

"Do you know Rio Diaz?"

"Yes. He *used* to be a friend. He introduced me to Creed that night in the bar." She had run into Rio once when she was pregnant, and he'd asked when she was due. She shouldn't have told him. Had he counted up the weeks since her night with Creed?

Holly lowered to the edge of her rocker. "Look, I'm trying to change. When I realized I was having a baby, I tried to do better, you know? I didn't want him to know because he seemed like bad news, like all the other guys I'm usually attracted to. The bad dudes I could never bring home to meet my sisters and brother. I figured he'd never know." There was

no sign of sympathy in their eyes. How could they understand? “If he knows about her, I doubt he’d even care. Wouldn’t he have called or something if he did? And if he’s hiding, he sure wouldn’t come to me.”

“If you see him, if he shows up here, we need for you to call us right away.”

She took the card Petri offered across the coffee table. “Is he dangerous?”

“We believe he could be. By now, he knows we’re looking for him. He’s probably armed.”

They got to their feet, and Holly checked on Lily, who had drifted off to sleep. She walked them to the door. “So . . . you’ll keep this quiet, right? About Lily? If he hasn’t told his family, I’d rather they didn’t know.”

Tynes looked back at her. “I can’t guarantee his family didn’t hear the voice mail. They’ve been looking for him.”

Her heart plunged. “Great.”

“They’re just focused on finding their son right now.”

She nodded, hating herself. *Great job, Holly. You found the only murderer in the room, got drunk with him, and conceived a child. How does it get better than that?*

She let them out and stood on the front stoop as they strode to their squad car. When they drove away, she went back in and studied herself in the mirror.

“Good job!” she bit out, angry tears rimming her eyes. “Look at you now.” She hated herself, from the tattoos on her biceps to the pink tips on her blonde hair. She wished she could shed her skin like a snake and become someone else, but she would still be a mess.

Lily’s pacifier fell, and the baby started to cry. Wiping her own tears, Holly shook herself out of her self-loathing and took care of her child.