

## Chapter One

*September 1997*

Rain pounded down.

Lauren Taylor squinted through the windshield, a backwash of water battered the glass. She flicked the wipers on high and tightened her hands around the steering wheel. With a quick glance in the rear-view mirror she noticed headlights behind her. The vehicle appeared to speed up, fall back, and then speed up again.

Her muscles tensed. “That driver behind us seems to be in a big hurry.”

Her father leaned forward in the seat and peered into the side mirror. “He’s all over the road. Might be drunk or something.”

“He’s crazy driving like that in this weather. I’m letting him go by.” She downshifted the Jaguar and steered onto the side of the road and rolled to a stop.

As the van raced by. A giant wave of water pelted the side of the car.

Her father watched out the window. “Christ, he’s flying”

Taillights flickered and quickly faded ahead into the blackened night.

With a quick glimpse in the mirror, Lauren steered the car back onto the road, her grip relaxed around the wheel. “That’s better.”

Her father repositioned himself in the leather seat and stretched his legs. “The Law Society’s dinner is next week. You going?”

God, the dinner. She’d bought an expensive navy and white designer dress for the occasion and even toyed with the idea of having her hair cut into something more sophisticated and polished for a New York district attorney.

“I’ll have to check my schedule.”

“Not good enough. I want you there, Lauren. My chance to show you off. Do some bragging, big time.”

She couldn't help but smile. “Okay, Dad. Okay.”

“And don't forget to bring a date for protection. Don't want a bunch of drunken seedy lawyers groping you on the dance floor. And by the way, I heard Eric was back in town.”

Her smile faded as she remembered the annual dinner years before. She'd never forgotten a single detail of that night—how Eric held her in his arms and how his mouth devoured her willing lips then pulled away and left her mouth burning for more...

“What else did you hear about him?” she blurted out.

“Not much. Can't even remember where I heard the news. Thought you didn't want to talk about Brennan?”

“I don't. I just wondered when he got back.”

Her father's jaw tightened. “Don't know.” His voice turned hard. “Just heard he's back.”

At one point in their relationship, Eric begged her to come with him and start a new life in Florida. She didn't have the courage to leave her father and walk away from her job. Four years later, she was taking on the most important case of her career—prosecuting Gino Valdina, head of New York's crime family, just like her father had done a decade before. But this time would be different. Gino Valdina wasn't going to get away with murder.

The sky split and lightning lit the wet road. Lauren eyed the exit sign to Hyde Park.

The whining squeal of an engine roared from behind.

Lauren glanced over her shoulder. “God, that van is back.” She clicked on the turning signal and steered onto the off-ramp. Her eyes darted back to the side mirror.

Headlights swerved from side to side.

A shiver drove up her spine. She clutched the steering wheel.

“I'm calling the police.” Her father grabbed his cell phone out of the glove box and turned it on.

“Damn it. I can’t get a signal.”

“Keep trying.”

The van’s driver gunned the engine.

The grill came into view, massive and powerful.

Close. Too close.

Metal connected and scraped against the bumper.

The van shoved the Jaguar ahead on the road.

High-beams from the other lane blinded her.

Lauren blinked and turned her head.

The van rammed the back of the car. Metal popped as the back window disintegrated into the back seat.

The seat belt snapped across her shoulder. Her head slammed back on the head rest then forward. “Oh my God!”

The cell phone flew from her father’s hand. “What the—”

“Dad!”

Like a slingshot the Jaguar shot down the slick road.

Lauren slammed on the brakes.

The car slid a half circle and spun out of control. A massive tidal wave of water washed over the roof.

Her father clutched the dashboard with both hands. “The tree!”

She yanked the steering wheel hard to the left.

Wood splintered. Metal buckled, squealed and cracked. The air bag struck her body like a fist, and smacked her head against the side window. She pushed at it, viciously. With every move, fiery pain shot through her face and down her neck. The sickening sweet stench of gasoline and smoke filled her nostrils. Her head clouded.

Lauren heard her own voice, pinched and muffled, cry out. “Dad!” until her words drifted into silence.