

LOVE'S ENCORE

Chapter 1

Ryan Croft leaned into an uppercut and dodged a lethal left hook before floating a jab that missed his opponent by several inches. He bit hard on his mouth guard to ignore the pain from the cut under his left eye.

He danced backwards with a slight wobble to his shuffle. Blinking sweat from his eyes, he took in his diminutive opponent and wondered where her strength came from.

Out of breath, Ryan held up his glove to indicate he conceded. "Why can't we talk about what happened?"

He watched Coco Delacroix lift her wet, loose-braids off her neck to let cool air dry her sweaty skin.

"What good would that do? We went through it years ago," said Coco.

"You don't have to be so guarded, Coco. We can still be ourselves with each other."

Ryan used his teeth to tear the wrist tape and slipped off his gloves. He trotted to his corner of the boxing ring and checked his cell phone for the time. He had an hour before he was due at the police station.

"You know I didn't come here for a heart to heart," Coco retorted.

“I can tell.” Ryan fingered the cut under his eye.

Certain his pride was on the line if any of his fellow police detectives learned that his diminutive ex-fiancé nearly went medieval on him in the boxing ring, he started weighing excuses for the injury.

“If you're waiting for an apology, don't hold your breath. You got sloppy and walked right into that shot.” Coco pointed to his cut.

“I haven't seen or heard from you in six years and you think boxing is the best way to get reacquainted?” Ryan gave her a half-hearted grin.

Coco shrugged. “Seemed like a good idea. And for me, this is the most comfortable way I know to ask you for a favor.”

Ryan considered her through hooded eyes. He could tell she considered him right back.

His chest tightened looking at her. She was thirty-six and still beautiful. Her almond hued skin, velvety—chocolate brown eyes and full, lush lips reminded him of long nights of watching her sleep beside him.

She was vertically challenged, topping out at five-foot-three, and had curves that fit pleasingly against the plains and crevices of his body. Her essence and presence flooded him with memories of her strength, sass and wit. She'd touched his heart like no other woman.

Despite time and distance, he was still crazy about her. Helping her could be the chance she never allowed him all those years ago. A chance to walk back into her life and tell her he was blind and stupid to have an affair — a chance to ask for her forgiveness — a chance for them to love each other again.

Ryan put his hands on his hips and leaned forward. “You know that I'd do anything for you. That'll never change.”

Coco swallowed and looked away. “Well, I'm an investigative blogger now.”

“What? Last I heard things were going well with your music?”

Coco pulled a water bottle from her gym bag, then, shoved her gloves inside. “A few of the songs I wrote got recorded and some airplay. I even got a deal as a solo singer for a hot minute. But singing is an art. Being a singer for a living is a business — a very hard, disillusioning business.”

“Where does blogging come into all this?”

“I needed to eat. I was a blogger for the Orange County Democrat, for a while. I wrote about the new music scene. You know, who’s hot, who’s not. That paid rent, but not groceries. Then I did a piece on the seedier side of the business. That paid for rent, groceries and gas in my car.”

“Sounds like you were making it in Los Angeles. Why come back to Oakland?”

Coco shrugged. “This is my home town.”

“You know what I mean.”

“I’ve got some family stuff to deal with, that’s all. Aren’t you gonna ask me what the favor is?”

Ryan folded his arms across his chest. “Okay, what’s the favor?”

“I heard that you investigate only cases involving high profile people and situations. I’m a journalist —”

Ryan cut her off, “Blogger. You said blogger.”

Coco pinched her nose. “The two aren’t mutually exclusive. Look, I want to work with you on any interesting cases you might have. You detect and I write about the people involved.”

“This doesn’t sound like a good idea.”

“You said that you’d do anything for me.”

“I thought it was obvious that anything didn’t include putting you in harms way or my job in jeopardy.” The muscle in Ryan’s jaw twitched.

“I’m still writing about the seedy side of the music industry. Somebody has to, but that doesn’t mean that I can’t write about the dark things in politics, film, you name it.”

Ryan scratched his stubble like a dog scratching behind his ear. “You’re a great singer, Coco. Singing for a living has always been your dream. When did you stop chasing dreams?”

“When I realized that the person I am is nothing like the singer the industry tried to turn me into.”

Ryan mulled her answer. He flinched when his cell rang.

“Croft.”

Coco slipped into a thin, pullover hoodie, hiked her bag over her shoulder and waited.

“Okay. Which uniforms are there? Aiken and Cheraw? Yeah, that’s good. I’ll be there in thirty, forty minutes.” Ryan hung up and tossed his phone back in his gym bag.

“If you’re not going to help tell me now. I don’t want to drag this out,” Coco snapped.

“I want something in return,” said Ryan, moving to crowd her personal space.

“What are you talking about?” Asked Coco. She stepped backwards, but the ring ropes halted her retreat.

“If I do this for you, you have to do something for me.”

Coco waited for him to keep talking, but Ryan stared at her with this jaw tightly clinched.

“I won’t say yes until you tell me what you want,” she prodded.

“I want to talk about what happened to our relationship six years ago. We can’t work together with that hanging between us.”

Coco put her hands on her hips and leveled a narrow eyed glare at him.

“Fine,” she said, the word stretched out. “As long as it isn’t the only thing we talk about. When do we start working together?”

“Right now. There’s been a homicide at your old vocal studio.” Ryan tossed her a towel.

“SingNation? Can’t be!”

“Looks like our first case together is gonna be a song.”

Coco shot him a sour look, then climbed out of the ring.

“What? Too soon?” Ryan joked at her retreating back.

Chapter 2

Coco sat in Ryan's unmarked police car outside of SingNation and waited for him to finish talking with the uniformed officers. She fanned herself with her hand. It was unseasonably warm for August in the Bay Area.

Yet, Coco didn't mind waiting. It gave her time to get a good look at Ryan without him staring back at her. He'd changed from his black boxing t-shirt and shorts into a plain grey suit, a nondescript white dress shirt and no tie. At thirty-eight, he looked the same — black, peach fuzz length hair, a rich, inky complexion, the sinewy physique of a linebacker and penetrating grey-black eyes that reminded her of a Greek sage. Even the faded scar along his jaw line added to his attractiveness.

Coco noticed he still had that tendency to lean into her as he spoke and let his gaze bore into hers. She rubbed her eyes to get a hold of herself. She had to be careful.

Ryan was the type of man who wore his virility with humility and ease. He could make her wet her panties upon eye contact. If she didn't tread carefully, she'd find herself reacting to his primal charms and open a Pandora's box of emotions she'd spent a long time closing.

His infidelity had made her feel betrayed, confused and deceived. Did she really know this man? Was their love real? Why ask for her hand in marriage if she meant so little to him?

Absorbing the reality that his commitment to her was no more than vapor had been slow and filled with fitful starts and stops. It took time to feel happy again — to smile without tears in her eyes — to even want to trust another man without fear.

She was relieved he had agreed to reunite at their old boxing gym. It was a low-key environment that would take the pressure off them. A place where working up a good sweat or landing a punch could exorcise memories and residual feelings.

Right now, she needed as little drama in her life as possible. Between her brother Jeremy's medical bills and what she owed to her record label, she needed to earn money and lots of it. Blogging was her side hustle and she had to make it pay. So any feelings she had for Ryan had to remain deep inside of herself.

Coco took in the scene — police cars, reporters, and onlookers. She took mental notes. She'd need them for her story. Absently, she turned on the radio and scanned the dial until she found her favorite Bay Area station.

"This is KQMA 106.1. Good Thursday to you. I'm Jack Holliday your midday groove master. Coming up we've got a full hour of old school jams and new school grooves for ya. But first some sad news, we have unconfirmed reports that Victor Suun, the embattled and former co-owner of SingNation is dead at forty-five."

Coco flinched. The volume was too high. She turned the radio down until Jack Holliday's irritating radio voice was at a comfortable murmur.

Ten minutes passed before Ryan waved for her to join him. Grabbing Ryan's keys, she turned off the ignition and bounded from the car. Tamping down her excitement at getting an inside scoop, Coco took a deep breath to steady her pulse.

"I can't believe Victor is dead," said Coco as she bent to scoot under the police tape.

Ryan pulled on rubber gloves. "I can. Gossip about town was everybody around here hated him."

"I ran into him last year in L.A. He rambled on about how Zandria cheated him."

"Zandria? Isn't that the wife?" He pointed to a path leading to the alley behind the studio. "This way."

"Ex-wife," Coco corrected.

"Let me guess. She got everything in the divorce?"

“It’s not that simple. Victor wanted to be a famous celebrity coach. He got mixed up with a kid who wanted to party more than sing. The kid’s first album came out and everyone panned his voice. It was the Titanic of flops. The kid, the label, the critics blamed Victor. After that, things went south for him. He and Zandria ended up divorcing. He gave her his half of the business. Something about never wanting to coach again.”

Coco stepped to the studio’s back door, but Ryan pulled her away. He pointed to the steel door a few spaces down. It had Larry’s Hookah Palace in crooked, faded gold letters. It swung open.

“But—”

“Trust me,” Ryan said with a grim smile.

Out came a tall, lanky, premature gray-haired man. He wore a surgical blue smock, yellow rubber gloves and his pale, freckled face sported large hazel eyes and a wide toothy grin that reminded Coco of the Joker.

“Ryan, my man. I heard you brought a guest to the party.”

“Early Joe, I hoped you’d be on this case.” Ryan moved to clasp hands and give his friend a bro-hug, but Joe held up his palms to reveal dried blood. He offered a fist bumped instead.

“Of course it’s me. Who else is willing to work with you? So, whose your friend?”

Joe’s deep irritating southern drawl crawled up Coco’s spine. Still she found herself smiling at him. She liked him.

“I’m Coco Delacroix.” She held out her fist for a bump.

Joe gave her a gentle tap as he eyed Ryan. “Coco huh? The Coco?”

“Yes,” Ryan coughed and pulled his notebook from his pocket. “What do we have?”

Joe chortled and swept his arm wide. “This way lady and gent.”

The hookah joint was littered with decaying cardboard boxes, fire singed furniture infested with mold, and rusted hookahs encased in six years of dust. Rat droppings rested on the grimy rugs like acorns after falling from a tree. Deteriorated shoji screens and broken glass were scattered about the room as if this were a scene from a post-apocalyptic movie.

The place was dark. The only light was a three-foot, battery powered work light. It illuminated the body sprawled behind a pile of dirty furniture haphazardly stacked against the far wall.

Coco covered her mouth and nose. The stench was putrid. It rode a gusty wind that followed them into the room.

“Oh God, what is that smell?”

“Mold, excrement, but mostly the body. It barely got below seventy degrees last night,” said Ryan as he pulled a flashlight from a holster on his belt.

“As you can see by the hole in the wall, SingNation is doing some renovation and expanding into this space. There was a fire here a few years ago. The place has been empty ever since,” said Joe, his playful tone gone. “Contractors found him this morning.”

“How’d he die?” Ryan scanned the room with his flashlight.

“My initial call is a GSW between the shoulder blades.”

“GSW? You mean gunshot wound?” Coco asked.

Joe grinned crookedly. “Give the lady a prize.”

“If you two are done flirting I’d like to see the body. Coco, you should wait outside. This isn’t going to be pretty,” said Ryan.

“I want to stay. If our —,” Coco glanced sideways at Joe, “arrangement is going to work I have to get used to stuff like this.”

“Miss Delacroix, seriously, this is ugly stuff.” Joe's voice was soft as if talking to a child.

She gave him a smile that didn't reach her eyes. "I can handle it, but thanks for worrying."

"Alright," said Joe. He gave her a doubtful glance. "If you two will follow me to junk pile number one."

Ryan grabbed Joe's shoulder. "Hold up, Joe. Just give us the deets. Coco and I can look at some of the less gruesome crime scene photos together later tonight? Sound good?"

Coco narrowed her eyes. "Ryan —"

"For God's sake woman, you're about to pass out from the smell alone. Behind that furniture is a brutally murdered dead body. The last thing I need is your puke contaminating the crime scene," Ryan reprimanded.

"Fine," Coco snorted. "I'll wait for you inside the studio."

Ryan raised a thick eyebrow and shot Joe a questioning look.

"Fine with me," Joe rushed. "My guy finished going over the studio before you got here."

Ryan scowled. "You mean that knuckle headed intern that botched my crime scene last week?"

Joe beamed proudly and winked. "The one and only."

Ryan turned to Coco. "I'll meet you in there. Okay?"

"Yeah, sure. It was nice to meet you Joe or should I call you Early Joe?"

"Joe's fine. Ryan calls me 'Early' cause the first time I had dinner with him and Peyton, I showed up an hour and a half early." Joe's voice petered out.

Even the low light could not hide the tension that overcame Ryan and Coco's limbs like rigor mortis when Peyton's name was mentioned.

Coco cleared her throat. "Umm, well, it's nice to know that Ryan's taste in friends has improved over the years."

Joe gave her a sheepish shrug. “Nice to meet you too, Coco.”

Without sparing Ryan a glance, she turned and picked her way through the clutter and marched through the barely framed doorway to the studio. It'd been six years since she had vocal training at SingNation. She wondered if it looked the same.

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Ryan watched Coco leave until she was out of sight before he punched Joe in the arm with a hard jab.

“Ouch! That’s gonna leave a mark.” Joe rubbed his shoulder. “What’s wrong with you man?”

“You had to bring up Peyton?”

“Coco drops back into your life after six years and you decide to bring her here — an off-limits and active crime scene by the way — and I’m supposed to automatically know what I can and can’t say?”

“Forget it. Just tell me the time of death?” Ryan rubbed his palm over his short hair.

Joe cut his friend a surly glance. “Factoring in the heat, rigor mortis puts the time of death between eight and midnight. The girl working the Reception desk says that Suun arrive just before eight. He asked her if it was ok for his fiancé to park on the street while she waited for him. After that, he argued with his ex-wife and her two business partners until nine. She believes all of them left the studio before she locked up at ten.”

“So time-of-death is probably closer to between ten and midnight,” Ryan surmised. “Did she say what they were arguing about?”

Joe checked the notes on his clipboard. “She told the uniforms she didn’t know.”

“If he left with the fiancé, I wonder if we're gonna find her dead body somewhere or maybe she killed him then dumped him here to setup the ex-wife?” Ryan wondered aloud. “This fiancé got a name?”

"I'm a medical examiner, not a beat cop. You're lucky I knew that much," Joe reproached.

Ryan gave him a crooked smile. "Anything else?"

"Yeah, now that you mention it. Just before you got here I got a call from CBI's forensics guy. Their Special Task Force is interested in this case," said Joe. He kept his voice neutral.

Ryan's lip curled as he scratched his beard. California's Bureau of Investigation's Special Task Force had a new Director, Peyton Monroe, his daughter's mother and the wedge between him and Coco.

"That's just great," Ryan muttered.

"What's that?"

"Nothing man. Just keep me informed."

"Always do. Look, Ryan —"

Ryan waited, eyebrows raised, for Joe to continue.

Joe smacked his gum harder. "This is probably none of my business, but you've been carrying a torch for Coco since I met you. I know that's a sticky subject between you and Peyton. What exactly happened between you three?"

Ryan fixed Joe with an inscrutable stare and planted his large hands on his hips.

"Six years ago I was engaged to Coco. Her brother Jeremy was my best friend. Knowing my investigation into that East Oakland serial rapist case was stalled, he asked his girlfriend from CBI to help me. She and I got caught up working that case and spent too much time together — lines were crossed."

Light dawned in Joe's eyes. "You don't mean — I mean that wasn't —"

"Yeah, I had an affair with Peyton. Yes, she was dating Jeremy at the time. And, yes, our affair resulted in us having Ava." Ryan's voice was flat. His gaze was dull and lifeless.

"So Coco isn't the issue between you and Peyton. Peyton is the —"

"— the issue between me and Coco," Ryan finished.

Joe blew out a breath and swung his arms bank and forth. "Wow, man, that's heavy. How did Coco find out? I mean did she catch you in the act or something?"

Ryan gave Joe a withering glare.

"Come on, man. You've kept me in the dark for years. You know I've got an inquiring mind," said Joe.

Ryan let out a harsh sigh and rolled his neck.

"Peyton and I only happened a few times. I broke it off. I wanted to tell Coco everything, but I was scared. A month later Peyton tells me she's pregnant and wants to keep the baby. So I told Coco everything."

Ryan let the pain and memory of his confession come into sharp focus. After he confessed to the affair and the resulting pregnancy, Coco had sat in silence and refused to look at him. He tried to hold her, but she threw off his embrace as if his touch was poison. When he finished talking, she left.

She moved out of their tiny condo next to Lake Merritt and returned to her parent's house in West Oakland. For weeks he tried to talk to her — love letters, text messages, voice messages, even sleeping in his car outside her house. But, she refused to acknowledge his existence and efforts to make amends.

"So Coco just left?" Joe asked, softly.

"Yeah, she moved to LA without a word. I had plans to go after her, but she sent an email asking me to let her go. She wanted to move on — didn't want to drag things out with tears and apologies."

Ryan sniffed and cleared his throat.

His mind whirled remembering his reaction to her words. He'd gotten angry. To him, her words were a white flag of surrender.

She'd surrendered their relationship without firing a single shot to save it — simply left him alone in the trenches to fight for their love and the life they built together.

"So that's when you decided to hook-up with Peyton?"

Ryan grimaced. "Yeah, I got into this head space where I believed Coco had wronged me by not giving me a chance. Stupid, I know, but it's the truth. I lived with Ava and Peyton for three years before I figured out that I was a jackass."

"Now I understand why you're doing the single dad thing," said Joe.

"Don't feel sorry for me, man. I brought this on myself."

For the past two years, Ryan had lived a schedule-based life of co-parenting Ava. He kept her on weekends and seldom exchanged more than five words with Peyton that didn't involve their daughter.

Peyton had become the icon of his regret and shame. It wasn't fair, but it was how he felt.

Joe shuffled his feet. "I don't know what to say."

"There's nothing to say," Ryan tossed over his shoulder as he left to find Coco.

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([Love's Encore](#), the novel, is available on Kindle Unlimited at amazon.com.)

Bonus novel excerpt from:

Love Under Fire

CHAPTER 4

It was midnight.

Jeremy kissed his sister, hugged Ryan and left the party — or what remained of it.

Moonlight, filtered by over hanging trees and thin fog dimly lit the path to his car. Wind wafted across the bay.

He lifted his jacket collar to protect against the cold and tucked his chin towards his chest to keep his neck warm. He replayed his conversation with Loty as muffled foot falls approached him.

Jeremy lifted his head, paused the conversation's playback, and stopped walking as a hand clamped around his forearm.

Helman? That crazy —

Jeremy whirled and swung his cane in a wild arc. It whizzed through the air and struck nothing.

"What the hell?" Coco jumped aside, avoiding his cane.

"Coco, sorry. I thought you were — I mean —"

"What is going on with you? You are even more surly and on edge than usual."

"It's nothing." He exhaled, relieved she wasn't Helman. "You should get inside. It's chilly and you're in the middle of recording an album. I don't want you to get hoarse."

Coco rubbed her bare arms to keep warm. "I know, but I forgot to tell you — I didn't get a chance to check on the contractor's progress on your condo. Getting ready for the party and all, I ran out of time."

"I'll stop by there before heading home." He hugged her. "Sorry for nearly taking you out."

"Take me out? You wish," she teased. "My reflexes are better than yours. Don't forget that."

Jeremy laughed but Coco's favorite way to workout was boxing and martial arts. Her reflexes really were better than his.

"You sure you want to sell the condo?" She asked.

"Coco, we've discussed this. I can't afford the taxes on Mom and Dad's house and homeowners fees on the condo. It has to go."

"But Ryan and I —"

"If you're worried about me being unhappy living at Mom and Dad's don't be. I'm content. Once I sell the condo you and Ryan won't have to keep pitching in." Jeremy squeezed her fingers. "Besides, you know the condo's doorways are too narrow to accommodate my wheelchair."

"I know but since you're walking now I thought that — never mind." She hugged him again. "Call me when you get home. I need to know that you are safe and sound."

"I will." He slipped into his SUV and started the engine. "I promise."

Jeremy stood in the brightly lit hallway outside of his Beach Street condo patting his pockets and cursing at himself. He couldn't get inside. He didn't have a key. There were two metallic-blue keys to the condo. Coco had his spare and his former neighbor, Mrs. Morales, had his key. She'd agreed to let the contractor and his crew inside during the renovations.

Jeremy turned and stared at the festive fall wreath on his neighbor's door. He planted and replanted his cane. The urge to wake-up Mrs. Morales pushed at him.

You can't do that. She is eighty years old. Waking her up at this hour is rude and selfish. That's what Coco would tell him.

Still cursing to himself he headed to the elevator. He figured he'd return tomorrow. The doors glided open to reveal a gaily dressed Mrs. Morales. Her dress was pale green and a white rose was tucked behind her ear.

Jeremy's shoulders sagged as the muscle knotting tension left them. Thank, God! He wouldn't have to squeeze in a visit tomorrow.

Holding Mrs. Morales' hand was a young man dressed in a tuxedo. Jeremy blinked. Was that her grandson?

"Hey, Mr. Delacroix. What's up?" Asked the young man.

That was her grandson. Lawrence? Liam? Lorenzo!

"Lorenzo, it's been awhile." Jeremy reached out for a handshake. "Are you a senior in high school now?"

Lorenzo smiled, bashfully. "Sophomore at Stanford. Your alma mater."

Jeremy patted him on the back. "Mrs. Morales you look lovely. What's the occasion?"

"Cumpleños de mi hermano. Noventa."

"Noventa? Ninetieth birthday? Your brother? He's fortunate."

"Sí. Sí," she said, eyes twinkling.

Jeremy smiled as graciously as his impatient mood allowed. He was tired and small talk really wasn't his forte. "I hate to bother you, but I need to get inside my condo. Do you mind unlocking the door? I want to check on the contractor's progress."

Mrs. Morales handed her purse to Lorenzo. In Spanish, she instructed him to retrieve her keys. Her arthritic hands were tired. Lorenzo unearthed two sets of keys. He unlocked his grandmother's door first and ushered her inside before returning to Jeremy.

"Uh, Mr. Delacroix, you're not gonna like what you see," said Lorenzo as he unlocked Jeremy's door.

"Why? What's happened?"

"Abuela says the contractor hasn't been here in days. And the few times the crew did show up they hardly did any work."

Jeremy ground his teeth. "Thanks, Lorenzo. Tell your Abuela to keep the key for a few more days. I'll take care of the contractor."

Lorenzo nodded. Jeremy extended his hand for a parting handshake but the young man's arms were stretched wide for a hug. Awkwardly, they split the difference by clasping each other's forearms and leaning in for a quick shoulder bump.

Jeremy exhaled like a whale after the young man returned to his grandmother's condo. He was exhausted from a long day and night, worried about the stalker and angry about his contractor.

He was feeling downright — beastly.

Jeremy entered his condo and didn't bother turning on the lights. The night time cityscape illuminated the space.

Sandwiched between the Presidio and Marina districts, the condo boasted a view of the San Francisco Bay and Golden Gate Bridge that was spectacular at night. It was the main reason he'd bought the place twelve years ago.

Jeremy's habit of storing his cane next to his front door at home followed him to the condo. He leaned it against the wall and surveyed the space in the semi darkness.

The contractor had removed the beige carpet, but the hardwood floors hadn't been installed.

How long does it take to paint walls and replace flooring in a nine hundred and eighty square foot condo?

It had been two weeks already.

Jeremy limped across the exposed concrete subfloor. He passed the kitchen, meandered down the hallway and peeked into the guest bath before stepping into the master bedroom at the end of the hall.

He wanted to grind his teeth until his frustration vanished but the sight of the bedroom's carpet still firmly in place made him realize he'd be toothless in hours. Too tired to stay angry, he awkwardly lowered himself to the floor and rolled onto his back. He turned his head and gazed at the view through the ceiling to floor windows.

The view — he missed that view. Relaxed in what seemed to him for the first time in ages, his eyes fluttered closed. His breathing slowed.

He fell asleep.

CHAPTER 5

Jeremy jerked awake.

He heard a noise. Something like the low keening of metal or hard plastic scraping against metal. He sat up and took a moment to remember where he was.

SCRAPE.

Jeremy stilled, listening.

Nothing. He rolled over to his knees, pushed himself to his feet and waited.

Still nothing.

He shook his head. This was ridiculous. The stalker's text messages had him jumping at every unexpected thing. He checked his watch. A quarter past one in the morning.

It was past time to go home. Stiff legged he padded down the hallway.

He froze. A duffel bag sat in the middle of the living room. Illuminated by the city lights.

Someone else was in the condo.

His heart thudded as he toe-heeled backwards.

Go back into the bedroom. Lock the door. Call the police.

His eyes darted around in the semi-darkness. The walls seemed foreign and threatening. Damn Helman for invading a place he had once called home.

Grazing the walls with his fingertips, he moved carefully. He had a hard enough time walking forward. Going backwards made him dizzy and off-balance.

He didn't see the gloved hand behind him stretching from the bathroom and into the hallway. It was inches from his head. Moving as an octopus. Unfolding. Fingers stretched wide like unfurled tentacles ready to envelope its prey.

Jeremy was mid-step when the fingers clamped around the back of his neck. A guttural shout formed in his throat but a needle's sharp point pierced his neck and jabbed into a muscle. The pain reduced his shout to an agonized gurgle.

He fought and clawed at the fingers but his limbs felt rubbery and sapped of strength. His vision blurred and his knees buckled. Grunting from the shock of hitting the concrete floor, he tried to cry out, but he couldn't push any other sound past his labored breathing. Sharp pain ran up his left arm. Jeremy clutched his chest and squeezed.

A body hovered over his.

The last thing he saw was a ghoulish white mask and soulless black eyes.

The last thing he thought — he wouldn't be keeping his promise to his sister.

#

([Love Under Fire](#), the novel, available on Kindle Unlimited at www.amazon.com.)