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DINA WHITE

SAVE ME



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Аннотация

She has lived with the perfect man for three years. In public, he is a dream. Behind closed doors, he is her nightmare. She tried to leave. He always brought her back.

Cole Shaw doesn't save strangers. But when her fiancé refuses to repay a debt, Cole takes the one thing Warren values most. His fiancée.

She doesn't scream. She doesn't beg. She says, «I'm not afraid.»

And nothing turns out the way anyone expected.

A psychological love story about freedom that comes in the most unexpected way.

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Save Me

Dina White

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Author's Note

This book contains scenes of psychological and physical abuse, descriptions of toxic relationships, and other content that may be triggering for some readers.

This story does not romanticize violence. It is about a victim's path to freedom, the right to be heard, and a choice that changes everything.

If you or someone you know is experiencing domestic abuse, please reach out for help. You are not alone.

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Part I. THE CAGE

Chapter 1. The Perfect Couple

The ballroom glittered.

Crystal pendants on three enormous chandeliers shattered the light into hundreds of sharp sparks. White tablecloths smelled of starch. Champagne poured into slender glasses without a single splash — the waitstaff here never made mistakes. The Hayes Foundation charity gala had drawn the city's elite for the fourth year in a

row, and for the fourth year in a row, everything was flawless.

As was the girl standing at the host's side.

Avery Brooks held a champagne glass she hadn't touched once. An ivory gown hugged her figure, baring her shoulders and collarbones — just enough to look elegant, not provocative.

Warren had chosen it himself. “It suits you,” he’d said as the tailor zipped her up. “Modest and expensive. Nothing vulgar.” She remembered that word. Vulgar. Everything he didn’t like eventually became vulgar. Her old jeans, her laugh, her friends — all of it was vulgar, and he had gently, patiently, relentlessly removed it from her life.

Now she stood, straight as a rod, smiling. Her facial muscles had long memorized the correct

position: corners of her lips lifted, eyes slightly narrowed, head tilted just enough to look engaged but not deferential. She had practiced in front of a mirror. Warren said it was important.

“Avery, darling.”

His palm settled on her waist. His fingers tightened — not hard, but enough for her to feel every knuckle. He always held her like that in public: possessive and tender at the same time. The gesture of a man who adored his woman and feared losing her just a little. Avery had believed in that once. Once.

“Mr. Grayson,” Warren flashed a dazzling smile at an elderly gentleman with a ruddy face and silver temples, “allow me to introduce my fiancée, Avery.”

She extended her hand. Her fingers were cold — the one thing she couldn’t control. Circulation. Or fear. Sometimes they were the same thing.

“Charming,” Mr. Grayson pressed his lips to her knuckles. “Warren, my boy, how did you get so lucky?”

“I know.”

The fingers on her waist tightened. For one heartbeat. A fraction of a second longer than necessary. Avery stopped breathing.

Mr. Grayson noticed nothing. No one ever did.

Across the room, half-turned toward the bar, a man stood watching them.

Cole Shaw had arrived without an invitation and without a date, which was normal for him. He had no interest in charity auctions, small talk, or the champagne they served warm here — he preferred water. The only reason he'd come to this ballroom was a brief conversation he planned to have before the formal program began.

He already knew Warren Hayes wasn't going to pay.

Cole had seen men like him dozens of times. They smiled, nodded, promised “just another week” — and dragged it out for months, hoping the creditor would lose patience, snap, make a mistake. Then they could play the victim and paint him as the heartless dog demanding what was his. Warren was a master of this game. Cole

had read him the first day they signed the contract.

Now he was watching Warren. And the girl beside him — beautiful, cool, flawless. She smiled so evenly it looked almost professional. Cole mentally tagged her: a trophy. Another rich heir's companion — model looks, expensive dress, empty eyes. They always looked the same.

He finished his water and headed for the exit. Dante was waiting by the door.

“Shaw.” Someone called his name.

Cole turned. Warren Hayes himself, champagne glass in hand, smiling with all the warmth of a jewelry store window.

“Glad you made it. I hope the champagne is decent?”

“I don’t drink champagne,” Cole replied.

“Ah, right. The ascetic.” Warren’s smile widened. “Listen, about our business... I remember, I’m on top of it. A couple more weeks and we’ll settle everything. You know how it is — business, force majeure, this and that.”

“I understand.”

“Excellent.” Warren clapped him on the shoulder — familiar, a beat longer than their brief acquaintance allowed. “You know I always pay my debts.”

Cole said nothing. He shifted his gaze to the girl. She stood a few steps behind Warren, wearing the same frozen smile, staring somewhere past

him. A beautiful porcelain doll.

“My fiancée, Avery,” Warren said, noticing his glance. “Darling, this is Cole Shaw. My business partner.”

“Former partner,” Cole corrected.

“Don’t be a bore.” Warren laughed and wrapped an arm around Avery’s shoulders. She didn’t pull away, didn’t tense up — just accepted the gesture as a given. “Well, we must go. The

mayor is waiting. Good to see you.”

Cole nodded. Warren steered the girl deeper into the ballroom, and she followed — the same smooth, lifeless grace.

“Problem client?” Dante asked quietly as they stepped into the hall.

“Not a client. A debtor.” Cole pulled on his coat. “And he’s not going to pay.”

“What do we do?”

Cole paused at the exit and looked back at the ballroom through the glass doors. Warren Hayes stood at the center of the crowd, dazzling and confident in his untouchability. Beside him stood his flawless fiancée — a trophy in an ivory gown.

“He has something he values,” Cole said. “If he won’t pay in money, he’ll pay with what he loves.”

“The girl?” Dante asked.

Cole shrugged.

“We’ll see.”

The evening dragged on like molasses. Avery moved from one group of guests to another, feeling Warren’s gaze on her back. He was always watching — even when he was talking to the mayor, even when he was laughing at someone’s joke, even when he lifted his glass to his lips. His attention was an invisible chain around her wrist.

“More champagne, Miss Brooks?”

A waiter appeared at her left. A young man with reddish

hair and a scatter of freckles across his nose. He smiled at her — just smiled, the way you smile at any guest — and Avery automatically smiled back.

That was enough.

She didn't notice Warren finish his conversation. Didn't hear his footsteps. At some point, his fingers simply closed around her elbow, and he leaned close to her ear.

“Are you flirting with the help?”

His voice was velvet. If anyone overheard, they'd think he was whispering something tender. Avery knew this tone. Cold. Dangerous.

“I was just — ”

“Quiet. Smile. We're leaving in fifteen minutes.”

He released her elbow and became perfect again. Adjusted his cufflink, nodded at someone across the room, laughed at someone else's

joke. Avery stood with her champagne glass and counted in her head. One, two, three — inhale. Four, five, six — exhale. Seven, eight, nine...

Fifteen minutes. She could last that long.

The car whispered over wet asphalt. City lights drifted past the window — yellow, red, blue — but Avery watched only Warren's hands. He was driving. Silent.

The silence was worse than shouting. When he was silent, it meant he was angry. And when he was angry, any word from her

was a match tossed into gasoline. Avery had learned not to speak first. Learned to wait.

“Do you know why I host these galas, Avery?”

“For the foundation,” she said quietly. “Charity.”

“For status,” he corrected. “Status is everything. People need to see the perfect picture: a successful man, his devoted woman, their flawless life. It builds trust. Trust brings money. It’s simple.”

Avery was silent.

“And when that man’s woman smiles at the waitstaff,” he turned the wheel, and the car swung onto their street, “she ruins the picture. Do you understand?”

Yes. She understood.

He parked by the house and killed the engine. The silence thickened, heavy as deep water.

Warren turned to her. The streetlamp light fell across his face, and Avery saw what no one else ever saw: eyes with no warmth. No spark. No pity.

“You made two mistakes tonight,” he said. “The first was with the waiter. The second was looking at Shaw.”

She flinched. He noticed. Of course he noticed.

“Who is he?” she asked, even though she knew her questions never led anywhere good.

“No one.” Warren unbuckled his seatbelt and reached for her face. His fingers brushed her cheek, slid down to her neck, and stopped. Didn’t squeeze. Just rested there — a threat without action. “Just a man who thinks he can take something from me.”

He pulled his hand away and got out of the car.

Avery stayed seated. One, two, three — inhale. Four, five, six — exhale. Somewhere in her chest, beneath the layers of fear and learned obedience, a thin thread pulsed. A faint, barely perceptible heartbeat. She listened to it and thought that once — in another life, it seemed — that pulse had been louder.

She stepped out of the car and walked to the house.

The door closed behind her with a soft click. Warren stood in the entryway, removing his watch. Rolex Day-Date, platinum. The bracelet slid across his wrist with a quiet metallic sound.

Avery hated that sound more than anything.

“Go to the bedroom. You’re sleeping alone tonight. Think about your behavior.”

He didn’t lock the door. She didn’t leave anyway.

Avery pulled her diary from behind the dresser — a black spiral-bound notebook, worn, with bent corners. She sat on the floor, leaning against the bed, and began writing by the light of her phone.

Today he didn’t hit me. He just said I ruin the picture. I am a detail. Like a watch. Like a cufflink. I can be adjusted if I slip. I can be punished if I break.

There was a man at the gala. Shaw was his name. Warren said he wants to take something from him. I wonder what. Maybe if someone really did take something from Warren, he’d understand what it feels like to lose.

No. He wouldn’t understand. Men like him never understand.

She closed the diary and hid it again. Lay down on the bed, still in her gown.

Rain fell outside the window. Avery listened to the drops hitting the glass and thought that tomorrow would be the same day. And the day after. And a year from now.

Somewhere in her chest, the thin thread pulsed.

It was still pulsing.

Chapter 2. Three Attempts

Morning arrived in silence.

Avery woke early — a habit ingrained over three years. Warren got up at six, and by then, fresh coffee had to be waiting in the kitchen. Not instant, not from a pod machine — brewed by hand, in a glass carafe, at exactly the temperature he preferred. She had learned to feel it without a thermometer.

She went down to the kitchen barefoot, still in her evening gown. The fabric was rumpled, but she didn't care. Fifteen minutes until he woke up.

Coffee. Toast. Avocado — mashed exactly the way he liked. Poached egg — the yolk should run but not spread across the plate. She did it all on autopilot, as she did every morning. Her hands remembered the sequence. Her head was empty.

At six-fifteen, footsteps sounded on the stairs.

Warren entered the kitchen in a dark blue robe, fresh from the shower, smelling of expensive soap and something citrus. His hair was already styled. Not a single strand out of place.

“Good morning,” he said, seating himself at the table.

“Good morning,” she replied, placing the plate before him.

He didn't look at her. Took his knife, sliced the toast, dipped it into the yolk. Avery stood by the counter, waiting for the verdict.

“The coffee is too hot,” he remarked, not looking up.

“Sorry,” she said.

He said nothing more. She poured herself a cup and remained standing. Sitting without an invitation wasn’t worth the risk.

The kitchen TV played business news. A perfectly coiffed anchor recited stock prices while Avery listened to the rain outside.

“I’ll be gone until evening,” Warren said, pushing his plate away. “Dinner at seven. Don’t be late.”

“Okay.”

“And wear something appropriate. Foster is coming with his wife.”

“Okay.”

He stood, straightened his robe, and headed for the door. He paused without turning around.

“You were almost flawless last night. Almost. Try to be completely flawless tonight.”

“I will.”

He left. Avery sank onto a chair and took a sip of coffee. It wasn’t too hot. It was perfect. But she didn’t say so.

When Warren was gone, the house changed.

Avery had long forgotten what freedom felt like. But the air grew a little lighter, the silence a little less crushing. She could open the fridge and eat a yogurt without hearing comments about sugar and calories.

She could stop smiling.

In these hours, she sometimes took out her diary.

She always carried it with her when she left the house. Warren didn't know about the diary — she hid it on the top shelf of the dresser, behind old boxes, but she didn't want to risk it. If he ever found it... She didn't know what would happen. She only knew it would be nothing good. So the diary always lay at the bottom of her bag, under her wallet and phone, wrapped in a scarf. A small black spiral-bound notebook. The only thing that belonged only to her.

One year ago. First entry.

I'm leaving.

I can't do this anymore. Today he told me I'm nobody. That without him, I'd be lost. That he picked me up off the street and made me someone. I stood there listening, and somewhere inside, everything tightened into a single point.

I'm not from the streets. I graduated from college. I had a job. I had friends. He erased all of it — one by one, slowly, like an eraser. And I let him. I thought it was love.

Tomorrow, when he leaves for his meeting, I'll pack a bag. Just the essentials. Documents, phone, some money. I'll get a motel room and call Lexi. She'll help. She always said she would.

I'm leaving. I'm really leaving.

God, please let me succeed.

Avery remembered that day. Waiting until his car disappeared around the corner. Pulling out an old gym bag from the top shelf. Packing jeans, a sweater, underwear. Documents. Phone. Twelve hundred dollars — everything she'd managed to hide over two years.

She called a taxi and waited by the window, clutching the bag to her chest. Her heart pounded so loudly she thought he'd hear it from across the city.

The taxi pulled up. She opened the front door.

And saw his car.

Warren had come back — forgotten his phone. He stepped out of the car, looked at her, at the bag, at the taxi behind her. And smiled. Not with anger. Wearily. The way you smile at a misbehaving child.

“Avery,” he said, softly. “What are you doing?”

“I’m leaving.” Her voice trembled, but she got the words out. “I can’t do this anymore, Warren. I’m leaving.”

He stepped closer. Took her by the shoulder — firmly, but not roughly. Looked into her eyes.

“You’re unstable,” he said. “Look at yourself. You’re shaking. You’re pale. Where will you go in this state? Who needs you there?”

“I — ”

“Stay.” His voice was velvet. “I’ll help you get through this. You’re overtired, it happens. We’ll get through this together.”

He hugged her. Pressed her to him. And she stood there, her face buried in his coat, feeling the air leave her body. Not from her lungs — from her will. From her spine. From the place where the thin thread pulsed.

The taxi left. She stayed.

That evening, he gave her a diamond bracelet. Said, “I love you even like this — broken. I’ll fix you.”

The bruise on her shoulder faded in two weeks.

Avery snapped the diary shut and returned it to the drawer. The past didn’t want to stay on the pages — it seeped into the present, like water through a crack. There were two more entries about escape attempts. All three ended the same way.

She stayed.

She always stayed.

She walked to the window. The rain had stopped, but the sky was still gray. A light came on in the house across the street — someone was living their ordinary life. She used to have that.

Now all she had was a kitchen to clean before he came home, and dinner at seven, and a dress

— “something appropriate” — to pick out in advance. She

turned from the window and got to work.

Somewhere in her chest, the thin thread kept pulsing.

It was still pulsing.

Chapter 3. The Debt

Cole Shaw hated waiting.

In his business, waiting meant vulnerability. Vulnerability meant losses. And he hadn't tolerated losses since he was nineteen years old, when he lost his mother and swore he'd never again find himself in a situation where

something depended on someone else.

Today, he'd been waiting for twenty minutes already.

The conference room at Hayes Properties was beige — expensive, sterile, faceless. Photos of skyscrapers owned by the company hung on the walls. A water pitcher and two glasses sat on the table. Cole hadn't touched the water. He leaned back in his chair, turning an old lighter over in his fingers — a habit he'd never kicked, even though he'd quit smoking five years ago.

The door opened. Warren walked in.

"Cole!" He was beaming. White shirt, expensive suit, perfect hair. "Sorry to keep you waiting. Meeting ran long, you know how it is."

"I do."

Warren sat across from him, adjusted his cufflinks, poured himself water. Every movement was smooth, rehearsed. A man used to being watched.

“So,” he began, taking a sip, “you wanted to talk about our deal.”

“I wanted to talk about the debt,” Cole corrected. “It’s a month overdue.”

“A month and four days,” Warren specified with a smile. “I’m counting.”

“Even more reason.”

Warren sighed and set down his glass.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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