

Chapter 1

I never believed in fate before, thinking people were in full control of their destiny, and their choices were their own. But right now, it was hard not to become a believer. No matter what decisions I made, like cutting off Winterland from my reality, it still led me right back here.

The beauty of death and destruction.

The true beast.

My fingers gripped the box, the power clashing inside, wanting to get out like a trapped animal. She could probably taste freedom with every step I took back to my sister and to hers.

Jessica Winters.

I remembered her. I remembered everything now.

The wall of mist and darkness, which had been haunting me for two years, dissolved the moment I cracked the top of the box. The power finally revealed itself, showing me every detail of Alice's descent into madness from the moment that woman stepped foot in our house. She had been married to Matt and had a son. Jessica had become Alice's therapist, the one who committed her to a mental institution, turned us against her, and cut Alice off from everyone.

Somehow my family's memories of her were erased, or at least contained, leaving patchy holes and unsettled memories filtering through. I had no idea how all the puzzle pieces fit into place, how Alice or Jessica fit in Winterland, or how this woman ended up in a box. I knew I now held the soul of Jessica Winters, and it was rotten and twisted with bitterness, rage, greed, and hate.

I rushed past the toys, my lips parted in a cry, their misery ripping me from myself. My legs wobbled underneath me.

No!

"Alice." I forced her name through my teeth, plastering my mind with images of her bleeding and dying outside this fucked up toyland. "She needs you." Pushing off a broken toy transformer, I clung to the box, willing myself to keep upright and move forward.

My feet came to a dead stop.

Lined up, toys were grouped together as though they were blocking something.

The way out. My stomach dropped, noticing the air behind them weaving and rippling. *That was the way out.*

"You both keep escaping me. But I won't let you pass this time." A high-pitched, witchy voice hissed into my mind, my blood running cold as the toys parted. An old-fashioned doll floated forward between them as though

she were a queen. The devil doll, the one with a cracked porcelain face and one revolving eye, wanted to consume my energy like a vampire.

Son of a nutcracker.

The closer the doll got, the more I could feel its rage and darkness. The greed. I wouldn't be enough; she would want more, destroy more.

"You and your sister are special. So much muchness," her voice cackled. "I want it so bad. You keep yours hidden, locked away, but I can feel it inside you. You are powerful."

My gaze darted around, noticing her toy gang surrounding me, trapping me. Their misery and hate sucked at my skin, my mind, making my mind blank with purpose.

Shit. What was I doing? Why am I here? Holding this box?

Movement in my pocket tore a scream from my throat, my glance snapping down to a tiny mouse sticking out of my pocket, his fingers flying around.

It took a moment before my brain wrapped around the fact I knew this little guy.

Chip. Right. I forgot.

His hands moved frantically, and it was another minute before I realized I understood.

"Don't forget, Ms. Dinah. Remember. Remember Ms. Alice. Hold on with everything you have. Concentrate, because in your heart and soul we are there, holding on to you too."

My lids fluttered with emotion, my head bobbing.

You are mine, Dinah. The doll hissed, her creepy porcelain hand reaching out for me.

"You better hold on too, Chip." My arms circled tighter around the box. "Literally."

A cry huffed from my mouth as I ran forward, and like a quarterback running for the goal line, my body slammed into the doll, hurtling her back.

Pain and agony tore through me, ripping out my energy, dropping me to my knees. The toys made a beeline for me.

Get up, Dinah. Don't let them win.

Grunting, I shoved back on my feet. The army of toys knocked into me, bumping and clawing at me. Oxygen seized in my lungs. Curling over, I screamed in pure agony as they plucked out my memories.

Taking me.

Fight, Dinah. Remember! I yelled at myself. Sucking in, I dove deeper into the throng, shoving and elbowing, my grip on the box growing weaker.

I wanted to die. To close my eyes and just let go.

“No! She’s mine!” The doll’s voice screeched in my head. Her order instantly caused her soldiers to retract, allowing the one-eyed freak to get closer to me. They circled me, giving me nowhere to run. *“I get her first. If I deem you worthy, you will have the scraps of what is left over.”*

Movement in my pocket, the feeling of something trying to nuzzle me, gave me comfort.

A touchstone.

Chip.

“Remember. Remember Ms. Alice. Hold on with everything you have.”

My fingers grazed his fur, his words rolling my shoulders back with determination. The exit was just a few yards away. I wouldn’t give up. My sister was on the other side. Her life was in my hands.

The doll reached both her arms out for me, her aged yellow gown floating like an apparition. As her dress brushed at my skin, her hand grazed my temple. An excruciating pain pounded in my head, almost blinding me. A sob scraped my throat, my mind in shreds.

“Nooooo,” I growled, driving through the stabbing agony. I gripped harder onto the box. “Fuck you, you Goodwill reject.” I barreled forward, shoving through the toys, each one tearing more energy and memories from me. I no longer understood anything.

Up. Down.

Right. Wrong.

My legs moved on instinct, a scream shredding the air as I pushed forward.

Energy coated my skin, crackling and rubbing, hitting my nerves. Flying forward, my body slammed face-first in the snow, the air ripping from my lungs.

My senses crashed down on me. I could feel the snow, hear it crunch under me, taste the clean coldness of it. Memories flooded in so quickly that I flinched as the abundance stilled me in place.

“She did it.” I heard a woman gasp as I lifted my lids.

“Dinah,” a man’s voice followed. Footsteps hit the frozen earth, his figure crouching down next to mine. Sea-colored eyes stared back at me with concern. Blaze. “Are you okay?”

Was I okay? I blinked, feeling as if I had been run over by a sleigh and a herd of reindeer.

“Let me help you.” Blaze gripped my arm, helping me roll over and sit up while I kept a death grip on the black box.

Jessica...

“Alice!” I scrambled to get up, yanking away from Blaze’s touch, his betrayal fresh in my mind again.

Mrs. Miser stood next to Alice, the candy cane knife at her throat as Alice wobbled back and forth on her feet, blood still slowly leaking out of her, her energy draining. Her brown eyes met mine, and her shoulders sagged

in relief, knowing I was all right. Her attention went down to my hands, and her expression shifted to anguish—not for herself, but for what I was holding.

The destruction I saw, she must have sensed as well.

“You did it.” Mrs. Miser’s greedy gaze was locked on the box. “Bring it to me.”

Alice’s head wagged back and forth, a cry pushing against the tape over her mouth.

I’m sorry. My glance said as I stepped over to Dr. Bell, the box in my arms, turning my focus onto my old therapist. Jessica had been Alice’s counselor. Jessica’s sister was mine.

Our fate was tied to this place with strings of deceit, binding us like marionettes.

“Open it,” Mrs. Miser ordered me, though I swore I could detect hesitation. Fear.

“Mother.” Blaze came around, his head shaking. “Don’t do this. You don’t know what will happen.”

An emotion I couldn’t grasp flashed across her face but vanished quickly, her expression turning cold. “Nutmeg! You are worthless.” She snarled, flicking off the fear as if it were a bug. “Guess your brother has all the courage.”

Blaze sucked in sharply, his chest rising, anger flaring in his easy expression. “At least I’m still here. Do you see your precious Frost anywhere, Mother? Do you?” His arms went out wide, and he peered around, demonstrating that no one else was around.

A flutter of ire went over her face before her lips pressed together. “And I’m rewarding you for your loyalty. You will get your time in the sun. Better not waste it.” She held the blade to him. “Watch them.”

Blaze stared at her offering for a moment, looking like he was battling for his soul. Then he inhaled, taking it from her, and re-gripped my sister’s arm, keeping her up.

His actions cut deep, my childhood friend turning against me, but nothing else mattered except protecting my sister.

“I brought your box. Now let her go. She needs help. Please.”

“Not my worry anymore. Plus, your job is still not done.” Mrs. Miser didn’t even glance at Alice as she stepped up to me, but she didn’t reach out for the box. “Open it.”

I could still choose differently. I could still stop disaster from happening.

My eyes flicked to my sister, her skin pale, her side bloody, but she still shook her head, trying to speak. Fight. Alice was a fighter. No matter what had been against her, what she went through, she got up and fought. She’d never give up. And I knew she would never let anything happen to me. Whatever sacrifice had to be made, she would do it. And I felt the same for her.

Turning my head away from Alice, I looked Mrs. Miser in the eyes. “You’ll let us go?”

Dr. Bell watched me for a moment before a malicious smile pulled at her mouth. “Of course I will. A deal is a deal.”

Ignoring Alice's muffled cries, I closed my lids, like I knew what the hell I was doing. In truth, I had no clue. The incident as a child just happened. I had done nothing.

Gingerballs, let's hope it wasn't a fluke.

Deep down, I knew it wasn't. I could feel something in me, calling to me to use. A power hidden for so long it felt ancient, a piece of myself I had denied.

My fingers traced over the impenetrable twine. The rope quivered under my touch as if it were scared. Unraveling, it dropped to the ground with a thump. The energy inside the box bounced against the walls, anxious to get free, rippling energy down my limbs.

Dark. Seductive. Cruel.

It enticed and frightened me with the same intensity. Something deep in me reveled in the power, the darkness.

Yes, Dinah, let it in. Your power would surpass your sister's. You are meant to be with us. The yang to your sister. She confines while you set free. Jessica's voice slithered in my ear, her face so vivid in my mind now, I could almost see her in front of me. Let go of all the rules. All the confinements you put on yourself. Feel alive and free for once. You put those bars around yourself because deep down you knew... you knew you had abundant muchness. An icon and ruler. Aren't you tired, Dinah? Tired of fighting, of hiding who you really are?

Yes, I heard myself reply.

Aren't you tired of that provincial, mediocre life?

Yes. I felt myself nod. I was... so tired of checking off lists, every day being the same.

Join me. I will give you so much power and freedom... you will be extraordinary.

Ye—

"Dinah!" Alice's muted voice shook me from my daze, and I gasped as my lids snapped open, our gazes latching. "Don't—in—head." Her words were barely coherent, but I understood enough.

Silver bells! What the hell came over me?

"Stop wasting my time," Bell snapped, her fury rising, but still, she wouldn't touch the box.

She was afraid. Of what would happen if she did or who was in there? I didn't know, but an idea grew in the back of my head.

"Open it!"

I focused on the lid, running my palm over it. My grip was sweaty on the box, my muscles preparing.

"Now!"

I flipped the lid, hearing the hiss of air, the seal cracking as I tossed the box at her. The lid toppled to the ground.

She dove for the box, a cry of fear strangling her throat.

Boom!

A surge of energy rammed down on us, flinging us back onto the ground like dolls. My bones cracked as I hit the packed snow, whacking the oxygen from my lungs. Orbs surged from the container, swirling up the snow in a tornado, heading for Dr. Bell.

“No, Jessie!” she cried, trying to scramble back, watching the lights spin before they dove into her open mouth.

Her scream tore through the air, twisting from terror to utter agony.

Everything blurred with commotion and chaos, jumbling time.

“Mother!” Blaze yelled, crawling for her, her screams only growing louder. My gaze landed on the knife he left behind.

“Alice! I darted for my sister. She struggled to sit up with her arms behind her back. Crouching over her, I peeled the tape from her face. “Are you all—”

“Make it stop! Noooo! It hurts!” Mrs. Miser thrashed on the ground as though she were possessed. “Stop, Jessie. Please, stop!”

“Fuck, Dinah... do you realize what you just did?” Alice’s eyes wide with terror.

I didn’t, not really. What I saw was a small glimpse. It actually was probably a thousand times worse.

“Can you get up?”

She nodded her head. I helped her to her feet as she groaned in pain. Picking up the knife, I sliced through the rope binding her hands, freeing them. She moaned as they dropped to her side, trying to shake them out.

“We have to go.” She gripped her wounded side, turning to me.

The screaming abruptly stopped, and a chill ran down my spine.

“Mother?” Blaze shook her. She whimpered, her eyes snapping open, her brows furrowing with confusion. “Mother! Are you okay?”

“Yes. Yes. I’m fine.” She sneered, batting his hands away from her face. “Help me up.”

Blaze gripped her arms, getting her to her feet. “Thank Santa...”

“Don’t you fucking say that man’s name.”

“Oh damn,” Alice muttered next to me, her eyes wide, her whisper hoarse. “We have to go... now.”

“What?”

“Don’t question, just run.” Alice grabbed for my arm, twisting around.

“Not so fast.” Mrs. Miser’s voice sliced into me, my feet stalling, yanking Alice back.

The tone was off—much stronger than the woman who had been playing my therapist. Even the way she held herself was different.

Regal.

Like a queen.

“Where do you two think you’re going?”

“I-I did what you asked. You said we could go free.”

“Did I?” An eyebrow curved. “My sister may have, but I most certainly wouldn’t. Isn’t that right, Alice?”

My stomach dropped, my attention flipping from my sister, her chest heaving in dread, back to the woman.

I knew it was no longer Dr. Bell.

It was Jessica.

“Shit,” I whispered.

“We are in it. Deep,” Alice replied, getting less steady on her legs. Even if we tried to run, could we get far?

“Blaze, do your aunty a favor and tie both of them up. They’ll be coming back with us.” Jessica flipped her hand toward us.

“Is-is my mother still...” Blaze held his shoulders back. “Is she alive?”

“My dear Maribell is perfectly safe and sound.” Jessica touched her chest. “She needs a little rest.”

Maribell. Dr. Mari Bell.

“Now do what I tell you,” she ordered Blaze.

His jaw locked, his eyes narrowing. “I am not your minion. I am part of this. Equal partner. We had a deal.”

Jessica let her head fall back, a peal of laughter chiming from her. “Is that what she told you?” She placed a hand on his cheek, patting it. “Oh, dear boy, you never were the sharpest one. Equal, you are not. I will give summer more influence and power for you being such a good boy, but child, remember your place. I can take it away quickly as well.”

A nerve along Blaze’s neck twitched.

“Now go fetch them.” She sighed dramatically at us. “I can’t wait until I have no use for these Liddell sisters. They have been nothing but a thorn in my side. Well, that one at least.” She nodded at Alice. “You, on the other hand,”—she nodded at me—“you might come in very handy. The spirits of past and future. The flip side of each other. The good and naughty. The light and dark.”

“What?” I jolted.

"Don't you feel it, Dinah? Deep inside you? You've been hiding it, playing the good girl, but you know you aren't. Not even your family knows the truth... that you have been part of Winterland far longer than your sister."

Alice's head craned to me, her eyes searching mine for understanding.

"Even the man, if you can call him that, your desire resides in the darkness."

Blaze's attention snapped to me as well, his eyes pleading for it not to be true.

"Don't lie. I've been inside your head, seen what you truly want. You can have it all if you just give in to it."

My teeth gritted together, my nose flaring. "Fuck you."

Red lips parted in an evil smile. "You will change your mind."

"Never."

"You already did, Dinah. You could have left me there. Sacrificed one for the others, but you didn't. What you wanted was more important."

"Stop, you conniving bitch," Alice snarled. "I would have done the same."

"Maybe." Jessica shrugged her shoulders. "But Dinah knows she is not the same. She tries to deny the truth by living a confined, rigid life."

"And what truth is that?" Alice snorted.

"One of you has the appearance of being good, and one of you actually is." She smirked, stepping closer. "Every coin has a flip side."

Alice wrapped her fingers around my wrist. "Funny, because when I see you and your sister, I see two bitches."

"I feel Alice needs another visit to the institution. How devastated your parents will be when they see you have regressed...and Dinah has gone crazy too. Think she will like the same treatment you received, Alice?" Her lips pursed with delight. "Though I had to get a new ice pick."

Alice stiffened, terror fluttering her breath. My adrenaline spiked at her reaction, scared at what Jessica was implying. Why did she hate us so much?

"You touch me or my sister, and I will do the same as I did to Dr. Cane." Alice snarled, her grip tightening on my hand.

"Blaze, get them. I'm tired of listening to her talk."

He faltered, his eyes going back and forth between us.

"Blaze!" She pointed at us.

"Get ready," Alice muttered.

“What? No... you can’t run.”

“I’m not going back.”

Blaze huffed, his eyes full of anger and hurt as he took a step toward me.

“Run!” Alice whirled around, yanking me with her.

Instinctively, my legs stretched across the snow, both of us running.

Blaze yelled for us, and I looked back and saw him pull out what looked like a candy cane gun from the back of his pants.

Bang!

A bullet pinged off a tree close to us, a cry faltering in my throat. Alice was trying, but pain slowed her down.

“Come on.” I tried to hurry her, my arm around her.

“This was a really bad plan,” she grumbled. “You know I’m crap at plans.”

Blaze was gaining on us, but I zipped us into a forest.

“Dinah! Come out, I won’t hurt you,” he yelled.

I wrapped my arms around my sister harder as she hunched over more, fresh blood leaking from her.

“Dinah! This way.” I heard a deep familiar timbre in my head, pulling me in a set direction. Alice and I darted down the hill, Blaze not far behind. We were never going to outrun him.

“Dinah... take a deep breath,” the man’s voice said.

Right then, the ground gave way under my feet, a cry sticking in my throat. A sense of déjà vu slammed into me, the memory of falling through snow-like quicksand.

“Dinah?” Alice screamed at me as we both dropped. “You have power too. *Wish!*”

Wish? What the hell was she talking about?

Everything disappeared, and the snow engulfed me in darkness