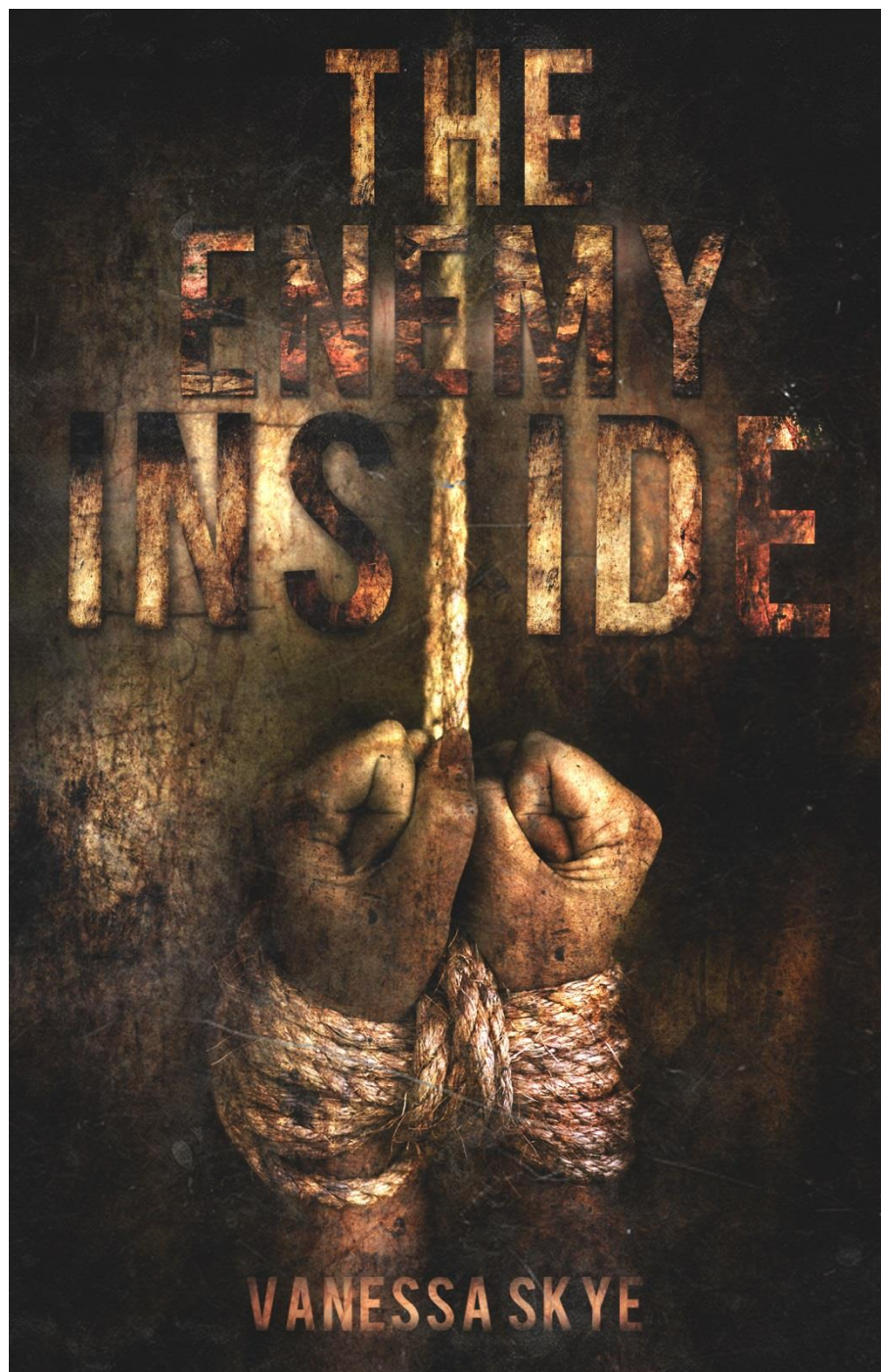


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SUMMARY: Detective Alicia Raymond hides her depression and tormented past from everyone, even her charismatic partner, Jay. Forced to engage in dangerous, anonymous sex to function, bringing murderers to justice is the only thing in her life she has worth living for.

When she sympathizes with a vigilante exacting sadistic revenge for a thirty-year-old rape, she faces the ultimate test: surrender to the evil inside her or finally confront the brutal past she would rather bury.

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Vanessa Skye

**The Enemy
Inside**

The Writer's Coffee Shop 
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Dedication

For Princess Ella. Anything is possible.

Prologue

The woman's hand shook violently. She cocked the hammer and aimed the revolver at his bloody face. Her eyes raked over his unconscious form, searching his features for a reason not to give in, not to surrender to the dark with his undeserved murder.

I can't do this!

His chest scarcely moved with his shallow breathing, and blood oozed from the countless wounds the attacker had taken special care and many days to inflict. Tight bonds at arms and wrists kept his otherwise slack body upright in the hard metal chair.

His blank features, usually so animated, were still heartbreakingly familiar under the swelling and bruising from the most recent beating. The one she had participated in. A stab of grief pierced her for a moment before she pushed it aside with a quick shrug.

She couldn't afford to feel anything. Not now.

Don't give in!

But she was so tired of fighting. Her weak voice faded away, replaced by a stronger, more insistent one.

He's just another man, it whispered.

THE ENEMY INSIDE

The dark inside recognized its opening and rushed at her, engulfing her in shadows until she no longer existed. The last shreds of her strength dropped away under the crushing pressure, shattering like fragments of fine glass. The black flowed through her body, creeping down her spinal column to invade her torso, limbs, fingers, and toes.

She tightened her finger on the trigger.

Vanessa Skye

PART ONE

The eighteen-wheeler's headlights cut a path through the murky darkness, illuminating the outbound Chicago highway in a ghostly glow, its rumbling engine the only sound in an otherwise silent night.

Shifting in his sticky seat, the driver twitched and spat through the open window. It was well after midnight. He had been on the road for almost twenty-four hours straight, hadn't slept for forty-eight, and was feeling stretched to the very end of his last frayed nerve.

He realized he should have stopped and had a break or a coffee before getting back on the tollway and heading out of the city, but it was too late now. The tollway was close to deserted as he sped west, the sprawl of suburbia thinning and being replaced by swathes of protected forests, expensive houses, and semi-rural property. There was nothing else for him to do but drive all night to northern Wisconsin, where another load and a lucrative payday awaited him.

The highway was dull, the same as every other road he'd driven on over the last thirty years. He felt like his life was playing on some kind of endless, tortured loop. His was a lonely existence, punctuated by the odd burst of static on his CB radio and the occasional disembodied conversation with other drivers.

He shifted again and looked at the clock stuck to his dash.

2:00 a.m.

He was ahead of schedule, thanks to some homemade stimulants and a lack of rest, and again considered pulling over to get some food or maybe a few hours of sleep in his cab. While sleep sounded like something he should get, his cock throbbed, reminding him of other, more urgent priorities.

He needed a woman. Any woman.

He wasn't an attractive man. He was heavysset, hairy, and balding with an array of amateur prison tattoos covering his body. Few women were willing to spread their legs for him. The only satisfaction he got was from the occasional truck stop lot lizard or cheap hooker when he loaded or unloaded in a city.

As the joyless decades passed, his need for more violent satisfaction had grown, and he had enjoyed himself immensely with a drug-addicted hooker last month. His erection strained painfully against his jeans as he savored the memory of the encounter: her shrieks of pain, thick, red blood mixed with slippery tears, and the muffled thuds of his fists striking soft, pliable flesh. The memory excited him so much he thought he might explode right there in the cab. He needed to feel some battered flesh writhing under him again—and soon.

He grunted, then hocked up phlegm from deep in his throat and spat again. His personally manufactured stimulants had several unpleasant side effects, the main ones being an increase in libido, a frustrating lack of sensation, and a disgusting chemical taste in the back of his throat he could never get rid of.

The truck's lights illuminated unexpected movement far ahead on the tollway shoulder. He forgot his desire for a moment as he shifted forward in his seat to get a better look at the solitary figure walking on the side of the highway.

He shifted down a gear, and the old air brakes hissed in protest as his lights settled on a petite woman with frizzy blond hair, her arm outstretched in the universal hitchhiker's salute.

A gift from God.

He pulled alongside her.

Weighing perhaps one hundred pounds soaking wet, she opened the cab door and hauled herself and a small purse into the truck.

She must really need a ride. I only get the desperate ones or the ug-os that no one else will pick up.

He was excited to see she was pretty in an almost familiar kind of way, as if he had seen her before in a movie or on television. She had light blue

THE ENEMY INSIDE

eyes and distinctive tight, blond curls. He absentmindedly wondered if the carpet would match the drapes, and couldn't wait to find out. She looked exhausted, as if she'd been walking for a while.

"Thanks," she said softly, flashing him a forced, nervous smile while she settled in the passenger seat. She quickly pulled across the frayed seatbelt and clicked it into place.

A safety-conscious hitchhiker? That's a new one. "No problem," he replied.

She clutched her bag to her chest like a life preserver.

As he eased the rig back out onto the highway, he smiled to himself. *This'll be easy.*

Chapter One

“Are you prepared to be happy, Berg?” Detective Inspector Jay O’Loughlin asked his partner, as he rushed into the dirty, overcrowded Chicago squad room.

Berg, in the middle of massaging her temples, looked up from her desk and brushed her long, wavy dark hair behind one ear. Buried deep in mounds of endless paperwork, the offer of a distraction sounded good. Her chair creaked as she stood to stretch and smoothed the wrinkles out of her suit skirt.

“How happy?” she asked. “Happy like I just found a great pair of Manolos in a half-off bin, or happy like I hit a moving target at two hundred yards?”

Jay flashed her one of his trademark, sexy smiles. “Berg, I know target practice is your idea of heaven, but I’m talking happy like I’ve just had the best sex of my life and she voluntarily goes home afterward.”

“Wow, Jay. In your world that’s pretty fucking happy.” She walked out of the squad room and he followed. “So, where are we headed?” she asked, turning back and catching Jay’s lingering stare on her lower legs.

“What? Oh, to the morgue.”

“Gee, the morgue. Yay.” She stopped to face him. “I fail to see how that is going to make me happy.”

“You’ll see,” he replied with a glint in his cobalt blue eyes. “Think of it as an early Halloween treat.”

They walked down the corridor in a comfortable silence, pausing to press the call button for the elevator.

Berg, formally known as Detective Alicia Raymond, leaned against the wall and studied Jay. They had been partners for two years in the newest section of the Chicago Police Department’s Bureau of Investigative Services, the Special Crimes Unit.

Jay was one of the best cops in the district, and she enjoyed working with him, his constant need to check her out notwithstanding. He was tall—one of the few men in the station taller than she was—and handsome in that naughty Irish way, with blue eyes, an easy smile, and wavy, dark brown hair that was a shade or two lighter than her own.

His only bad quality was that he’d slept with nearly every woman in a two-mile radius, both in and out of their district. There had been some station talk, early in their partnership, of a marriage fifteen years ago when Jay was a young cadet. But he point-blank refused to acknowledge whether the rumor was even true the one time Berg had mustered up the courage to ask. They never discussed the subject again. Since then, Berg had lost count of Jay’s conquests.

Still, while everyone knows he’ll fuck anything that moves, it doesn’t stop the women flocking to him like bees to honey. Berg shrugged.

The elevator arrived and they stepped back to let a young female officer get out. She pushed between them, pausing only long enough to direct a malevolent glare at Jay before stalking off.

Berg laughed. “If looks could kill, you’d be dead a thousand times over. Don’t you ever get tired of picking up young officers, then discarding them like used tissue and spending the rest of your life avoiding their hatred?” Berg grimaced at her partner as he raised an eyebrow in response to her question. “You needn’t look so smug.”

“Seen her naked. So worth the death glares,” he said with a grin.

Despite her disapproval, Berg couldn’t help but smile as she contemplated his general appeal. Jay was impossible to dislike. Men and

women were equally drawn to him for his easygoing character and self-deprecating laugh. A well-connected, third-generation cop, he was dedicated to his job and solved more than his fair share of cases with diligent work and deadly charm.

“You need to become familiar with the phrase *don’t crap where you eat*,” she said.

He chuckled. “Maybe if you ever *had* sex, you’d understand. There’s no need to live up to your nickname all the time, Iceberg. You need a good humping.”

Berg gritted her teeth and crossed her arms. “You volunteering?”

Jay stepped back and raised his hands in surrender. “Hell no! I mean, don’t get me wrong, you’re great to look at and all, and I’m damn sure the sex would be great, but I saw what you did to that veteran cop a couple of years back after he dared to pat you on the ass. You barely moved and the guy was on the ground faster than kids in an earthquake drill. What was that, kung fu?”

Berg raised an eyebrow. “Karate.”

Jay took another step back. “Yeah, well, whatever it was, I don’t plan on being on the receiving end of it, nice as the view may be.” He slowly raked his eyes down from her face to her body, lingering on her chest before looking away.

“We’ve been partners for two years—do you think you could keep the staring to a minimum?” She glared at him.

Jay winked. “I’ll work on it.”

They approached the morgue, barged through the two-way doors, and walked into the cold, sterile silence.

Jay crossed the white linoleum room with a few strides and pulled open a metal refrigerator drawer. “Ta-da!” He made an exaggerated flourish, sliding out a body covered with a sheet. “One dead scumbag.” He waved toward the covered body like a manic *The Price is Right* model.

Berg looked dubious as she wrinkled her nose and lifted the white sheet to view the corpse. “A dead fat guy? You better have something more for me than some dead scumbag, Jay. I got up from my desk for this.”

“What if he was a serial scumbag?”

Berg arched an eyebrow. “How serial?”

“Like the guy responsible for the missing hitchhikers?”

Berg’s heart lurched. They’d been working on the missing hitchhikers for six months. During a routine review of missing persons’ files, Berg had noticed an anomaly—five local women between the ages of eighteen and twenty-one had gone missing over the past two years without a trace. Missing persons were not all that uncommon; most eventually turned up locally or out-of-state, but these women had simply disappeared.

There had been something about the victims that got to her, so Berg dug a little deeper, talking to any available friends and family between working her regular cases. She had discovered that all the women were known hitchhikers. While many had come from broken families, they had no criminal record and no reason to disappear into the ether without a word to anyone.

Curiosity piqued, she had taken some DNA from the missing women’s personal items and family members. Then came a stroke of luck. During a CODIS, or a Combined DNA Index System, comparison between the Missing Persons’ Index and the Unidentified Persons’ Index, she’d gotten a match. Decomposed remains matching the DNA of one victim, Amelia Smith, had been found.

Then the trail went cold—no more witnesses and no new leads. Nothing.

While her hunches had generally panned out, with no hard evidence connecting the victims to each other or yielding a major breakthrough in the case, Berg had hit a wall. It was the most frustrating and mysterious case she had ever worked on. She had come up with squat beyond the one match, and she had to wonder if she’d seen patterns where there were none.

“You wouldn’t tease a girl, would you?” she asked Jay, now interested in the body.

Jay laughed. “I sure would, but not you, Berg. Name’s Danny Taylor, fifty-five, independent trucker based out of the city. The body was discovered three days ago, five miles from his truck on the tollway, near the Poplar Creek Forest Preserve. He had been tortured and dumped.”

Berg rubbed her arms free of the goose bumps that were emerging due to the frigid air drifting out of the open refrigerator drawer. “What does the ME list as cause of death?”

Jay looked through the medical examiner’s report. “Not sure yet, but the ME thinks shock or loss of blood. Hard to ascertain with so many injuries.” He nodded toward the man.

Berg studied the body critically. It was mottled with bruises, stab marks, and deep gaping wounds. Ligature furrows on his hands and wrists, combined with his blue fingers and toes, indicated he’d been tied up for a good length of time prior to death.

“Of course,” Jay said with a grimace, “he may have willed himself to die once his dick was cut off.”

Berg lifted the sheet a little higher and looked down to the ragged, gaping wound where the man’s penis should have been. “Ouch. Removed pre or post mortem?”

“The ME agrees it was done before he died, judging by the surrounding tissue trauma.” Jay said, looking vaguely ill. “Anyway, ME says there’s a lot more undeveloped bruising under those ugly tats, as well other injuries, so cause of death is still to be determined. We’ll know more tomorrow.”

“Okay, all this is kinda interesting in a gross way, but I’m hearing nothing from you about why you think he’s responsible for my girls,” Berg said, impatient.

“Because we found a lovely hair belonging to Melissa Shipper on him.”

Chapter Two

“You’re shitting me,” Berg said. “How do you know it’s hers? You haven’t had time to run it.”

Jay grinned, clearly delighted he knew something she didn’t. “I shit you not. I collected it off the body myself. Tight, natural blond curls—not too many women with that kind of hair, so I took a shot. I checked the visual comparison with the hair you took under the scope, and the match is identical. I am still waiting on DNA confirmation, but I don’t expect the final report to say anything different.”

Berg frowned. “Melissa went missing over eighteen months ago. Either this guy never washed, or you made some kind of mistake.”

Jay laughed. “Judging by the smell, this guy was not familiar with soap. And I don’t make mistakes—”

Berg raised an eyebrow.

“In my professional life, anyway,” he said. “Besides, the hair was on his shirt, not his body. He may not have worn the shirt for a while, or it may have been on the floor of his truck and picked up just in time for him to meet his maker and send us the case-breaker we need.”

He watched her as Berg considered the development. Melissa was one of the women who had disappeared, and if the hair was hers then it was good news all round. If they could tie this dead man to her, it could be case closed.

“There’s more,” Jay said in a teasing tone.

Berg sighed impatiently. “Okay, give.”

“He matches the general description of the guy we suspect killed that hooker a little while back.”

Berg recalled the crime. One of the grislier murders of recent months, a nineteen-year-old drug addict and suspected lot lizard had last been seen outside a local truck stop off the tollway. Her body was found a week later. She had been repeatedly raped and then beaten to death. Even more disturbing was that the life had been beaten out of her with bare-knuckle blows; her facial injuries so extensive, she had choked to death on her own blood. But the assailant’s DNA had yielded no matches on any local or national database.

Motorists who had witnessed the victim’s last movements saw her getting into a dark blue semi with a heavysset tattooed trucker, and that had been the last time anyone saw her alive. The witness statements had been hazy on the make and model of the truck, how long it had been there, or the direction it had gone when it left. Truckers suspected of being at the stop during the time in question conveniently couldn’t remember, and their daily logs were nothing more than works of fiction. It was no surprise that further investigation had yielded zero leads as the truckers closed ranks, supplied shady alibis, faked inspection reports, and spread disinformation to ensure none of their buddies was ever investigated—something they were notorious for.

If this guy was responsible for the hooker’s murder and had DNA linking him to Melissa’s disappearance, was it such a stretch to put two and two together? Berg felt the beginning of excitement stir in her belly.

“Yes, hence my *treat* remark,” Jay said. “We may have just stumbled across the solution to a spate of nasty attacks on women. Kinda makes you warm and fuzzy, doesn’t it?”

“Look, I don’t want to make this guy responsible for all the crimes in recent memory until I get some kind of DNA confirmation,” Berg said with her usual caution. “But if he did kill the hooker, and maybe Melissa, what else might he be responsible for? The streets may once again be a little

safer for women young and dumb enough to thumb a ride with random, perverted strangers. Hallelujah.”

They both looked back down at the man’s bruised and battered body.

Could it be possible? Was this guy responsible for two, if not more, attacks on women? Berg wondered whether he was what had happened to one of her girls.

“He sure did die a nasty death. Looks like he pissed off someone bigger and nastier than him. Bless them,” Jay said.

“Yeah. I’d like to meet the guy who did this. Smelly here must weigh three hundred plus pounds. It would take someone the size and weight of a bulldozer to bring him down, not to mention keep him down while they tortured him. Karma’s a bitch.”

“Well, if Smelly here is responsible for killing young women, I’d like to buy whoever did him a thank-you beer,” Jay replied, turning and walking out of the morgue. Stopping, he looked back at Berg, who was still staring at the body. “Hell. Make it two beers.”

The Enemy Inside by Vanessa Skye is available for purchase on Amazon, iTunes, B&N.com, Kobo and The Writer's Coffee Shop.

Review copies are available upon request. Please email marketing@thewriterscoffeeshop.com.