

SHELBY K. MORRISON



# SHATTERED

DONT ASK QUESTIONS

## CHAPTER ONE

*"Perfection is within our grasp, if we only have the courage to take it."*

*- Arthur Townsend, 1945*

Alexandra Bowen glanced up from her kneeling position at the masked man's side. His attention and cocked gun was aimed at the cashier. A knife on his belt glinted in the florescent lights overhead. She had to act, had to stop him. Without thinking, she snatched the weapon and plunged it into his side. Deep-red blood gushed around the weapon and down her arm, like sap from a tree.

The man cried out in agony, turned his gun from the cashier, and fired it in her direction. The deafening shot echoed through the empty convenience store.

She threw her body to the side, narrowly avoiding the bullet. A soft moan came from behind her. *Oh, no.* She looked over her shoulder and found the snowy-haired man, who had been on his knees behind her, on the floor, his argyle sweater quickly reddening from his wound.

The cashier fled the store, chased by another bullet that shattered the glass door.

Alex dropped the knife, leapt to her feet, and lunged toward the weary gunman as he aimed at her chest. She threw a fist into his hidden face, years of muscle from her daily kickboxing class behind it. He stumbled, and she grabbed the back of his head and slammed him into the counter. Her technique was perfect, despite it being the first time she'd used it outside of class. It was easier than she thought it would be.

He went down, unconscious, his life draining out of him, pooling around her feet. *That's a lot of blood.* She just wanted to immobilize him and get the gun away. But this...

She was left alone, the silence growing thicker with each passing second.

Even at midnight, the bustle of convenience stores never ceased. Yet tonight was an exception. Outside, no cars guzzled fuel, no usual flock of teens crowded the corner with their skateboards, nothing. Odd.

The strong, metallic odor of blood overwhelmed her nose, churning her stomach and assuring her this was no movie set. The dark red liquid

stained her sneakers, filling the cracks of the dirty floor, outlining each greasy tile till it spilled over like a plate in a filling sink.

Two totally different men lay dead at her feet. Both deaths on her hands. The old man, his round spectacles still atop his nose, his white cottony hair in place, wore a peaceful expression despite the red life pooling around him. Her heart ached for him as she guessed at who he had been. But if she hadn't acted, she'd be lying on the floor beside him. This fact offered no comfort.

The other figure was dressed in black, a ski mask covering his face and his shame. She was tempted to lift the disguise but eyed the gun resting a foot from his open hand and decided against it.

The lights flickered, as if reminding her she needed to act. But do what? She had killed the man. The police would want to talk to her. Even as the idea floated through her mind, her acceptance letter to medical school vanished from her future timeline. They'd never let her in with homicide on her record.

She looked at the bodies, looked to the door. The silence crushed her chest, tempting her to flee. She cursed, flipped open her cell phone, and punched 9-1-1. She'd made a choice, and now she had to live with it. The operator took the information and told her to stay there.

Numb, Alex went to the sink behind the counter and ran her hands under the water. She watched in a haze as the clear water ran red, swirling in the sink. She recalled the speech she had given in Debate that day. The presentation she'd won awards for the last two years in college. *Carpe Diem*. Could her oration have gotten into her head? Had she given the life lesson one too many times?

The smell of blood forced her from the store. The silence was killing her. She hit a speed dial number and waited for her sleepy best friend to answer.

"Christie? It's me. I've just killed a man."

Her friend shrieked. "What? Where are you?"

Alex relayed what happened as best she could before blue and red lights flashed in the distance.

"The cops are here. I'll talk to you later."

"Alex, wait—"

Alex disconnected the call and stood when the uniformed men approached, weapons drawn, like lions sneaking up on prey.

A portly officer stopped before her, eyes filled with concern. "Ms. Bowen? I'd like you to come with me."

## CHAPTER TWO

The next two days passed in a blur. Apart from reliving the gruesome scene in her dreams, Alex had slept the entire day after, and Friday she'd mentally checked out of her classes. Never more grateful for a weekend, she sat on the edge of her bed, debating on what she felt up to doing. She'd tried her kickboxing class Friday, channeling her confusion and anger into each uppercut and roundhouse. Kickboxing always worked, sweating out her stress before a test or her guilt about overindulging the night before. But this time, her punches were weak, her kicks halfhearted. The memory played in her mind like a broken projector. The sinking feeling of the knife, the overwhelming smell of blood, the old man's peaceful face, scrubbing her sneakers for hours.

Her best friends since freshmen orientation, Bryce and Christie, had even attempted to cheer her up with their usual Poker Night but were the opposite of helpful. They admired her actions, thinking of her as heroic. They'd told her she should be happy she'd stopped a killer in his tracks. She had preserved her own life. It was self-defense. A natural reaction. A reflex.

But was it? Sure, the cops had let her go, but what now? Was she just supposed to move on? Despite showering half a dozen times since it happened, she still felt dirty. An oil of guilt seemed to cling to her and no amount of soap could wash it away.

Her father had tried to comfort her, telling her the law was just and she'd feel better when it was all in the past. But for the first time, his words rang hollow. After all, she had *killed* someone. How would anything ever feel normal?

The shame was driving her crazy. She hadn't been able to look at herself in the mirror since coming home that night. She needed to be punished, needed someone to tell her what she'd done was wrong. Was everyone really okay with her taking someone's life?

She cast a lazy eye to her advanced biology book on her nightstand. She just wanted things to go back to normal, for school to be her priority, for her to be on the same page as her friends. Mostly, she just wanted to understand her own actions. Why had she done it? She couldn't move

past this until she understood why. Was she crazy?

Another wave of guilt crashed over her, and her stomach churned. She sprinted to the bathroom and threw up, a cold sweat breaking out on her face. She didn't want to be let off the hook. She didn't want to be admired. She didn't like how easily she had killed a man. She didn't like any of it.

Then another sickening thought hit her—how she'd reacted when it happened. She distinctly remembered being calm, methodical even. With force, but no other thought than the goal at hand. Stopping him. No hesitation. She just did it, as if she were sparring in class.

The cops shouldn't have just let her go, should they? So why had they? Everything about this felt wrong.

Her body heaved again and again, purging itself of the blame, her terrible choice, and anger over not being punished. But most of all, it wanted to rid itself of the misplaced logic, the confidence, and the lack of hesitation in her actions.

When her stomach finally settled, she stood and locked eyes with herself in the mirror above her sink. Her face was pale as parchment. Beads of sweat dripped down her forehead and neck. *This is normal. This is what I should have felt right after stabbing that man. Shock or no shock, you don't feel calm as you end someone's life.*

Her gaze drifted to the sink then back up to her reflection. *Perhaps that was just you. You're a monster that has no problem killing another person.*

She left the bathroom in disgust. She couldn't even look at herself.

She stalked to the living room but was confronted by another mirror. Anger rose like a fever, from her fingertips to her arms, following to her head. Without realizing it, she had made two fists. Her mind filled with self-loathing. She needed to hit something. Yet all she wanted to hit was herself. Her eyes glinted in the mirror.

In an instant, she snatched up the small vase on her coffee table and flung it with all her force against the mirror. Her reflection shattered. In its place, a dark, jagged-edged hole gaped in the wall.