

Excerpt from the novel, *Mirror, Mirror* by Raven Oak.

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## CHAPTER ONE

"We're sorry for your loss. Henry was a good man."

"Our thoughts and prayers are with you."

"Irene, please let us know if you need anything."

The front door closed with a sense of finality, its smooth birch kissing the red-painted inner frame as if the two would somehow meld together with the weight of my grief. For all that my friends' platitudes meant well, my ears burned amidst their kind words.

I wanted to scream, their speech devoid of meaning as my world swam without anchor. When Henry died three days ago, I feared being alone, deserted in our home already too large for only two. I feared the silence in the house; places where his voice ought to have been, where his footfalls should have echoed, and where his dirty laundry piled beside the bed instead of making it into the clothes hamper--one in a house of three, now two. In those first days, I found myself turning not once but twice to remind him to pick up his socks...only to find him absent. His dinner sat untouched that night on the table--a cold plate of chicken baking under my red-rimmed glare as I waited for the sounds of his boots on the wooden front porch, but they never came. There was no consolation for me.

But as the waves of friends, family, coworkers, and neighbors traipsed through our home, their feet walked across the wine stain from our first night in the house, and their voices tucked into the corners, stealing memories from me as they tried to bring comfort where there was only sorrow. It was then that I craved the silence. Needed the silence.

All I wanted was to be left alone. Alone with my pain. With my scars.

I leaned my head against the chill of the wood door. The cold nose that brushed against my slightly open hand reminded me that one more remained; one who didn't understand any more than I did why Henry was never coming home.

How long I stood there, allowing the door to prop me up, I don't recall, but when Leo's nose nudged me again, more urgently this time, I stood up straight, tense muscles used to portraying false strength to the world. When I looked at his dog, now mine, his tail wagged twice before returning to its former status of floor cleaner. He whined before prancing a bit in place, and when I didn't move, he pawed at the leash hanging beside the door.

"Do you need to...go?" I croaked, wincing at the sound of my own voice, the sound foreign as it thickened with unshed tears. Leo whined once more, and I bit my lip before opening the front door. He darted outside and stopped in the front yard. He craned his neck around to find me, and his darkened eyes watched. Waited.

Leo was Henry's dog. I never wanted a pet, but Leo got him last year. "A Christmas present for us both," he'd said, the lopsided smile he wore matching the energy of the wiggling puppy in his arms.

"I don't like dogs," I'd reminded him, but he only smiled.

Henry walked him. Henry fed him. Henry played with him.

Mostly, I watched Henry and Leo like an outsider, an intruder on their relationship. Leo never attempted to change our relationship status, understanding that I didn't like dogs. *Until Henry didn't come home.*

The first night, I woke to a warm body on Henry's side of the bed, and I wrapped my arms around my husband, inhaling deeply the smell of his shampoo...which reeked of a mix of damp fur and jerky. When my eyes flew open, Leo stared at me, and I could swear he was crying--his eyes watery pools of black that reflected the glow from the night-light in the corner. (I'd been unable to face the dark room alone, and surprisingly didn't electrocute myself as I'd plugged in the old night light from the guest bathroom, tears bouncing off my shaking hands in the dark.)

I'd almost kicked Leo out, out of our--my--room, if not out of our home, but the comfort of his body kept me from insanity that first night. His head rested on my shoulder, and I ignored the odor of beef jerky when he exhaled. He was warm. He was here. Henry was not.

Now as Leo stood in the yard, I knew he was waiting for me, waiting for me to take him on his walk. No one had thought to let him out during the wake, but now.... "I don't have the energy for this," I called to him, and he sat in the grass, waiting. "You are not my dog."

I said the words, but he ignored me, tilting his head to the side before he lifted a single leg and urinated on one of my rose bushes. "No! Stop that! Bad dog!" I shouted, two steps out the door before I realized it, the sunlight harsh against my sore eyes.

He lowered his leg as I stood on the porch, and with a sigh, I reached inside for the leash, closing the door behind me. Tired legs stumbled across the lawn. If a dog could grin, Leo was certainly grinning as my black pumps sank in the dampness of the soil. Standing there, my shoes muddy, I realized I hadn't locked the door. And then I didn't care, apathy spreading across me like the moisture seeping into my shoes.

"If someone wants to break in, they can have it all," I muttered, and a sob rose deep within me, my vision swimming in a mass of green and blue.

Leo licked my hand again, gently taking hold of my fingers between his teeth, and he pulled me away from the silence of the house and into the harsh world. He led himself on his walk, my feet following behind him like an obedient zombie.

I wasn't focused on anything more than the thoughts in my head, memories of Henry and me in our home, *before Leo*, when a car horn blared in my ears, and the world rushed back in a maze of bright lights and sounds. The leash tugged me in a momentary circle.

Blue. Bright blue. The car is blue. I fought to make sense of the vehicle before me, stopped less than a foot from where I stood at the intersection of McGraw Street and 28<sup>th</sup>. My eyes darted around the car. Then under.

"Leo? Leo?" I called, not sure why my heart was racing beneath my pale flesh, and when I felt the tug on the leash behind me, I spun around to find the dog sitting at the corner, his golden-brown tail between his legs.

"Hey lady, are you trying to get yourself killed or something?" A man stepped out of his vehicle, his arms gesticulating at me as his reddened face crinkled into a snarl, but I ignored him, returning to Leo, whose tail thumped the pavement twice before stilling. I reached out my hand, my fingers trembling a bit as I moved slowly towards Leo's head.

"There, there," I said, patting him between the ears twice before resuming normal distance between the two of us. His fur had felt stiff beneath my fingers, which I drew up to my nose without thinking to inhale the smell of dirty dog. *Dirty, damp dog*, I thought, and cursed as I realized that it was now my job to bathe him as well.

"I can barely remember to bathe myself these days, and now I have to bathe you, too?" I shouted, and the driver frowned before scurrying back into his car. His tires squealed against the asphalt, and his hand shot out the window in a rude gesture as he turned the corner.

Leo sniffed at the nearby tree, satisfied for the moment to be a canine rather than my protector. I slid down to rest against the curb, my feet hanging out into the street as if I were a beach loungeur rather than sitting in my Sunday dress and heels.

*Did I want to die?*

Interesting question. Death wouldn't guarantee more time with Henry. *I don't even know if there is a heaven*, I thought, staring at the tops of my knees peeking out from the hem of my black dress. I brushed away imaginary dust from its frilly edges. The faces at the funeral had blurred together in a meld of flesh-colored ovals bearing multi-colored eyes. While a few guests wore neutrally schooled expressions, the bulk in attendance dabbed eyes with balled-up tissues as the corners of their mouths reached for rigid jaw lines. I'd attempted to pay them little mind, but they'd thrust themselves into my personal space.

Their silent mouths screamed their pain, and I'd winced at grief so visible through my tears. I had enough of my own sorrow and certainly didn't need theirs to boot.

Another car drove past me, swinging wide in the narrow residential street to avoid contact with my outstretched legs; the driver honked a quick meep, interrupting my thoughts, and I sighed. *I can't do it. I can't leave them behind to feel this pain*. The air in my lungs expelled in a sudden rush, and my vision swam as I pictured my mother standing over my own casket, her blue-polka-dotted shoes standing out among the sea of black pumps.

*They would stand around and remember me, the way we're remembering Henry, and they would hurt. They would ask why. I couldn't do that to them.*

*I can't believe he did this to me. I can't believe he's dead.*

The flash of anger caught me off guard, and I frowned, holding a hand over my sore eyes as I stared up towards the bright sun. *This is progress, I guess. What are the stages of grief again?* I thought, watching a grasshopper crawl across a gap in the pavement. Leo spotted the green critter about the same time I did, his eyes following his nose as he inched his way forward, sniffing and wiggling until it leapt towards me in a rush to escape the large beast in view. The insect bounced off my shoulder, and Leo slid to a stop before me, his tongue wagging left to right. When I didn't move, his wet tongue reached out and touched my cheek before he rested on his haunches, his lips curled upward.

"You don't have to look so proud of yourself. It was only a grasshopper."

Leo yipped as I stood, and he nosed the end of the leash in my hand.

"I know, I know. Pay attention this time," I said. As I walked towards the house of three--now two--Leo's steps kept pace with mine, his eighty pound body knocking into my knees. He cried when my toes stepped on his.

"If you weren't trying to attach yourself to my leg, maybe I wouldn't step on you." He pulled ahead of me, but only by six inches, and I spent the rest of the return trip stumbling over the leash and his tail.

Once the front porch appeared in sight, he pulled the leash from my grasp and raced towards the front door, causing me to stumble at the lip of the driveway. Once upon a time, I'd pleaded with Henry for this house, its enclosed veranda and columned front entry reminding me of the colonial homes in the South. "We could afford it if we skimped."

"If we skimped a lot," he'd replied.

My fingers ran along the pale yellow clapboard before I'd spun around to face him, peering at him through the bright sun that sifted through the magnolia tree out front. "Please?"

*Henry never could turn me down*, I thought. I'd gotten my house. And now it was mine alone. Looking at it now, my stomach quivered. The sour yellow clapboard was peeling in too many places--*Henry was supposed to paint it this weekend*--and the tree that had once been my favorite bore overly bright flowers. I winced at their cheeriness.

I didn't want to go inside.

Leo bounded up on his hind legs, paws thumping against the wood door. When it remained closed, he scabbled at the wood with his nails, the scraping noise pierced by short, little yips.

"What?" I called out, but he scratched harder, stopping a moment to pace back and forth on the porch.

*Maybe someone had broken in!* Panic surged through me as my feet debated what to do, and in a moment of indecision, I caught up to Henry's dog. My hand trembled on the brass knob, which turned beneath my fingers in millimeters before the door swung open. Leo was off again, tearing through the doorway, and when he stopped in the hall, his cries mixed with the thumping of his tail. I frowned. *If someone were in the house, why would he wag his tail?*

"Hello? Is anyone here?"

Nothing answered me except the concurrent superimposition of growls and barks as Leo 'talked' in a series of au-au's and yips.

"Henry?"

*Henry's dead. Stop it.*

My feet carried me into the hall where Leo danced on all fours, his head low to the ground and rear held high as he wiggled in place, but when I reached him, no one stood in the hall of long shadows.

"What is it?" I yelled at Leo, who ignored me, his gaze focused on the floor length mirror. The white sheet lay unmoving across the standing mirror, and my hand shook as it reached out to touch the thin fabric.

I hadn't wanted to cover the mirror. I'm not Jewish, nor do I carry superstitions, but Kerry had insisted upon it in the hour before the wake. "Mirrors are gateways to the land of the dead. Last thing we need is Henry peering out during the visitation and freaking out your mother."

Ridiculous as the thought was, I waved a hand at her before retreating to the den with my glass of wine. Kerry's dark humor always spurred laughter in our home. Kerry--Henry's

childhood friend and later mine. *Even my friends are his*, I thought as I peered into the red wine. *His favorite.*

As I stood before the mirror now, the sheet felt damp beneath my fingers. I didn't want to look. I didn't want to see my own haggard appearance reflected back at me as I stood, numb and afraid, but with another yip reaching my ears, I pulled the sheet away in one tug. When I glanced up, a pair of green eyes met mine.

He looked at me and smiled.

My eyelids bunched up in a mass of wrinkles, and when I opened them, Henry was gone.

"Damn dog. There's nothing there."

Leo whined, tail to the floor, and I jabbed a shaking finger in his direction. "Henry is dead!" Aloud, the words had power. They had meaning.

I didn't care that he smelled of earth and musty fur. I buried my face in Leo's shoulder as the tears took me, and I waited for a man who was never coming home. And I couldn't help but glance once or twice through my wails at the mirror, searching for that flash of green.