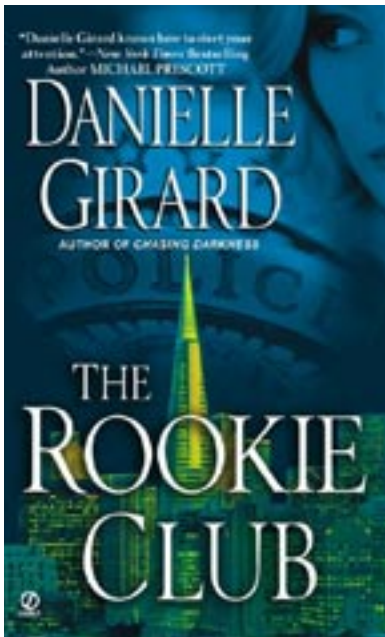


Chapter One



Emily Osbourne stepped out of the darkened sex crimes department and closed the door behind her. The station was deserted. Everyone was already at the awards ceremony. It was the last place she wanted to go. She'd been up since five a.m., in the lab for fourteen hours. The cases were so backlogged that evidence in even the most time-sensitive ones were taking up to three months.

Any crime less serious than murder was backed up six months or more. At least she'd finally finished the initial findings on Jamie Vail's latest serial rapist case. It was more than six months old. Vail had been on her hard. Now Emily just had to stay away for two hours of acceptance speeches and she'd be able to catch a few hours of sleep. Maybe even seven. A record.

She entered the bright hallway, blinked away the spots. Her eyes burned. She punched the down arrow on the elevator. She propped herself against the wall, closed her eyes. Man, she could sleep right there.

Forcing herself up, she jabbed the button again. Nothing. She'd take the stairs. The walk might wake her up a bit. She leaned against the long metal bar and the heavy door creaked open.

The cold, steel handrail stuck to her clammy hand. The soles of her boots scraped against the cement stairs. She passed four. Three more, she thought. As she reached the landing, a door creaked open above her.

Her stomach tensed. She looked up but saw no one. She took a breath and shook it off. She'd never liked the police station. She preferred the bright open space of the crime lab at Hunters Point. She picked up her pace, almost out.

Footsteps clunked above her. At the second floor landing, she eyed the door. No, she was almost there. One more floor. The footsteps neared and she hesitated. She glanced back then moved forward again, her heart pattering.

The footsteps stopped. She halted, like a rabbit with ears perked, poised to run. A door opened and then shut and she was alone again. With a deep breath, she began down the final flight of stairs.

Now alert, she jogged the final steps. She reached for the door. Felt the cool metal graze her fingertips when someone grabbed her from behind.

The strap of her purse yanked her backwards. Something hard struck her square in the head. She stumbled forward. He shoved her into the wall. Hands out, she tried to brace herself against the impact.

Her face struck the wall. Bone snapped. She screamed out, saw black. Fighting to shake it off, she reached to claw at him. Her wrist throbbed as it knocked against him. She groaned, cupped it to her chest.

Hands gripped her shoulders, swung her away from the wall. The room raced across her vision. She couldn't focus. He pushed her to the ground. She landed hard.

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Her wrist collapsed and red pain rocked through her. She tried to lift herself, but he slammed her down on her back. His head was covered in a white hood that was cinched around his neck.

She gasped. “No.”

Jagged eye holes and a larger mouth were cut in the fabric.

She started to scream. He covered her mouth. “Not a word,” he hissed. Spit struck her cheek as he spoke.

“I’ve got a knife.” He jabbed the point into her side. The blade struck a rib. Warm blood dripped down her side. She closed her eyes. Fought to breathe. God, no.

Fabric covered her face. She opened her eyes to blackness. Panic filled her lungs like water. She coughed and choked, reared her head.

He struck her again. She toppled to one side. He pinned her down with his legs. She bucked her hips, cried out.

He punched her face. Her head crashed against the cement floor. She heard a pop in her skull, nausea rose in her gut. She gagged.

She blinked, struggled to stay alert. She heard the crisp sound of her shirt ripping, felt cold air. A button struck the wall behind her. She flinched at the cold blade of the knife under her bra. Choked on a sob at the raspy sound of the blade cutting fabric.

She heard a rip of something like tape. Oh, God. She twisted to her side, struggled to get away.

A sweaty palm wrenched her injured wrist over her head. Vomit rose in her gut. She gasped, choked.

He clasped the tape over her hand. Pulled the other one over her head. Bound them together. He shoved her hands to the floor above her. Pinning her, he sank his hips down into her stomach.

She flinched as moist hands palmed her breasts. He rubbed them hard like he was molding clay. Squeezed and pinched her nipples. She turned her head, tried to escape her own body. He wrenched open her zipper. Helplessly, she struggled to reach for her pants as he jerked them off her hips. He slammed her down, backhanded her.

Pain closed in like darkness. She stopped moving. She touched her tongue to her bloody lip. Struggled to control the panic. She considered whether she could break free. He had a knife.

She prayed it wasn’t what she thought. Not that. Then she felt the hardness. Jabbing at the bare skin of her thigh.

She wanted to move, didn’t dare. Eyes squeezed shut. Oh, God. No. No. No.

The head of it stabbed her. She tensed as the whole of it tore her open.

Bucking against the pain, she screamed. With bound hands, she clawed at him as he jammed inside her.

He grabbed her neck, squeezed.

She stopped fighting. Sobbed.

He rocked on top of her. Rammed her into the floor. The buckle on her purse strap was caught beneath her. The hard metal ripped into her back with each violent thrust.

And she did nothing--nothing. She turned her head into her arm and cried. Silently. Shamefully. Listened to the click, click, click of the building’s old heating

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system. She pushed her mind away. Imagined a beach, sand, and ocean. God, drowning. She tried to inhale the water, to make this stop. Anywhere but here. She wasn't here. This wasn't happening. Not to her.

It got faster. Blood dribbled along her cheek. She didn't wipe it. Couldn't. The flesh around her eye ballooned, throbbing. Please, let it be over. Please, let it end. Please.

She was being--No, she couldn't think it. Wouldn't let the word enter her mind. It was just too terrible. She searched for the ocean again, struggled to imagine cool water or soft sand. The images that came were dark and horrible. Blood. Pain. Searing heat. Fire.

Then, he groaned and slumped into her. There was a stretch of silence. It felt like forever. Breathe. She counted. Prayed. Please let it end. Please, God. Please leave.

He shifted. Something sharp scratched her thigh. It stopped then she felt it again. The knife or a zipper. Then the weight was gone.

She heard him stand, the rustle of clothes.

She didn't move. She listened to the aching thud of her wrist, her head. Ignored what she felt below. Ignored the fluid that seeped between her legs. Knew from the viscous warmth that it was her own blood.

She heard him growl. Flinched as his foot struck her side. Howled. She lost her breath. Fought to draw in air. She was ready to die. Please. No more.

Then, she felt his face beside her head. Terrified, she turned away. The next blow didn't come.

Instead, he said, "Tell the Inspector hello for me."

She didn't move. Didn't speak. A hundred thoughts flashed through her mind. What inspector? Jamie Vail came to her mind first--Jamie Vail of Sex Crimes. Sex crimes. Oh, God. Rape. She trembled, shudders rocking through her.

She heard him stand. She held her breath. His shoes squeaked against the cement as he walked. The door whined open, hissed closed and clicked as the lock engaged.

She waited. Counted to three. Then, waited again.

Shaking, she pulled the hood off. She blinked hard. Her focus was blurred. She couldn't separate her hands. Held them both to her face and ran her fingers across her skin. She felt the swollen mass of her left eye.

She glanced down at herself. A single drop of blood struck her shirt. She watched as the white fibers drank in the red.

Collapsing, she sobbed.