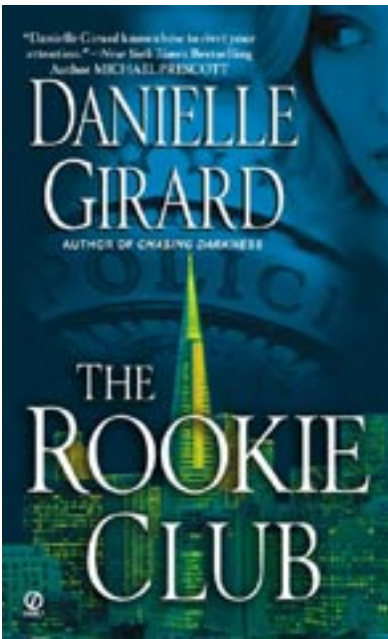


Chapter Two



From the far corner of the convention center ballroom, Jamie Vail cupped the perspiring glass. She tugged up the waist of her pants, shifted them across her flat, bony hips. Underneath, nylons pulled the fabric in strange places when she moved. Did women even wear nylons anymore? She adjusted her jacket then realized nothing would help. It wasn't the suit or the nylons or the pants. The problem was her.

She took a tentative sip of Coke and watched the officers mingle. Natasha Devlin stood talking to Bruce Daniels of Internal Affairs. Devlin tossed her hair over one shoulder and kicked her head back to laugh at a joke. Jamie felt ill.

She imagined her own hair, the blunt cut just above her shoulders. Her light brown strands had no rich color, no blonde highlights, no sexy curls. Just a weird wave she could never quite control. Her green eyes were dull and pale, faded against her light skin and hair. She'd had people tell her she could accentuate them with make-up. But for what? Or whom?

Someone touched her elbow. She turned and found her ex-husband.

He clinked his glass to hers. "You okay?"

"Great," she lied. She didn't even try to smile.

He smiled. "Good."

They stood awkwardly. She made no effort to fill the air. There was silence as his eyes traveled across the room. His attention piqued by something more interesting. More likely it was someone. Perhaps even Devlin though Jamie no longer saw her. "See you, J."

She didn't answer. Screw this, she thought, and turned for the door. She walked ten steps before she saw the women sitting at a small table. Women she couldn't just walk by--members of the original rookie club.

Fifteen years ago, when Jamie had been a rookie cop in her early twenties, a group of women had bonded together. It had begun as a drunken night back in the days when Jamie still drank. They'd spent hours in a bar, bitching about the assholes who held them back for gender. After years of being isolated in the predominantly male department, suddenly they'd had a network.

That first night had felt so refreshing, the gathering had become a monthly ritual. It still went on, but Jamie hadn't been in years. Not since she found one of the other rookies in bed with her husband.

The women glanced up and Sydney Blanchard waved her over. Jamie eyed the door longingly as she approached them, wishing she hadn't left her quiet corner.

She took the seat between Inspector Hailey Wyatt of homicide and Sydney, who ran the crime lab.

"I haven't seen you in ages," Sydney said.

She nodded. "Been buried."

Chapter Two

“I heard about the latest case. Did Emily get you the results?”

Jamie shook her head. “She said she’d drop them off before she came here.” She glanced around the room. “I haven’t seen her yet.”

Sydney shook her head. “Me, neither.”

Jamie looked back. “You know the results?”

Sydney frowned. “No swimmers, no cells.”

Jamie slumped back into the chair. It was the same as the last one. “Damn.” Two percent of the male population naturally produced semen without sperm. A vasectomy produced the same results. But this rapist produced no semen. Even without ejaculating, a man normally released some semen. Not this guy and Jamie had no idea why not. A condom would explain it, but there was no evidence of latex to suggest condom use. No semen meant no DNA. And no DNA meant no way to match the rapist with the FBI’S Combined DNA Index System (CODIS).

Sydney touched her arm.

She opened her eyes.

“I’m sorry.”

Jamie nodded, thinking she was referring to the case. But when she glanced up, she saw Natasha Devlin saunter toward them. She wore a black pantsuit that hugged curvy hips and fell straight down over long, thin legs. Her jacket was cropped and when she raised her hand to touch her thick dark hair, a tiny strip of naval showed.

When Devlin returned her hand to her wineglass, cleavage hefted out of the top. Somehow, though, it was never quite enough to be obscene.

“Will you excuse me?” Sydney said. “I’m going to try to find Emily.”

Jamie nodded, steering her gaze away from Devlin who walked right towards them.

Sydney stood, greeted Devlin briefly and left.

Devlin laughed at something Sydney had said and Jamie felt the room silence as all eyes turned toward the beauty.

“Hi, ladies,” she said then glanced at Jamie. “Vail.”

Jamie nodded to her. “Slut,” she said just loud enough for the group to hear.

Devlin glared. “Did you say something?”

Jamie stared back. “Nothing newsworthy.”

“Sit down, Natasha,” Cameron Cruz said.

Devlin glared at Jamie and sat.

Hailey Wyatt leaned in to Jamie. “She does it to get your goat. Loves the reaction.”

Jamie shifted toward her. “She got my husband already. You’d think that would be enough.”

“You doing okay?”

Jamie looked over at her. “Fucking dandy.”

Hailey smiled softly. “Glad to hear it.”

Jamie laughed then relaxed a little. “I just found out my rapist isn’t leaving any DNA. I’m in a lousy mood.”

“Condom?”

“No sign of that either. Just no semen.”

Chapter Two

Hailey frowned. "I'd say you've got reason to be pissed."

Jamie nodded. "How are things with you?"

She winked. "Murder."

Jamie watched as Tim approached the table. She shifted awkwardly as Tim stopped beside Devlin. He glanced at her then quickly shifted his gaze away. Though Jamie had never suspected it would last, Tim and Natasha had been on again, off again for more than a year and a half.

Devlin glanced over her shoulder coyly then looked at Jamie and grinned.

"Knock it off, Natasha," Hailey Wyatt said.

Devlin's eyes widened. "What do you mean? I'm not doing anything."

Jamie stood. "Don't bother, Hailey. I'm leaving."

Tim touched Devlin's shoulder again. She waved him off.

Tim's expression stiffened in anger. "I need to talk to you."

"Not now."

He grabbed her arm. "Now."

Devlin turned in her chair, set her wine down and stood slowly. "I said no, Tim."

He pulled her toward him. He spoke softly, frowning.

Devlin stared over his shoulder.

Tim jerked her arm to get her attention.

When she turned to him, her face was set in fury. "Get the hell away from me."

He grabbed her shoulders with both hands.

Suddenly everyone was watching them. Jamie was embarrassed--for them, for herself.

"Stay the hell away from me," Devlin said and shoved Tim with both hands.

Hailey stood.

Jamie froze.

One of the assistant district attorneys, Chip Washington, stepped in and grabbed Tim's arm. "Is everything okay here?"

"It will be if he leaves me alone right now," Devlin said.

Jamie watched the pain in Tim's face, the cruel smirk on Devlin's.

"Don't do this," Tim whispered.

"God, stop with the drama already," Devlin said, her voice commanding the attention of the room.

Tim reached for her.

She winced. There was a momentary flash of fear. Then she regained herself.

"Stay the fuck away from me."

Tim didn't let go. Instead, he yanked her closer and spoke through gritted teeth.

"You'll be sorry, Natasha."

Jamie shuddered at the emotion between them. Unable to stand another moment, she turned away. She took two steps and felt her phone buzz on her hip.

She didn't recognize the number. "Vail."

"Inspector Vail, this is Officer Hamilton. You're needed on a scene."

Christ. She pulled her notepad from her jacket pocket and flipped it open.

"Where are you?"

"850 Bryant, ma'am."

"The station? You got a suspect?"

"No. A scene, ma'am. Main building in the stairwell, bottom level."

Chapter Two

Jamie stiffened. “You’ve got a rape scene at the Hall.”
“Yes, ma’am. We’ve got medical response on the way for her, but they told me to call you.”
Medical response. “How bad is she?”
His voice cracked as he spoke. “Real bad, ma’am.”
“I’m on my way.” She started to hang up then added. “You have an I.D. on her?”
“She’s with the department.”
Jamie closed her eyes.
“The name’s Osbourne, ma’am. Emily Osbourne.”
Jamie looked back as Chip Washington stood between Tim and Devlin. Jamie turned for the door, didn’t look back. She was on her way to another rape scene.
Another police officer raped.