

Third
Life:
Taken

(Preview: Chapters 1-7)

RJ CRAYTON

Copyright © 2014 RJ Crayton

All rights reserved.

DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to my siblings: Herman, Teresa, Jamaal and Nuri.
Life is always interesting with them around.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to thank my fans, for letting me know how much they enjoyed these books and that they wanted more. That always inspired me to get it done, even when other things crept up to cause delay. I want to thank my family for being supportive of my writing. I want to thank my wonderful beta readers in the Mitchelville Writers Group. The group as a collective offered advice on excerpt. Individually, I am so thankful to the following people who took the time to read the entire manuscript and offer priceless feedback that improved the novel: Jim Brown, Lee Bruno, Stafford Battle and Shirley Hayden. I also want to thank my friend Joan Conway, who is such an inspiration to me with her cheery attitude and in her ability to write so much so well.

A special note to thank those who entered the Goodreads contest and won this Advanced Review Copy. I hope you enjoy it.

MONDAY

1

KELSEY

The doorbell startles me because we so rarely have visitors. More importantly, unexpected guests make my pulse quicken. It's been 17 months since the bounty for my capture was removed, and after narrowly escaping being shot to death because people wanted reward money, I never feel completely safe.

I am in the kitchen and have just poured Major Nelson, our 100-pound Black Russian Terrier, a bowl of dog food. "Come on," I say to him, and he turns his boxy, fur-covered head away from the food and looks at me curiously. I take him by the collar and lead him through the doors separating the kitchen and family room of our cozy one-floor home. Major Nelson is a well-trained dog, so he comes without much difficulty, despite leaving food behind. We head through the family room. In the corner, I see my 18-month-old daughter is stacking blocks in her play area, which is cordoned off by safety gates. We round the corner and head to the front door.

Major Nelson's panting presence by my side gives me a boost of confidence as we reach the door. I look through the peephole and laugh when I see who is standing on the other side. "One minute," I call through the door.

"Go on and eat," I tell Major Nelson as I release his collar. The kitchen is the best place for him while I have

company. I point at an angle toward the kitchen door, which can't be seen from here. Major Nelson gives me a put out look and pads away. I take a few paces and watch him plod through the open kitchen door. Then, I practically skip back to the front door and open it.

Standing in front of me is a stocky man, 5 feet 10 inches tall, with black hair, brown eyes, and an uneven smile. "Greg," I say, taking a step toward him and wrapping my arms around him. "I am so glad to see you," I say as I release him and take a step back to get a better look at him. He looks generally the same: sturdy and committed. The perfect husband for my sister-in-law, who wanted to count on someone else after spending her childhood taking care of her younger siblings after their mother's death. But, he also seems tired. A hazard of traveling, I guess. But, that's unimportant, as I'm so happy to see a familiar face from back home.

I've forgotten myself. I step aside so Greg can enter the house. I am still grinning at the turn of events. As I shut the door, I instinctively give a quick look to see if Emmie, my husband's sister, is out there, even though I'm sure she's not. Luke would be ecstatic to see his sister. Emmie is 10 years older than Luke, and he adores her because she practically raised him. However, Emmie is eight-and-a-half months pregnant right now, so surely she wouldn't travel by plane, the quickest way, and probably not by vehicle, as I could think of nothing less appealing to a pregnant woman than a 12-hour car ride. I feel my smile begin to fade as I realize how odd it is for Greg to come all this way, to a foreign country, given how far along Emmie is. "This is such a surprise," I say to Greg. "What are you doing here?"

Greg smiles and looks around, but doesn't respond.

His unexpected appearance coupled with his silence

makes me worry something has happened to Emmie or the baby. “Is everything alright?” I ask.

“Everything’s fine,” he says, widening his smile. Greg’s skin is a little pale, and he has bags under his eyes. His hair is neatly combed, and despite the heat and humidity, his clothes are crisply pressed. But something about him is off. I can’t quite put my finger on it.

“If everything’s fine, why are you here?” I ask, then blush, as I realize just how rude that sounds. “I’m sorry,” I say, and motion him to follow me further inside. We head toward the family room, where there’s a sofa, a flatscreen, a couple of easy chairs, and Penelope’s play area. Unfortunately, the floor is littered with Penelope’s toys. We — I guess me, really, as Penelope isn’t entirely helpful — generally tidy up a bit before Luke comes home. However, since that is a few hours away, it basically looks like a cyclone blew through. “Come in. Have a seat.”

Greg follows me, stepping awkwardly to avoid tripping over a plastic block. I point to a chair, kneel to pick up a couple of toys that are clearly walking hazards. As I stand to carry the toys to the gated play area, I notice that Greg is still standing.

“I’m just going to put this away,” I say, as I walk and toward Penelope’s play space. “Go ahead and sit, and you can tell me what brings you here.”

“Why I’m here,” he says, pausing and fumbling with his hands. “I apologize, but I don’t have a good answer.”

I set the toys I’m carrying next to Penelope, and then take a couple of steps toward him. I stare, waiting for him to say more and hoping I don’t look as bewildered as I feel.

“It’s something private that Emmie sent me to discuss with Luke,” Greg says, shocking me. “Is he here?”

I shake my head, speechless. He’s shown up out of the blue to discuss something with Luke. Without calling.

Without even checking if Luke would be here. Something Emmie doesn't want me to know. I'm not related to Emmie by blood, but I still thought we were family. It hurts that Emmie doesn't trust me. Though maybe she resents me. I fled after refusing to participate in a government-mandated kidney donation. I'm a fugitive from the Federation of Surviving States (FoSS), the country that emerged after pandemics wiped out much of the United States population. Not every state joined FoSS. The former Florida along with a couple other parts of the gulf coast formed Peoria, the nation I live in. When I left FoSS, I took Luke, Emmie's favorite brother, with me. So maybe she has reason to cut me out.

I try to shake off the slight. Greg is staring at me, waiting for me to answer his question about whether my husband is home. "Luke's at work," I manage, trying not to look as wounded as I feel by Emmie's request to keep me out. I look up at the wall clock. It is almost two. "He won't be home until five."

"Mama," I hear. Penelope is apparently tired of being ignored. I look toward her play area in the corner. She's too old for a playpen, but we have gates that snap together and keep her from roaming the house unattended. "Have a seat," I say again, sweeping my arm in the direction of the sofa and the armchair.

I walk over and pull Penelope from her play area, smiling when I do. She always does that to me: makes me forget everything else that is going on because I am so happy to be with her. She has Luke's beautiful blue eyes, and everything else about her is distinctly her own. She's slightly big for a year-and-a-half, and brilliantly smart, I think. But, that's probably just maternal bias.

I pat her diaper through her pants; it still feels dry. I just fed and changed her not five minutes ago, but I want to

make sure she hasn't peed again. I wouldn't want her stewing in a wet diaper while Greg and I chat. I kiss her cheek, and set her back down. I turn to join Greg, only he is standing right behind me. I step back, gasp and clutch my chest.

"Sorry," he says. "I didn't mean to startle you." He smiles and waves at Penelope. She looks at him curiously. "She's a lot cuter in person," he says, looking at my darling carrot-topped wonder.

"Thanks," I say, appreciatively, as my heart rate winds back to normal following his abrupt appearance behind me. I turn to my daughter. "Penelope," I say, "this is your Uncle Greg."

She looks at him with renewed interest and giggles.

Grrr. I hear a low, throaty growl as I turn to see Major Nelson head through the open kitchen door and into the room. Greg takes a step back as Major Nelson pads over, growling hostilely the entire way. "He's not used to guests," I tell Greg, as I grab Major Nelson's collar. "I'll take him out back. Could you keep an eye on her for a second?"

He nods, then bends down, picks up a stuffed monkey and starts waving it cheerfully in front of Penelope. I pull Major Nelson back toward the kitchen, so I can take him out through the back door, yet he isn't cooperating. Instead of going kindly with me, he pulls toward Penelope. I wish he'd stop. He's a very useful guard dog, in that he hates everyone new. But, in situations like this, it's a pain. "Come on, Major Nelson," I say sweetly, trying to coax him. However, it's not working. Usually he's incredibly obedient, but he's trained to be hostile towards strangers and Greg is a stranger to him. I struggle with Major Nelson all the way through the kitchen, to the back yard. He even knocks over his half full water bowl, then barks furiously at me when I close the sliding glass door to the kitchen. The yard is

fenced in, so I expect him to forget about Greg and roam free, perhaps tear into the new bone Luke brought him yesterday. Instead he stands at the door, his paws banging against the glass. I grab a few paper towels and clean up the water he spilled as I was taking him out. When I'm done, I look up and see Major Nelson still standing there, watching. I give him a frown before turning and heading back.

"I'm sorry it took so long," I say as I walk through the kitchen door and into the family room where I left Greg and Penelope. My stomach drops. The room is empty. Penelope is not in her play area and Greg is not here, either. My heartbeat quickens as I take a few frantic paces and see the front door wide open.

I am still trying to comprehend what is going on, what could be happening, when Penelope, pulling Greg along behind her, enters. She looks confused by my panicked expression, and says, "Fow-er."

Greg, who is not at all confused, gives me an apologetic glance and says, "She wanted to show me flowers."

Penelope toddles over to me in what a generous person might describe as a run. It's an awkward, speedy walk that Luke and I find adorable, and I'm incredibly happy when she reaches me. I pick her up and hold her close, feeling her warm body right next to mine. Having her near, feeling her grab a strand of my shoulder-length brown hair and twist it in her fingers, calms me just a bit. For some reason, I still feel panicked, even though it should have subsided since she's back and fine. I slide her fingers from my hair and look at her, her sparkling blue eyes, the mirror image of her father's. Greg closes the front door with a thud, and I look up at him.

"You know, Luke used to walk just like that," he says.

"What?" I ask, taking a step back, trying to parse out

why I feel so ill-at-ease.

“When he was little,” Greg clarifies. “When I was 12, I used to come over and help Emmie with her science homework and we’d get such a kick out of it whenever Luke ran through.” He smiles at the memory, and it should give me comfort to think of my husband as a toddler. It should give me comfort to remember that Greg has known my husband for a quarter of a century, that Greg lived two doors down from my husband’s family all his life. But it doesn’t. Greg smiles again, but something about it feels sinister.

“You should go see Luke at the office,” I say.

“You’re right,” he says, moving closer to me and reaching into his pocket. He pulls out something small and black and I stare at him trying to figure out what it is. He is holding a small mobile phone. “Before I go, I want to get a picture of the two of you.”

Emmie has tons of pictures of us. Luke sends them all the time. He sent one last week, in fact. “I’m sure Emmie would rather see one of Luke with Penelope,” I say, brushing off the suggestion.

“No, it’ll just take a second,” he says. “Smile.”

Since Penelope is in my arms already, it seems easier to smile and look at the phone than to protest further. He takes a few shots, the electronic camera click the only sound in the room and says, “These are great.”

I nod. “Luke’s office is in the Bradley building,” I say, hoping it will nudge Greg out. “Room 481.”

He is still looking down at the photos on the tiny screen. “Come take a look,” he says.

“I’m sure they’re fine,” I say, not moving.

His expression is jovial, yet there is an undertone of strain in his voice. “No, you’ve gotta see. Here,” he says this last bit and steps closer to me. Feeling the need to

separate him from Penelope, I back away, making my way to the play area, where I set her down. He either doesn't notice or care about my apprehensiveness, as he keeps coming at me, his phone in hand.

"See," he says, standing right in front of me. Then he turns so he and I face the same direction. He stands beside me, shoving the tiny screen right in front of me so I can see me and Penelope in still image. "Take it," he says. Unsure how to refuse, I grab hold of it.

"Just hit the arrow on the side to see the other ones." I nod, despite not really wanting to. All I want is for him to leave. But what harm could tapping an arrow do?

"The Bradley building's part of the hospital?" Greg asks, shuffling through his pocket, probably for a pen and paper.

A wave of relief hits me now that he is on board with leaving. I tap to see another photo. "Yeah, just follow the signs from here. St. Francis Hospital."

I tap the arrow a few times looking at the pictures. Penelope always looks great. But me, not so much. I wish I'd done something to my hair this morning. It normally has a mild wave, but it looks frizzy, which can't be helped with all the humidity. My eyes look bright, brown and cheerful, but it's obvious the smile is fake. I still look chubbier than I'd like. Love Penelope, but I've still got 5 pounds of baby weight that I can't shed. Tired of dissecting this photo, I tap the arrow once more and see a photo of a woman on some type of hospital bed. Her hair is jet-black and matted, and her arms and legs are held in place by what look like leather straps with buckles. I pull the screen closer to my face trying to make out where this was taken, who it is. The woman looks at once familiar but like a stranger. I feel like I should recognize her, but I don't. The face is turned in profile so I can just see half of it, and not that well. Then I see it: those features I know so well. They are

family features — a face shape, a nose profile — they all have. I look more closely at the abdomen: a slight rounding, but definitely not eight months pregnant. I am so confused. “Is...” I stammer. “Is that Emmie?”

As I am turning to get my answer, I feel the cloth on my face and the weird odor emanating from it. Sharp, burning, unpleasant. I struggle for a moment, but Greg is behind me and has wrapped one arm tightly around me while he uses the other to hold this drug-soaked rag over my face. I know I am in danger. I know I have to get away. But I also know I am about to pass out.

2

KELSEY

My mouth is dry and my head pounds. I wonder if I'm hungover. People who've experienced it say it's miserable, and I certainly feel miserable right now. Before, I'd had a glass too and a tough morning the next day, but nothing like this. This is 10 times worse than that.

"Luke, I feel awful," I mumble, my eyes still closed, as I try to place what led to this predicament.

I am going to ask Luke if we had champagne last night, but I become preoccupied with the fact that my wrists hurt. Something is cutting into them. It almost feels as if my hands are bound with ropes.

My eyelids pop open. Bright sunshine streams in, nearly blinding me, so I close them again.

In that second, I know. Everything comes back to me. Greg. The rag over my face. Penelope. I open my eyes again, this time blinking to adjust to the sunshine. Taking in my surroundings, I see I am in the backseat of a sedan, tilted to the left side leaning against the window, but strapped in a seatbelt.

Thin brown ropes bind my wrists, which sit in my lap. I look to my right and see Penelope strapped into her car seat sound asleep. I gasp.

"You're awake," Greg says, perturbed. "I was hoping

you'd sleep until we got into FoSS."

His voice is cold and so unlike the gentle Greg I remember. "I don't understand Greg," I say, my voice hoarse, probably from the chemical he used to knock me out. "Why are you doing this?"

He chuckles. "Because you deserve it. You saw that picture of Emmie. That should be you, not her."

The image, one of a woman I barely recognized, a woman who looked vacant, who looked dead. That was Emmie. And the baby. She didn't look pregnant. Part of me doesn't want an answer to my question, but I know the answer is crucial to why I'm here, so I ask it. "What happened to Emmie?"

He doesn't respond. We drive in silence. I look at Penelope, her lips making sucking motions, probably dreaming of a bottle. I now notice that next to me on the area between us, Penelope's stuffed monkey, Mr. Giggles, lies in a heap. She takes Mr. Giggles everywhere. She must have had him when Greg brought her to the car. It likely fell from her arms after she'd fallen asleep. I've got to get us out of here.

"Please," I say softly, looking back at Greg. "I'm worried about Emmie, about the baby. What happened?"

"The baby's dead. Stillborn. She stopped feeling movement, so we went in; they had to deliver immediately. Only it was too late." His voice is devoid of feeling, as empty as Emmie looked in that photo. "Emmie couldn't cope. They put her in a mental institution. They want me to bring you to them, and then I can get my wife back."

3

KELSEY

I can see Greg's face reflected in the rearview mirror. His eyes are wild and desperate. I know I need to escape. Only I don't know how. I need time to think. For the moment, I decide I should keep him talking, distracted.

"Greg, you don't have to do this," I plead, wiggling my wrists, hoping to loosen the ropes encircling them. "If we get Luke, he can help you figure out a way to get Emmie back."

Greg glances at me using the rearview mirror. His eyes are cold and hard. "This is the best way, Kelsey."

I try to be inconspicuous as I work furiously at loosening these ropes binding my hands. "There has to be another way. One that doesn't end up with Penelope's mother dead. You don't want her to lose her mother."

"You're kidding, right?" he asks, full of disdain. "You don't have to die, Kelsey. This is the thing I've always hated about you. You're selfish and self-involved. If it's not your way, then it's just wrong and dire and the world is coming to an end."

He breathes out, and changes lanes on the road. "Tell them you renounce this stupid anti-Life First sentiment, and raise your daughter in peace in FoSS. It's really simple."

Gee, I had no idea my brother-in-law hated me and

thought I was selfish until this very moment. Yes, I guess I should have clued in when he kidnapped me. But, I thought that was more about saving Emmie's life. Now, it sounds like kidnapping me and turning me over to FoSS is something he'd be happy to do without Emmie being institutionalized.

I am not sure where to take the conversation now. Arguing with him seems like a bad idea. FOSS wants me dead. When I was selected, or marked, to donate a kidney, it was because of the Life First policy, which dictates we endeavor first and foremost to preserve human life, even if it means sacrificing our organs. Unfortunately, I don't think FoSS cares whether I renounce my beliefs or not. They think I've started a movement and I think more than anything, they just want me dead. But, I won't be able to convince Greg of that. Given his disdain, I don't think I can appeal to his sympathy for me. I try pulling my wrists apart some more, but it seems like the ropes are getting tighter, not looser.

I look out the window and see a road sign indicating we are getting closer to the border. I have to think of something right now. Once we were in FoSS, I am dead, and I have no way to make sure Penelope is safe and returned to Luke.

"OK, I'm selfish," I tell him. "I admit that. I'm sorry."

I can hear the panic in my voice. This is not going to go over well. I have to compose myself. I look at Penelope, innocent in her car seat. I have to figure this out for her.

"But, just because I'm selfish doesn't mean you should trust FoSS," I say, trying to steer this conversation away from me and my misdeeds. "Just because you deliver me doesn't mean they'll give her back to you."

His eyes find mine in the mirror again, and part of me hopes he'll crash the car — not a real smash-bang-

everyone's-dead-crash — but a fender bender that will bring help my way. His eyes express uncertainty.

“You can't game me, Kelsey,” he says, without much force.

“I'm not trying to game you,” I tell him. “It's just that you could ruin my life and Penelope's life and Luke's life and still not get Emmie back.”

He shakes his head, the helmet of black hair bobbing rhythmically in front of the head rest. “We've signed an agreement. I bring you in, and they give me Emmie. Simple as that.”

“What if they rip up the agreement when you hand me over?”

He is silent; I am too. My skin is bleeding now. The ropes are cutting into me way too badly.

Penelope is still asleep, her red curls falling into her eyes. Please dear God let her stay asleep. If she sees me like this, tied up, bleeding wrists, she's going to panic and cry. Who knows what Greg will do. If anyone had asked me yesterday if my brother-in-law would hurt anyone, I would've said no. But, now I can't trust him at all. I can't trust that he won't hurt my daughter if I do something he doesn't like.

“Kelsey,” Greg says, softer, “I know you don't want to go back to FoSS, and the truth is, I don't really care to take you back. But, this is the position we are in now. So, buck up and deal with the situation. Stop trying to use Psych 101 to get me to let you go. It's not gonna happen.”

I grit my teeth. This is so frustrating. Mainly because I know he is right. There is nothing I can say to him that is going to change his mind. I am a selfish person, his wife isn't, and he is going to sacrifice me for her.

If given the choice, I wonder if Luke would do the same: sacrifice someone else — someone who had never hurt

him — to save my life.

No, no he wouldn't. He'd find another option. Something that didn't involve hurting people to get what he wanted.

"How is she?" I ask him.

"Who?"

"Emmie."

A long breath sails out of him, almost as if he is being deflated, having all that is in him sucked out. "She's not well, Kelsey," he says. "She could get well with medicine, but they want you back before they give her that help."

I want to reach out and slap him. I would if I weren't tied up and bleeding. "Now it's my turn to ask: are you kidding?"

"What the Hell's that supposed 'ta mean?" he asks, indignant.

"You may think I'm a selfish bitch, but I'm not withholding psychiatric medication from someone who needs it," I spit. "And you really think they're going to let her come back to you when they won't even help her get well."

He reaches his hand up and pulls it through his hair. "The reason they won't help her is you," he shoots back with venom. "Anyone else they would have helped a long time ago. But, because she's Luke's sister and he's with you, they won't help her. So, if you hadn't up and walked out on FoSS without doing your civic duty, my wife would be fine."

"Her break down is not my fault. And it's FoSS that won't treat her, not me."

He glances at me in the mirror once more, eyes full of anger and pain. "It is your fault Kelsey. Don't you get that? You never do get anything unless it revolves around you, do you?"

I soften my tone. "I'm sorry, Greg, I don't understand how it's my fault. I thought you said it was the stillborn."

"It was," he says. "That was the trigger."

"So I don't see how that can be my fault." I manage to sound gentle even though I am frightened by the situation. Despite my earlier desire to soften him up and escape, it seems I am only making him angrier. At me, no less.

"Let me ask you a question, Kelsey: Were you surprised to learn Emmie was pregnant?"

Whoa. I'm not sure where he's going with this. I think back to Luke telling me. And the truth is that I was surprised. "A little," I say, tentatively, not wanting to anger him with the wrong answer.

"Why?" he asks, as if my answer was correct.

I want to answer correctly again, so I try to think this through. It's a tough one, because the why is hard to pinpoint. It just seemed that Emmie never really wanted to mother more people. With her own mother mentally ill and a father who worked all the time, she'd lost her childhood mothering Luke and Chase. It was as if she'd given all her love to her younger brothers, done all the mothering with them, and she simply wasn't interested in it. I mean, she is 10 years older than Luke and she doesn't have any kids.

She'd been pregnant once before, and that had been at Greg's insistence. When the baby didn't make it, they seemed resigned to being childless. "I don't know exactly," I say softly. "She just seemed happy to have raised Luke and that's it."

We are at a stoplight. He turns and flashes a smug grin. "See, you can actually think beyond yourself if you pay attention, Kelsey."

He turns back to the road. "Somewhere deep, I think she did want another baby, but on the surface, she was done. Luke was her baby. She loved him like a son, and she

was proud of him and content with him and that was enough. She was also scared about mental illness and pregnancy and being like her mother. It was the stillborn that caused her mother's descent into madness," he says with a sigh. "I guess she was right to be worried, in the end. It's what caused Emmie to go mad, too. But, she was pregnant, and she wanted a baby because she missed her baby. She missed Luke. She missed Luke because you took him away from her. So, this started with you, and it's going to end with you."

I want to kick the seat. I know I can't, but I really want to. This is surreal. At least I can see why it is so easy for him to kidnap me. He's put all the blame for this situation on me. And maybe he is even right. Maybe, Emmie would be fine if I had just done my duty and not taken Luke from her. I don't know. What I do know is, Penelope and I need to get out of this car and away from Greg. "I'm bleeding," I say.

His eyes glance back in the rearview again. I hold up my bloody wrists. He rolls his eyes. "Trying to escape, huh?"

"No," I insist. "I just want the ropes to loosen. They're too tight."

"It's a constrictor knot," he informs me, dispassionately. "The more you try to loosen it, the tighter it gets."

I nod, though I'm not sure he notices. What he said makes sense. I wish he'd told me that from the get-go. I probably still would have tried to loosen them, but not for as long as I did.

"I'm a bad person, and I've caused problems for Emmie. I realize that," I say, trying to sound forthright, "But, Penelope doesn't deserve to see me like this — my wrists covered in blood. It's going to scare her. Can you please just stop, loosen the ropes, and maybe wipe up some of the blood?"

He sighs. “It’s just 15 more miles till we get into FoSS. I’ll do it then,” he says.

“The ropes have already cut my skin. What if they slice into a vein or something? Can you just stop and make it more comfortable for me? I promise you I won’t try anything. I just want a little relief. And it will really help Penelope if I’m not covered in blood when she wakes up. You know Emmie wouldn’t want to upset Penelope.”

He doesn’t look back at me, but I can see him in the mirror. He is contemplating what I said. He keeps driving, and after a minute more passes, I am feeling desperate enough to say something that could sway him, but also runs the risk of further enraging him. “Penelope is Emmie’s niece. Think of what Emmie would say if she found out you let her wake up to find her mother bound and bleeding in the back seat.”

He still doesn’t speak to me, and I’m not sure what to make of it. He could be hostile to me for trying to use Emmie to play on his sympathies. Unfortunately, that’s the only option I have left at the moment. I feel the car slow and in a few moments we are easing to the side of the road.

We pull to a stop, and he gets out, leaving the car parked and idling. Instead of opening my door to check on me, he goes to the trunk. I look out the rear window, but all I can see is the top of the raised trunk door. When he closes it, he has something gray tucked under his arm. Finally, he swings around to my door. He is about to open it, so I get ready. I know this is the only chance Penelope and I will have to escape.

4

KELSEY

Greg opens the door to the car and leans in. He looks over at Penelope and finally at my bleeding wrists. “Kelsey, I am sorry about this,” he says, and he seems to mean it. “But, I can’t loosen the ropes. I brought you this blanket. It will cover your hands, so when Penelope wakes up, she won’t see any blood.”

I want to roll my eyes, to spit in his face, but I can’t. “Can you maybe unbuckle the seatbelt, so I can get repositioned. Just get a little more comfortable?”

He gives me a scrutinizing look, and I try to appear sincere. He clicks his tongue against his teeth, sighs, then unbuckles my belt. After, he begins to unfold the gray fleece blanket and place it over my hands. When his head is close enough to mine, I say his name softly. He looks me directly in the eye, expectant. Our faces are level, so, with all my might, I tip my head forward and headbutt him. I read somewhere that headbutting hurts the person who isn’t expecting it more, but after doing it right now, I’m not so sure.

My head is aching, but I can’t focus on that. Greg yelps and I fall on my back, pull my knees to my chest then thrust my feet forward, kicking Greg to the ground. My hands are still tied in front of me and hurt like hell. I wish he’d untied me, but he is not an idiot. At this point, I’ve got

to get away, but my hands are a problem. I sit up in the seat, and through bound hands, try to grip the door well enough to pull it closed. If I can just lock him out of the vehicle, I'll have more time. The key is still in the ignition. I just have to keep him out. I've got hold of the inside door handle and am pulling, but suddenly Greg sticks a foot in the door, and while I'm pulling with all my strength, it's not going to close as long as his foot is there.

He pries the door open with his fingers and his face is contorted with rage. He looks like he's going to hurt me. But, I know he wants to turn me over alive to FoSS, so I throw myself at him, knocking us both out of the car and onto the ground. I'm lying on top of him, but he doesn't immediately grab for me. I'm not sure if it's because he's so startled, or because I've knocked the wind out of him. I roll off and steady myself to stand up. We're on the side of the road. Maybe I can flag down help.

I'm on my feet, when I feel him grab my leg. "Get back here, bitch."

I shake my leg, trying to loose him, but he hangs on and pulls. I lose my balance and fall to the ground, just barely getting my arms out in front of me so I don't smack down face first. He rolls me over, and climbs on top of me. "Looks like you need to be out for the rest of this ride," he says. I struggle beneath him, but he's too heavy for me to budge. He pulls a bottle from his jacket pocket and the rag again. Not more of this. Dear God. As he puts the rag over my face, I bite his hand. He wrenches his hand back, screams in pain, looks at me with pure venom and slaps me hard. My face explodes in pain. I hear tires squeal and try to turn my head to see where the car is that's making the noise. But then the rag covers my face again.

5

KELSEY

When I come to, my head is pounding again. I am lying on a bed of some type, and my eyes feel leaden. There are strange noises. Beeps and whirs. My wrists hurt. A dull throbbing intensifies the more alert I become.

“Penelope,” I whisper, but I don’t open my eyes. “Penelope.”

“Kelsey” says a familiar voice. It is kind, yet authoritative. “Kelsey, I’ve called Luke and he is on his way. I need you to open your eyes if you can.”

My lids flutter a moment, then let in slits of light, slits of vision through which I see a tall, lean blonde man with turquoise eyes and an easy smile. Shit, I think. I wonder for a moment why that came to mind, but then I recall that “Shit” is the first thing Jasper Christensen ever said to me. “Jasper?” I squeak out, my throat dry and raspy.

“Yes, Kelsey, it’s me,” he says, standing at my bedside looking down at me with a serious expression. “We need to know what happened. Where is Penelope?”

The fog in my mind clears and terror replaces it. I try to sit up, to a swooning effect and lie back down. “She’s not here?” I screech.

“No, Kelsey,” he says, shaking his head, adamantly. “The man who found you said someone was attacking you

on the side of the road. The man scared off your attacker when he drove up, and then called an ambulance. They brought you to the emergency room. I happened to be here for an emergency consult and saw you. I identified you and called Luke. But he had no idea what happened and he says Penelope's not at your house."

My breath catches in my throat. I think I'm going to be sick. "They took her, Jasper," I say, the guilt of abandoning my daughter, of getting out of the stupid car, weighing on me like an anvil. "FoSS took her."

6

SUSAN

I'm almost done. I sigh and plop down on the sofa in my living room. My one bedroom apartment is almost completely packed. A neat pile of 25 boxes occupy the other half of the room, and the movers are coming for them tomorrow. Given how much time I spent at my fiancé's place, I'm shocked how much stuff I managed to accumulate here in a year.

My phone rings, so I pull it from my pocket, look to see who it is, then answer. "Hello, Dr. Donnelly," I say.

"Hello, Mrs. Donnelly, almost."

"Five days, 15 hours, and counting," I gush. I'm giddy with excitement over this, which is not what I expected. It's not me to be a simpering, gushing fool, but this wedding has done it to me. I look at my watch. "Are you in the car?"

Nothing. I wonder for a second if I've lost my signal. "Erica said she needs five minutes of my time," he says.

Good grief. His boss is a total chatterbox. "So, you're saying you're going to be delayed by an hour?"

"Between the wedding, the honeymoon and moving into the house, we're gone for a month," he reminds me.

Maybe he's right, but I'm not sure I actually understand why he even needs to be there. "You submitted everything awhile ago, and I thought it was going to be at least another month before you got approval for a human trial."

"It's supposed to take a month, but Erica got word they're fast-tracking us," he says. "It will probably take two more weeks for them to approve it, which means, I'll be out of the office. That's fine, because we have to solicit

patients and approve them. I made one last change to the solicitation, and I think she just wants to make sure we're on the same page."

I sigh, realizing he's right. This is important work. Finding a method to reverse paralysis that doesn't use illegal stem cells is important to him, and if his research is right, he's found one. One that works on primates, but he needs government approval before the human trials start. Only, I wish he could wait patiently at home, rather than finding excuses to go into the office. "Fine," I say, more pouty than I actually feel. "Have your meeting. Since you're going to be awhile, I'm going to hop in the shower. I'm hot and sweaty."

"That's my favorite way to find you."

"You sure? Because, if you can actually keep Erica to five minutes, I'll be all wet and slippery when you get here."

He pants into the phone. "I stand corrected," he says. "I'm going to go talk to Erica for exactly five minutes, because I definitely think I'll like wet and slippery much better than hot and sweaty."

* * *

I've showered, and am wearing my robe and nothing else. I figure Rob will like that. I even took a minute to put on the lipstick he likes: hot red cherry. The color is exactly what one would imagine based on the name, bright, bold and sexy as hell.

I check my phone, which I'd set on the table next to the sofa. Two texts. One from Jane — my soon to be sister-in-law — telling me I'm going to love my bachelorette party. The next text is from Rob from ten minutes ago. "Did it! Five minute meeting. Forgot my key to your place, but will be there soon. I expect a reward for my promptness; something that takes longer than five minutes. :)"

I smile. Perfect. There is a knock at the door. Ha, that

was quick. He must have high-tailed it over here. I head to the door, and start speaking as I open it. “So what would you like for your re — ”

I stop short, stunned by what I see. My first impulse is to slam the door shut. That would stop my racing heart and perhaps end the panic setting in. But, that is not the move of someone who is alright. Not something someone who has moved on would do. Instead, I swallow, my hand clutching the doorknob tightly for support, and say, “Kevin.”

My former fiancé hasn’t changed much since we last saw each other. Same inky black hair, brown eyes, chiseled jaw, slender nose. And that same smile — two rows of perfect white teeth, from birth, not braces — that makes you feel like you are the only one in the room.

In this case, I am the only one in the room. I want to look away, before I’m caught up in memories of all those good times before everything went south, but I fear he’ll know what I’m doing. That I’m avoiding his gaze, so instead I maintain eye contact, like someone who is fine. Like someone who he didn’t hurt immeasurably.

His eyes linger on me. His gaze is so intense, it feels like he wants to suck me into his vortex. “May I come in?” he asks.

No. I want to say. I should say. I don’t say. “Sure,” I tell him, cinching my robe tighter, sliding the door wider and taking a step back so he can enter. Once he steps inside, his black dress shoes padding softly on the floor, I close the door and stand next to it. I should offer to let him sit, but I don’t have it in me. I need him to say his piece and leave.

“May I sit down?”

I shake my head. “Kevin, I’m not really dressed for company,” I say, as I start feeling conscious of my robe. “Now isn’t a good time.”

For the first time, he doesn't look like the confident Kevin of most of my memories. He looks unsure, unsteady, the way he did in our last conversation. "Sue," he says. He always called me Sue. I liked it. It was special, something he alone called me. But, now it has the effect of nails scratching a chalkboard. It grates on me. "I'm sorry to come right now, but I found out some disturbing information you ought to know. It's about your marking surgery."

7

SUSAN

I ushered Kevin into the kitchen, then ran to my room and made a quick change into jeans and a t-shirt. I've returned to the kitchen to find Kevin waiting patiently. He is wearing black slacks, a white shirt, a tie and a blue blazer; overdressed for sitting in a wooden folding chair at my circular table.

He pulls a sheet of paper from his breast pocket and hands it to me. Taking it, I scan the first few lines. Once I realize what it is, I set it down. My eyes squint at him in confusion. "This is the recommendation Sen. Reed wrote me for the FoSS National Honors Architecture Masters Degree program," I say. "How did you get this? It's a sealed recommendation. I've never even seen it."

He takes a quick breath, picks up the letter and pushes it back in my direction. "Look at the highlighted section."

I'm hesitant, still not sure what this letter means, or why he has it. I look down at the paper, limp in his hand, and take it. I skim to the bottom, where a yellow highlighter has illuminated two lines: "I've known Susan since she was five years old; she's my daughter's best friend and like a daughter to me. I think she would make a wonderful addition to the Honors Architecture program."

The words warm me. Sen. Reed said as much to me last year, but I hadn't realized he'd told anyone else. "Why do

you have this?” I ask him again, letting the letter fall to the table.

“I’ve been working part time for Dr. Rounds,” he says, as if this name should have meaning to me.

“Who is Dr. Rounds?”

He doesn’t answer immediately. Instead he lifts the letter, folds it and puts it back in his pocket. Softly, he says, “He’s in charge of the Universal Program to Preserve Life through Citizen Donation.”

Only Kevin would feel compelled to call the program by its full name. I frame my question the way any normal person would. “The marking program? You’re working for the man who runs it?”

Kevin slowly nods his head, his expression inscrutable. I try not to grimace. The Citizen Donation program, which most people just call the marking program because once you’ve been selected, or marked, you’re required to help needy patients through live donation. Selections are made based on DNA. Everyone’s DNA gets uploaded into a database at birth and when a person gets gravely ill and needs life-saving procedures, the marking program finds the best match and marks that person. I was obligated to donate bone marrow to a needy patient, and an infection after that surgery left me paralyzed from the waist down. My friend Kelsey fled the country to avoid a forced kidney operation after she was marked. I’d still be in a wheelchair if it weren’t for a miracle medical procedure performed last year. Even though I can walk again, mention of the marking program sends shivers up my spine. I give Kevin a bewildered look. “I don’t understand. What does this letter have to do with Dr. Rounds? With the marking program?”

Kevin looks around the room, as if it might be bugged, then slides his chair around so it’s right next to mine. He’s violated every tenet of personal space and is close enough

that his leg brushes against mine. “This was in Dr. Rounds’ personal file cabinet.”

I put my hand up to get him to pause. “Why would he have this?” I ask, baffled.

“That’s what I wanted to know,” Kevin whispers. “So, I went ahead and looked at the records for your marking surgery.”

I slide my chair away, stand up, take two paces from him. The blast of anger that has erupted in me spills out when I speak. “You did what?” The idea that he would go through my medical records — through those medical records — infuriates me. He hadn’t wanted to know at the time. He hadn’t stuck around to help or ask questions when I needed him most. He abandoned me, but now when we’re through, he violates my privacy and gets those records. I point a finger at him and snarl, “You had no right, Kevin.”

He stands and walks over to me, contrite, and stops right in front of me. “I’m sorry,” he says. “You’re right about that. I just was concerned about why he had the note.”

I take a step back. “Did you ask him?”

“Of course not,” he tells me. “I wasn’t supposed to have found it. I wasn’t supposed to have been in his office, in that drawer, OK? But, once I found the note, I copied it, and I went looking in your medical records.” He reaches out his hand and puts it on my shoulder. “I think you should sit back down.”

I want to say, no. But something in his tone tells me I shouldn’t. I sidestep the arm on my shoulder, walk back to the table, slide his chair further from mine and sit. He follows and sits. “I’ve seen my medical records. I know the surgery went wrong. I lived with the consequences of those mistakes for more than a year. I’m not sure how anything in my file changes that.”

He purses his lower lip. “It’s not the file that relates to what happened after you were marked, Sue. It’s the marking file, the one that shows the match results. The one that shows which people would be the best genetic match for donation.”

I tilt my head toward him.

“Sue, you weren’t the best match for that man. There were 92 people better suited to be his donor,” he says, his voice soft, yet full of gravitas. “Someone moved you to the top of the list, and I think your connection to Sen. Reed is the reason why.”

END SAMPLE

THANK YOU

Thank you for reading this preview of *Third Life: Taken*. The book will be published on Sept. 10, 2014. For more information about the book, including deleted scenes and release details, please subscribe to the monthly newsletter at <http://rjcrayton.com/subscribe>.

This is the third book in the *Life First* series. If you haven't had a chance to pick up the other two books, please do. I think you'll enjoy them. Thanks again for checking out this preview.

RJ Crayton

ALSO BY RJ CRAYTON

LIFE FIRST

"I was completely intrigued by this book from the very first page. There were fairly few characters in-keeping with the story, but they were all extremely well thought out. I really think RJ Crayton should be expecting calls for film rights because this played out in my mind as I read it like a really great film.... It gripped you like King Kong and would not let go until you had finished the book."

-BestChickLit.com

SECOND LIFE

"Twists and turns with a dash or two of betrayal."

-Amazon Reviewer

"I just cant give the twists away, but you will be sat on the edge of your seat."

-Amazon Reviewer

FOUR MOTHERS

Sometimes, a mother's flaws are dangerous... Four stories. Four mothers. Four crises. One great read.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

RJ Crayton grew up in Illinois and now lives in the Maryland suburbs of Washington, DC. She is the author of the Life First series of novels, which includes *Life First* and *Second Life*. Prior to writing fiction, Crayton was a journalist, writing for newspapers, including the *Wichita Eagle* and *Kansas City Star*. Crayton also worked for several trade publications, including *Solid Waste Report*, *Education Technology News*, and *Campus Crime*. Her first novels were published in 2013. *Four Mothers*, a short story collection, was published in June 2014. The third novel in the Life First series will be released in August 2014. Crayton is a monthly contributor to the Indies Unlimited (<http://www.indiesunlimited.com/author/rjcrayton/>) blog and a regular contributor to the Institute for Ethics and Emerging Technologies blog (<http://ieet.org/index.php/IEET/bio/crayton/>). When she's not writing, Crayton spends her time being a ninja mom (stealthy and ultra cool, like moms should be) to her son and daughter. You can find out more about her at <http://rjcrayton.com>.