

A Face First

From Chapter Seven . . .

They brought in a doll the day they told Kelley about the mask.

The doll's name was Beth. She was a big doll, about twenty-four inches tall, with chunks of her short-cropped blond hair missing, exposing her pink plastic scalp. One eye sort of wavered, half shut, making her look kind of sleepy – or drunk. Still, Beth appeared lovable with her one wide blue eye and her little red rosebud mouth. Kelly considered herself way beyond the doll stage, but even she had the urge to reach out and hug Beth to her.

“Now. Kelley. Do you remember when we talked about how scar tissue grows back puffy?” Anita asked. Leslie stood beside her.

Kelley, meanwhile, had turned her attention to Anita's diamond ring. It was an engagement ring. She had told Kelley that her fiance's name was Tyrone Jamal, but she called him T.J. He was a student at the police academy, an expert in tae kwan do. He could kick a cinderblock in half with his heel.

“Do you remember when we talked about that? The day you got your Jobst glove?” Anita persisted.

Kelley nodded. She was fascinated by the diamond's glittering facets. She wondered how much T.J. had paid for it.

“Kelley.”

Reluctantly, she focused on Anita, and Beth, who was wearing a miniature set of Jobst stockings and a long-sleeved Jobst jersey the color of wet sand. She was even wearing tiny matching gloves like the one on Kelley's right hand.

But Kelley already knew about the Jobst garments. She didn't need a doll to understand it.

Anita was waiting. "Kelley, please. Do you remember?"

Kelley's eyes flashed at her. "Yes, I remember! Hypersonic – hypertrophic scarring! I'm not stupid, you know!"

Kelley dropped her head. She hadn't meant to be insulting. *You're losing control again*, she warned herself deep inside.

"I guess I'm not myself today," she apologized. "I can't imagine why."

She looked back up to see if Anita would forgive her and saw that the doll had been stood up right in front of her, on the edge of the bed.

Only this time, Kelley noticed that Beth also had some sort of a *thing* strapped on her head. A kind of clear plastic shield over her face, with holes cut in it for eyes, nose, and mouth. Like a see-through Halloween mask. Weird, Kelley thought – until the horror of it began to sink in.

"The mask will do the same for your face, Kelley –"

"Oh, wait a minute –" she started. She could feel the blood drain from her face and the invisible belt of panic tighten around her chest. She should have known something was up when Anita came to her room with Leslie and they closed the door. They had this planned!

"I'm not wearing that –"

"You had a third-degree burn on your right cheek, extending up around your eye and back to your ear –"

Kelley was shaking her head. "No!"

Leslie came and put an arm around her shoulders. "Kelley," she said into her ear. "This is part of recovery."

Kelley tried to push her away. "No way!"

“Let me finish,” Anita said firmly, placing one of her hands on Kelley’s arm and looking her hard in the eye.

“All the grafting, all the skin growing back in is just like the skin on your hand. It’s been two weeks since your face graft, Kelley. It’ll come back in all puffed up and hard unless you restrain it.”

“But I’ll look like a freak!”

“If you want your skin to grow back smooth – ”

“No! Don’t make me wear that!”

“Kelley, you’ll be more of a freak if you *don’t* wear it!”

Kelley turned her head away. She knew it was useless to argue. They were only doing their job. She stared at the wall of her room and couldn’t help the silent tears that came.

“How long?” she asked wearily, turning back to Anita.

Anita’s sad eyes warned her. “A long time, Kelley.”

“A long time,” she repeated, her voice wavering. “Like what? A couple weeks? A month?”

Anita put her other hand on Kelley’s knee and gripped it. “At least a year.”

Kelley closed her eyes . . .