



Tears on Stone **Excerpt**

Book 2 of the Falcon's Bend Series
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Prologue

"Though I do not expect the terror...will ever altogether leave me, at most times it lies far in the back of my mind, a mere distant cloud, a memory and a faint distrust; but there are times when the little cloud spreads until it obscures the whole sky. Then I look about me at my fellow men. And I go in fear..."

~from *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, H.G. Wells

He was drunk again.

Dorothy hung up the phone, her heart thudding painfully in her chest as she considered for the first time in so many years that her husband always called before he came home. *Just like my father*, she thought.

Paul Hawks worked at the same factory her father, and his father, had all his life. The factory was the lifeblood of this small any-town, USA. The pay and benefits were lousy; the working conditions were bad. It was a dead-end job, but it was all they knew. They worked hard for little, then pissed it away every night on booze.

Dorothy immediately checked on the children, who slept fitfully just as they always had. She didn't have time to look at them in anguish. They had the faces of angels. They lived in hell. She had to protect them, no matter what was required of her.

Her eyes fixed on the clock, she closed the door of their bedroom firmly behind her. Paul would be home in five minutes. As she swept into the kitchen, she sent an experienced gaze around the house. Everything was neat, in its place. Quickly she set the table, got an icy beer from the freezer where she'd put it twenty minutes ago, and put it next to his placemat. Then she took the hot plate of food from the oven and transferred his dinner to a cooler plate.

When Dorothy heard his car pull into the garage, her heart rose into her throat. She could hear it beating there as she prayed this was a dream she'd wake from soon. On automatic, she forced herself to enter the living room and glance at herself in the mirror. She'd put on a touch of makeup, not much.

As she raised her hand to smooth her dark hair, she saw her mother staring back at her.

"Go to your room. Quickly. Stay there no matter what you hear." Mama would send an experienced eye around the room to make sure everything was neat and in its place. She would set the table, put out a fresh beer. Then she would check herself in the mirror--not too much makeup. The little bit of blush on her cheeks would stand out sharply on her pale cheeks. The bruises there stood out just as sharply despite her attempts to cover them.

"But, Mama--" Dorothy would begin to protest, but Mama wouldn't give her the chance.

"Guthrie, take your sister to your room. Take care of her," Mama would say, her voice no more than a frantic whisper, and Guthrie would nod and whisk her away, locking the door behind them.

Dorothy now swallowed the fear in her throat, but it wouldn't go down as she touched the swollen side of her face she'd tried to cover with makeup. She was her mother. She was her mother in some sadistic play that she tried to set the scene for every night, and every night the script could change.

One thing would stay the same. Just one thing. She couldn't win. That never changed.

She was there when Paul walked in the door. Her forced smile was greeted by the face of an angry stranger. She'd married him when she was eighteen, back when he was a little older than she was, a little wild, and impossibly handsome. Now he was dark, grizzled. He was nothing of the man he'd been, the one she'd wanted him to be so badly. And she no longer adored him blindly.

She kissed him, living up to his ballsy expectation for her to be the loving wife when he walked through his door at night. He shoved her away like he always did. She forced herself to smile. *I hate you, Paul, with everything inside me.*

"Your dinner is ready, honey," she told him, anticipating the grumble and glare she got as he lurched into the kitchen reeking of smoke and booze.

He sat and ate. She sat with him, getting him a beer whenever he needed it and agreeing with anything he muttered.

The first time he did this ritual we just got back from Florida: our honeymoon. He got home from work and tripped over the suitcase I didn't have time to unpack because we both had to go to work. Our living room has become a boxing ring almost every night since then for five years. My mother did it for over fifteen. Oh my, I don't think I can do this.

Everybody knew. Long ago, her co-workers must have realized she hadn't fallen down the stairs or tripped over anything. They all knew. *Just like everyone knew what Mama went through, what me and Guthrie went through. What Benji and Annabelle go through-- because we're just women, worthless punching bags. My children hate their daddy as much as I hated mine.*

Tears filled Dorothy's eyes against her will. She'd never once wondered why her mother stayed. She'd never known any other way. Tonight, she looked across the table. She looked at those hands...the ones that had held her, touched her tenderly for a mere two weeks, and now only gave her pain. What she wouldn't do to be free of those hands, to free her children from this hell.

When Paul glanced at her, she lowered her eyes quickly, terrified he'd see her loathing of him there.

"Where're the kids?" he demanded.

Dorothy stopped breathing. He'd never hurt them. They were young enough that she could still protect them. But they would grow. Someday Benji would try to protect her the way Guthrie had tried to protect their mother...and then she wouldn't be able to keep Paul from hurting them anymore.

"It's after ten, Paul. They're asleep."

His dark eyes narrowed to slits. *Please God, help me distract him.*

"When the hell 'm I s'pose to see 'em? I work all day; I come home, I wanna see my g@#n kids, too. That's not too much to ask."

He shoved himself away from the table, and Dorothy was on her feet in an instant. "Paul, please. Just don't wake them. Just look in on them, all right? But don't wake them."

His hand shot out, impacting her chest as he shoved her back. Dorothy lost her balance and fell against the floor lamp. It crashed to the floor next to her, and the light bulb popped before going dark.

She was on her feet a second later, after him before he could enter the children's room. Standing close by, she watched him flip on the overhead light. Dorothy's hatred of him for the insidious ways he had of bullying them grew as she waited for him to do something or nothing. The children stirred in the brightness, but didn't open their eyes. They knew better, Dorothy realized.

After a few minutes of looking at them, Paul swiped his hand down over the light switch again and left the room. Dorothy closed the door when he didn't make a move to do it.

He wouldn't let her get away with her attempt to prevent him from seeing his children. She knew that and told herself if it got too bad she could call Guthrie. But Guthrie would beat him to within an inch of his life, and when Dorothy came back, Paul would make her suffer for it.

No, she would take it tonight. She would take his fists. Then she would take his vile hands on her when he crawled into bed on top of her with her blood still on his knuckles.

Dorothy righted the floor lamp, holding the cold metal in her hands while the muscles in her stomach clenched painfully in premonition.

"Wanna keep me from my kids, do you?"

We got this lamp as a wedding present, she remembered. She'd thought the intricately etched metal lampshade had been so beautiful. So beautiful, befitting the beauty of their new union.

"Mama?"

Dorothy's ears heard the small cry as though from a dream, from the past. Tears stung her eyes again. She could almost feel the pressure of Guthrie's hand holding hers so tightly behind the door. She could almost hear her mother's screams, the sound of impact over and over again. Her father's voice--*the devil's*, she used to think--tormenting, luring, bellowing. The sound of his satisfaction.

Her mother's words came from Dorothy's mouth as she cried reassuringly to her own son, "Go back to sleep, honey," like everything was all right. Like anything would ever be all right. *Mama never tried to escape her hell, our hell. She never even tried. She took it like it was her cross to bear for being a woman.*

"What the hell've you been tellin' 'em, you b@#h? You think you can turn my own kids against me?"

"I didn't tell them anything, Paul. I swear it."

She heard the desperation in her voice and hated it almost as much as she hated her need to run. He was closing in on her, circling before her, and her heart thudded painfully against her chest while she waited for him to make his move.

"You didn't tell 'em anything, you swear," he mocked, his lips twisted. "They're awake now. Maybe I wanna see 'em. Maybe I wanna show 'em what happens when their mama tries to keep their own father from 'em."

Dorothy's instincts took over. Eyes narrowed, she shook her head at him. "No." She would never let him hurt Benji and Annabelle. Never. It would be over her dead body. "No, Paul. If you want to hurt somebody, you hurt me...you f@#g bully."

His eyes widened. She'd never doubted his speed. She didn't have time to run. He grabbed her by the hair and threw her across the room with every ounce of his strength. The impact of hitting the wall took her breath away, but she came to with the pain of his fingers in her hair again, dragging her up. She smelled the stale reek of beer and the pollution from the factory. *It hurts. It all hurts. Fresh and yet familiar.*

Dorothy closed her eyes and whimpered. *I want to die*, she thought when his fist slammed into her cheek and burst open her lip again where he'd hit her two nights ago over and over for wearing too much lipstick like a whore. A week before that, she hadn't worn *enough* lipstick to please him.

I can't win.

When he let her go, she ran, just like he wanted her to. Instead of trying to hide the way she usually did, though, she found her fingers clutching the cold, solid metal of the lamp again.

I can't die. I can't die because my kids need me. I need them. But you...

He was grinning as he came toward her, his fists clenched, bloody.

...without you we're free. Without your bloody fists, we survive. And I can say the devil made me do it, you b@#d.

Dorothy picked up the lamp in both hands, lifted it like a baseball bat, and swung it with a strength she hadn't known she had in her.

The metal lampshade connected with his head, and he grunted in surprise. But she was already bringing it back and swinging again. And again.

She heard his body hit the floor, and she tilted the lamp and smashed the base down on his head once more. He wasn't moving. *His blood...tonight it'shis blood. Tonight I'm free. Tonight I'm not just a woman. I'm a survivor.*

Carefully Dorothy set the lamp down again and walked to the phone. She dialed the operator and told her it was an emergency. Her husband was dead. Send the police.

Her children were crying, and that was real. She went to them, holding and kissing them as she told them the only two words her mind could grasp: "Never again."

Only moments later, her children crying in her arms, she opened the door to the police. Officer Stanley Wheeler. She knew his wife, Janice. Stanley had never been above "givin' the old lady what-for when she gets outta line".

"Where is he?"

Dorothy pointed to the living room where Paul lay face down in a growing pool of blood.

"What the hell happened here?" Stanley demanded.

Nothing mattered. She'd saved herself and her children, the way her mother had never been able to. They'd leave this town tomorrow. They'd leave hell behind them at last.

"He was beating me," she said simply. Stanley wasn't blind, yet he didn't seem to notice or care about her face, swollen and bloody, her back aching like it had been broken from where she'd hit the wall. He wouldn't care that clumps of her hair were clutched in Paul's fingers.

"*You* did this?"

Dorothy nodded.

Stanley's mouth twisted in anger when he stared at her. "Step away from them children, Dorothy Hawks."

"What?"

"You're under arrest for manslaughter."

As Annabelle and Benji burst into tears, Dorothy stared at Stanley, unable to comprehend this. He'd come to their house many times before and found her, beaten and bloody, by the hands of her own husband. He'd never arrested Paul. He'd told him to "take it easy next time".

Stanley grabbed her arm in a painful grip, turned her away, and slapped handcuffs around her wrists as tightly as he could get them. Then he whispered, "You'll never see your kids again, you murdering b@#h. I'll see to that personally."

Dorothy only had time to twist her head around to see another officer dragging her children, screaming, away from her. "No, please..." Dorothy whispered in disbelief. "No. No! I saved us."