

Always

Book One - Wolfe Brothers Saga
Fiction for Adults

Max Redford - RIP - 5/85 to 7/21

and

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Foreword

“We are born with our father's names. We are not responsible for their failures. We are responsible for what they made us believe in. That is our only obligation. And it is even then a choice which we may sometimes be wise to ignore.”

~Warren Eyster

Prologue

The Origins of a Maniacal Hero

IT WAS BACK in the day . . . Freak on a Leash and Nookie topped the rock charts and TRL was the biggest thing on television—at least as far as most of the youth of that time was concerned. If you didn't have Issues, then you didn't know who Korn was. If you had issues, then you were fitting right the fuck in with the mainstream, a generation where having a social stigma or a psychological problem made you unique and being individualistic was all the rave. Bi-po was the new spaz—and Ritalin was the best candy.

Unlike other sixteen-year-olds, Cameron didn't strive to be unique, didn't care about the latest rave, wanted little out of life and had few friends.

He tightened his half-gloved hand around the barbell.

“One more set,” Dwoane said gruffly, standing behind the weight bench, spotting. “You can do it, Big C!”

Although Dwoane was a senior, the Panthers' tight end and had the physique that could rival a Big 12 college player, Cam's build was even bigger. At sixteen years old and a height of 6'4, Cam weighed in at 270, bench pressed 310, squats 420.

Cam was big. He was strong.

He was an anomaly, whether he wanted or appreciated that fact or not.

In. Hold.

Lower. Feel the burn . . . flowing . . .

“That's smooth,” Dwoane said.

Exhale. Lift. Slow. Steady.

Dwoane's name was pronounced Duh-waun but guys on the team liked to razz him. They'd call him Dwayne. And he'd lose it.

“I ain't no white-ass hick, muthafuckers! I got genuine Texan black snake right here, baby!” in which he'd always grab his crotch. Of course, only other varsity players ever got to mess with Dwoane.

Cam had personally witnessed a JV player make the same joke and Dwoane made him eat grass until he screamed for mercy. The poor guy had tears running down his face before Dwoane finally got off him.

“Nine more just like that, baby!” Dwoane said.

This was Cam’s third and final set on the bench.

Two more.

“This is the wall, boy! Hit it! Smash it! Show me that willpower!”

Cam’s teeth clenched. The high school’s weightlifting room was stifling hot, even with a half dozen fans set up inside the barn-like building. It was the best this country-hick high school could afford.

“C’mon! My great granny can pump iron better than you and she’s ninety-two!”

Cam had heard the Panther’s coach, Coach Sammy Block, use that same zinger, so it didn’t make the fire burn any hotter, not that he needed more motivation. Cam wasn’t working out with aspirations of joining the football team. He wasn’t trying to bulk up to get girls.

Cam had one motivation; get strong and big enough to kill Tony, his old man. He had stopped calling him ‘Dad’ about two years ago, the night Tony had beat Mom unconscious. And Ajay, his younger brother, was only six at the time. That’s when he had his first panic attack. Both Mom and Ajay were rushed by ambulance to the hospital.

“Two more to go, baby! Push!”

The flames of pain constricted around his arms and upper chest. Good flames. Great flames! No pain, no gain. No pain, no gain. More gain, and no more pain . . .

Dwoane was one of Cam’s few friends, which was fine. Cam didn’t want a bunch of friends. His six-foot frame and three hundred pounds proved useful in keeping people at a distance. Not many other sixteen-year-olds measured up. He was a freak-of-nature the school bully had teased, until Cam knocked three of his teeth loose, earning him the nickname The Tooth Reaper. Ironically, the moniker wasn’t given to him by a foe; it was given to him by Dwoane—who had spoken the sentiment in jest.

“Last one!”

Arms shaking.

Breath ragged. “Let’s do this!”

Lower.

“We gonna do this or not? Anytime now!”

Cam held the bar a half-inch above his ribcage.

“We’re gonna finish this shit!”

Cam grunted. He thrust the weights upward.

“That’s my man!” Dwoane did a dramatic twirl. “Alright. Alright. That’s good. That’s good. That’s real

good. Let's call it a day, my man."

Exhaling, Cam set the bar down.

Although he was considerably bigger than Tony, he couldn't help but fear the bastard. He was sure he could beat Tony to death, and probably do so easily, but he couldn't shake his nervousness and self-doubt.

Cam was no different than most kids, he supposed. Growing up, he saw his dad as a figure of authority, someone you respected, tried to obey best ya could and never, ever gave lip to. Cam simply couldn't wrap his head around reversing their roles.

It was a mindset, Cam realized. Think of his dad as inferior. And think of himself as the one in control. The parent. It was the only way he could muster up the spine enough to take the fucker out. And the fucker really had to be taken out. Soon.

Because every night that went by without Cam doing the deed was another night Ajay had to take another beating.

Another part of Cam's hesitation was because he didn't know how he would kill his father and get away with it. Leave no evidence. No reason to suspect foul play. Religiously, his mother—and Tony if he wasn't passed out drunk—would watch America's Most Wanted with John Walsh and for the last several months Cam had paid special attention to all the murder cases, especially the evidence that led to the captures in the update portions of the program. Fingerprints were a big deal, and so was motive. There wasn't much he could do about motive.

After today, Cam knew how he would kill Tony.

Because today, in his eighth-grade health class, he had learned the answer to a question that had haunted his waking and sleeping thoughts.

The answer to the puzzle hid within a simple statistic: More than eighty percent of alcohol-related boating accidents resulted in death by drowning.

And fingerprints didn't stick to water.

Day after tomorrow, Tony would go fishing.

He went every Saturday and Sunday, as long as the weather held out.

And sunny skies were forecasted for this weekend.

It was the same routine, every damn weekend. Tony would toss a bunch of rods and reels and a large tackle box into the back of the truck along with a case of beer. Then he'd hitch the green aluminum boat to the truck.

Sometimes Ajay would try to bring a whole case of Hot Wheels with him, but Tony would say there wasn't enough room.

Dwoane tossed a wet towel at Cam as they headed for the door. The cool moisture on his burning muscles was a welcome reprieve on his sweaty flesh.

"You maxed 335 today," Dwoane said. "By tight end standards that places you only five away from the Excellence rank, that's 90% max rank."

Cam tossed the towel back at Dwoane. "Ninety-percent? I want one-hundred-fucking-percent."

"I know. I know. You one crazy cracker. But you push yourself too damn much, too damn hard, and you gonna blow your muscles like a car blows a belt. Then it's all gonna be for zilch."

"Just meet me here tomorrow. Same time."

"Nah. Take tomorrow and the weekend off. We'll pick up on Monday."

"I can't wait that long. Tomorrow. It's my last chance."

Dwoane shook his head. "Look, I ain't gonna hook you up with anymore 'roids if you don't cool your jets for a bit. This some serious shit, Big C. Hell, your face is already starting to look like you got stung by a nest of bees. People gotta know you doin' the shit by now."

Cam felt his temper flare. Face reddened. Teeth gritted. "Nobody knows shit."

Dwoane moved to stand in front of the doorway, obstructing Cam's exit. "None of this shit better blow back on my black ass, you got that?"

With a grimace, Cam nodded.

They pushed through the double doors and strode across the high school parking lot.

Dwoane flipped him off. "See ya Monday, Big C."

Cam groaned. He slipped keys from his jean pocket. He approached his mother's car, a rundown Chevy Citation. That's when he saw the note on the windshield.

*You don't have to pick me up. Had to leave work early so I got a ride home with Debbie.
There was an incident. Ajay got suspended. Brought a knife to school.*

~mom

Cam's right hand tightened into a fist. "Fuck!" He punched the roof of the car. The metal buckled and creased.

Tony would punish Ajay for sure. Hell, he didn't need much of a reason to whoop Ajay and did so most every night. Ajay's panic attack two years ago set something off inside Tony, a special kind of hatred.

That's when he started hurting Ajay.

Started with sending him to bed without supper and forcing him to take baths in iced water.

And progressed to putting out cigarettes on his head and making him sleep in the shed.

Tony was smart, never leaving evidence. He rarely touched Cam.

And only Mom when she tried to interfere—and Ajay, but mostly Ajay.

Tonight, Tony would surely make Ajay sleep in the shed; no pillow or blanket, lying on car oil stains in the wood floor, feeling the tickle of crawling cockroaches and listening to the scurrying of rats, while Cam would be left to sleep in his bedroom on a soft mattress with pillows and blankets, all comfy like.

Cam started the car, shifted to drive. He drove toward home and what surely would be a long night, for all of them.

Dark Waters

CAM STOOD ON THE EDGE OF Lake Raven, a remote pond nestled deep in the forest of Huntsville State Park. A hundred yards offshore empty cans bobbed around Tony's green boat. He was striking matches, cussing the wind for blowing them out, while a cigarette wobbled between his thin lips.

From a Styrofoam cooler Cam grabbed a can of beer, cracked it open and guzzled.

Ajay sat crouched on the sandy bank and stared up at him incredulously. "Daddy gonna whoop you for drinkin' his beer."

"Yup," Cam said.

Ajay returned to his measly two Hot Wheels that he'd stowed away in his denim shorts. A red convertible and a pick-up truck with tiny plastic cargo lights molded on the top, both filthy from the wet sand.

Blood raced through Cam's veins. Bullets of sweat bubbled on his forehead. A flash of heat swept over his body. With balled fists, he closed his eyes and concentrated on breathing, slow and controlled.

Ajay lay on his stomach by Cam's feet. He pushed the toy car and truck through some dried pine needles further from the bank, carving a road through the packed needles. "It's getting dark." He glanced up at Cam. "You think we might go home soon? I'm bored."

Dried blood covered the crack on Ajay's bottom lip. The purple on the apple of his cheek had darkened but, at least the swelling had gone down. Last night's 'punishment' had left obvious marks. Tony was getting careless.

"Goddamn wind!" Tony bellowed. "That sonuvabitch on the Weather Channel don't know shit!" Tony chucked the entire box of matches into the pond.

He crouched beside Ajay. "What were you thinking, bringing a knife to school? You're in third grade for fucksakes."

Absently, Ajay shrugged.

Cam lifted Ajay's shirt. Between his shoulder blades where Tony had burned him with a cigarette, a blister oozed puss. "If you stop screwing up, maybe Tony would get after me one of these nights instead of you."

Ajay glided the car over a rock. "I wish I had a real car. I wish we could drive somewhere. Anywhere but here."

"Shithead," Tony bellowed from the middle of the lake. "Beer!"

"Want me to go this time?" Ajay asked. "I can swim good."

Cam rubbed the black hair on top of Ajay's head. "You take enough shit from him already. I got this."

"Now!" Tony's gruff voice echoed off the dense pines of the secluded campground.

Cam pulled Ajay's shirt down. Gently, he gripped his brother under the arms and turned him until his back was toward the lake. "See that big stump way over there?" He thumbed, gesturing with a tilt of his head.

"Yeah. I see it."

"Go make a racetrack around it, okay?"

Shrugged. "I guess . . . might be cool." Ajay climbed to his feet and headed for the stump several yards away.

Cam pulled his sweat-drenched shirt over his head, folded it neatly and set it on a log. He looked down at his muscle-bound torso and the bulges in his biceps. Would it all pay off?

Ajay glanced over his shoulder. "Whatcha gonna do?"

"Bring Tony his last beer."

Chapter One

Maker's Hell

. . . almost 20 years later

Jags walked up the driveway toward his father's house, hoping the next forty or so minutes wouldn't end up being a waste of time.

Dad was worried about Cam, the eldest of Jags' brothers.

And when dad worried, he could be quite dramatic, overreacting to situations most would find mundane and ordinary.

If Jags was lucky . . . this might be one of those moments.

And if this situation was like the others, Dad would simply fix himself a cup of honey-lavender tea--and before he could empty the mug, whatever had gotten him worked up would pass and with no lasting effects on anything or anybody.

Cam was actually Jags' step-brother but they'd dropped the 'step' a long time ago. Their blood ran thicker than kin -- same with his other brother Ajay. Jags couldn't even remember what Cam, Ajay and his Mom's last name had been before, because as long as he could remember they'd always been the Wolfe family.

Since Gramps had been slowly losing his mind over the past year, dad had assumed Gramps' position as head of the family. It was his job to make sure the three brothers stayed out of trouble. But Dad was out of town a lot. He volunteered with the Peace Corp and was oftentimes halfway across the planet.

Jags swung the door open to his father's modest home. He moved down the hall, past a dozen or so framed photographs on the wall. The photographs showcased his father's life over the past thirty years, off and on, numerous stints. In Senegal, he had learned French and how to build a tree nursery for live fencing. For three years, he taught rudimentary algebra in Liberia. And most recently, he'd spent several months tossing sandbags in Guyana. Quite impressive for a fifty-six year old man. Douglas Wolfe was a saint, simple as that. Jags could not be prouder of his father.

Jags approached the kitchen, hoping to see his father nursing a cup of tea in his trademark Smokey The Bear mug.

But when Jags turned into the kitchen, he noticed a dull and most forgettable white mug in his father's hand. Dad paced, swiping the back of his free hand across his sweaty forehead.

Nothing about him seemed calm, cool or collected.

"Dad?"

"Thank the Maker you're here." He shoved his cellphone at Jags.

Jags pushed play and put it on speaker phone.

Cam's voice. "Can you check in on Gramps. I gotta go out of town . . . for a while. I'd ask Jags but you know him . . . he has a hard time parallel parking. Never mind keeping all Gramps' medications straight. Anyway, I left a notebook on the coffee table with detailed . . . very detailed instructions on preparing his favorite snacks and I left some premade snacks in the bottom drawer of the fridge--but don't tell Gramps or he'll eat them all at once and it'll screw his sugar up. And don't use garlic when cooking, it gives him the shits. Also, if he's not in his rocker when you get there then he's probably in the back room --he's been tinkering with those old t.v. sets . . . he doesn't like to be interrupted so you better knock before going in. Else, Gramps gets real cranky. Guess it's his 'me' time. And don't be surprised if some old folks from the VA randomly drop by--they're worse than Jehovah Witnesses but they're harmless. Usually just bring him another TV to work on . . ."

Jags set the phone on the table. He opened the fridge to grab a bottle of beer. "So, he didn't say where he was goin'?"

His father shook his head. "There's more. Keep listening."

". anyways, just drop by and keep him company will ya? And tell him . . . I I-love him -- and . . . yup, you know . . . I love you, D-dad . . . and hell . . . tell . . . Jags I love him too . . . 'cause I know he'll hear this message sooner rather than later I gotta go . . . t-take care . . . thanks and I . . . uh . . . love you. Yeah, . . . that's it . . . I guess . . . see ya . . . bye."

Jags set his beer down. He looked at his father. "You don't think..."

"What do you think?"

"When'd he leave the message?"

"Yesterday."

"Yesterday! He could be . . . ah Maker's hell!"

"I know. He's got a head start. But you can find him, right?"

Jags knew he was the only one who could put his father's worries to rest. Because Jags was an empath. With skin-on-skin touch, Jags could read a person . . . not as clearly as the written word of a book, but more like the vague recollection of a dream.

Jags snatched the phone, pointed at it with a dramatic flair. "This is a phone, Dad! I can't read metal. Only people."

"I know. I know."

Jags inhaled a controlled breath. He paused before putting a hand on his father's shoulder. "There's only one place he would go . . ." He gave his father's shoulder a reassuring squeeze. "Don't worry. I'll find him."

His father nodded. "I know."

Jags raced down the hall and out of the house. When he got into his F350 he opened the glove box. Several packages of gum spilled onto the floorboard. He passed on the package of Airwaves, a British gum with Eucalyptus and menthol. Flung the tin of Foie Gras, a bubble gum that tasted like the French entree of fatty goose liver. Ironically, no animals were harmed in the manufacturing of this gum--it was printed right there on the package. Jags went with a piece of Mexican Motitas Banana gum, popping it into his mouth.

As his F350 peeled from the curb, he racked his brain, trying to reason why after all this time Cam would . . . Jags cursed. "I swear Cam," Jags ground his teeth on the gum, "if you've done anything stupid . . . I'll kick your ass from and back to the Maker."

The F350 roared faster down the country road, nearly jack-knifing as it swerved to follow signs to Sam Houston State Park.

Deserve Better

Always control the muzzle -- point it up or point it down.

The snub-nosed revolver rested next to Maggie Stewart on the bench seat of the aluminum boat.

Smirking, she turned the .38 until it pointed toward her bare thigh.

Guns are dangerous, sis. But not nearly as dangerous as people.

Her brother Eric's words echoed in her mind.

Maggie scooped her long red hair into a hair band, keeping it off her shoulders, leaving it to dangle in a ponytail down her back. She braced her palms behind her, opening her body to the last of the day's sunshine. Maggie closed her eyes and breathed deep.

tried to relax . . .

and enjoy the gentle breeze coming over the smooth lake water . . .

revel in the gentle sounds of nature . . .

crickets . . .

birds . . .

Maggie glanced at Tilly, her childhood friend, sitting across from her in the 3-person boat.

Tilly's short blonde hair lay matted beneath her wide-brimmed straw hat, damp from the nearly 100% humidity.

Groaning, Maggie remembered that she was the one who'd asked Tilly for this girl's-only weekend.

Lately, her hometown of Cut n' Shoot, Texas had felt suffocating.

And that *was* an oddity.

Because normally Maggie couldn't get enough of the rat race, so to speak, life in the fast lane. She was a hopeless adrenaline junkie, she could admit.

Saying she loved to party was an understatement. A real whiskey-sour girl who strutted to outlaw country and cozied up to cowboys who smelled of sweat, beer and cigarettes; a little pot on special occasions like days that ended in 'Y'.

Maggie was living proof that the daughter of a politician could put those of preachers and cops to shame.

When it came to her life as a hellraiser, she owned it unapologetically, but shame occasionally needed her conscience. Regretfully, she knew she was a disappointment to her father.

And yet . . . despite her faults, she was still Daddy's little girl.

And always would be.

She emptied her beer and tossed the bottle aside.

Here she was in the middle of a lake in the middle of Huntsville State Park, with nothing to do . . . or rather *nobody* to do . . . which was what she thought she wanted . . .

but now that she was here . . .

doing nothing . . .

with no loud music to talk over . . .

no men to toy with and . . .

Maggie sat up. Getting to her knees, she inched toward the cooler on the center seat and dug through the ice. Only three bottles left. . . .

no fucking beer . . .

what in the hell had she been thinking . . .

her nerves felt electrified . . . tight . . . vibrating . . .

like an addict itching for her next fix . . . needed . . . what? . . .

To go home?

Hell no.

Not even close.

So what did she need?

More beer? A good lay?

Hell yeah.

Goddamn . . . she was really, really . . . fucked in the head.

Tilly let out a dramatic sigh. "So . . . why are we really out here?"

"Just needed to get away."

"And I'm set to have a lurid affair with Matthew McConaughey."

"Sounds hot -- think Matt would mind if I joined in?"

"Don't do that." Tilly shook her head. "I deserve better."

And she did. They had few secrets between them. Tilly was one of the few people--next to Eric--that never judged. She could tell her anything and vice versa.

Maggie sighed. "Dad's throwing a shindig this weekend."

"So? You go to his parties all the time. What's the deal?"

Maggie lifted her chin, gesturing toward the hardback beside Tilly. "What's that you're reading?"

Tilly looked to the book, as if she'd forgotten she'd brought it. "The Great Gatsby."

"What's it about?"

"A guy who can't escape his past and struggles against a bleak future. Sound like anybody you know?"

"No, but it does sound depressing."

A shrug. "This month's choice for the book club. It's been some years, but luckily I've read it before."

Tilly gave her a devilish grin. "So I brought a backup." She lowered the open book to reveal a paperback inside its pages. A thin dime-romance. On the cover was a woman in a tight corset and billowing skirt in the arms of a shirtless, brawny man.

Maggie laughed. "Niiice."

"So." Tilly said, matter-of-factly. "Your dad's party?"

...

...

Tilly gave her a look of impatience. "I showed you mine, now you show me yours."

"The party is for Stephen Walker."

"Didn't he just get elected for city council?"

"Yeah."

Tilly looked at her curiously. "Is he . . .?"

"An associate in my father's law firm."

"And that's bad because . . .?"

"I just didn't want to go to this particular party. Can we leave it at that?"

Tilly nodded, a look of understanding. She eyed the empty bottle by Maggie's bare feet. "I'll get you another."

Maker's Hell

Jags' empathic ability was not without parameters. He'd have to physically touch someone to gain insight into their psyche, spirit and sometimes their destinies. But this psychic ability could not be conjured or manipulated, not as easily as his empathic abilities.

Jags' ability to see the future paled in comparison to his unfiltered empathy.

He found human beings entertaining, interesting, truly cared for their well-being, and reveled in their spirit. The ability to look into another's soul was nothing short of fascinating and a feat that never lost its wonder.

But it wasn't all fun and games.

Jags had learned the hard way that some people were dangerous to read. His brother Cam had taught Jags this lesson. With a simple shake of Cam's hand, he'd pulled Jags so deep into the darkness that he fell into a coma and did not wake for almost two weeks. Ever since, Jags had remained vigilant and reserved with regard to reading strangers.

But, he had to admit, finding restraint was oftentimes difficult, damn near impossible.

Oftentimes, Jags' curiosity just could not be quelled.

The sun was fading, falling numbly beneath the horizon of Interstate 45.

The Chili Peppers played somberly from the truck speakers. Jags lowered the driver's window and spat out his sixth piece of gum.

He fumbled in the open glove box, found a tiny 1.8oz novelty bottle of Jack Daniels. He swigged and tossed it to the passenger floorboard where it landed next to four other empty bottles.

He popped another piece of gum, Melon Berry Slam. A burst of fiery mint exploded in his mouth, making his eyes water. With the heel of his hand, he dried the corner of his eye and relished in the more subtle flavors of strawberry and watermelon.

With his window cracked, the whistling wind whipped Jag's long blond hair about his face. He fumbled in the cupholder and found his Triskelion earring. Made of silver, the Celtic symbol consisted of three spirals, rotating in symmetry. For some, it was a symbol of strength; for others it offered hope in times of great adversity. Jags fingered the earring into his left lobe. He cranked the music louder. And drove the truck faster, racing the setting sun.

He'd get there in time. It wasn't too late.

Blue and red lights flashed in his rear view mirror. Silently, he threw up a prayer to the Maker.

He's not after me. I'll slow down, pull over and he'll pass on by, racing off after some other poor soul.

The cop's siren blasted for a fraction of a second as his front bumper threatened to kiss Jags' rear bumper.

Jags flicked his blinker, slowed and pulled his truck into break down lane. He lowered his driver's side window and watched officer Brian Felding striding toward him.

As the police officer approached, he removed his sunglasses and crouched beside the driver's door. "Jags, how the heck are ya."

Jags offered his hand. "Been better, big guy. Been better."

Brian shook the offered hand. "That why you're going 95 in a 65?"

"Worried about Cam. He skipped town with no explanation."

"Have you filed a missing person's report?"

"Not like that. Just need to find him and make sure he's not up to no good, if you get my drift."

Brian laughed. "Jags, you don't do subtle very well." He raised himself, standing tall now. "How can I help?"

"Really?"

"I owe ya man, you know that."

"You really don't."

The officer crouched again, bringing himself eye level with Jags. "My little girl might not be here if you hadn't warned me about Daryl. Did you know we arrested him last week for solicitation of a minor?"

Jags shook his head. "I hate it when I'm right." Daryl's reading offered nothing in the way of a vision, but his coloring was all wrong. A darkness . . . so dark . . . almost vibrated with a deep purple. All wrong. "I saw Rachel a few days ago. She was pumping gas at the Tank'n'Go, ya know, the one on Meryl street."

"Yeah, that's right by the house."

Jags grimaced. "She's still mad at me."

"Sorry about that, hope she wasn't rude. What can I say? She thinks she loves the guy. Fuckin' guy's my age."

"Scary world."

"Enough about me. How can I help?"

"Need to get to Sam Houston State Park, quick as possible."

Officer Felding gave an approving nod. "Aight." Brian straightened to his considerable full height. He rolled back on the heels of his boots, his right hand forming into a pointing-gun gesture. "Get off the highway. Take the Old Thompson road 'bout a quarter mile up. Stick to the back roads. I'll call Mike and tell him to give ya a wave when ya fly on by--he's the only officer patrolling that route."

"Thanks Brian. I owe ya."

"No. You really don't."

As Officer Brian strode back to his cruiser, Jags sent the Maker a silent prayer of thanks.

A Sense of Calm

“That birdhouse over there - on the pole.” Maggie pointed across the water where a mockingbird poked its head out of a tiny hole. A faded Texas emblem covered one flank of the red birdhouse.

Tilly took an empty beer bottle from the cooler centered in the canoe. She set it down beside four other bottles. “You 3: Me 5.”

She looked up, glanced across the serene lake.

Past Maggie and to the shore. “I spy . . .” Looked to the left. “. . . something . . . big . . . and . . .” Frowned. “That man . . .”

“A man?” Maggie sipped her beer. “I don’t think you’re supposed to tell me what it is you spy. Not how the game works.”

“No. I mean . . . look.” Tilly pointed toward the shore. About a hundred yards away stood a tall man. “Something about him. He looks familiar.” Shrugged. “Might’ve seen him at Chase Industries.”

Maggie used a hand to shield the setting sun from her eyes, peering to get a better view of the mysterious man.

He was huge. No other way to put it. Muscular and tall. Faded blue jeans. Black work boots. Ten o’clock shadow. “Thinking you didn’t see this guy at Chase. Doesn’t look like the computer-geek type.” She bit her bottom lip. “But he does look like my type.”

Tilly gasped, covered her mouth. “He’s got a gun!”

“So does my grandmother. What of it?”

Tilly stood, the sudden movement tossing the small boat into a clumsy rock.

Maggie gripped the sides of the boat, anchoring herself before trying to stand, an effort to balance the teetering boat. “Whoa!”

The boat jolted sideways. A gush of lake water rushed, flooding the bottom of the canoe.

Tilly’s body wavered, her arms flapped haphazardly. “Aaaaaahhhhh!”

Head first, Tilly arrowed into the lake.

Before Maggie could utter a curse, the boat capsized, hurling her body, face-planting into the black water.

A desperate gasp for air.

Water snorted up her nose.

A violent cough.

More water in the mouth!

A gurgle!

Maggie flailed like a mad woman, arms reaching, hands grasping . . . for what . . . which way was the surface . . . nothing but darkness.

She was going to die.

Heartbeat quickened with panic . . . but for only a moment . . . before a strange sense of calm came over Maggie.

Her limbs went still. Lips parted. Water ballooned inside her mouth, sharp pings shot across her chest, lungs tightened with stale air.

Maggie closed her eyes.

And inhaled.

Just Plain Rude

Maggie's eyes opened to a world of shadows. She was floating. No. She was walking . . . being walked. Cradled like a child. Faint starlight swam across her hazy vision; far off voices echoed in her mind. The sounds of the distorted words grew closer then faded away. Something heavy hung from her head . . . it was her own hair, dense and matted, tracing the shallow water and along the matted sand of the bank. Gently, she was laid on her back.

A large copper shadow fell toward her face.

Belched lake water erupted from her mouth and nose. She spat and coughed.

"Is she goin' to be alright?"

Maggie blinked, trying to focus.

"Thought she needed CPR," a deep voice said.

Maggie pushed herself up onto her elbows and craned her neck. The same huge man they'd spotted from the boat was kneeling beside her. A silver chain around his neck dangled a matching silver ring halfway down his bare and wet chest. A significant scar ran along his collar bone. Knife wound?

He said, "All she needs is strong coffee."

Maggie's voice strained, "*She* . . . is right here. And *she* can hear youuuu." She smacked the side of her head, trying to loosen water from her ears.

He shot Tilly a look, who had taken some steps back.

"Like I said, she'll be fine."

"Anybody ever tell you that 80% of alcohol-related boating accidents result in death?" He lifted his gaze, gesturing toward the lake.

Maggie looked across the water where their upside-down boat floated in the middle of the lake, surrounded by dozens of beer bottles. She pushed herself to a sitting position, causing something to fall away from her chest. A floppy straw hat was in Maggie's lap and her string bikini top was twisted out of sorts, exposing half a breast, giving her one heck of a muffin-top. She groaned and awkwardly stuffed herself back into the flimsy bikini. She glanced up and caught the big guy getting an eye full.

Before she could call him on it, he began to climb to his feet, straightening to an impressive six and a half feet, at least.

The man spoke again, more hoarsely, "Take her to the hospital. Just to be sure."

“Um . . . hello? Again . . . *her* . . . right here.”

“Yeah,” he said dryly. Then he crouched and scooped her up. Without a word, he began walking, carrying her along a dirt path.

She nestled into his hold, tucking her head against his bare chest. “You could at least offer to buy me a drink?”

The scent of bourbon wafted from his hot breath. Was he a Jack or Jim kinda guy? She inhaled, reveling in the scent once again. Definitely a Daniels dude.

“Wait!” She squirmed in his embrace. “Where’s my gun?”

His hold tightened. “At the bottom of the lake.”

Shit. An image of fish swimming past the .38 flashed in her mind. Eric would get a kick out of this. Hell, but she’d never tell him. Otherwise, Daddy would find out and that’d be worse than drowning. She could see the headline now. *Mayor’s Daughter Parties at Lake Raven and Almost Drowns. Unregistered firearm found at scene . . .*

Yeah . . . this little incident would stay between her, Tilly and Mr. Huge.

“We appreciate your help.” Tilly followed behind. “But I can take it from here.”

The man kept walking, as if Tilly hadn’t spoken. They walked in silence for a moment before breaking through a thicket of pines and into an empty campsite.

He set Maggie on a picnic table and regarded her with indifference. Hesitated, as if he wanted to say something. But said nothing, just drilled her with the most intense black, empty, doll-like eyes.

Bad boys. Her major fucking weakness. The badder, the better.

Here she goes again.

As if he read her thoughts, a smirk formed on his unshaven face. He ran a hand through his unkempt hair before turning and vanishing back into the thicket of pines.

Tilly knelt on the ground in front of Maggie. She brushed a damp strand from Maggie’s cheek. “You scared the living’ crap outta me. Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Is he coming back?”

“Let’s put some distance between us and him and if you’re up to it, we’ll head back to the cabin.”

“You go,” Maggie said. “I’ll catch up with you.” She stood and staggered toward the greenery where her mysterious rescuer had disappeared.

Tilly popped off the ground, grabbed Maggie by the forearm, forcing her to sit back down. “No way.”

“What?”

"Are you outta your ever-loving mind? Tell me you're not thinking of bedding that man."

Maggie laughed. She scooted off the table, straightened and gazed down at her threadbare bikini. "No. I plan on fucking him."

"You've done some stupid stuff before, Mags . . . but this is over-the-top. Even for you."

"What's your problem?"

"What's my problem? I'll tell you what my problem is -- that man is not to be trusted!"

"I thought you said you recognized him -- "

"That doesn't mean I trust him. I could've seen him at the supermarket or on America's Most Wanted."

"I think you're overreacting."

"I am most certainly not overreacting. But as usual, you're underreacting. Did you see that look he gave you?"

"What look? The 'I'm gonna play hard to get' look?"

"No. The thousand-yard-stare look."

"Then what?"

"One of my patients, Edward Gomez, has it."

"That old fart who falls asleep in his soup and berates you for being a communist sympathizer?"

"I'm serious, Mags. A common symptom of PTSD. It can be some scary shit."

"So you're saying he's not playing hard to get? He's just got issues? Who doesn't?"

"He's not playing a game. He's planning on being the starring role in the next episode of Dateline -- the one where you end up tied up and thrown in the bed of his truck."

Maggie's posture went rigid.

A cold chill.

Blanched.

"I'm sorry," Tilly said, "I shouldn't have said that."

Maggie threw up her hands. "Get to your point."

Tilly extended her arm, pointing to a spot on the underside of her wrist.

Maggie leaned closer, squinting. "What am I looking at?"

"That pink mark. That's where he grabbed me. When I asked if you were gonna be okay. I must have startled him."

"There's no mark." Maggie groaned. "You're just being paranoid, all thanks to your controlling husband."

“Don’t bring Nate into this. This isn’t about him and you know it.”

“You’re right. It’s about you not mother-henning me. And you letting me live my own goddamn life!”

“I just don’t wanna get that 2am phone call. Again! To pick you up at some random bus stop or--”

“That only happened once.”

“Four times in the last eighteen months. You still owe Nate and me \$1500 for bail--but I know you don’t remember cause that asshole Charles had you so doped up you thought I was your third grade teacher Mrs. Hartford. The whole drive back to Cut n’ Shoot you made me recite the multiplication tables. We made it all the way to twelve.”

Maggie could admit her choices in men as of late . . . or just in general, hadn’t been stellar. But everybody went through a few bushels of sour grapes before finding their Dom Perignon.

Tilly had been with her husband since high school. She had no idea what the singles scene was like. Maggie would have explained this logic, but truth was . . . Maggie *had* dragged Tilly through some ugly shit, bad people Tilly didn’t deserve to be with and bad circumstances she surely didn’t ask for.

Maggie sighed. “Okay. Okay . . . You’re right. I’m sorry.”

“It’s not gonna end well one of these times, Mags.” Tilly’s lips pursed into an exaggerated pout.

“I’m just gonna get his number. That’s all. I swear.” Maggie leaned into her friend, lightly pecked her on the cheek. “Butterfly swear.”

“Just his number.”

Maggie put up her hands, a gesture of surrender. “Absolutely Tills, you got it.”

“Fine. I’ll wait here.”

Maggie smiled. “That’s the girl I know and love.” She threw her arms around Tilly and wrapped her into a fierce hug. Her head beside Tilly’s, she whispered in a gracious tone. “Thanks for coming away with me this weekend. I mean, thanks for being there for me.”

Tilly pulled out of the hug. She gave Maggie a weak smile. “Always.”

Here We Go Again

Tilly sat on the picnic bench and crossed her arms. She watched Maggie disappear into the thicket of pines.

Sighed.

Long and loud.

“Here we go again.”

Chapter Two

Not Too Late

Jags veered onto the dirt road marked by the sign: WELCOME TO SAM HOUSTON STATE PARK.

He stopped at the long-arm gate blocking further entry into the campground.

The plexiglass window of the single-man ranger station shack slid up and he was greeted by Ranger Scott, a retiree of some years now.

"Howdy, Jags! I'm surprised to see ya."

"Oh, why's that?"

"Cam checked in yesterday, but he was by himself. Thought it was weird since you're always with him. Ya brother told me you were out of town."

Out of town? "What cabin is he in?"

"Thirty-two. The one you guys seem to always get, you know, the one near #5 boat ramp."

"I know the one. Thanks." He shifted the truck to drive. "Tell Joanne and the kids I said hi."

"Sure will. You go on through now."

The long-arm gate lifted.

Jags drove forward, into the maze of the state park's campground. He thought about Cam and what he might be doing or if he might have already done what he came here to do.

It was late afternoon. Would he just be sitting idly in the cabin?

Jags veered left at the fork and spotted a thirty-something man with two young girls in tow.

He approached slowly and came to a stop beside them. "Excuse me, have you seen a really big guy around here? About six-foot-six, real UFC-looking fellow?"

"Big Monkey-Man!" One of the little girls said. "He's huuuuuge! Like a gorilla."

"Yeah," said the man. "I saw him head down the Cougar #2 trail 'bout thirty-five, forty minutes ago -- toward the lake."

"Thank you kindly."

Ask For My Number

Maggie stepped toward the woods. But only made it a few steps before she heard the big man approaching. His bare feet were now covered with well-worn combat boots, laces loosely tied. A navy tee stretched tight over his muscular chest. Holding a Glock, he stepped in front of her, blocking her path.

Toe-to-toe, she looked up at him. "I'm Maggie."

The man bowed up, moved forward, like he was going to bulldoze right into her, but she held her ground. "This is the part where you tell me your name."

The guy stared at her.

She shrugged. "Or ask for my number?"

With no warning, he bull-rushed past her, causing her to lose her footing and stumble. Groaning, Maggie gripped a tree to right herself and chased after the man, her bare feet padding over dried leaves and twigs with every painful step.

She burst through the thicket of pines, back into the campsite where Tilly waited--not so patiently--on the picnic bench.

The man had walked past Tilly and was several yards away now, walking up the dirt road.

What in the hell was his damn problem? A person tells you their name, it's only polite to return the courtesy. What a dick. Thousand-yard stare or not it was just plain rude!

Her hands went to her hips--Tilly-style--as she stared at the back of his retreating silhouette. Wasn't he attracted to her?

He was gay. What other explanation could there be? She looked down at her emerald bikini, primed the girls, situating herself neatly inside the flimsy fabric. She snapped the slender string holding up her bikini panties.

Gay. Definitely gay. Definitely.

Tilly clapped her hands and stood. "Swing and a miss, Mags. Let's go."

Before Maggie could tell her to fuck off, Mr. Thousand-Yard-Stare turned and ran back toward them.

He wrapped Maggie's hand around the grip of the gun. "We don't know each other. We never met. And this," he moved her hand, the hand holding his Glock, into her naked belly, "isn't mine. Got it?"

A tall lanky figure appeared in the distance.

"Cam!" Lanky ran toward them.

The Darkness Underneath

CAM HAD NO FRIENDS and no job, other than taking care of his aging grandfather. He was filled with a sense of dread and doom, a constant pressing darkness that would not let up . . . ever.

He hated everything.

And everyone.

But his family.

Ajay, Doug, Gramps and Jags. They were his circle, his only circle.

How the hell would he explain . . . everything; the wet clothes, the strange women? At least he had dumped the gun on the redhead. The gun would bring questions, questions he didn't have answers for.

He had gone to this spot on the lake on the anniversary of the end of his father's reign of terror, an end to his life, a life Cam took many years ago and with little to no hesitation and with even less regret.

Head in a fog, he couldn't remember why he had even brought the gun. Couldn't even remember how long he'd been here at the park. Pretty sure he arrived a day and a half ago, but it felt like more than a week had passed.

Darkness.

Hate.

Regret.

Irrational rage.

Made thinking . . . existing . . . exhausting.

Cam had to distract Jags, get him back to the cabin, and all before he saw the women. Because if he saw the women, he'd want to meet them and surely read their future.

Jags loved humans.

That simple.

He found people simply fascinating. And thanks to his almost paranormal gift of soul searching, he could feed this fascination with ease. And had zero self-discipline in this regard. More importantly, he had zero shame.

Jags pinned him with a glare. "Why didn't you tell me?"

“Tell you what?”

“Don’t fuck with me.” Jags held up a scolding finger. “We always go camping together. Why are you here without me?”

Cam gritted, “It ain’t always about you.”

“I know exactly what this is about.” Jags reached for Cam’s wrist, but Cam jumped backward. No way was he gonna let the little shit read his future. “Don’t touch me!”

“You’re hiding something?”

“Not every part of my life . . . of me is your fucking business!”

Jags frowned. “At least tell me why you’re all wet? You try to drown yourself?”

“Drown myself? Fuck no, I was--”

Jags lifted his head, glancing over Cam’s shoulder.

“Tilly!”

And with that he sprinted past Cam and straight for the women.

Fuck.

Embarrassing

Mr. Big turned to face the new guy. He grabbed the lanky guy's arm. "You found me. Now's let's go."

As they walked away, two thoughts crossed Maggie's mind.

Either Mr. Big Cam and Lanky were lovers . . . or --more hopefully -- Mr. Lanky was Cam's parole officer.

As she stood there reeling, she felt Tilly's hand on her shoulder.

"He obviously isn't interested. Stop embarrassing yourself."

"He has to be gay."

"Sure. Whatever you say. Let's go."

"Tilly!" A voice said.

Mr. Lanky had returned and was quickly approaching. Before Tilly could react, he wrapped her in a bear hug. Kissed her cheek. "You here with Nate?"

"Actually no. I'm here with my friend. Jags this is Maggie. Maggie. Jags."

Maggie nodded with a smile. "How do you know each other?"

"He works at Chase," Tilly said.

Jags turned to Maggie with a big ol' silly smile. "It's a pleasure to meetcha, Maggie." He extended an inviting hand.

So adorable! Not her type. But sooooo adorable. Maggie took his hand into hers.

Long Night

Cam watched as Jags lifted the blonde and twirled her in a circle. Of course, he'd know her. He knew everyone. He made it a point to know everyone and everything about everyone. Jags was the biggest nosy-body Cam had ever met.

His body temperature rose; hands began to tremble. He took a deep breath, pushed back the rage and strode toward Jags, determined to drag the little shit with whatever means possible, back to the cabin.

And for what was sure to be one hell of a long night.

Jags turned to Maggie with a big ol' silly smile. "It's a pleasure to meetcha, Maggie." He extended an inviting hand. As they shook, he asked, "What's a sweet thing like you doing with a gun? Cam has the same model. Gen4?"

Would she keep Cam's secret?

She simply shrugged and tried to take back her grasped hand, but Jags held her firm. She looked at him with question and with some alarm, but Jags didn't notice. He was too busy reading her goddamn, fucking future.

Fucking hell!

Jags stumbled, releasing hold of Maggie's hand. His arms swiped through the air as if blind. He tripped and fell into the table. Regaining his balance, he felt his way along the worn wood and sat beside Maggie.

With his head back and his fists balled by his side, he released a guttural groan. A sound so deep and reverberating, almost sounded demonic.

Tilly, Maggie and Cam all watched in silence . . . waiting . . . for Jags to . . . say something . . . do something.

Hugging herself, Maggie stepped away from the table. "What's wrong with him?"

Cam rushed to Jags' side. He gripped his upper arms and gently shook him. "Why do you do this to yourself?"

Jags popped to his feet and brushed past Cam. With careful steps, as if approaching a skittish animal, he neared Maggie and cupped her chin. "So. Much. Pain."

A twinge of possessiveness sparked Cam's temper. His face flushed. Sweat dripped down his forehead. Cam shifted his weight and shook his head.

"He won't give you the end that you seek," Jags said.

She shuddered. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"My brother has been alone too long. You don't know how happy I am to meet you."

Tilly tapped Jags on the shoulder. "He's your brother?"

"Yes."

"I must have seen him at Chase then visiting you. I thought I recognized him." Tilly grimaced. "Didn't you have a vision of what your brother just tried to do?"

"I rarely subject myself to Cam's chi. Too painful."

Cam rolled his eyes. And there it was. The freaky voodoo crap.

"You're all soaked and I don't think it's because you went swimming, since Cam is dressed and so is Tilly. I'm guessing there's an intriguing story to tell." Jags turned toward Tilly, a mischievous smile on his face. "So, the question is what did my brother just try to do?"

"Hold it," Maggie said. "Am I missing something?"

"He tried to kill himself." Tilly pointed to the Glock in Maggie's grip. "With that gun."

Before Cam could say, *'the hell I did'*, Jags' head whipped around and pinned Cam with a disapproving glare.

Jags' brows lowered and the goofy smile on his face turned down. He took the gun from Maggie and bowed at the waist. "Ladies. I bid you farewell."

Cam walked.

Jags followed.

Yup. One hell of a long night.

Chapter Three

One Year Plan

CAM WHIPPED THE SCREEN door open and stormed into the cabin. Planting his palms on the far wall, he hung his head between his arms.

He listened to Jags' work boots thump on the wood-planked floors. With the thud of each step, Cam's rage soared and the familiar symptoms surfaced. His hands shook. Beads of sweat speckled his neck and forehead. A white light pierced his vision. A monster migraine slammed behind his eyes.

Jags' footsteps stopped.

"No psycho-babble bullshit," Cam said. "Not tonight."

Silence.

Cam glanced over his shoulder to find Jags standing in the center of the room. No smile. No scowl. Jags without a hint of his usual animation and goofiness, traits that Cam found comical and sometimes maddening. Jags stepped forward. His leg whipped out and swiped Cam's feet from beneath him.

He landed on his ass. "What the hell!"

With a booted foot, Jags stomped onto his chest.

The air whooshed from Cam's lungs. He stared in disbelief. Sure, they'd wrestled many times, but never with any intent.

Cam grunted as he tried to catch his breath. "I thought you hated violence."

"Of the few times I've been forced into violence, most were because of you." He removed his boot from Cam's chest. "Sometimes I really hate you."

Cam climbed to his feet. He slammed Jags against the wall and gripped him around the neck. Saliva sprayed from his clenched teeth. "Don't fuck with me!"

A steeled fist rammed into Cam's gut.

Cam stumbled backwards. "Shit. I'd hate to think—" He clutched his stomach, gasping. When Jags walked toward him, Cam held up his hands, palms out. "—how'd you'd be if you loved violence."

"Start talking."

Talk. Not Cam's favorite pastime. He slugged Jags across the jaw, a move Jags could've easily blocked but for some reason chose not to.

Stepping backwards, Jags glided a finger over his cut lip. He slid a pack of gum from his pants' pocket and leaned his back against the parallel wall.

"I'm listening."

Cam bent at the waist and braced his hands on his thighs. "Tony didn't drown. I held the fucker's head under the water until I was sure he was dead. And I'd do it again."

If Jags was surprised at this revelation, he didn't show it. "You probably saved Ajay's life."

"For too long, I didn't protect my little brother from that bastard. How pathetic is that?"

"Pathetic is not a word I would ever use to describe you."

Jags' bore into Cam, eyes unblinking, focus intense, obviously trying to read him.

The last time Jags attempted to 'see' him, Jags' fell into a coma. Cam's step brother was extremely sensitive to—what Jags called—the dark side of a person's psyche.

Determined to keep Jags out of his psyche, aura, chi, whatever-the-fuck Jags called it, Cam looked at the ceiling. "Last week I got rear-ended in the Expedition. Turns out it was some old geezer. Couldn't have weighed more than a hundred pounds." Cam covered his mouth with his fist. "I knocked on his window but before I could say a word, the old man burst into tears."

Jags cocked his head, a clear expression of boredom. "Get to the part where you decide death is the only option."

"For fucksakes he pissed himself! And I didn't come here to kill myself."

"You're huge. I probably would've pissed myself too if I didn't know you better, and your 'fuck off' expression doesn't help either. I know you're out of practice but try a smile every once in a while. And yes you did. But you're so far inside yourself you can't see it." Jags pointed to the side of his head. "But I can see it."

Cam sighed, rubbed a hand over his head.

"Keeping it all bottled inside is tearing you apart. Please. Let me in." Jags grimaced. "If you don't, I'll force my way in."

"You wouldn't dare?"

Scoffed. "Try me."

Cam pushed off the wall and paced. "The same demon that made Tony hurt Ajay is in me. I've felt it all my life. I've held it back." Cam faced Jags. "I'm tired of fighting it. And if I stop fighting it, I'll end up hurting somebody, somebody who doesn't deserve it, somebody like that old geezer who fender-bendered the Expedition. Or somebody like Ajay. Maybe I never laid a hand on him, but I never stopped my father from

either.” Resumed pacing. “Gramps needs me and I’d hate to leave him, but I won’t become Tony. I’d rather blow my own fuckin’ head off before I let that happen.” Cam leaned against the wall, propped a foot behind and crossed his arms over his chest.

“Thought you didn’t come here to kill yourself.”

“I didn’t!”

Jags scoffed. “We may not be blood. But you are my brother and I know you would never hurt anyone. Much less, a defenseless elderly man. I don’t need my visions to tell me that.”

“That doesn’t mean—”

Jags cleared his throat. “Adrian cheated on Ajay. I never read her aura, I just sensed she was a conniving little witch and I was right. Some people’s auras are so wicked, I don’t need to be touching them to see the black of their soul.”

“You know that kind of talk freaks me out.”

“Right now, I don’t give a shit. I was right about the waitress at Roxy’s that had a crush on you. I steered her clear. I was right about—”

“Get to the point!”

“I see people for what they are. I’ve never been wrong. And you—” He pointed. “—my friend, are not evil.”

“If you see—” Cam made air quotes. “—people so well, how come you nearly fainted when I told you your girlfriend asked me to fuck her in the backseat of your truck?”

Jags dropped his gaze to the floor. “Hitting below the belt, buddy.”

“I’d call her a cunt, but she lacks the depth and warmth.”

“We’re getting off topic. My point is that if you were a monster, like Tony, I would have sensed it. You think I could be around you, if your soul was colored with the same kind of evil that painted Tony’s?”

Cam tapped the back of his head against the wall. “You just don’t get it.”

“What I get is that you need a solid fucking.”

Cam groaned. “We’re not goin’ there.”

Some years back, Cam had walked in on his girlfriend fucking a bald-headed punk and he beat the guy until the police pulled him off. The fucker lay in the hospital for a week. Worth every one of the hundred and seventy-six days he served in Huntsville State Prison but not an experience he cared to repeat.

From that moment on, to keep others safe, Cam had vowed a life of celibacy and solitude.

“Did you know that societies where premarital sex is discouraged have more crime and incidents of violence?”

Clasping his hands behind his head, Cam traipsed back and forth, his boots thudding on the floor. “Shut the fuck up.”

“Did it ever occur to you that your aggression worsened when you decided to keep your pecker to yourself? Need more reasons to keep your head on your shoulders? I’ll give you a few. Gramps. Dad. Ajay. And yours truly.” In front of his mouth, Jags steepled his fingers. “I’ll admit that you have a great pain hiding in your psyche.”

“Enough with the psycho-babble bullshit! I killed my own father and don’t have an ounce of regret.”

Jags hung his head and snickered. “If you had no regret, we wouldn’t be here right now.” He pierced Cam with that familiar all-knowing, cocky look. “Give me a year. If you’re still convinced you’re a menace, I’ll shoot you myself.”

“You expect me to believe that load of horseshit?”

“The details of the plan. First, you’re going to get laid, as soon as possible. Second, you’re gonna get off your ass and make the repairs needed on the old Copper Creek place and turn it into the best restaurant this side of Houston. You need a life other than taking care of Gramps.”

“I won’t leave him alone.”

“Lest I remind you that less than an hour ago you were prepared to shoot your brains out, thus leaving him very alone.”

“For the last time, I didn’t try to kill myself!”

“No. Sale. Not buying it.”

Cam shook his head. “I cannot hammer nails into a wall, stock glassware and plan a dinner menu if I’m constantly worried about Gramps.”

“Gramps won’t be alone. Leave that to me.”

“I don’t like the sound of that.”

With three large and graceful strides, Jags crossed the room and set his hand on Cam’s shoulder. Heat warmed the muscles in Cam’s neck and arms. His legs weakened. An invigorating chill ran through him, like taking a deep breath after sucking on a peppermint; except his whole body felt electrified, not just his mouth.

Cam collapsed onto his ass. “How the hell do you do that?”

Jags crouched and bounced on his haunches. "It might have something to do with all the pussy I get. It doesn't leave room for aggression, only peace, a peace I am more than happy to transfer to you." He offered his hand. "Do we have a deal?"

"I don't know how to live."

"I'm going to teach you."

"I don't like the sound of that."

"One year."

Cam sighed.

"Please." Jags nodded at his own outstretched hand.

Jags didn't wear his emotions on his sleeve. He showcased them in neon flashing lights. His unearthly compassion might as well have been stamped on his forehead. He wasn't an open book; more like a 3D IMAX blockbuster.

Jags waggled his fingers, urging Cam to accept his hand. His eyes glimmered with moisture. "One year."

Cam laced his fingers behind his neck. "I don't want to hurt you. I don't want to hurt anybody."

"Hearing you nearly blew your head off, blew a cannon through the center of my chest. It was kind of painful. Now stitch me up. Accept my hand and give me one fucking year." Tilting his head, he flashed a wide smile, teeth clenched, like a child forced to smile for school pictures.

With a grimace and a nod, Cam shook Jags' hand and clapped him on the shoulder. "Brothers."

Jags curled his fingers around Cam's forearm. "Always."

Call of the Wild

On a cot in the screened-in cabin's porch, Jags slept soundly.

Until . .

his cell rang.

He slid his phone from beneath his pillow. "Ajay?"

"What happened to him?" Ajay asked.

Over the phone, in the distance, Jags heard a woman's voice. "Milk's expired. We should grab some when we go out."

"Do I need to come home?" Jags' step brother asked. "Anyone making arrangements yet? Y'know I'm not good at that shit, Jags. Fuck---Fuck!!"

"You buy off-brand java?" the woman said, "Who does that?"

"Arrangements?" Jags rubbed sleep from his eyes. "What are you--"

"Funeral arrangements," Ajay said. "Goddamn. Are you high Jags?"

"How do you take your coffee?" she asked.

"Who's making the arrangements?" Ajay repeated. ". . . With a splash of Jack."

Jags blinked. "Who's with you?"

"Have any sugar?" came her distant voice.

"Check the pantry," Ajay said. ". . . where's the service being held? And please don't tell me Reverend Lewis's church or I fucking swear I'll punch that hypocritical piece of shit right in his holy balls next time I see 'im."

"Have you seen my phone?" the woman asked.

Jags shook the fog of sleep from his head. "Calm down. Cam isn't dead. He's very much alive. No funeral services required."

"Look in the goddamn bedroom," Ajay growled. "Wait . . . what? What ya mean he's fine? Cam isn't dead?"

"Never mind," she said, "I found it."

"The bastard didn't off himself?" Ajay asked.

"You promised to make breakfast," the woman said.

"No. No, Cam didn't off himself," Jags said into the phone. "He's still with us--"

“Bitch! I didn’t promise you a goddamn lick of shit,” Ajay bit out. “You got a free ride on the A-Tram Express and no I don’t want any fuckin’ coffee and especially with fuckin’ sugar! Do I look like a pussy?”

“Is this a bad time?” Jags asked.

“No! It’s fine. Sides, Jags --- I called you. You ain’t so smart as you think huh But I’m glad Cam is okay.”

The woman ground out a sigh. “You don’t have to be a prick about it.”

“Fuck you too!” his brother yelled.

“It’s three in the morning,” Jags said, “I’m beat.”

“Ugh, I can’t believe I slept with you!” the woman said.

Jags heard a door slam.

“Get the fuck outta here,” Ajay said.

“ I’ll call ya later.” Jags hung up.

Chapter Four

Chances Are

FOUR DAYS AND nothing. Cam hadn't heard from or seen Jags. Normally, they spoke two or three times a day and if not, he'd surely get an in-person visit. What if he was sick? Had he been in a car accident?

Cam crossed the cavernous living room into the kitchen. He washed his hands and dried them on his jeans.

Pressing his palms on the yellow cracked counter, he hung his head and sighed.

Until now, he hadn't realized how much he took Jags' visits and phone calls for granted.

Dammit!

As he slid his phone from his pocket and dialed Jags' number, he heard the unmistakable rumble of Jags' loud exhaust. He pressed the red oval ending the call.

His stepbrother bounced through the door and entered the kitchen. Cam leaned back, his ankles crossed and his hands gripping the edge of the counter behind him.

"You need a life too." Jags yanked open the refrigerator.

"Get me one."

"A life or a beer?"

"Never had a life," Cam said. "Just need a beer."

Jags grabbed two bottles, shut the door and popped the caps. "Sit. We need to talk."

"I hate when you say that."

Jags set the bottles on the table, turned a chair and straddled it backwards. Balancing his chin on the chair back, he said, "What? That dreaded four-letter word?" He cupped his hands around his mouth. "Talk."

"Shouldn't you be at work?"

"I'm on my lunch hour."

Cam pulled a foil-topped dish from the refrigerator. He put the casserole in the microwave, set the timer and plunked down in a chair.

"Is that the spicy chicken and sausage casserole?" Jags asked.

"Meatloaf."

Jags rubbed his hands together. "Fantastic."

“Talk.”

“I think we should hire a visiting nurse to help you with Gramps.”

Heat flashed through Cam’s body. His pulse raced. A blinding headache blurred his vision. “No.” Cam inhaled a deep breath, pushing the rage back. Rubbing his temples, he said, “His mind slips further every day. Things you’d never suspect, tip his world upside down, and a stranger wouldn’t know how to deal.”

“Like what?”

“A game of checkers will bring him to tears and only one thing will help is a shot of Glenlivet.”

“I thought checkers was he and Meemaw’s favorite game?”

“Yup. He breaks down every time he’s reminded of her. A year after she and mom disappeared, I took down all her photographs and boxed up her clothes. He still breaks down . . . just not as often.” Cam stopped rubbing his temples. He grimaced and looked his brother up and down. “You’ve lost more weight.”

“I can’t shake the nightmarish visions. I know it’s something to do with Meemaw and Mom’s disappearance. Every time the vision comes close to conclusion I black out.” Jags paused. A weak smile formed on his face. “But I’m getting closer to figuring it out. I think two people were involved.” He pressed the heels of his hands against his closed eyes. “As soon as I begin to feel Meemaw’s and mom’s suffering I snap out of it and then—”

“Let’s not do this. I prefer you to be conscious and alert, not comatose.”

Jags blew out a breath. “You’re right.” The bell dinged on the microwave. He wiped a tear from his cheek, grabbed a fork and the casserole and plunked down at the table. “Where were we?”

“Checkers.”

“Right,” Jags said. “We’ll make sure they know not to play checkers with him.”

“What happens when he starts quoting lines from Richard III, or starts singing Chances Are? I’ll tell you what’ll happen. They’ll try to admit him to a loony bin.” He pointed. “Which I will never let happen.” Cam gulped his beer. “Besides, we can’t afford it and I’m managing fine on my own.”

“He’s not even your grandfather.” Jags leapt to his feet. “I can’t believe I just said that.” His hands went to his head. He scrunched his long hair in his hands.

Years ago, the marriage between Cam’s mother and Jags’ father melded their families. Biologically, Gramps and Jags were no relation to Cam, but Cam loved them like family. Until now, he thought the feeling was mutual. “Neither can I.” Cam took another swig. He set the bottle down harder than he’d intended.

“I’m sorry.” Jags clapped Cam on the back. “You know that’s not what I meant.”

Cam shrugged off the gesture. “You could’ve called. You didn’t have to drive all the way over here.”

“You’re ten minutes from work and if I called,” Jags sat down and shoveled more meatloaf into his mouth, “I’d be eating a microwaved hamburger and cold French fries in the cafeteria right now.”

Cam slouched and waited for his brother to inhale more food than he and Gramps combined could’ve eaten.

When Jags devoured the last bite, he slid the dish away.

Cam asked, “Why a visiting nurse when I’m handling things fine on my own?”

“The plan was to get you a life other than Gramps. You never leave here. You don’t work. You don’t play. You don’t date.”

“You know why I don’t date.”

“Yes well, that’s a fight for another day,” Jags said. “Today, I just want to get you to have a beer with me.”

“We are having a beer.”

“I was thinking of a place with pool tables, country music, and scantily clad ladies.” Jags glanced around the room. His nose scrunched. “A place that smells like stale beer and cigarettes, not old people funk.”

“I don’t smell anything.”

“You need to get out more than I thought.”

“We’re done here.” Cam strode to the doorway and with his back against the door jamb propped a foot behind and crossed his arms over his chest.

Jags brought his plate and fork to the sink and nodded as he passed. “I gotta get back to work.”

“Jags?”

Pausing on the front stoop, he looked over his shoulder. “Yeah?”

“I mean it,” Cam said. “No visiting nurse.”

Jags winked and closed the door behind him. “See you at six.”

“Jaaaaaags!”

My Sweet

RANE GLANCED AT THE room number and back at the postcard. Approaching room 21B, he opened the door and entered. The room housed five round tables that each sat six people. A blue folder was set before each seat. A crisply dressed man, probably the instructor, sat in a cushioned chair at the front of the room.

Rane chose a table in the corner. His boss had requested he attend the seminar. Star felt he needed to improve his communication skills and be more social. Problem was he had no interest in making friends. He valued privacy and solitude.

As the room filled with more people, Rane used the complimentary pen and doodled on the back of his folder. He sketched the face of the only person he'd ever loved—his mother. Thin lips. Sunken cheeks. Pale complexion. The cancer had stolen the sparkle in her eyes and the warmth of her skin. He scowled at his depiction of his sickly mother. Tightening his grip, he stabbed the pen into the folder and scribbled over the drawing.

To clear his mind, he approached a nearby water cooler and poured himself a cup. As he sipped, he noticed a young woman entering the room.

Rane shook his head. Too fat. He took his seat and studied the door, watching more people arrive. Another woman entered.

Too old.

The well-dressed man stood and stepped behind a wooden pedestal. "Welcome to Successful Communications in the Workplace. I'm Lorenzo Parker and I'll be your instructor for the next three days. Working amicably and effectively with others can be one of the most challenging aspects of your job."

A woman with shoulder-length brown hair entered the room. She gave the class and instructor an apologetic grin and took a seat near the front of the room.

"Especially," Mr. Parker continued. "If you work with someone who consistently arrives late." He gave her a smile and turned his focus back to the room. "Inside your folder, you'll find a stack of papers, the first being a questionnaire. I'll give you twenty minutes to complete it." He looked at his watch. "And the clock starts now." Everyone removed their questionnaires. The papers rustled in unison.

Rane's focus drifted to the woman who'd arrived late. Her name was Jewel Albright and she had made the fourth, fifth and sixth grade a living hell. After searching for years, a stroke of dumb chance had brought her to him. He should buy a lottery ticket.

Four hours passed and he hadn't heard a word the instructor said. His mind raced with visions of all the ways he planned to fuck her. Usually, he kept a woman for a month or so, before handing her to his friend Kipp. But Jewel was different. He may keep her for a while and make Kipp wait.

Assorted breads, deli meats and cheeses were brought in for lunch. Rane watched Jewel fix herself a plate. When she passed him on her way back to her seat, she said, "Anybody ever tell you it's rude to stare?"

"Thought I recognized you."

"I'm certain we've never met."

"No, I guess not."

The smirk on her face mirrored the expression she gave him long ago, the day the bullies of the school beat him, stripped him nude and tied him to the flagpole.

Jewel was the first to walk by, probably because her boyfriend Ajay had bragged about their misdeed. When everyone else just chanced a brief look, she stopped, pointed at his penis and laughed. Using a black Sharpie, Jewel drew a down arrow on his stomach. Above the arrow, she wrote *supersize me*.

After the sixth grade, Jewel and her family moved away and he hadn't seen her since. Not until today. And as luck would have it, she didn't recognize him.

He hated her and blamed her for much of his childhood misery, Ajay was Rane's major pain in the ass. The leader of the Hell Pack had made Rane's life miserable right up until the day Rane moved and transferred to Trenton High.

Rane waited for everyone to get their food before approaching the long table. Bypassing the meats and cheeses, he filled his plate with three mini chocolate cupcakes, two peanut butter cookies and one sugar cookie then carried his plate to his seat. His hand hovered over a peanut butter cookie then glided over a chocolate mini cupcake. Smiling, he selected the sugar cookie and took a bite. The sweet goodness overloaded his sensitive taste buds. He moaned.

My sweet.

I Won't

Outside, a door slammed. Cam brushed the blue drapes aside and peered out the bay window. Jags waved as he circled his truck and approached the door.

Fuck!

Without knocking, Jags strode through. He crouched beside the recliner and rubbed Gramps' balding head.

Gramps rubbed his eyes and stretched. He frowned. "Cam?"

"Try again."

"Ajay?"

"Nope."

Gasping, Gramps covered his mouth. "Jags!" He opened his arms and they embraced.

Shaking his head, Cam entered the kitchen. Jags followed.

Cam leaned against the counter and crossed his arms. "Why you back?"

Jags opened the refrigerator and grabbed a beer. He set the bottle on the table and straddled a chair backwards.

Cam downed much of his beer in one long guzzle. "So it's six. What're you doing here?"

Jags lifted his bottle and nodded. "Cheers." He sipped his beer.

A quiet knock resounded.

The chair scraped on the tile floor as Jags jumped to his feet. He jogged through the dimly-lit living room and opened the front door. "Tilly."

"Hello."

Jags swept his arm across his chest, stepped aside and bowed. "Come in."

"Thank you."

Jags guided her into the kitchen. "Cam. I believe you know Tilly. She's a nurse." Jags sported a wide grin.

Cam narrowed his eyes.

Tilly sat on one of the rusted metal chairs surrounding the card table. She slid a folder from under her arm. "I have references." She fanned the sheets across the table.

Cam didn't much like all that voodoo crap, but on the rare occasion, it did have its advantages. Jags' empathic abilities trumped any reference she could produce. If Jags trusted her, so would he.

Tilly said, "From what Jags told me about Gramps I think he and I will get along quite well. I just happen to love *Chances Are*."

Jags said, "She'll come every Monday, Wednesday and Friday."

Cam grimaced. "On whose dime?"

"Mine," Jags said. "She's going to sit with him, make sure he doesn't burn down the house and anything else you need. You just have to let her know. She'll be here from six to eight. And what do you know? Today's Wednesday." He looked at his watch. "And it's 5:57."

Cam jumped from his chair. He grabbed Jags by the scruff of his shirt and held him against the wall. "Swear to me you can afford this."

Calmly, Jags gently brushed Cam's hands from his shirt. He clapped Cam on the shoulder. "I swear. Now let's go get drunk." He gripped Tilly's hand. "Where's my manners? Nice to see you again."

When she tugged from his grasp and failed, Cam bopped Jags on the head. "Do you have to do that to everybody?"

Jags let go of her hand and stepped backwards. Tears streamed down his cheeks. Curling his fingers in front of his lips, he bit into his knuckle. "Please God, no."

Tilly frowned. "What did you see?"

More tears fell. "I'm so sorry."

Tilly tucked a lock of her short blond hair behind her ear. "I can handle it. Tell me."

Jags shook his head.

She grimaced. "Does something terrible happen to me or Nate?"

Red, swollen eyes narrowed on her.

"The triplets?"

"Who're the triplets?" Cam asked.

"Nate's younger brothers," Tilly said without taking her eyes off Jags. "Does something happen to the triplets?"

Jags shook his head.

"Nate's sister?" Jags shook his head.

"My sister, my parents, Nate's parents." With a frustrated groan, she gripped his arms and shook him. "Tell me, dammit!"

“I won’t.”

Tilly took a deep breath. When she glanced toward Cam he offered her a small smile. He felt for her but Cam was used to Jags’ stubbornness. Jags rarely revealed what he saw in his visions and nobody knew why; just the way he’d always been.

“We’ll go have a beer,” Cam said.

Nodding, Jags lifted his shirt and wiped at his tears.

Cam tilted his head toward the living room. “Have a seat, Tilly. Got some things to go over with you.”

With a forced smile, she followed Cam and sat on the faded blue sofa. From the end table, he picked up the notebook where he’d jotted down Gramps’ quirks and how to deal with them. He also listed Gramps’ medications, when and how much to administer and possible side effects.

Halfway through the notes, Cam noticed Jags peering through the curtain of the living room window then glance at his watch. He’d grown impatient but Cam didn’t give a shit. Jags probably thought he was overprotective when it came to Gramps and maybe he was but he had no plans on changing.

Ten minutes later, Cam and Jags headed out the door. Two steps down the walkway, Jags turned and went back to the house. He cracked the door and peeked his head inside. “The vision had nothing to do with any of your or Nate’s living relatives. I’m sorry I can’t tell you more but does knowing that much make you feel better?”

She gave him a small smile. “I suppose.”

“The future cannot be changed. Worrying about it will only waste energy and time.”

“I understand but it’ll be hard not to think about it.”

“Can you at least promise you’ll try?”

She grimaced. “Sure thing.”

Don't Get all Mushy on Me

Two nights ago, Maggie had woken from a nightmare, a gory visual of a bullet exploding through Cam's head. She had sat up and wrapped her arms round her waist, desperate to rid her body of a tortuous chill. Her body, slick with sweat, had shivered uncontrollably from the cold consuming her.

Even her teeth chattered.

Fourteen years ago, her uncle had killed himself and her father still mourned the loss. She didn't know Jags or Cam well, but if she could spare another family the grief her family still suffered, she'd do almost anything.

The day after her vivid nightmare, Maggie talked to Tilly and found out she could help Cam in two ways. For the first, she'd need her father's help. But for the second, well . . . that required seduction, an art she'd mastered long ago.

Maggie entered the spacious home office. A rectangular maroon rug covered most of the walnut laminate flooring. On the wall behind the desk hung a portrait of their family dog, Jimmy, the sweetest cocker spaniel ever born on this planet. He died last year of old age. His custom-made doghouse remained by the back door under the overhang.

"Daddy?" She circled the mahogany desk, her fingertips gliding along the dark wood.

"Uh oh." He pushed from his desk and swiveled toward her. "You only call me Daddy when you need something or you're in trouble. Which is it?"

She walked behind the distinguished gray-haired man, circling around to the front of the desk and dropped into an oversized leather seat opposite her father. "Busted."

He rolled his chair back to the desk. "Spit it out."

"You know the old Copper Creek place?"

"The abandoned restaurant off Highway 105?"

"I need it rezoned."

"Why?"

"The person who bought it can't get the permits needed for repairs because it's zoned as a historical building."

He palmed his forehead. "I miss the days when all you asked for was money."

Maggie rolled her eyes. "Can you do it or not?"

He clasped his hands on the desk, a silver thick ring on each hand, one high school, one college. "Tell me about this friend."

"What do you want to know?"

"For starters, his name."

She frowned. "Why do you assume my friend's a man?"

He gave her a sidelong look.

"Fine." Maggie sighed. "It's a man."

"Now that we've established the gender of said person . . ." He slid a narrow drawer open and retrieved a black marbled notebook and matching pen. He fanned the pages and tore out a clean sheet. Pen in hand, he said, "Name?"

"Shit."

He scribbled 'Shit' and peered at her. "Does Shit have a last name?"

"That's the problem." She groaned. "I forgot to ask Jags what his last name was."

Rocking back in the executive chair, he dropped the pen. "Not exactly what a father likes to hear from his daughter."

She didn't have the best reputation in town, and until now, hadn't realized her father knew it too.

"And what the heck is a Jags?" he asked

"He's Cam's stepbrother, the one who needs Copper Creek rezoned."

"And this Cam is?" He arched his brows.

"Just a friend."

"Really?"

She groaned. "Yes really."

His brows furrowed. "Is he gay?"

"I don't really know him. He's a friend of a friend."

"Let me get this straight. You want me to rezone said property for a man who is a friend of a friend?"

"Can you help or not?"

"Under one condition." Pointing a finger, he said, "Get a job."

"Not this again."

"You can't live off me the rest of your life. You're twenty-five. It's time to grow up. Do we have a deal or not?"

It was then she noticed the leather band on her left green sandal had a tear. She'd have to go to the mall today and get a new pair. Hopefully, they still carried this style.

"Yeah, deal," she said, her focus still on her sandal.

She looked up and absorbed the disappointment painted in her father's eyes. "So, you'll help Cam?"

He swiveled toward his monitor. "Only because the place is an eyesore and I'd like to see it restored."

Maggie skipped around the desk. From behind, she hugged him. "Thank you, Daddy."

"I'm not making any promises." His words blurred against her arm.

"One more thing."

He swiveled toward her. "How much?"

"A thousand should do it."

He turned back to his keyboard. "I'll have it wired this afternoon."

She kissed him on the cheek and quietly stepped toward the hallway, paused in the threshold. "You're the best."

He waved her on. "Yeah. Yeah. Don't get all mushy on me."

She hid a smile. "Wouldn't dream of it."

Chapter Five

She Did Help You

CAM STOOD IN THE CORNER of the dark living room, hiding in the shadows while Jags burst through the front door.

“Hey Gramps.” His almond carpenter pants hung loose.

Damn. Cam silently vowed to put some weight on that boy.

On the front of Jags’ shirt was a large winking eye and above was written: “I’m not wearing any undies.” A silver loop earring dangled in one ear and a silver stud in the other.

Jags kissed Gramps on the top of his head. “Where’s Cam?”

“Who’s Cam?” Strings of gray resembling guitar strings crossed over Gramps’ head.

“The miserable SOB who makes you the to-die-for smoothies.”

“Oh, Cam.” Gramps frowned. “Who are you?”

He kissed the top of Gramps’ head again. “Someone who loves you.”

“Jags!”

“Gramps!”

They hugged.

“Did you bring me any cigarettes?” Gramps asked.

“You don’t smoke.”

“I don’t?”

“No. But you’ve been smoking, haven’t you?”

Gramps sighed. “What gave me away?”

“I can smell it an ocean away. Who’s getting them for you?”

“I don’t remember.”

Cam stepped from the shadows and walked toward the kitchen.

“I need to talk to you,” Jags said.

Cam groaned.

“I know,” Jags said. “I used the four-letter word you hate so much.”

Cam leaned against the counter, a bottle of beer in his hand. "It's only 12:15 so you're not here to go out drinking. You must've had another vision. I'm not interested. I don't care if you saw the President of the United States being eaten alive by giant beetles." He took an angry swig of his beer.

"The first time I touched Maggie I had a vision of you and her at Critters. You had a man pinned to the wall. And you were pissed as hell."

"You hardly ever tell me about your visions. Why now?"

"I also saw Maggie hiking with a little girl. They get hurt real bad. I want you to take her hiking and teach her the basics."

Cam took another swig. "What for? The future can't be changed. You said so yourself."

"There's more to this than you know. Just trust me."

"Why don't you take her hiking?"

"Because I don't think Lori would appreciate it," Jags said.

"You've been dating for a week. Give me a break."

Jags dated a lot of women but never got serious with any of them, as to why, Cam had no clue. Jags was sensitive and kind and Cam was sure he'd make some woman very happy. Why hadn't Jags let himself get close to any of the many women he dated? At least he wasn't like his other brother Ajay, who would donate a kidney if it meant he'd get laid.

"This screams setup," Cam said.

"She did help you."

"Help me?"

A slow smile formed on Jags' face. "Any news on the rezoning quest?"

"My lawyer called yesterday. My petition finally went through." Cam smirked. "But something tells me you already knew that."

Jags opened the refrigerator and grabbed a bottle. He plunked down at the table, popped the cap and sipped his beer. "Maggie's father is Mayor Stewart. I told her about my vision and that if she'd talk to her father on your behalf, you'd teach her to hike."

A burst of heat swept over Cam's body. Sweat bubbled on his forehead. His hands trembled. He forced back the rage and growled, "Why did you do that when you know I can't leave Gramps alone?"

Jags popped from his chair and leaned against the counter beside Cam. Shoving an elbow into Cam's side, he said, "Take Maggie hiking. A couple of days doing something you love to do anyway. What's the worst that can happen?"

“Do I really have to answer that? What about my waking nightmares?”

“Separate tents,” Jags said.

Gramps, Ajay, Dad and he were pawns Jags used to contort life to his musings. Cam would die for Jags without a second’s pause, but his tireless pursuit to mold Cam’s life was positively fucking frustrating.

“Listen,” Jags said. “Write down everything I need to know about Gramps. I promise I’ll follow your instructions to the letter. If it’ll make you feel better, I’ll ask Dad to help out.”

Cam couldn’t remember the last time he hadn’t succumbed to Jags’ whims. For whatever reason, he just couldn’t say no to him, but he took comfort in knowing most people had the same affliction when confronted with Jags’ unwavering tactics.

“I don’t want you bothering Dad.” Cam’s knuckles curved under his chin. “I’ll think about it.”

“Okay.”

“That’s code for I’ll come back to haunt you if you don’t do it.”

“Save us both the time and just do it.” Jags opened a drawer, fished out a pen and wrote on Cam’s forearm.

“That’s her cell number.”

Cam turned. With his hands braced on either side of the stainless-steel sink, he hung his head. “I hate you.” He spoke the words even and slow.

“I love you.” Jags clapped Cam on the back. “Brothers.”

Cam groaned. “Fuck off.”

Hello?

CAM EMPTIED THE DRYER, folded the clothes and put them away. After playing poker all afternoon with Gramps, he made a peanut butter and banana sandwich and set it on his tray stand. Cam's cell rang. "Yup."

"Cam?"

"Yup. Who's this?"

"Maggie. We met last weekend. You remember? The day you tried to shoot your head off."

He scowled at the phone and brought it back to his ear. "How the hell did you get this number?"

"Jags," Maggie said. "He said he had a vision of me getting hurt and I should learn to hike and that you would teach me."

Cam rolled his head and cracked his neck. His stomach churned. Heat coursed through his body. Pain drummed behind his eyes, giving him the mother of all migraines. "Jags was mistaken." Cam grabbed a bottle of beer from the bottom shelf of the refrigerator. "Hello?"

"I could have those permits revoked."

His hands, damp with perspiration, shook as he popped the cap. "You bi—"

"Don't say it."

Cam chugged his beer as he crossed the room and sank onto the sofa. "It's not that I don't appreciate what you did. I don't know what Jags told you but I'm not an expert hiker. You should hire somebody who is."

"That's not the only reason I want you to take me hiking. I thought maybe we could be friends."

For the first time in a long while, Cam considered the possibility death might not be the only option. Running his restaurant would be distracting and a good avenue to vent some of his unwarranted and unreasonable anger.

But two obstacles stood in his path; finding time in between caring for Gramps, and a hot saucy redhead who wanted to be friends. Would she really revoke the permits if he didn't take her hiking? He threw an arm over his eyes. "Want to go hiking?"

"This weekend good for you?"

Cam dragged his hand through his hair. "Sixty percent chance of rain this weekend."

"I have tennis every weekend," Maggie said. "I already cleared my schedule."

He covered his mouth with his fist. "How many miles were you thinking?"

"I don't know. Something we could do in two days. Start Friday. Get back Sunday."

"Have you ever been on an overnight hike?"

"No."

"The only restroom for miles is a hole in the ground."

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...

"Hello?"

"I'm okay with that."

"Do you have hiking boots?"

"No."

"Buy some. Today. Wear them as much as possible for the next three days. Sleep with them on. If you get a blister halfway through, I'm not carrying your ass the rest of the way. I will leave you wherever you drop."

"Are you always this charming? Or am I special?"

"I'm not trying to be a dick, but I am not friend material. I'm doing this as a thanks for helping me and because I don't want to see you get hurt while hiking, but that's as far as this goes. We will never be friends."

"Sure BFF."

"Separate tents."

"Got it."

"Come Sunday we're even," Cam said. "I owe you nothing. I'm paid in full."

"What time on Friday?"

"Noon. What do you have for supplies?"

"A sleeping bag. I could probably borrow a tent."

Cam sighed. "Get a pen and paper. I'll wait."

Seven White and Seven Black Roses

AFTER WORK, Jags drove to Conroe's Flowers & More. Approaching the counter, he stretched out his hand. "Good afternoon, Charlie."

The elderly man rocked back on his heels. He shook Jags' hand. Yellowed crooked teeth showcased a genuine smile. "Mr.—"

"Damn it. I told you to call me Jags."

"Jags. I've your order right here." Charlie pulled a bouquet of flowers from under the counter, seven black and seven white roses.

"Sure appreciate it." Jags took the flowers. "Charge it to my account."

Charlie waved. "See you next Tuesday."

Jags set the roses across his lap. He shifted to drive and drove to Oak Creek Cemetery. Upon arriving, he climbed out of the truck and strolled through the sea of headstones.

When he found Keith Hammond's grave, he knelt on one knee and bowed his head. "I beg your forgiveness. I will carry the injustice until my heart stops beating."

After laying the fresh roses down, he grabbed the wilted flowers he'd left last Tuesday, stood and walked to the woods edge. He came upon a shallow hole. Dropping to his knees, he pulled a lighter from his pocket and lit the wilted flowers on fire. "I beg your forgiveness. I will carry the injustice until my heart stops beating."

The ashes grew cold before he climbed to his feet and strode back to his truck. He folded his arms over his head and leaned against the driver's door, his forehead pressed against his forearm.

"God help me."

Chapter Six

You Don't Fuckin' Smoke

CAM SAT ON THE sofa and yawned. He was tired after tossing and turning all night, dreading the idea of leaving Gramps' care to his irresponsible brother. He slid his phone from his pocket and checked the time. Jags was forty minutes late, not surprising. Maggie hadn't arrived yet and for some reason that hadn't surprised him either.

Cam heard a knock and cursed under his breath. Whipping the door open, he said, "About friggin'—" He could overlook the green T-shirt with 'Princess' spelled out in silver glitter, but her green beaded necklace and emerald loop earrings warranted a significant smirk.

Maggie's red hair draped down and over her shoulders. Soft curls framed face. Lull lips formed a sexy smile and he grew erect. Three days alone in the woods with her. Why the hell had he agreed to this? Vow of celibacy. The thought slammed into his consciousness like a wet rag. "Dammit."

"Something wrong?" she asked.

"I'm gonna be a minute." He walked to the bookcase behind Gramps' recliner, propped a booted foot behind and crossed his arms over his chest. "Jags isn't here yet."

She followed him inside. Her gaze settled on Gramps. "Are you going to introduce us?"

"He won't remember you five minutes from now."

"Introduce us anyway."

Cam stretched out his hand, his expression one of boredom. "Gramps, this is Maggie."

"Did you bring me any cigarettes?"

Cam said, "You don't fuckin' smoke."

"I don't?"

"We both know you've been smoking. Where did you get the cigarettes from?"

"Cigarettes? I don't smoke."

Cam groaned.

Jags rushed through the front doorway. He wore an Affliction-Brandon red shirt, mid-rise maroon sneakers and a silver hoop earring in each of his ear lobes. "Hey sweetness." He hugged Maggie and crouched beside Gramps.

“Did you bring me any cigarettes?”

Jags sighed. “You quit smoking. Don’t you remember?”

“I did?”

Jags glanced up at Cam. “One of these days we’re going to figure out who’s getting him the cigarettes.”

“And then beat the piss out of ‘em.” Cam pulled a tray stand in front of Gramps. On top was an untouched sandwich. He would feel a fuck load better if Gramps would eat before he left with Maggie.

Gramps said, “I don’t like peanut butter and banana sandwiches.”

“You love ‘em.”

Gramps shoved the plate away. “Get this horse manure away from me.”

Cam slid the plate back. “Take a bite. You’ll see.”

Maggie walked toward the kitchen. “I’ll make him a sandwich. What kind does he like?”

He stormed after her, infuriated she had the nerve to butt her nose where it didn’t belong. As if she would know more than he, what Gramps liked or needed.

“I can take care of it myself,” Cam growled. “And he likes peanut butter and banana sandwiches.”

Maggie opened the pantry and scanned the shelves. “It would seem he doesn’t.”

“Mind your own damn business.”

Maggie closed the cabinet door and walked to the living room. She grasped Gramps’ bony hand, kissed him on the cheek and nipped at the sandwich, gagging as she swallowed.

“It’s good. Want a bite?”

Gramps patted their clasped hands. “What a sweet girl?” He glanced up at Cam. “She’s a fine woman.”

Cam allowed himself a laugh. Damn, it felt good. He had her pegged as a conceited snob who thought of nobody but herself. Here she was, bewitching his grandfather with her beauty and charm.

“We’re just friends,” Cam said.

“Nonsense. Look at her.”

“I got it.” *What the fuck!* “Will you just take a bite of the damn sandwich?”

Gramps patted Maggie’s hand. “Thank you for the sandwich, dear.”

When Gramps opened his mouth, so did Cam. When Gramps’ closed his mouth around the sandwich, Cam closed his mouth. Gramps took another bite and turned his attention back to the television.

Cam quirked an I-told-you-so brow and strode back to the kitchen. “Jags. Get your ass in here.”

“Coming.”

“These are chewable tablets. He takes them twice a day, once in the morning and once at night. Make sure he takes it at least thirty minutes before he eats.” Picking another bottle up, he continued, “This one is a liquid. He gets it twice a day too but it doesn’t matter if he’s eaten or not.” A notebook protruded from a nook between the microwave and wall. Cam slid it out. “It’s all in here.”

“We’ll be fine,” Jags said. “Go.”

“Make him a peanut butter and banana sandwich tomorrow for lunch.”

Winking, Jags ushered him toward the door. “Have a great time.”

“He’s been having trouble swallowing so I made an extra pitcher of smoothies. They’re in the freezer.” Cam lifted a large red backpack from the corner of the kitchen and knelt beside Gramps. “I’m gonna be gone a couple days, but Jags will be here.”

Gramps patted his hand. “You’re such a good boy.”

“No, I’m not.”

“You’re Cam?”

“Yup.” He took Maggie by the elbow and dragged her toward the front door. “Let’s go.”

“Bye Maggie.” Gramps waved.

She waved back. “Bye Gramps.”

As they approached her silver CTS, Cam blocked Jags’ path. “He remembers Maggie, someone he just met, but not me?”

Jags laughed. “You have to admit, she’s someone you don’t forget too easily.”

She popped the trunk. “We’re taking my car, right?”

“I probably won’t get much reception,” Cam said. “But I’ll keep my phone with me anyway.” He dropped his pack in the trunk. “So call, if anything comes up, just in case I do get some reception.”

Jags opened the passenger door and guided Cam to the seat. “Watch your head.”

“Both medicines twice a day,” Cam said. “The chewable tablets thirty minutes before a meal.” Jags closed the door and waved. “You kids have a good time.”

You're Quick

AN HOUR INTO THE HIKE and after listening to Maggie chatter with barely a pause to take a breath, Cam contemplated setting his hair on fire. Despite his refusal to talk, Maggie never shut her trap, seemingly unaware she'd monopolized both sides of the conversation. His silence forced her to change the subject from him to herself.

Cam learned she liked to play tennis and had won a few regional competitions. He laughed out loud when she said how much her favorite pair of boots cost, more than his first car. Despite her eternal dieting endeavors, Maggie loved to eat out and admitted she barely touched the food she'd order. The last time Cam ate at a restaurant was last year for Jags' birthday.

The wind shifted and he caught the scent of her perfume, a blend of berries with a hint of vanilla. Groaning, he whipped around.

Stumbling over the rocky terrain, Maggie continued forward, her eyes on the ground, her steps careful.

Cam put his hands on her hips to keep her from walking into him.

Maggie looked up.

He ran his eyes over the length of her body. Tilting his head, he tucked his nose into the crook of her neck and inhaled. His fingers tightened around her waist and he felt her shudder. She sighed and he tasted cherry on her breath, remnants of the Lifesaver she'd been sucking on.

Stepping backward, he ran a hand over his head. "Wait here." Determined to keep her from breaking him, he veered off the trail and plucked a pinecone from a nearby tree.

He thought about his recipe for meatloaf. With another quarter cup of diced tomatoes and onions, he might be able to duplicate Meemaw's secret recipe. It was worth a try but two more eggs would be needed to keep the meatloaf from falling apart.

The leaves on the ground rustled and a black snake slithered from beneath. Cam waited for it to pass. He returned to the trail and found Maggie sitting on a rock. He set the pinecone beside her, retrieved a fist-sized stone from the ground and smashed it. He sifted through the shattered bark and found two seeds, crushed the pods and peeled off the shells.

"Here."

"You can eat these?" Maggie asked.

"Yup."

“Are they fattening?”

“How the hell should I know?”

She gave him a tight-lipped smile. “I’ll pass.”

Shrugging, Cam tossed the nuts in his mouth and continued along the marked trail.

Maggie followed. “What kind of stuff do you like to cook?”

“Food.”

“You’re not going to talk for the next two days?”

“You’re quick.”

“So I’ve heard.”

Cam held a branch back, waited for her to pass and let it go. Pushing past her, he resumed his position as leader. He approached a steep slope, turned and offered her his hand. “Walk sideways. It’ll be easier to maneuver the loose gravel.”

She took his hand and shuffled up the path. “Do you find me attractive?”

Cam bit back a curse. “Why does it matter?”

“Why do you think?”

Cam glanced over his shoulder, shook his head and looked forward, his booted feet trudging along the well-worn path. “It’s not gonna happen. You’re wasting your time.”

“Jags told me that you have a little problem I could help with.”

“I’m sure he did.” Jags had always butted his nose where it hadn’t belonged, but this was a whole new level of what-the-fuck.

“We can’t even be friends?”

“Are you one of those pathetic women who are drawn to men that constantly shit on them?”

“Hardly.”

“Well enlighten me on what you consider shit on because I’m clueless.”

“Friends.”

“That would be too complicated and I don’t have or need any friends.” He looked back. “Are your boots waterproof?”

“Why does it have to be complicated? How ‘bout friends with benefits?”

Cam crouched, one knee on the ground for balance.

She squatted beside him.

"I don't work like that." He pointed. "That's poison ivy. You can tell by the leaves. They're almond-shaped and shiny."

"Afraid you might actually start to like me?"

He gripped her elbow, stood and yanked her up with him. "You may find this hard to believe but I don't fuck, I make love. And since I don't love you, friends with benefits is not an option. Is that clear enough?"

Her mouth dropped open. "You can't possibly be serious."

Maggie was so beautiful. She was sexy, charming and entirely too good for him.

He considered himself a good judge of character and something told him that she genuinely wanted him, and it wasn't because his crazy ass brother had pimped her out to him.

But something about her pursuit of him didn't seem quite right. She was hiding something.

None of his business. Whatever demons haunted her, she'd have to fight by herself. He had his own demons to battle. And the last thing he wanted was to put her, or anybody else, in the crossfire.

He could tell her he's got a record.

He could tell her he killed his own father, an act of premeditated madness.

He could tell her about his unstable, flash temper, a fire that sometimes burned so hot, it literally, physically blinded him with rage.

But Cam was a firm believer in keeping it simple. It was always best. "I'm not a nice guy."

When she let out a condescending laugh, he shook his head and stomped along the trail, with Maggie following closely behind. Too closely.

"Oh please. Really? I think I read that once or twice in a cheesy romance novel. Okay, I'll bite. Why are you not a nice guy? You rob banks. You're an alcoholic or a drug addict. You like to fart in elevators and closed cars. You're a restless sleeper and hog all the covers. I mean, how bad could you be? After all, you did rescue a damsel in distress." She snapped her fingers. "I know. You like to get rough with your women when they get out of line."

He glanced over his shoulder and smiled.

She gasped. "No."

Cam faced her, his body inches from hers, hoping his size and the snarl on his lips conveyed the sincere warning in his heart. "Yup."

"I don't believe it."

He picked up a pebble. "This is you." Cam closed his fist around the stone until his knuckles turned white. "You're in the middle of nowhere with a man who just told you he likes to beat his women, a man who could squash you like a bug." He lowered his voice to a whisper. "But you don't believe it."

"Men who beat women don't usually fess up about it."

His eyes narrowed. "And how would you know that?"

"I just know."

Cam pitched the rock and seized her upper arm. Through clenched teeth, he growled, "Who hurt you?"

Maggie jerked from his hold and scowled. "Not me, a friend of mine."

His blood boiled, his face burned hot. As that familiar surge of fury surfaced, he willed a lightning bolt to incinerate him. With a nod, he turned and continued walking.

"What I can't figure out . . . is why you would lie about something like that. I suppose you could be trying to scare me off but that still doesn't explain why you want to scare me off."

"Is it so hard to believe that I'm just not attracted to you?"

She sighed. "Yes."

Apples and Horseflies

AN HOUR HAD PASSED and Maggie's efforts of seduction had failed. Hell, she couldn't even lure him into a conversation, never mind luring him into her pants.

"Slow down." Tired and hot, she longed to hear three simple words. *We'll camp here.*

"Speed up."

The man's a machine. I think I'm going to faint.

The muscles in her legs burned and quivered. She plunked to the ground. With her legs stretched forward and her palms braced on the ground behind her she heaved a sigh. "Much better."

"Three minutes." Cam leaned against a tall rock, pulled an apple from his backpack and took a bite.

She stared up at him and watched him take another bite. And another. The apple's juices coated his lips, making them even more enticing. A moist, shiny gloss that made her core writhe in anticipation. For a man of his age—she guessed early thirties—who had creases in his forehead and a scruffy lower face with dark bristly growth, he had lips that looked remarkably smooth and soft, youthful even, lips which significantly betrayed those hardboiled, down and dirty traits. Hell, those juicy lips made him downright irresistibly fuckable. If those lips could look so damn alluring with the sweet juices of a piece of fruit, what would they look like gleaming with her own juices? She was determined to find out.

Another bite. Not much left but the core.

He began nibbling.

If only he'd nibble on her core.

As she watched his very pronounced Adam's apple bob with every swallow, Maggie began to climb to her feet.

She took a step toward him, only slightly conscious of the warm moisture dampening her red laced panties.

Cam leaned back, as if she had the measles and he'd never been vaccinated.

Maggie slid two fingers beneath the gold. When her finger grazed his olive skin, he hissed as if her touch scalded him.

"It's beautiful," she whispered.

"It's a poor man's trinket."

"Did it belong to someone in your family?"

A horsefly dived at his head. He swatted it to the ground.

“Yup.”

The pest gathered its senses and resumed circling him.

I know how you feel, Maggie thought, referring to the insect. She'd been circling and toying with the big brute for hours and had gotten the same reaction.

Cam's arms flailed as if a hive of insects attacked him, not a solitary horsefly. It was irritatingly distracting.

From her backpack, she removed a can of hairspray. Quickly, she misted the sticky dew above his head. A plume of aerosol hovered around them like a thick morning fog.

Groaning, he plucked the can from her, hacking and hocking loudly. He leaned over with his hands on his knees, coughed and gasped more violently.

Maggie snatched the can back. “No more horse fly.”

He collapsed to his hands and knees and crawled toward her. “Are you trying to kill me?”

“I use it every day and it hasn't affected me yet. Suck it up.”

Cam lifted his hand in front of his face. Dirt clung to his fingers. His fingers clung to each other. The mist began to dissipate.

And out of the last blot of fuzzy mist, came the bloated fly. His heated gaze snapped to her.

“All you did was pissed him off!”

Two more horse flies buzzed him.

He swatted. “What in the hell?”

“How cute. He brought his friends.” Like a trained cop, Maggie raised the hairspray to take aim.

But he snatched the can and sprayed.

And sprayed.

And sprayed.

He sat on a boulder with the can tucked by his side . . . stared at his hands, fingers splayed. Dirt, grime, fragmented leaves clung to him like the haphazard wrappings of a mummy. “Shits like glue,” he said. “And you put it in your hair?”

Maggie slapped a hand across her mouth, hiding her shit-eating grin, waiting . . .

Another horsefly circled him. “Why are they only after me?”

“You must taste sweeter than me. Give me a bite and I'll let you know.”

Cam sprayed again.

“Are you confiscating my hairspray for the remainder of our trip?” Maggie asked.

“Yup.”

She cupped her ear. “Hear that? I can hear the testosterone leaking from your pores right at this very moment. All you need now is some hand lotion, a tube of lipstick and a tampon and the transformation will be complete. “Wait. Wait. I think I’ve some lotion in here somewhere.”

He almost smiled.

Almost.

Handed her hairspray back. “Break’s over. Let’s go.”

“Got something to eat?”

“I have some energy bars. Chocolate and oatmeal, raisin and cinnamon, or peanut butter and oats?”

“Chocolate and oatmeal.”

From a pocket in his backpack, he grabbed the snack and tossed it to her.

A mixture of caramel, chocolate chips and granola dissolved in her mouth. She moaned. “This is great. How many calories are in this?”

“How the hell should I know?”

“Well, what brand is it? I’ll look it up when I get home.”

“I made it.” He strapped his backpack on. “Eat and walk.”

“You made this?”

“Yup.” He took a high step over a large fallen tree. “Watch your step.”

You Do Bathe?

MAGGIE'S PHONE HAD GONE DEAD so she had no clue what time it was. Judging by the ache in her muscles, she'd guess they'd been hiking for two days, but since it wasn't dark yet, common sense told her they'd only been walking for a few hours. Funny, she thought wryly, since she'd spent more than six hours in a mall or department store without ever receiving a single blister, but currently she could feel one forming on the back of her left heel. The large fallen tree taunted her aching muscles. With a grimace, she stepped over it.

They approached a stream. It was only about a hundred feet wide but stretched in either direction as far as the eye could see.

He bent over, untied and removed his boots. "We'll take a break soon. First we need to cross here."

"That's a small river."

"I do it all the time. Hasn't killed me yet," he said, throwing her own words back at her.

"But the trail doesn't lead—"

"I didn't think you'd slow us down as much as you have. I know a shortcut to get us to the spot where we're going to camp tonight. If we don't take it, we'll never make it before dark."

He tucked his socks into his boots, then tied the laces together so he could drape them around his shoulders, a boot dangling across each side of his broad chest. He then slid Maggie's sack from her back. Holding their backpacks over his head, he sloshed into the stream and waded until the water was waist deep.

"You coming?"

He didn't wait for her answer before he tossed his boots and the backpacks to shore on the other side and dunked under the water.

He surfaced and glared at her. "This will be the only chance we have to clean up. You do bathe, huh?"

"Of course. I just prefer to bask under a swivel shower head set to pulse. The sensation on my breasts is borderline euphoric. And a bottle of strawberry daiquiri body wash—"

He groaned. "I don't want to know about your lady bits." He dived under again, this time resurfacing with a handful of oozing green seaweed in his fist. "All natural body wash. Good for the skin, full of minerals and vitamins."

Maggie covered her mouth and laughed. "I've never seen pond algae in a Bed Bath & Beyond. And who the heck says 'lady bits'? How old are you? Seventy?"

"Get the fuck in the water before I throw you over my shoulder and dunk you and your lady bits."

"Just trying to keep things light. Geesh, you got a short fuse."

"Woman, you have no idea."

Just as Cam had, she tucked her socks in her boots and held them high. She stepped into the water. Mud squeezed between her toes, slimy, cold, disgusting. Shit brown was not her color. A substance like sticky wet lace greased the bottom of her foot. Lace was never supposed to be sticky.

Shrieking, she jumped back. "I'll just sponge bathe with some of the water I packed."

The water rippled as he strode toward her. "That's to drink, not bathe in." He stretched a muscled arm toward her. "Take my hand."

Maggie shook her head.

Cam bolted out of the water. *How could something so big move so fast?*

"I don't have the patience for your shit." He slung her over his shoulder—like a bartender would a dishrag— and waded into the murky water.

Maggie punched at his back. "Bastard! Put me down." She dug her nails into the middle of his back.

He grabbed the boots from her hand, chucking them onto the shore next to the backpacks.

"You won't have to touch the bottom."

As if she weighed a hell of a lot less than her hundred and four pounds, he maneuvered her so she lay on her back with his hands beneath her. He lowered her, submersing her body but keeping her head above water. With a hand under her back, he balanced her on the surface.

The gold ring that draped from the chain necklace around his neck glimmered in the fading sunlight. The dark wet stubble on his chin now appeared much softer. His high forehead, olive skin and dark, mysterious eyes melted her resolve to keep him at a distance.

Sure, she wanted to screw him 'til the morning light rose, but she had vowed long ago never to let herself get close to a man. Friends-with-benefits was truly all she wanted, nothing emotional, no drama.

But when he twirled a lock of her hair around his fingers, she involuntarily sighed. She pictured his large hands caressing her breasts, his body over hers, his cock . . .

As if he knew her thoughts, "You a natural redhead?"

"Kiss me."

He gave her a devilish grin, the same as he had the day she'd met him. "If you tell me your secret."

“I don’t have any secrets.”

“The day we met, Jags said you were seeking something. What was he talking about? Jags doesn’t lie, so don’t bullshit me.”

She had no clue and even if she had, she would never tell him shit. She hardly knew him, never mind trusted him. He could as easily murder her out here as he could fuck her.

With a tenderness someone of his size should not possess, he ran the back of his hand down the side of her face.

“Your skin’s so soft.”

Those dark eyes pierced hers for only a moment before he snapped his hand away, as if he had just been burned. “Time to go.”

Like a switch, the tenderness vanished and he was back to his grim self. With her cradled in his arms, he sloshed onto shore and set her on her bare feet.

She blew wet strands from her face and twisted her long locks, wringing water from her hair.

Men were simple creatures. Sports, friends, and hobbies were all great, but all they really needed was sex and food, a theory that had helped her manipulate every man she’d encountered since damn near puberty.

Sexy talk. Seductive moves. Sensual touches. A wanton gaze.

Not a man existed she couldn’t seduce.

Until now.

He was obviously attracted to her, but maybe he trusted women about as much as she trusted men.

Cam was complex and mysterious, unlike the transparent men she’d typically dated.

Any sane woman would run from a man who’d threatened to squash her like a bug. With a squeeze of his hand, he could break her neck, silencing the sounds of her own screams, screams that haunted her waking and sleeping consciousness.

But his threats and size didn't scare her.

She wanted to trust him and that terrified her almost as much as the memories of that terrible night so long ago.

Want Some Popcorn?

THE TEXAS SUN WAS SETTING and the temperature had dropped, albeit not by much. When Cam saw the large oak that had fallen across the trail, his landmark of sorts, he knew they were close. Thick overgrowth obscured most of the fallen tree, but there was a small gap serving as a gateway to the other side. He climbed on the trunk and offered her his hand. Maggie braced a foot and hoisted herself up. Cam jumped down the other side and took Maggie with him.

They walked deeper into the woods, following a well-worn path. Cam often took advantage of this spot, like many other hikers. With any luck, it would be empty of any squatters. Most weekenders wouldn't venture this far, but the veterans kept the path clear and open, a private sanctuary reserved only for the most experienced.

They came upon a clearing where the tall grass had been packed flat. Rocks enclosed a circular patch of scorched ground.

"You shouldn't make a fire," he said. "Try to leave nature the way you found it, as undisturbed as possible."

Maggie slid her backpack off. "Somebody obviously made a fire here."

"Yup. So if we make a fire, we won't be disturbing nature." He untied the casing to his gray tent and shrugged it off.

He finished pitching his tent and reached for her backpack.

"Could I sleep in your tent? I hate sleeping alone."

Grimacing, he wagged his fingers in a *'give-me-the-damn-backpack'* sort of way. She relinquished said backpack, dropped herself to the ground and crossed her legs. As quickly as he'd set his own tent up, he'd done the same with hers. As he anchored the last stake, he asked, "Want some popcorn for the show?"

Maggie shrugged.

Cam shook his head. He headed toward the woods. He returned shortly carrying a stack of large dead branches. She probably would've helped set the tents up and get firewood had he asked her. But she just looked so dog friggin' tired. Honestly, he'd not even expected her to make it this far. There was a closer spot that he'd tented at a few times, but he'd not mentioned that to her—and nor would he ever mention it to her now. The woman had definitely surprised him.

Without a breath of conversation between them, he made a fire, using smoked pine cones and branches to get it started, before feeding it a few of the dead branches from the stack he'd gathered from the woods. The pine kindling perfumed the campsite. Cam inhaled, getting lost in the sweet scent.

This was probably the closest he ever came to meditation, to clearing his mind, or as Jags would've said, *finding your inner peace*. But there was a tiny distraction in the corner of his mind that typically wasn't there. This time he wasn't alone. He was sharing his inner peace with another person—a female person, at that. A part of him almost felt like her presence was desecrating this sanctuary.

He'd set out to wear her down within the first mile or two. But here she still was.

Cam cracked a sturdy branch across his knee while staring at Maggie's flame-lit face.

The girl was thin as a string bean, but she had the spirit of a hellcat.

Let Her Go

For the better part of the next hour, they sat around the fire and watched the flames dance. Eventually, she'd get the hint and stop trying to converse, he hoped.

But she was relentless. Several times, she tried sparking conversation, but he refused her efforts. He would just poke at the fire, whether it needed tending or not. Finally, darkness came.

"Goodnight." She stood and looked down at him, probably waiting for him to protest her departure. Not going to happen.

"Whatever," she muttered and disappeared into her tent.

When the second whiz of a zipper sounded, the tension in Cam's muscles faded. He just had to get through this weekend then he could concentrate on opening his restaurant. He'd never have to see or speak to her again. If he couldn't lose her in the trees, then maybe he could lose her in the silence of the night.

Idly, he prodded the coals and embers beneath a large smoldering branch. Couple of red embers glowered at him.

You find answers to life's problems in the natural world, Jags said once. When Nature speaks, we should listen with open ears and an open heart.

Note to self, he thought, don't ever talk to Jags again before a hike. Or better yet, don't ever talk to Jags again—his squirrely new-age crap ironically didn't foster peacefulness, only more confusion and aggravation.

Remember I'm psychic Jags had told him and Ajay years ago while they were playing a game of Monopoly with Gramps.

I think they make medication for that Ajay had said. *I knew this guy one time who used to beat his head on the concrete wall in gym class. They ended up putting him on a non-psychic medication or something.*

With an empty Dr. Pepper bottle, Cam smacked Ajay across the head. *That's psychotic, you dipshit. Not psychic!*

With a small laugh, Jags had simply said, *Cam's going to win with Park Place and Boardwalk loaded with houses and the utility companies after he has to mortgage all his greens.*

And two hours later, Cam had won that game just as Jags had predicted.

Coyotes bayed loudly as Cam continued his stare-off with the judging embers of the fire.

Jags was wrong this time. He'd completely missed the mark. This wasn't some silly board game with tiny sterling battleships and irons and cars and cheesy property deeds.

Tension built behind his eyes. With the tip of his boot. he stubbed those accusing embers out.

No room in his fucked up world for a scrawny redhead girl.

One problem. He wanted her, wanted her bad.

Maggie was bold, adventurous, and silly, not to mention, stunning. She was cute and at the same time sexy as hell. Cam squeezed his head between his hands.

You're a monster! Let her go.

More embers blazed to life in the coals.

Chapter Seven

Put That in Me and I'll Kill You

AN ANIMAL SHRIEKED. Cam's lids flipped open. He lifted his head from the tent floor and propped his weight on his forearms. An owl? Another shriek. Nope. Not an owl. He jerked to a sitting position. Maggie? Another shriek.

Yup. Maggie.

The three-quarter moon helped to illuminate Maggie's shaking tent. He whipped her flap open to find her jumping up and down and slapping at her arms. Grimacing, he snatched her wrist and dragged her from the tent.

"Calm down," he growled.

"They're biting me! They're everywhere!"

Cam willed his temper to cool as he tried to still her movements. "I can't get them off, if you don't stop jumping." He slapped at the tiny red specks crawling up his own arm that was latched onto hers. "Take your shirt off!"

Still jumping and screaming, Maggie struggled with the bottom of her oversized princess shirt. Cam swatted her hands away, yanked her shirt up and over her head.

Along with a troop of tiny red ants, Cam saw blistery red bumps on her belly, shoulders, and lower neckline. Immediately, he began to wave a firm hand over her skin, clearing away the ambitious little bastards.

"Shyyyyyyyyiiiiiiiiit!" she shrieked and began beating at her waist, thighs and legs.

"Hell," Cam muttered. Without warning, he snatched hold of her shorts before ripping them down to her feet.

Maggie stood in her green undies and matching lace bra as he swiped his hands down her belly, past her navel and gently plucked and knocked away the ants that had made it past her hips. Crouching, he began swatting her legs, turned her and did the same down her back, stopping periodically to wipe the little fuckers from his own limbs.

She bounced on one foot and clawed at the other. "My feet are so itchy."

Cam lifted from his crouching position, straightening himself to his full height. In a tone as calm as he could muster, he said, "I can't help you if you don't stop dancing around like a kindergartner at recess."

Maggie put her foot down, raised her other and gave it the same clawing treatment. "Why are my feet so itchy?"

"It's your body reacting to the venom." Cam framed her face with his hands. "Your lips are swollen. Are you allergic to ant venom?"

"I don't think so."

Texas fucking fire ants. Who wasn't allergic to these bastards?

He dragged her toward his tent, but she jerked from his grasp.

"What if they're in your tent too?" she asked.

"Unlike you, I'm not dumb enough to leave food in my tent."

"I did not leave food in my tent," she said with conviction.

He gave her a sidelong look.

"Unless I did." She huffed. "Maybe a little bit of that energy bar."

He laughed. "If it'll make you feel better, I'll move my tent away from yours. Okay?"

Maggie's jaw dropped. "They have legs."

"Would you go to a restaurant you knew had no food?"

Without waiting for her answer, Cam began yanking the tent stakes up. He dragged his tent away from hers then escorted her around the tent. Using a flashlight, he showed her there were no ants before ushering her inside where he did the same inspection.

Maggie looked barely convinced but conceded since her only other option was to stand under the moonlight in nothing but bra and panties.

She sat in the center of the tent and clawed at her feet. Cam threw her one of his T-shirts and retrieved an EpiPen from his backpack. He waited for her to put on his shirt then crooked his finger.

Tilting her head, she gestured to the item in his hand. "What's that?"

"EpiPen. I always have one with me. I'm allergic to bees."

Maggie scurried to the corner. "I don't do needles."

Smiling, he crawled toward her. "Not my problem."

"I'll kill you if you put that thing in me."

He cocked his head and gave her a sultry smile. "Isn't that what you've wanted from the start? For me to put it in you?"

Her brows furrowed. "Now you flirt?"

Seizing both her wrists in one hand, he jerked her close. She wiggled and kicked but he handled her as if she were an inanimate object. "I hate you!"

With an arm barred across her chest, he raised the needle over her thigh. "Can't have you dying on me. I'm too lazy to carry your dead weight the rest of the way."

"That's so sweet."

She looked so damn sexy when she was mad. "Are you ready?" He delayed intentionally, loving every minute of her squirming torture.

"Wait. My feet aren't itchy anymore. They feel much better. Yes. Yes. I'm good."

Cam's smile widened.

She reached but he lifted his arm.

Maggie groaned. "What if you get stung by a bee?"

"Unlike you, my reaction would be severe. This wouldn't help me. I'd be dead in minutes."

"Then why do you carry it?"

"If I'm not in the middle of the woods, miles from civilization, it'd give me time to get to the hospital."

"I don't need it." Maggie shook her head. "I don't want it."

"Sorry, babe." He drilled the needle into her thigh.

Her body jolted. "Bastard!"

"It's your own damn fault." Cam tossed the empty canister at his backpack, sat on his butt, and draped his forearms over his slightly bent knees.

Maggie hugged her knees into her chest. "There's only one sleeping bag."

Yup. She had no recognition of her surroundings. "It's October in Texas. It's close to eighty degrees, if not warmer. I don't need a sleeping bag. You take it." He laid down facing away from her, using a bent arm for a pillow.

"I can still feel them biting me."

"It's in your head. Go to sleep."

Cam sensed she made a face at his back. She was entertaining if nothing else.

Sleeping in the tent with Maggie wasn't an option, so the plan was to wait for her to fall asleep then leave, make a fire and wait for dawn. Cam could just tell her the truth and leave the tent now, but he was ashamed of his problem. If possible, he'd keep his violent sleeping seizures his little secret.

So he waited, watching her curl up in his sleeping bag, watched her pretty green eyes close. Watched her breathing calm. He ignored the urge to reach out and touch her red locks. He'd just sit here for a little while longer. Just to make sure she was going to be alright.

Just for a little while longer . . .

Then he fell asleep.

Let It Go, Brother

And his dreams . . .

A corvette and a pick-up truck with cargo lights crashed.

See that stump over there?

. . . I've done a lot for you cracker . . . but this is the last I do for ya
squeeze . . . goodbye . . .

Don't do it cracker . . . you're a good guy . . .

Forty-niners, baby! You betta be there!

. . . goodbye.

Don't do it cracker . . .

A real man . . . a real man . . . be careful . . . cracker

When Nature speaks, we should listen with open ears and an open heart . . . then . . . you hear the
truth . . . the natural truth . . . trust . . .

Let it go, brother . . .

This is pure . . .

Never Wake Me!

“YOU DRUNK FUCK!” Cam roared.

Maggie watched him roll to his stomach, punch and kick. He ground out a gritty scream. A nightmare? Quickly, she scurried from her sleeping bag and crawled to the corner. “Wake up!”

At the sound of her voice, he scrambled to his hands and knees and stared at her. His chest rose and lowered with dramatic form. Heavy breaths hissed from clenched teeth. Sweat saturated his hair and clothes. His black messed hair only added to his rugged handsomeness.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

He leapt at her!

Maggie jumped back but he snatched her wrist and dragged her beneath him. As he silently hovered, saliva dripped from his snarling lips.

Her eyes widened. Instinct told her not to struggle. Surely, he’d wake at any moment, but as the sound of his labored breath reverberated throughout the small tent, she began seriously doubting her decision to come on this trip. What the hell was she thinking?

Cam lowered his head.

“Fucking Sunday! Running out of time!”

Maggie winced and held her breath.

This man was crazed, not the man who confiscated her hairspray just hours ago.

Suddenly, the weight of his large frame collapsed over her trembling body. The air from her lungs whooshed from her ribcage.

“I want one-hundred-fucking-percent!”

He covered her mouth with his, drowning her screams. The strength of the kiss pinned her head to the tent floor. His tongue forced its way inside her mouth, exploring with a primitive desperation. Her lungs burned for air, but she couldn’t help wanting him to never stop. She wanted him so badly.

The feel of his weight on hers, his coarse palms on her face, the scent of the salt in his sweat drew a guttural groan from her.

She’d downed shots of Jack, J&B and a dozen beers in a single night . . .

But her head had never spun this wildly, ever. If her head spun anymore from the scent of his minty breath and his lecherous body she'd probably have left this entire plane of existence—to hell with alcohol and drugs . . . Cam was her poison of choice.

“ . . . last beer . . . ”

Right now, she planned to devour every inch of his massively delicious body.

She craved it all. Like nothing she'd ever craved before.

Cam's fingers walked down her thigh and slid under her shirt. “You feel so good.” His voice sounded sane now. Not surreal, not far off. Was he with her? In the here and now?

He lifted her shirt, pushed her bra up and over her breasts and covered her hard nipple with his mouth. He licked and sucked while a hand slipped down her panties. Sliding two fingers inside her, he stroked, his fingers plunging and withdrawing at a tortuous and slow pace. “You're so fuckin' wet . . . so fuckin' . . . I want . . . ”

“Shut up,” she hissed. She arched her back and tilted her hips, urging his rocking fingers to sink deeper, move faster.

Suddenly, his breathing changed. His head jerked back. He tugged her shirt to her waist. “Maggie?”

“What! What's wrong?” She asked, annoyed.

Cam stumbled off her. He clumsily got to his feet and dashed from the tent.

Maggie jumped to her feet. Whipping the tent flap open, she followed after him.

He paced beside the smoldering campfire. His hands covered his face.

“Don't ever wake me from a nightmare!” He breathed hard. “Ever!”

She harrumphed. “It didn't feel like a nightmare.”

With his head down, he sprinted for the woods and vanished behind the shadows of the trees and the night.

Maddening!

She could kill him. If she didn't want to fuck him so badly.

The last man who'd left her in this sort of a wound up . . . wait . . . no man had ever left her like this, a crazy kind of hysteria.

Who the fuck is this guy?

When Jags had told her that Cam was pent up from sexual frustration, she could hardly believe it. Cam was rather big—okay, that was an understatement, the guy was a beast—and rough around the edges which made him somewhat scary, but the man was hot as hell. And apparently practiced abstinence.

When she assured Jags that Cam's vow of celibacy was on the brink of collapse, she did so with confidence. Absolute certainty.

But here she stood, in the middle of the woods, dressed in a tee and panties, albeit wet panties, as sexually frustrated as Cam.

Maggie crawled back into the tent. The plan was to stay awake until he returned.

Then she fell asleep.

Chapter Eight

My Sweet

If this day was like the others, Jewel would take the seven to eight o'clock aerobics class and leave between eight-twenty and eight-thirty. That was her routine. So many people had a predictable day-to-day or week-to-week routine. Up at dawn, Cheerios by seven-thirty, shower by seven-forty-five, makeup and perfume to hide the truths of age, and off they go.

In-out.

In-out.

Almost too easy.

Rane waited in his truck with his black gloved fingers squeezed around the steering wheel. No music. The radio would be too distracting. He had better entertainment in his head, 24/7. Like a combo-pack of Showtime, AMC, Nickelodeon and an X-rated channel, but most of what played through his mind was composed of real memories.

Elation shivered through him, balanced with an equal level of terror, worried he'd get caught. But even that caused his cock to twitch.

Oh! The hunt!

The most exhilarating phase of the entire process. In the beginning, the first couple times, he'd gotten so excited—too excited—during this particular phase he'd lost it in his pants before he'd even touched the object of his desire.

The danger, the risk, the . . . god he couldn't wait 'til he had her. Ajay's one. The leader of the pack. The Hell Pack.

He'd done this many times before, but usually he took a woman from a bar. The only exceptions he made were for the mothers, daughters, sisters and wives of the members of the Hell Pack. The capture of Ajay's mother and grandmother was . . . well, that was a really, really special time. He'd had a lot of fun with them. A lot more fun than he'd had with the other twats he'd taken—no-namers.

When he'd flung their used-up bodies to Kipp, his friend and partner-in-crime, he'd actually felt a strange sensation . . . he'd been . . . stricken with a moment of separation anxiety.

A moment.

It'd been good.

He'd love to feel that again. To taste it. To hear it. He'd never cum so hard or so many times in a single day. By the evening, there wasn't much left of them. Their holes were stretched beyond recognition and he'd felt like he'd ran a marathon. The next day he'd had to make an emergency trip to Rite-Aid to pick up ointment for his raw, rashed cock. It'd taken an ungodly amount of willpower not to take Polaroids of their mangled bodies, but that was how people got caught. He couldn't have that. Not until he'd finished what he'd started.

An hour and twenty-five minutes passed before Jewel emerged from the large square building. Rane slithered from his car and crouched behind hers. Her car lights blinked and the click of the locks releasing resounded.

She climbed behind the wheel and tried to close the door, but he caught it and snatched her wrist. Covering her mouth with one hand, he yanked her from her car with the other. Her feet kicked at the pavement; her hands gripped at his fingers.

All to no avail.

Rane dragged her to his back seat and slugged her in the head several times, knocking her unconscious.

Using the rope he'd bought earlier, he tied her hands and feet then covered her with a gray blanket, the same blanket he'd covered Ajay's mother and grandmother with. The Wolfe's Shroud he affectionately called it.

Driving in the slow lane on Highway 45, he repeatedly slapped his palms against the steering wheel, releasing some of the adrenaline surging through his veins. "Hot damn! Hot damn, baby! We're gonna have a lotta fun; yes ma'am, we are." He reached down inside his pants and readjusted his erection, hardly surprised by the copious amounts of sticky precum already leaking from the tip.

When he arrived home, he eagerly parked and exited his yellow pickup truck. Reaching behind the driver's seat and into the extended cab, he gripped Jewel under her arms. He hauled her from the back and began lugging her across the over-grown front lawn, and finally into his single-wide trailer.

The front door swung open. Rane gave his balding, short friend a nod. "Hey. I got her, give me a hand."

Kipp grabbed her feet and together they carried her through the kitchen into Rane's bedroom.

“Let’s do the swing thing,” Rane said. They tossed her onto the black comforter. “Oh boy,” Rane said with a wolfish grin. “Think the bitch pissed herself. Make sure we get some of that on the comforter for later.”

Kipp nodded, giving his own rendition of an eager smile.

“Remember Ajay’s mother? Pissed her panties so bad, looked like she’d bathed in them. Bitch’s bladder must’ve been as weak as a napkin!”

Kipp took a seat at the small kitchen table.

Following Kipp out of the bedroom, Rane gripped the top of the door frame. “You like her?”

“Y-y-yes.”

“I knew you would. What’s not to like?” He grabbed a pair of scissors from a drawer. “You want to do the honors?”

Kipp walked to the bed and began carefully cutting the garments from her body.

A mixture of intrigue and lust pulsed through Rane. He grabbed a black sharpie off the top of the bureau. Elbowing Kipp out of the way, he climbed over her. On her stomach, he drew an arrow pointing down and wrote the words "MY SWEET".

“Let’s have a bite to eat,” Rane said. “She might be out awhile. You goin’ to watch us?”

Kipp dipped his head forward, one slow nod.

A carton of chocolate cupcakes were set on the counter. Rane offered one to Kipp. A white plump cat jumped to the table, purred and rubbed against the side of Rane’s face.

“Cupcake.” He trailed his hand from her head and down her tail. With his mouth against the cat’s cold wet nose, he gave her a kiss. “I missed you.” He scratched Cupcake behind her ear. “We have a guest. When she wakes, I’ll introduce you.”

Rane smacked his lips as cupcake icing seeped from the corners of his mouth. Impatiently, he stood up and peered around the corner, but Jewel was still out. He drank a glass of water and refilled the glass.

With a fresh cupcake in one hand and the glass in the other, he walked to the bedroom and tossed the water at her face.

She gasped, eyes snapping open.

Rane climbed over her. He pushed the cupcake at her lips but she turned her head and screamed. Hot tears washed her cheeks.

He slapped her. “There’s nobody for miles. Nobody will hear you. Regardless, it irritates me so don’t do it again.” More tears swelled in her eyes. Bending down, Rane slowly licked the salty, warm tears running

down her warm, flushed face. Sometimes, he thought, tears tasted as good as the juices between their legs.

More tears poured down her face.

He moved the cupcake toward her lips. When she only nibbled, he shoved the cupcake into her face. Blood gushed from her mouth. Gagging, she spat out a tooth.

“Oh, my sweet,” he said sadly. After smearing the cupcake over her forehead and through her hair, Rane clasped both sides of her face. “Smile for me, sweets.”

She didn’t smile. Her chin trembled and that made Rane’s cock do a lively jerk inside his pants. “Smile for me,” he said softly. “Or I’ll slit your throat.”

Reluctantly and weakly, Jewel’s lips curled into a grotesque grin. The missing tooth was one of her front teeth, leaving a black gaping hole in her smile. “Oh, that’s terrible, my sweet. You used to have a wonderful smile but now . . .” Rane shook his head. “Kipp! Bring me a plastic bag to put over her ugly face.”

Kipp bounded into the bedroom holding a white plastic bag.

Apparently, the bitch knew what was in store for her because she began to shake her head wildly in protest.

“Don’t please . . . please don’t! Please, please, please . . . don’t kill me.” Her sobs and pleas were the most beautiful music to Rane’s ears. Mozart and Chopin could eat their dead rotting hearts out! They didn’t have nothing on the sounds of a petrified twat in the throes of impending death.

Rane snatched her neck, yanking her forward with one hand before covering her head with the plastic bag, then slamming her head back onto the bed. Immediately, her hands clawed at the bag, but Rane held it securely against her face. A quick glance back at Kipp and the other man nodded. Kipp wrestled her arms into a firm hold above her head.

A portion of the plastic sucked into her gasping mouth.

With a snarl, Rane grabbed a chunk of her hair, yanked it violently to the side, causing the woman to scream and suck more bag on the intake.

“Hot damn, Kipp! Now we’re having a good time.”

Strings of drool ran down the corners of Kipp’s mouth as he nodded in agreement.

Rane loved Kipp watching. It would have been strange and awkward doing all of this without an enthusiastic audience.

Jewel’s writhing became less pronounced. Rane tore the bag away from her face. A pale violet-blue ring circled her lips and her eyes lolled in a morbid dreamy way.

“Don’t worry, my sweet,” he said, leaning down to smell her weak breath. “We’re just getting warmed up.”

Chapter Nine

Tired and Hungry

The tent started to shake. Maggie's lids flipped open. "What?"

"Time to go,"

She dressed in shorts and a tank before stumbling from the tent. The sun was just beginning to rise, its light filtering through the leaves of the trees. The camp had been all packed up, even the fire doused out. Everything was as it had been, all except the tent she was just sleeping in. His tent.

Minutes later, he had that tent packed too. The hike resumed without a word from him.

And she was too tired and hungry to fight with him.

When they climbed the slightest of slopes the muscles in Maggie's legs quivered. She placed her open hand on her thigh. Nope, her skin hadn't burst to flame. She willed her body to continue without complaint. She wasn't about to give him that satisfaction.

But eventually her resolve collapsed and her efforts failed. "My legs feel like spaghetti."

His back to her, he said, "If I use the hairspray on you, will you stop pestering me?"

"Why don't you just let me land on you? What's the worst that could happen?"

"You could sting me." He spoke without looking at her, still trudging forward.

"Occasionally, but you're thick-skinned. You'd survive."

Cam shook his head. "But then I'd crush you like that damn horsefly."

"What does that mean?"

"My knee-jerk reaction would be to flatten you."

Maggie stepped forward and gave him a swat on his ass. "You could try, but this pest is quick and always comes back for more."

"You don't get it."

"Well, then . . . explain it to me, Prof. Jackass. After last night, it's the least you could do."

He turned and stalked toward her. "Flatten you."

He backed her into a tree, wedged his knee between her legs and wrapped his calloused warm fingers around her neck. He turned her head and whispered close to her ear. "Flatten you."

Maggie drew in a shaky breath.

Cam smiled. "Now you get it?"

Never Again

FINALLY, THE SUN BEGAN its descent. For what felt like days, they had walked in silence, until Cam finally veered off the beaten path.

“We camp here.” He dropped his backpack and reached for hers.

But she pulled it from his reach. “I can set up my own tent.”

Cam nodded and headed for the woods.

Sighing, she dropped to the ground and crossed her legs. Her dry eyes burned from physical and emotional exhaustion.

The painful desire she felt just hours ago, had morphed into a generous portion of revulsion, thanks to him blatantly threatening her.

Not gonna take that shit. No fucking way.

Maggie curled on her side and hugged her knees against her chest.

Never again would she find herself vulnerable to anyone. Much less a man.

Despite her body’s objections, her conscience couldn’t tolerate one more second with this excuse of a man.

Snatching her backpack, she ran. How hard could it be to follow a marked trail? Once she was a safe distance, she’d pitch her tent, get up in the morning and finish this damn hike on her own.

Not Gonna Hurt You

CAM DROPPED THE WOOD he'd collected and scanned his surroundings. Maggie was nowhere in sight. She could be doing her business but based on the little she'd drank and ate that day, he doubted it.

He sprinted down the trail. His face flushed, not from exertion, but rage. He wanted to wrap his hands around her scrawny little throat and shake her. How could she be so stupid?

Didn't she realize wandering alone through the middle of the woods was dangerous?

Cam ran faster, shouldering through brushes and low-hanging branches. Fuck if he had the patience for this preschool bullshit.

Turning a corner, he caught a glimpse of her red tank top. "Maggie!"

She peered over her shoulder, and their eyes met. Her head whipped back.

Maggie ran.

Aside from the crunch of the dry leaves beneath their feet and the wheeze of her labored breaths, quiet monopolized the forest.

An eerie quiet.

When he finally neared, Maggie dashed around a cluster of narrow trees. Cam circled toward her, but she countered, moving to maintain an equal distance between them.

With a forced smile, Maggie struggled for a breath. "Lesson's over. I got this hiking thing down pat."

Cam changed direction, rounding the greenery in the opposite direction. Maggie did the same. Since all she'd eaten today was two of his energy bars, he gambled that she'd tire way before him. "I'm getting dizzy."

"Then stop chasing me," she said, her tone matter-of-fact.

"Nope."

"Am I amusing you?"

"Yup."

From the ground, she snatched a branch the size of a broom and held the makeshift weapon across her chest. "Come and get me!"

Cam held up his hands, palms out. "I'm not going to hurt you."

She raised a brow. "Really?"

"I've never hit a woman out of anger," he lied.

Although he never intended to put his mother in the hospital, he did hit her out of anger. He had woken with a start and didn't realize he was beating his own mother half to death. She should've known better than to try and wake him from a nightmare. He shook his head at the absurdity of his own line of thought.

"Then why did you say you would hurt me?"

"I never actually said that." Cam changed direction and rounded the cluster of trees in the opposite direction. "What I said is that I could flatten you. Not that I would flatten you."

She jerked to the opposite direction, whirled the branch down and whacked him across the hand. "Semantics."

"Son of a bitch!" He cradled his hand. "I think you broke my wrist."

"I'll break more than that if you come any closer."

Cam bent over and examined his wrist more closely.

Maggie cracked the branch across the back of his knees, as he'd hoped she would. But damn that shit hurt like a muther. He faked a groan and toppled forward, landing face-first onto the dry grass. With another moan, Cam rolled to his side.

And Maggie sprinted down the trail—exactly what he'd waited for.

She didn't get more than a few feet before he tackled her—football style—to the ground. He positioned himself over her hips and straddled her waist. Maggie slugged him across the face. Blood trickled from his busted lip.

"Ahhh!" She tucked her hand into her chest.

Cam massaged each finger then her palm. "I don't think anything is broken."

With her good hand she swung, but he gripped both of her wrists and pinned them over her head.

Leaning forward, he spoke against her quivering lips. "I'm not going to hurt you."

Maggie struggled and clicked her teeth, trying to bite him.

Maintaining a tight grip on her wrist with one hand, Cam clapped his other hand over her mouth. "You split my lip," he hissed through gritted teeth. "I have a gash across the back of my knees, and my tongue is bleeding. If I was going to hurt you, I'd have done it by now." He arched a questioning brow.

Maggie's body stilled.

Cam waited.

He waited some more.

Sighing, he rolled off her and cupped her chin. "Babe?"

Maggie slammed her body against his, toppling him backward. She sprawled her body over his, rained kisses over his closed eyes, down the bridge of his nose and on his mouth.

He shoved her aside and sat up. "Talk about Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde."

"Me?" She sat back on her haunches. "You're the one who's telling me you're a monster one minute, but when I kick the crap out of you, all evidence seems to the contrary."

Cam smirked. "I let you beat on me."

Maggie cupped her ear. "Ssss. I hear it again, except this time the testosterone is spraying from your pores, not just leaking."

Cam smiled.

Maggie pushed him back to the ground and straddled herself over his waist, just like he'd done to her. "Now we make love and live happily ever after." He let her pin his hands over his head. And when she leaned forward, her breasts brushed against his chin, her low-cut tank top allowing him a delicious view.

Swallowing, Cam turned his head. "Nope. No happily ever afters."

"What are you afraid of?"

He shook his head. "Not the making love part."

"Living happily ever after? You think you'll get bored with me?"

He snorted. "Nope."

"Then what?"

Cam's cock pushed at the crotch of his sweatpants. "I don't want to hurt you." Stretching his neck, he focused on the trees behind her.

"We've already established that's not going to happen. You said so yourself. I made your tongue bleed and put a gash behind your knees and you did nothing. No retaliation. You really are a good guy. So what's with the *I'm-a-dangerous-scary-person* charade you persist on playing?"

"Not a game. Not even remotely."

"Do you even hear yourself?"

He turned his watery eyes toward the purple sky. Cam bit his tongue, resisting the urge to thrust his hips into her groin. "My father's blood flows through my veins."

Maggie laughed. "That's what this is all about? Daddy issues?"

"What the hell is so funny?"

"Silly." She gave him a quick kiss. "Silly, silly man." She kissed him again.

Maggie flicked her long hair to one side and kissed the side of his neck.

Kissed his cheek.

The corner of his mouth.

Cam's breath caught in his throat. He shoved his groin against hers.

Maggie spoke against his lips. "You're not him."

"You're sure?"

She frowned and sat up. "You're shaking."

Looking to the left, he studied a red bird perched atop a young oak tree. "I'm fine."

"People don't shake when they're fine. What can I do?"

Fuck me! "Get off me before I hurt you."

"I just beat the crap out of you, and you didn't hurt me."

"But I'm really mad."

Gripping his chin, she turned his head, forcing him to look at her. "So? Getting mad is not a crime."

Maggie put her lips to his, a soft, wet kiss, slow and sweet.

Cam's body stiffened. A moan escaped his restraint, betraying his virtuous intentions. When she drew his tongue into her silky mouth, his cock nodded its approval.

Moaning, Cam jerked to a sitting position. He braced her head between his hands. His tongue drove deep, exploring, possessing, fucking her sweet, so fucking hot mouth.

Suddenly, he broke from the kiss, his trembling hands framed her face. "Fuck!" He hung his head and grunted. "You don't understand. The rage rides my veins like some kind of fucking roller coaster. It's a venom." He lifted his head. "It literally burns. I break out in a sweat, and I—"

Maggie pressed a finger against his lips. "You won't hurt me."

"You're fucking killing me!" Gripping her around the waist, Cam set her on the ground and climbed to his feet. "You seem to have some subconscious death wish and I want no part of it."

She scrambled to her feet. "That's not—"

Cam held up his hand and folded his fingertips to his thumb, giving her the universal sign for 'shut the hell up'.

"Just—"

He opened his hand and folded his fingers, reiterating his message.

Maggie's hands went to her hips. "Who the hell do you—?"

Cam folded his hand for a third time. "Friends. That's the best I can do. No benefits. Take it or leave it."

Her shoulders slumped. "Take it."

Cam cupped his ear. "Hmmm?"

"Take it, damnnit!"

"Good." He slid her backpack over his shoulder, grasped her hand and led her back up the trail. "No more walks in the woods alone."

"Yes, master."

He ignored her sarcasm, silently pulling her alongside until they got back to camp.

Dark Chocolate

After pitching both tents, he lit a fire and grabbed two fat red bottles from his backpack. He handed her one. "It's a protein drink. Tastes like a smoothie."

"Thanks." She took the drink and sat cross-legged on the ground. As he poked at the fire, she said, "I thought you said not to make a fire because it would disturb nature."

"Yup."

"So why did you make a fire?"

Because he had to keep busy and not think about tearing her clothes from her body and fucking her into a puddle. Cam sat beside her and twisted the cap off his own red bottle. "Sooner or later, nature gets disturbed."

"Ah huh." She laughed and sipped her drink.

"I have a surprise for you." Cam slid a stainless-steel canister from under his leg. He poured out the melted ice and pulled out two dark chocolate bars, 70% cocoa.

"No thanks."

"You don't like chocolate?"

"Too fattening."

Cam shook his head. "Do you want to sleep with me?"

Her hand splayed over her heart, she leaned back. "What gave me away?"

"As thin as you are, I'm afraid I'll break you."

She gave him a slow wink, licking her bottom lip. "Let's test that theory."

Cam wrapped her fingers around the brown wrapper. "You're not eating enough calories. It's why you can't keep up with me. You're burning more calories than you're consuming."

"So I might've lost weight over the past two days?"

He groaned. "That's not a good thing."

Maggie chucked the chocolate. Cam snatched the candy from the ground, broke off a square and pressed it against her closed mouth. She swatted at his hand until it fell to the ground.

"Fuck." Cam grappled with her until she was on her back and he was, once again, sitting over her hips. Holding the chocolate high, he broke off another square.

She squirmed, kicked and clawed.

He smiled. "Let me know when you're done."

"We're not hiking so I don't need the damn calories, and I doubt I'm getting any other action tonight so take your freakin' calories and shove 'em where the sun don't shine."

Damn.

If only her stubbornness wasn't so damn sexy, he might be able to resist fucking her right here, right now. He leaned down, tilted his head, and grazed his lips across hers. "Open for me, baby."

She shook her head.

Above her head, just within reach, he spotted a gecko watching them with a curious interest. He snatched it by the tail.

Dangling the tiny lizard, he held it over her face. Her eyes widened, but she kept her composure and she kept that pretty, little mouth shut.

Cam admired her determination. She could definitely give him a headache or two.

An image of Maggie on her back with some nameless, faceless fuck wedged between her naked thighs flashed in his mind.

Heat rose from his neck and into his face. A drop of sweat slid from his forehead. Cam pushed back the rage, smiled and dropped the lizard on her nose.

"Ahhh!"

In, the chocolate went. He clamped his hand over her mouth as the frightened gecko ran for its life back into the forest.

When she closed her eyes and let out a soft whimper, he removed his hand. "Well?"

Maggie swallowed and licked her lips. "More."

Cam rolled off her and handed her the rest. "No woman can refuse dark chocolate."

Moaning, she licked her fingers. The erotic sound and the image of a single finger withdrawing from her full lips shot to his groin. His tormented cock would've screamed mercy if it could have. "Damn."

Her brows lowered. She shrugged and asked, "You have any more?"

"You can have mine." As she tore into the second chocolate bar, he said, "I'm going to wash up."

Cam went inside his tent and grabbed a bottle of water.

As he strode toward the woods, she said, "I thought water was for drinking, not bathing?"

Holy fucking shit! She was killing him, slow and easy. "God help me." He said the words aloud, not blasphemy but a genuine cry for help.

Chapter Ten

Tough Girl. Tough Guy.

Maggie sat on the ground. With her hands up, palms toward the flames, she warmed herself.

Laughing, Cam sat beside her.

“What’s so funny?” she demanded.

“I keep seeing you holding that branch like a sword. You got guts. I’ll give you that but I’m surprised it hasn’t gotten you into trouble before now.”

“Who says it hasn’t?”

He shot her a look. “I’m sure.”

Now that they’d crossed from combatants to friends, maybe she’d have more luck striking up a conversation. “So how did you get into cooking?”

He glanced at her, skepticism evident in his small smile. “I used to work at Copper Creek as a busboy before it closed. Me and Mr. Moretti became good friends. I miss the hell out of that old coot.”

“Why didn’t you keep in touch?”

Cam shook his head. “The man hates me.”

Maggie poked at the fire with a stick. Leave it to her to bring up a sensitive topic. She had to keep things light. She could ask him how long he worked there, how many hours a week he worked or what some of his favorite foods were. She rolled her eyes. That was way too boring and cliché. She could do better. She racked her brain trying to come up with something fun, something he would want to talk about . . . anything to keep the conversation going.

Cam stood. “I’m turning in.”

“Why won’t you talk to me? We’re supposed to be friends, remember? Friends typically talk.”

“I don’t need any friends.”

“Well I do.”

Cam scowled. “A pretty rich girl like you needs friends? I find that hard to believe.”

“Why are you suddenly shutting me out?” Maggie pulled on his arm. “Tell me what happened between Mr. Moretti and you. Please.”

Reluctantly, Cam sat down. He looked at the fire and draped his arms over his bent knees. "He found out I popped his daughter's cherry and fired me. One of the worst days of my life. He was like a father to me." He sighed. "I told him that I loved Carina but that only seemed to make the old coot madder."

"I'm sorry." Maggie squeezed his hand.

He shrugged and moved his hand out of her grip.

"What about Carina?" she asked. "You still keep in touch with her?"

"About a month later, I saw Carina at the movies with another guy. He was squeezing her ass and making out with her while they waited in line. One of those sickening couples you wanted to scream at to get a room." He hesitated before continuing. "Anyway, the restaurant closed soon after that. Her family moved away."

So much for keeping things light, she scolded herself. At least he was talking. "Was she your first too?"

"Yup."

A howl echoed in the distance. Coyote? Wild dog? Maggie shivered. "You hate talking about this, don't you?"

"Yup."

"Change of subject," she said. "So you and Jags are close?"

He shot her another skeptical look. "I'm close with both my brothers."

"You have two brothers?"

"Ajay's in the Army, stationed in Iraq."

She nudged her shoulder against his. "Tell me a crazy story."

"Like what?"

"I don't know. Anything."

"Alright, one story and then I'm calling it a night."

"Deal."

He stretched his legs on the ground beside the fire, his palms braced behind him. "Well, okay, there was the time we all went out drinking then drove home and passed a cop. I'd only had a couple beers, but I panicked. When we turned the corner, I jerked the wheel, and we crashed into the woods. Things were going pretty good until we started down a steep hill. Dumb ass that I am, the first thing I did was hit the brakes."

"Why is that a bad thing?"

He laughed. "The front of the truck stopped, but the back kept going. We flipped three or four times. Ajay and I were fine, but Jags was beat up bad. We limped him home all four miles." He shook his head. "I've never been so tired. After the second mile or so that light-ass son of a bitch got heavy."

Despite the illumination offered by the almost full moon, an eerie darkness closed in around her. The hairs on her arms stood up. "What do you do besides cook and hike?"

"Nope. I'm done. Now, it's your turn."

As if she were five years old, hiding under her comforter from the closet monster, fear gripped her and a chill ran down her spine. But why? "I've never had a guy for a friend. I'm not sure what kind of stuff I'm supposed to talk about."

"Why don't you tell me about your first love? I told you about mine."

Love was for saps and the weak-minded. A wave of nausea overcame her. Her stomach churned and saliva filled her mouth. She swallowed. "Can't say I've ever been in love."

"Are you telling me you've never had your heart broken?"

"I always break the hearts. Not the other way around."

"Wow. I figured everybody's had their heart broken at least once. Isn't it a requirement to being human?" He looked at her. "What about the guy who took your virginity? You must've felt something for him?"

Bile rose to the top of her throat. Her chest heaved. "I'm going to turn in."

As she stood, he grasped her wrist. "But we were getting along so well. Don't shut me out now."

He smiled and her heart sank.

She sat on her ass, facing the flames and hugged her knees. "If I told you the story, you'd have to promise not to tell anyone. Ever."

"I'm not sure why I'd tell anyone."

"Promise."

"Scouts honor."

"Were you ever a Boy Scout?"

"Does that make a difference?"

She shrugged. "I guess not. Okay. Here goes. I was a football cheerleader in high school--"

"No shit? Really?"

She smirked. "Wise-ass."

"Sorry, continue."

“They were playing against The Hornets, our rival team from Trenton. It was the game that got us into the playoffs, and we won in overtime. People were screaming and jumping. It was craziness. I was walking through the parking lot to use the restroom in the school when I saw some players from the other team hanging out by a truck. I started shouting, calling them losers. They made like they couldn’t hear me . . . so I moved closer.”

“Maggie.” He hissed more than said.

She looked at him. “You seem to have figured out the rest of the story . . .” She drew circles in the dirt with a stick. “Two of them grabbed me and threw me in the bed of the truck. The next thing I knew the truck was peeling from the parking lot. I screamed and one of them punched me. I think I was knocked unconscious because when I woke I was in the middle of the woods.”

The darkness squeezed tighter around her, suffocating her, imprisoning her. She blinked away the tears and heaved a sigh. “Shit. I don’t know why I just told you all that.”

Cam squeezed his head between his hands. His forehead dripped with sweat. He moaned and muttered under his breath. He looked like she felt.

“What’s wrong with you?”

“Migraine,” he whispered and looked at her. “Did they ever find them?”

“Find who?”

“The football players that raped you.”

Maggie picked up a stick and threw it into the flames. “I never pressed charges.”

“Why the hell not?”

“I didn’t want the whole town knowing what a dumb shit I was.”

“It wasn’t your fault.”

“Plus, we moved to Cut n’ Shoot so my dad could run for Mayor. If the press got word of the total fuck up he had for a daughter, he never would’ve won the election. Not to mention, he was a well-known attorney in Houston. I couldn’t embarrass him like that.”

“A cheerleader gets raped in a small town and no charges are filed?”

“I refused to testify or reveal anything about my attackers. Not their names or what they looked like or even that they were from Trenton and not local boys.”

Cam’s hand palmed his forehead. That must have been some migraine.

“I grew up in Cut n’ Shoot,” he said, “so I might have gone to school with the fuckers?” He blew out a breath. “Did we go to high school together? How old are you?”

“Twenty-five.”

His lips tightened into a grimace. “I didn’t but Ajay did. He’ll be home on leave soon. When he tells me who they are I’m going to—”

“No!”

“You should have pressed charges!”

“Keep your condescending higher-than-thought attitude to yourself.” She’d kept her secret for over a decade so why did she reveal her darkest secret to a man she’d known for only a few days? “You know nothing!”

“What’s there to know?” he said. “Rape is rape. It’s pretty cut and dry. No gray.”

“It was a long time ago. I’m fine.”

“How many raped you?”

“Stop saying that word.”

Cam brought his face in front of hers. “How many?”

Maggie glared at him until he grunted and turned his attention back toward the fire.

“Four,” she murmured.

“They still in town? You ever run into them?”

“Two of them I see all the time.”

“Shit.” He ran a hand over his head. “You were a virgin?”

Maggie shot to her feet, her hands on her hips. “What are you doing?”

Cam stood and faced her. “Huh?”

Her anger flared, either from her own stupidity of revealing her secret or from his condescending interrogation. “You really want to know the details? All the juicy, sick details?” She jabbed a finger into his chest. “Do you?”

“Yup.”

“You want me to cry like a girl and tell you how awful it was? Where they put their filthy hands and their . . . and how many times? Want me to tell you how I screamed?” She shoved him and he stumbled, a gesture he must have conceded. She could never move him without his cooperation. “Sorry to disappoint, but I was unconscious for a good part of it. And I never screamed.”

He gripped her shoulders. “You think I enjoy hearing this shit? No! But those guys deserve to pay.”

She shrugged out of his grip. “When I came to, they were sticking objects in me. I think the first was a flashlight, but I can’t say for sure because my eyes were swollen shut. But the second felt like a stick. And it

hurt bad. Is this doing it for you? Want me to tell you how I peed myself and how they smeared my own filth all over my body?" She shoved him, but his feet remained planted. "If you're waiting for hysterics and 'oh please save me, knight in shining armor', it's so not going to fucking happen."

Cam's hands framed her face.

"Fuck you!" She swatted him away. "The badass image you try to pull off is so not working for you right now." Holding her arms wide, she wiggled her fingers toward the sky. "Come on. Come at me."

Lines creased his forehead, his brows lowered. "That's why you wanted me to take you hiking. You want me to end it for you?"

"When you told me that you would flatten me I wanted to shoot you in the head. If I had my gun . . ."

"And now?"

She took his hand and curled his fingers around her throat. "Do it."

When he squeezed, calling her bluff, she covered his hand with hers and forced him to squeeze harder. "Do it." Her voice cracked and he released her.

"That's what I thought." Maggie stepped toward the fire. "Pussy."

He grabbed her by the elbow and flipped her around. "If you don't want a knight in shining armor then why did you tell me?"

Maggie hesitated. "You were interrogating me."

"For the tough girl you try to pull off, you caved pretty quick."

The slap of her hand across his face echoed through the hollow forest. "Let's be clear about one thing." She wagged her finger. "All I want from you is your cock. Nothing more. I just wanted to get laid. And that's all you are to me. A potential good fuck. All you will ever be to me."

He palmed her face, and her body—against her will—shuddered.

"Why do you talk like that?"

"Because I'm a slut, in case you haven't figured that out on your own. God, you're such a dumbass."

He wrenched her against him, his cheek pressed against the top of her head, his body cocooning hers. "Just because they treated you like a slut, doesn't make you one."

Maggie's words blurred against his sweaty shirt. "Why do you think they picked me?" She wrapped her arms around his back and gave herself to him, a man who threatened to squash her like a bug.

Cam pushed her to arm's length. His hands slid to her hips. "You were a virgin. I don't know what your definition of a slut is but as I understand it, virgins are not usually classified as sluts." He shook his head.

"You're so much better than that."

Ever since that day almost a decade ago, Maggie had distanced herself from everyone. She'd not met one guy who sparked anything in her except her hormones.

Until now.

She wanted Cam to hold and protect her and the thought of needing a man so completely, made her nauseous.

One good thing came from the attack. She'd learned to trust and depend on only herself. She would never be caught off guard again . . . or so she'd thought.

Unfortunately, Cameron Wolfe had single-handedly broken apart her defenses and now relentlessly clawed at her heart and soul the way no other man ever had.

She shrugged from his embrace and ran for her tent.

Rape? Rape !

CAM RAKED HIS HANDS through his hair and cursed. He paced beside the fire, his hands balled into fists, his face flushed. He stopped pacing and drew a deep breath.

Calm down.

He repeated the words, attempting to cool the beast threatening to overcome his control. For as long as he could remember, he'd envisioned his beast as a snarling, horned monster with steaming saliva oozing from its maw, rattling the bars of a cage that was shrinking, closing in. He'd never asked Jags--afraid of the answer--but his brother probably would've told him that the monster was his psyche's visual manifestation of the chaotic emotions all balled up inside his soul. Or something deep and profound like that. But all Cam knew was that he had to keep that monster tightly chained and imprisoned. Most importantly, the beast was never to be fed.

And it was an insatiably hungry monster.

Nothing short of beating the fuck out of the four football players could satiate the beast.

Evil existed. If anybody knew that, Cam did. He didn't have to be raised Catholic to believe in devils and demons. He'd been conceived by one.

And it took evil to destroy evil--like fire to fight fire. Maybe he'd take it upon himself to be a solitary crusader against evil men. Or maybe he just needed a reason to justify letting the monster loose.

In the beginning, even before he'd taken Tony his last beer, Cam had contemplated what could cause a person to unload so much sadistic hatred onto another person. Dwoane once told him to stop thinking about that kind of shit or it'd eat him alive from the inside out.

He stormed her tent with no idea what he would say or do.

She was seated in the corner. "Go away." Her voice low and mournful.

He crawled closer. "They raped you."

She tucked her knees into her chest and covered her ears with her hands. "Stop saying that word!"

"Rape?"

With her eyes squeezed shut, she screeched, "Stop!"

"Rape!"

She let out a long breath. Defeatedly, stoically, "I hate you."

Maggie's whispered plea sucked the moisture from his eyes. He fought an excruciating urge to shake her. "Rape!"

"Get out!" She pointed, tears streaming down her face. "Are you happy now?"

Cam grasped her chin between his thumb and forefinger. "Happy isn't the word that comes to mind." He crushed her against his body, knocking the air from her lungs.

Maggie gasped for a breath and pounded on his back. "I hate you!!"

He held her firm.

"I hate you," she repeated, but with less strength.

"Baby," he whispered. "You don't even know what hate is."

"I made it all these years." She sagged against him. "Not one tear. One night with you and you turn me into a . . . a . . ."

Cam looked down at her, an arm wrapped around her waist, a hand cradling the nape of her neck. "A girl."

She collapsed and mumbled into his shirt. "I begged them to stop." Her fists pounded on his back. "So much blood." Her distant stare gazed right through him. "But not a single tear . . . until now."

Cam lay flat, keeping her quivering body trapped in the crook of his arm. With her head on his chest, he trailed fingers down the side of her head through her long silky hair.

Maggie curled her fists into his shirt. She burst into hysterics. Her sobs escalated to gasps. With every frenzied attempt at a breath her chest hiccupped in rhythm.

Sharp pings of pain shot through his skull, giving him the mother of all migraines. His eyes stung. He closed his lids, desperate for the moisture to return. If that wasn't enough to keep him awake, the fire coursing through his veins would undoubtedly do the job.

Visions danced through his head. A gun would be too quick and not as much fun. *Yup*. Given the chance, he'd beat the fuckers to death. With bare hands, his own bare hands. They'd see the monster he'd managed to keep locked inside.

Cam opened his eyes, smiled and waited for dawn.

Chapter Eleven

Hellcat

The canvas of the tent blurred the sun's rays and trapped its heat. Cam laid flat, his hands clasped on his stomach and his ankles crossed. He glanced toward Maggie. Her legs were tucked into her chest, her body rolled into the fetal position.

He wanted fresh air but didn't want her waking up alone. Last night, while he held her, she'd cried for several hours. Years of pent up anger and hurt had finally escaped. After being brutally raped by a gang of teenage boys, she'd buried her feelings deep and kept her secret, all because of an unwarranted shame and to save her father's political career. What a beautiful, vibrant and strong woman.

Maggie opened her eyes.

"Good morning," Cam said.

She scooted toward him, wiggled under his arm and tucked her face against his neck.

Her face was still swollen from her emotional breakdown. What he wouldn't give to get his hands on those bastards.

"You okay?" He gave her a squeeze.

"Sorry." She tossed a leg across his sweatpants.

"For what?"

"You agreed to take me hiking not . . ."

He gave her another squeeze and kissed the top of her head, his eyes shifting to the valley between her breasts, a haven made visible by her tank top. A full erection throbbed and he rolled his eyes toward the ceiling of the tent.

"I'm the one who should be sorry," he said. "I've been tough on you these past couple of days."

Maggie slipped her hand under the waistband of his sweatpants and curled her cold fingers around his erection.

"What . . . what are you doing?"

"Please, Cam. I need this and I think you do too."

When she withdrew her hand, a curse lingered on his tongue. He wanted her but not like this. The head on his shoulders refused to take advantage of her vulnerable emotional state. If only his other head would stick to the plan.

More blood rushed to his cock and he bit back a curse.

She crawled down his body and knelt between his legs. Cam dug his heels in and lifted his body. She slid his pants to his knees, tucked her fingers in the slit of his boxers and gripped the base of his shaft.

Cam laid back and groaned, his fingers clenching the plastic of the tent beneath him.

Maggie leaned over him, her long hair sweeping across his thighs and cock. Flicking her hair to one side, she ran her tongue along the inside of his thigh.

With her hands spread on his inner thighs, she slid him into her mouth, inching her splayed fingers higher until they grazed his sack.

Cam scrunched his fingers in her hair and rocked his hips, gliding himself between her lips of silk. When his cock grazed the back of her throat, a flash of heat swept through him, his skin ablaze, his eyes damp with tears.

“Maggie,” he growled, his hand palming the back of her head, his fingers knotted through her hair.

He jerked to a sitting position, pulled her up his body. He laid her flat and sprawled beside her. He braced his weight on his forearm.

He hadn’t been with a woman in a long time and if he was doing this, he would do it right. “There’s no halfway with me. Are you sure you want this?”

Biting her bottom lip, she nodded.

He gazed into her green eyes, searching for understanding and found none. She had no clue what a disaster a relationship with him would be.

“Use your words,” he growled. “Say you want me because you have to know that I’m not easy to—”

“I want you.”

He unfastened the button of her white shorts and pulled down the zipper. With his palm on her flat stomach, he said, “Life with me won’t be easy.” He turned his focus from her green panties and fixed his gaze on her face, ensuring she read the sincerity in his eyes. “I’m fucked in the head.”

Maggie placed a finger over his lips. “I never thought I’d ever say this but shut up.”

He kicked his sweatpants off and yanked his shirt over his head. She sat up and slid her shorts and panties down her legs and reached for her backpack, but he grabbed her wrist and laid her flat. Cam

positioned himself over her, his forearms braced on either side of her head, his cock nudged against her core.

“Don’t you want a condom?” she asked.

His body grew rigid, as if she had slapped him. “You’re not on the pill?”

Maggie’s brows knitted. “I can’t have kids. That’s why I’m not on the pill.”

Cam slid a hand under her head, laced his fingers through her hair and captured her mouth in a savage and hungry kiss.

Would he really let her into his life, into his heart? Panic convulsed through him, spurring the acid in his stomach to eat at his insides. Doubt clouded his mind and judgment until she slid her fingers through his hair and moaned. His lust surged past the point of rational thought.

Maybe if there was a drop of blood in his brain, instead of all pooled between his legs, he could do right by her and leave her alone, let her find a man that didn’t struggle with his own sanity.

“Please, baby,” she moaned. “I need this. I need you.”

Nothing and nobody could stop him from being inside her. Cam traced a finger down the bridge of her nose. “No condom.”

Her beautiful face crinkled in confusion. “Why?”

“Because I’m the last man you will ever be with.”

“Cam . . . I don’t think—”

Cam slipped her tank top over her head. The front clasp snapped and soared across their small enclosure. He drank up her beauty, his eyes locked on her breasts. With his body on hers, he pushed his cock against her sex. But she moaned, and not in ecstasy, but in pain.

“Am I hurting you?”

Maggie tilted her pelvis and forced him deeper, burying the head of his cock inside her channel.

“Baby, let’s take this slow. I don’t want to hurt you.”

“I want this.” She panted the words. “Don’t stop.”

“I have no intention of stopping.” He lowered his head and kissed the side of her neck. “You’re strangling my dick, not that I’m complaining, but I need you to relax.” He forced himself deeper. “Damn, baby you feel good.”

When his mouth came down on hers, she bit, licked and sucked. Her tongue drove in his mouth, her hands squeezed his ass.

Cam jerked his head back. “Slow.” The word lingered in a quiet hiss.

“I need you. You have to believe me.”

Cam fought the urge to laugh out loud. “I believe you.”

“I think—”

“Don’t think.”

Her body stiffened.

He bit back another damn curse. “What’s the problem? I mean have things changed so much that I don’t know how it’s done any more?”

“No, it’s just—”

He clamped his hand over her mouth. “Shut your trap.” He lifted his upper body and let his eyes devour her flawless figure. His gaze traveled lower to where their bodies were so intimately joined, her mound trimmed neat. “You’re a natural redhead.”

He glided his fingers down her taut abdomen and watched her face as he circled a finger along her clit.

Maggie closed her eyes, her head drifted to the side. She moaned and he nearly came inside her. “Take your time, baby. I’m not gonna hurt you.” He circled his tongue around her erect nipple and soon her clamp on his shaft loosened.

“You like that.” He surged further, balls-deep. “You okay?”

Rotating her hips, Maggie ground herself against him.

“I’ll take that as a yes.”

Clearly, his little fireball wasn’t used to letting her lovers set the pace or steer the direction of their lovemaking. Now that she’d relinquished the reins, he’d make sure she enjoyed the ride.

Did her past lovers really let her perform like some kind of fuckin’ circus act?

No wonder she saw herself as nothing more than a whore for men to use for their own pleasure. Ironic, that Maggie probably had more experience than him, yet he knew more about pleasing her than she knew about pleasing herself.

With controlled strokes, he rammed into her faster, harder. The clap of skin against skin spiraled his desire. Her pussy clamped around his cock and he roared in satisfaction.

Cam sealed his lips to hers but she jerked her head to the side and let out a high-pitched screech.

He wedged his hands under her thighs and pushed her knees toward her shoulders. Bracing his weight on his palms, he tilted his hips, altering the angle of their joined bodies and drove into her, his strides long, slow and deep.

Her nails sank into his shoulders, her back arched and he nearly lost his hold on his impending orgasm. Cam smacked her tight ass. "Let me set the pace or you're going to make me come."

Her hands gripped his head and pulled him down. She smashed her lips against his.

What kind of foods should he offer at his restaurant? What colors should he choose for the booths, dinnerware and carpet? Think of anything but her liquid heat drowning his cock, her pussy squeezing around him.

"Stop," she said. Sweat dampened her forehead. Her breaths labored from her lungs.

Cam froze.

"Push deeper and just stop," she said.

He buried himself to the hilt.

"Don't move."

"I have to move." His teeth gritted.

She groaned, her channel tightened. The muscles in Cam's back tensed as he fought the urge to jackhammer into her. When he felt the tension in her body fade, her climax subsiding, he slid from her hot little pussy, flipped her onto her stomach and dropped on top of her.

"Am I crushing you?" he gritted low and deep in her ear.

Maggie turned her head, their lips locked and he entered her. Cam's hands slid beneath and palmed her breasts. He rocked his body, a slow and fluid motion, tilting his hips slightly, ensuring her clit rubbed along the floor of the tent.

"You're gonna come again."

She nodded.

"Use your words," he snarled.

"Ah huh."

Maggie moaned, a soft squeal he already recognized as her signature sound, indicating she was about to explode.

"My little hellcat." Cam kissed her bare shoulder.

Palming the back of her head, he knotted his fingers through her long hair, yanked her head back and captured her mouth in a fiery kiss.

A primal urge to dominate her overcame him. Maggie was his little spitfire and he wanted to tame her. "Get on your hands and knees." He wasn't used to channeling this level of desire. He'd never felt this kind of lust.

When Maggie raised herself, he gripped her hips, steadied her body and rammed into her. His fingers tightened around her slender hips. The first orgasm he'd had—aside from self-generated—rolled inside him. His eyes watered. The temperature of his body soared, his every pore leaked sweat.

With his release close, he plunged himself deep. She circled her hips, a slight movement that hurled him over the top. "Fuck!" The word echoed within the confines of their small shelter.

Maggie moaned, a cute feminine sound that sparked another thundering roar from him.

Her sweet, hot pussy milked his cock, a sensation that almost killed him with pleasure.

His body shuddered as he poured a seemingly endless stream of cum inside her.

Cam lifted her hands off the floor. He brought her upright, leaving them both on their knees, his body pressed behind hers, his arms crossed over her chest, his hands cupping her breasts. Tucking his nose in the crook of her neck, he waited until their bodies relaxed, utterly satiated.

He feathered kisses along her shoulder blades and slick-with-sweat back, his hands still cupped around her breasts, his cock still embedded in her sheath.

"What have we done?" He collapsed onto his back, taking her with him.

Maggie draped a leg over his. "Don't you dare say you regret it."

He'd just had the hottest, most mind-blowing sex of his life, with his stunning, quirky little hellcat and she wanted to know if he regretted it?

Cam cleared his throat. "I'm not sure I can get enough of you."

With a devilish smile, she said, "One taste and you're already addicted."

Tilting his head, he fastened his lips to hers, his tongue thrusting, fucking her mouth in a blatant display of possession. He kissed the tip of her nose. Then she did something he never thought he'd see from his little fireball.

Maggie blushed.

Cam wrapped his arms around her and crushed her against him, the side of her face pressed against his bare chest. He kissed the top of her head and closed his eyes.

How much closet space would she need? Maybe he should clean off a shelf in the linen closet for her toiletries. At least he knew she liked Gramps and Gramps liked her.

If he hadn't tried to kill himself, he might never have met her. Ironic that his attempt on his own life had led him to the one person he now lived for. He loved her and would love her the rest of his life.

Cam glanced down and discovered she'd fallen asleep.

Guilt nagged at him. He'd taken advantage of her fragile state and mated with her like some kind of wild beast.

He scooted from under her, got dressed and quietly left the tent. After relighting the fire, he watched the flickering flames.

He no longer wanted to die but hadn't a clue how to live, how to love.

Chapter Twelve

Pride?

For the better part of an hour, Cam had sat on the ground, poking at the fire with a stick, until he finally heard the whiz of a zipper. He watched as Maggie exited the tent. "Hey."

Maggie sat onto the ground beside him. "How long was I out?"

"About an hour."

She stretched her legs and crossed her ankles, her palms on the ground behind her. "You promised you wouldn't tell anyone."

While thoughts of how he'd convince her to move in with him raced through his mind, her thoughts centered on reassurance that the sadistic, inhuman, perverted defiling of her perfect and soft body remained a secret.

"You'll keep your promise?" she repeated.

"Yup."

When she started to get up, he grasped her wrist. "It wasn't your fault."

Maggie nodded.

Resisting the urge to roll his eyes, Cam climbed to his feet. Together they packed up camp with little conversation.

When they finished, he said, "Why don't you take the lead?"

"Okay."

He slung her backpack over his shoulder. "I'll take this for a while."

She scowled. "Don't treat me like a . . . a . . ."

He palmed the side of her face. "A girl." Stepping around her, he trekked up the trail. "I'm carrying it and that's the end of it."

Maggie jogged past him and stood in his path. She smacked her palms on his chest and shoved.

Stepping backwards, he threw up his hands, palms out. "Don't do this."

When she pushed again, he grasped both her wrists. "The tough girl act doesn't work with me."

"It's not an act."

He brushed a lock of hair from her face. "You won't win this one, my little hellcat, but I'm looking forward to the battle."

Maggie reached for her backpack. Laughing, he danced around her and up the path. A few yards away, he turned and waved her on. "Come on. Even Gramps don't walk so slow."

Sprinting, she shouted, "Give me my pride."

Cam stopped, when she reached him, he said, "Why does somebody helping you hurt your pride?"

"It just does. Didn't it hurt your pride when I helped you with your red tape problem?"

"I admit I didn't like it, but it wasn't a matter of pride." He shook his head. "I accepted your help, so accept mine."

"The difference is you needed my help. I don't need yours."

"That's where you're wrong. I'd have gotten the permits eventually on my own." Cam continued along the trail, a backpack slung over each shoulder. "We should get going."

From the Tap

CAM DROPPED BOTH packs in the trunk and climbed in the passenger side of Maggie's silver Cadillac. She took the dangling keys from his fingers and started the car.

The ride home was quiet. No idle chatter. No goading or playful teasing. The spark in his little spitfire was no longer explosive, reduced to smoldering embers. When Cam grasped her hand, she smiled and returned her attention to the road.

Ah hell.

He rubbed his forehead. Why had everything changed? He wanted to spend the rest of his life loving her and she wanted nothing to do with him. She chased him and caught him. Goal accomplished. She would move on.

"I'm not good at relationships." The uncensored words leapt from his mouth.

"I had a good time. I hope we can still be friends."

Where was the fucking Jack Daniels when he needed it? Just give him a bottle. He'd swig the Tennessee whiskey straight from the tap. "Pull over!"

When Maggie rolled the car to a stop and shifted to park, he clutched her head between his hands and took her mouth in a domineering kiss, a mesh of lips, teeth and pure, unadulterated lust.

"Maggie." Her name hissed from his lips, a plea of sorts. "What exactly do you think is going on with us?" Sweat rolled down the side of his face, his hands trembled. The moisture in his eyes evaporated.

She smiled. No joy in the gesture, the same look she'd give a bird with a broken wing struggling to take flight. "We're good. Call me if you want a good time."

Was she the whore those bastards treated her as? Was he just one of the many she screwed? Tomorrow, maybe even tonight, she might give herself to somebody else. She could be in another man's arms before dusk.

As Cam's anger soared, he was reminded why he'd resisted a relationship with her in the first place. He'd spent three whole days with Maggie and never felt more out of control than now. A whole new level of fury and frustration hummed through him. If he stayed with her much longer, she'd be the death of him. He'd either end himself to avoid inflicting his rage on another or he'd lose control and kill someone—most likely the first guy he found Maggie with—and die on death row.

Cam forced the next words from his mouth, his focus on his boots. "Friends. Nothing more. I've stated that from the start."

"We understand each other then." Maggie shifted to drive and continued down the road.

Why had he dragged her from the lake? He should've pulled the trigger, blown his head off and let her drown. His soul would have rocketed to hell, but hell couldn't be worse than where he was right now.

It felt like forever before Maggie finally pulled in front of his house.

She gave him a tight smile. "I meant what I said. Call me if you want to get together again." She darted her focus forward, past the windshield. "Please get out. I'd like to go home, shower and maybe take a nap."

Cam whipped the passenger door open and slammed it shut. The lock on the trunk popped. He lifted it and snagged his pack.

Watching her car fade from his sight, he realized he'd never felt more alive than he did at this moment. Nobody could suffer this level of torment unless they were truly alive. His first instincts were correct.

Death was a better option than life.

You Fucked Her?

CAM THREW HIS keys on the coffee table and plunked down on the faded blue sofa. He glanced at his grandfather and at the television, airing a show on Dolphins.

Jags strode in from the kitchen and sat beside him. "Do tell." Sporting a mischievous grin, he nudged his shoulder against Cam.

"I don't want to talk about it."

"Try again," Jags said. "You know me better than that."

Cam inclined his head at his grandfather. "Hi Gramps." He looked at Jags. "Did he get the Namenda?"

"Yes. And the other one. I can't pronounce it."

"Methylphenidate."

"Sure," Jags said.

"Did you wait at least thirty minutes before he ate to give it to him?"

"Sure. So the hike? Tell me. Don't make me get the Otoko. I have some in my truck."

"Otoko?"

"The gum that smells like a locker room."

Cam winced.

Grinning, Jags stretched his arm out on the back of the couch. "I'm listening."

Cursing, Cam popped from the couch, sprinted through the kitchen and out the back door.

He ran until he reached his S-10 pickup. Three years ago it had died and it had rotted in his backyard ever since. Bracing both hands over the top of the driver's door, he hung his head.

He cursed, heaved the piece-of-shit forward, let the vehicle fall back and gave it another strong shove.

"Cam!" Jags dashed from the house, stopping a few feet away. "Talk to me."

Keeping his hands braced on the cab, he looked at his brother, determined he wouldn't succumb to Jags' whims.

Not this time.

The last thing he wanted was some psychobabble bullshit on how he wasn't dangerous to anyone and he was good for Maggie. He spoke his next words enunciating each syllable loud, clear and slow. "Go. Home."

Jags' eyes narrowed. "You fucked her . . . didn't you?"

A flash of heat exploded through Cam's body. Sharp jabs of pain needled the back of his skull. Cam charged toward Jags and slugged him across the jaw, thrusting him across the overgrown lawn.

Jags lay still, curled on the ground.

Cam said, "Fight back you pussy!"

Jags licked the blood from his lip. He slowly got to his feet and walked back toward the house. When he reached the door, he glanced over his shoulder.

Cam cringed because he didn't want any more unsolicited advice or to talk. He wanted to break something, maybe even set something on fire.

Jags spoke one word before he disappeared into the house. "Always."

Chapter Thirteen

So Hard to Believe?

Maggie showered and changed her clothes. Retrieving her cell from her hunter green purse, she glanced at the time. One-thirty. She was supposed to meet Star for a tennis match at two. And Star hated when Maggie was late and she was late more often than not.

Tennis might take her mind off Cam, a distraction she desperately needed.

Usually, as soon as the erotic fun ended, she'd hand her lover their keys and tell them to drive safe.

Cam and she had fucked. No big deal. Nothing was supposed to change.

But everything had changed.

She hoped for a future with her lover.

I'm not good at relationships, he had said. But that wasn't true. If anybody sucked at relationships, it was her.

What Cam wanted . . . what he deserved, she couldn't give.

No eating spaghetti dinner on the couch while watching sitcoms.

No church on Sundays and Wednesdays.

No birthday parties for nieces and nephews.

That wasn't her style.

Happily ever after didn't exist, not for women like Maggie.

Descending the stairs, she checked her cell for messages. Mark, her current off-and-on lover, left a message asking if they could talk. Either he wanted to get back together or he wanted to be fuck buddies. But just the thought of him holding her hand sent a chill down her spine.

Her phone vibrated. She slid her finger across the screen and held the phone to her ear. "Hi Jags."

"Hi, sweetie. How'd everything go?"

A wave of calm enveloped her, a tangible energy. No pill or glass of wine could settle her nerves like the sound of Jags' harmonious voice. It was downright eerie. "Why don't you ask Cam?"

"I'm asking you."

"It was fine."

"That's the response you give when someone asks you how a root canal went. Try again."

Still reeling from her emotional breakdown, Maggie found his grilling for gossip tiresome. She swung her green gym bag over her shoulder and opened the front door of the five thousand square foot colonial built before the birth of this country. "Listen, I'm on my way out. Can we talk later?"

"Now."

She meandered through the tall freshly-trimmed bushes lining both sides of the stone walkway. Rummaging through her purse, she searched for her car keys, the phone tucked between her shoulder and cheek. "You seem like a nice guy and I know you're only trying to help, but he's not interested."

"What about me?"

"What?"

"Can we be friends?"

Was he actually hitting on her? "You seem great. But—"

"Friends."

"No offense," she said. "But I'd have thought you could come up with something a little more original." Maggie pressed the unlock button, her car beeped.

"Sweetie. There's something you should know about me. I'm brutally blunt. I'm incapable of bullshit. If I was attracted to you, we wouldn't be talking on the phone. I would confront you in person and you would either slap me or . . . well, you get the drift. See? Brutally blunt."

"You want to be friends?" She inserted the key into the ignition, shifted to drive. She waved at the security guard of the gated neighborhood as she passed by the open wrought iron gate.

"Is that so hard to believe?"

Maggie sighed. "Yes."

No I'm Not

CAM GAVE THE piece-of-shit truck another heave. It flipped on its side. The left tail light cracked and the only glass left untouched—the rear passenger window—shattered. He shoved the truck again, toppling it upside down. Shards of glass crunched beneath his boots as he circled to the driver's side. Shoving again, he rolled the truck upright. He rounded to the passenger side. Cursing, he shoved, flipping it on its side.

"Cam," Gramps shouted.

The coarse voice of Gramps broke his trance. "What?" He made no effort to hide his annoyance.

"I'm heading to bed."

Cam jogged up to him, his breath labored and heavy. "You shouldn't be taking a nap, it's too early. You won't be able to get to sleep tonight."

Gramps frowned. "Son, it is tonight. You've been out here for three hours."

Cam panned his surroundings. The full moon illuminated much of the yard. He inspected his hands. Red, raw and bleeding. A rip in his jeans stretched from his knee to his ankle.

"Shit!" Dashing past Gramps, he whipped open the screen door. "You need your medication."

Gramps shuffled across the kitchen and took a seat at the table. Cam's hands trembled as he poured the medication into a three-ounce cup. Holding it out, he forced a smile.

"Son." Gramps crooked a finger.

Cam dropped to one knee in front of his grandfather.

Gramps' bony, cool hand covered Cam's. "You're such a good boy."

Jags and Gramps were blood relatives, a concept Cam sometimes found difficult. While Jags' sense of others excelled, Gramps' judgment lacked greatly.

"No, I'm not."

Chapter Fourteen

Meant No Disrespect

Cam spent the following day flipping through wholesale catalogs looking for used restaurant equipment. He sketched a floor plan for the dining room, wrote out a probable menu and called the Coke vendor to schedule the delivery of the drink station. Despite his efforts to stay busy and keep his mind off Maggie, he couldn't stop thinking about her, remembering her scent and the feel of her soft body beneath his, her cute feminine squeal as she climaxed.

Cam pulled a tray stand up to the couch, set a notebook on top and sat down. Pen in hand, Cam cursed the day he met Maggie then jotted down ideas for a classified ad he would place in the Conroe Gazette listing the positions he was looking to fill.

Reclined in his armchair, Gramps looked up from his book. "Son, is something wrong?"

"I'm fine."

"Meemaw used to say the same thing." Gramps returned the armchair upright and set the book down. "She never meant it either."

Cam stood and took Gramps' arm. Slowly he raised his grandfather to his feet.

"I'm going to lay down for a bit," Gramps said.

Cam helped Gramps down the corridor and into bed. Folded at the foot of the bed, lay the afghan Meemaw had crocheted many years ago. As he pulled the handmade blanket over Gramps' frail body, he heard a knock.

Cam returned to the living room and peered out the window. Jags' truck was in the driveway. He debated ignoring him but since Cam's SUV was in the driveway, unlikely Jags would go away anytime soon.

Cam decided to ignore him anyway.

He sat on the sofa, grabbed the remote and turned on the television. The Discovery channel was airing a show on the myth of BigFoot. Cam stretched his legs along the length of the couch and leaned back on the arm of the sofa.

The little fucker banged on the door, drowning out the television. Cam forced his attention on the show.

More knocking.

Cam groaned, ignored the knocking, and watched the show.

More knocking.

A hard bang.

More banging.

Thirty minutes later the episode had ended but Jags relentless assault on the front door never wavered.

“Fuck!” Cam whipped the door open. “You mention her name and I’ll beat the shit out of you.”

Jags gave Cam a weak smile and with a swollen hand and bleeding knuckles waved.

Grasping Jags by the elbow, Cam dragged him into the house, down the hall and to the bathroom. He closed the lid on the toilet and ordered Jags to sit.

Silently, Cam wrapped gauze around Jags’ knuckles and applied strips of medical tape.

“How are you holding up?” Jags asked.

“Son a bitch! Why did you do this to yourself? Obviously, I didn’t want to talk to you.”

“I wanted to apologize for yesterday. I meant no disrespect when I asked if you’d fucked Maggie. I just wanted—”

“Stop.” Cam applied the last strip of medical tape. “I should be the one apologizing. I wasn’t ready to answer questions about her.” He hesitated, cursed. “I’m sorry I hit you.” Cam shook his head as he left the bathroom.

Jags followed him into the living room. “Tilly will be here soon. Can we still go out as planned?”

Cam sighed. “Yup.”

Chapter Fifteen

Halloween Party

For the last two weeks, Maggie had plagued Cam's daydreams, nightmares and every hour in between. The woman had bewitched him. Damn her!

He dreamed of them floating in a boat on a calm lake. She wore the same emerald bikini she wore the day he met her. He wanted to teach her to fish but she refused to use live bait so they used rubber worms, which ensured they wouldn't catch a thing all damn day.

Maggie rested her rod and reel beside her, stretched her legs forward and leaned back to bask in the sun. He crawled over her and pressed his body against hers, his mouth over hers. When she wrapped her legs around his waist he rocked against her, the bulge in his jeans nudging the crotch of her skimpy bikini. She moaned and tilted her hips. The boat rocked in sync with their dry-fucking.

He pushed at her more forcefully, picking up his pace, thrusting the canoe into a clumsy rock. The boat tipped and tossed both of them into the water. When she emerged, he planted a kiss on her forehead. "My little fireball."

For the first time in his life, he was dreaming! He couldn't remember ever having a dream, not a pleasant one anyway. His dreams weren't the only thing that changed since the hike.

He had burned two meals, another rarity for him. He hadn't burned a meal in years.

Yesterday afternoon, he opened the refrigerator and found his keys on the top shelf wedged between two long necks.

Earlier today, he pulled the knob on the washing machine to start a load of laundry. The phone rang and an hour passed before he remembered the laundry he'd started. The load had run a full cycle without a stitch of clothing inside.

Cam was wrecked and all because of his little hellcat.

He entered the abandoned restaurant, the place where he'd fallen in love for the first time, learned the value of a good day's work, and to always be true to himself, no matter the consequences to others. Mr. Moretti taught him how to be a man, how to treat a woman and the value of integrity.

He gave Cam a place to go every day after school, a place to hide from his father. While there, he learned to bake cheddar biscuits, pecan pie and the secret to Mr. Moretti's infamous eggplant parmesan.

Cam approached a dusty wooden table and swiped his hand along the top. He had to get her out of his head, out of his heart. He needed a distraction. So Cam asked his father to watch over Gramps' so he could start the repairs on Copper Creek.

For the next few hours, he swept, dusted and cleaned windows. He chose a room in the back of the restaurant as Gramps' second living quarters, a place where Cam could keep an eye on Gramps and also manage the restaurant.

After installing a flat screen television, he muscled a black leather recliner and matching sleep-sofa and positioned them along adjacent walls, then set an oak coffee table in front of the sofa. Tomorrow, he'd fill the compact refrigerator with cranberry juice, milk, bananas and homemade potato salad. And of course, plenty of peanut butter, bread and fresh fruit.

"Hey," Standing in the doorway, Jags wore a pink shaggy housecoat and red and blue striped tube socks. Green goo covered his face and pink curlers draped low from his long hair.

Shaking his head, Cam said, "Are you serious?"

"Critters is having a Halloween party tonight," Jags said.

Cam snickered. "I got a surprise for you."

"Ajay!"

"Yup. I was just about to leave to go pick him up at the airport. Don't suppose you'd mind going for me? I got some stuff I'd like to finish up here." He'd give anything to see the expression on Ajay's face when he sees Jags.

"Heck yeah!" Jags turned to leave but hesitated. He said, his back toward Cam, "Our brother is coming home."

"Only for a week."

Jags glanced back. "You better make a trip to the liquor store."

"Goes without saying."

Pepto Pink

AJAY STEPPED THROUGH the airport's double glass doors. A black duffle bag was slung over his shoulder. He started down the long corridor when he noticed the ugliest woman he'd ever seen was running toward him. Holy shit! She was wearing a housecoat the color of Pepto and fuzzy slippers. She neared and he cringed at the sight of her face covered in some kind of green lotion.

Ajay glanced at the people behind him but none of them seemed to recognize this woman. Only a few feet away, he recognized this hag as his crazy stepbrother.

With both feet off the ground, Jags vaulted at him, but Ajay stepped to the side.

Gracefully Jags landed on his feet. He turned and chased after him. "What's up buddy?" He gripped Ajay's forearm but Ajay shook him off.

Glancing over his shoulder, Ajay asked, "Are you for real?"

"Not you too. It's a Halloween costume."

"I should hope so," Ajay said. "Stay behind me and don't talk to me until we get to the truck."

"You gotta learn to loosen up."

"People are going to think we're lovers."

Jags let out an abrupt laugh. "Someday you may wake up beside someone who looks like this."

"The first time my wife wears anything more than a thong to bed, will be the last because I'll burn the additional garments the next morning."

"You're such a Neanderthal."

Ajay stepped in the rotating door with an arm stretched out, barring Jags from joining him. "If having a penis makes me a Neanderthal, then I guess I'm a Neanderthal."

Approaching the airport parking lot, Jags slapped his brother on the back causing him to stumble forward. "It's really great to see you."

"It's good to be seen." Ajay climbed into the passenger side of Jags' white F350.

Jags circled to the driver's side and slid behind the wheel. He shifted to reverse, glanced behind and let his foot off the brake. The truck rolled backwards a few feet before Jags slammed on the brake and shifted to park. He snatched Ajay's wrist and traced one of the many dime-sized scars on his left arm.

The accident occurred eight months ago and every day since Ajay had dreaded this inevitable moment. He hated the weepy look Jags always got when he or Cam was hurt and he detested sympathy, from him or anyone else.

“It’s nothing,” Ajay said.

“Can you be more specific?”

“I was too close to an IED when it went off.” When Jags nodded, the invisible board strapped to Ajay’s back disappeared, allowing his posture to sag to a more comfortable position.

Jags shifted to reverse and let his foot off the brake. “How much longer?”

Ajay stared out his side window.

Jags slammed the truck into drive and that damn invisible board resurfaced.

“Ajay?”

Silence.

“Did you reenlist?”

Ajay turned toward Jags. “I’m not in the service anymore but I’m still stationed in Iraq.

For the past year I’ve been working for a private security firm as a mercenary.”

Jags brows lowered. “Why did you lie?”

Ajay glanced out the window. “I guess I didn’t think you’d approve.”

“Probably because I wouldn’t have.”

Ajay looked at Jags. “Why?”

“Because it’s too dangerous.”

“No more dangerous than the US military.”

“Why do I find that hard to believe?” Jags eyed him. “What’s up with the fatigues?”

“They’re not military issued. I wasn’t sure I was going to tell you. I wore them for your benefit.”

Jags hit the blinker and veered onto Highway 45. “Tell me some good stories.”

Tension eased as Ajay told stories about his time in Iraq, stories about practical jokes played on him, pranks he played on others, drinking binges and football games they played in the desert heat and dry dirt.

When they pulled into the barren Copper Creek parking lot, Ajay pointed at the red Expedition. “Cam’s here?”

“Should open in a month or two.”

“He’s finally doing it. Good for him.”

When Ajay and Jags entered the restaurant, Cam slid from a booth and stood. Ajay and Cam walked toward each other, their right hands raised over their heads. Their hands slapped and came back in a tight clasp.

Ajay glanced around. The booth cushions, dishware and wallpaper were decorated in a unique shade of green, not dark but not light. Different but good. He shrugged. "I like it."

"For crying out loud." Jags wrapped his arms around both his brothers. "Group hug."

Their foreheads touched.

"Tonight we celebrate. Our brother has returned to us, and all in one piece." Jags squeezed them tighter. "Tonight we get crazy."

"Tonight we drink lots of alcohol," Ajay said. "I just have one request."

"Anything," Jags said.

"Women. Lots of women."

Jags winked. "You got it."

Damn Straight

MAGGIE SPENT THE last two weeks with her mind in a haze. The events of the hike played over and over in her mind. Swimming in the pond, killing horseflies, the feel of his body on her, inside her.

He hadn't called . . . not even to play the friends-with-benefits card. Why did she care when she was the one who had pushed him away?

She flopped onto the bed, face down and let the tears come, tears she'd successfully held back until now. As she wept into her pillow, she heard the door creak open.

Whoever it was could go to hell. A hand rubbed her back and a familiar voice asked, "What's wrong?"

Maggie turned from the pillow and saw Tilly's younger sister sitting on the edge of the bed. Star's long strawberry blonde hair was balled at the nape of her neck.

Maggie groaned into her pillow. "He hasn't called."

"Cam?"

Maggie turned on her side.

Star gasped. "I've never seen you cry."

Maggie flipped back to her stomach, burying her face in her pillow. "I'm pitiful."

"A little."

Maggie sat up and wiped the tears from her face. "What's wrong with me?"

"Come on. Get up." Star walked to Maggie's walk-in closet and shifted through the long row of blouses and skirts.

"There's no way I'm going out tonight," Maggie said.

"Oh, no you don't. You need a night out. Get your mind off of him."

"Look at me. I'm not going out in public with a face like this." Maggie could only imagine how puffed up and red her face was from crying.

Star dragged her to her vanity in the corner of the room and ushered her into the chair.

"There's this neat little invention. It's called make-up."

"This may be beyond make-up. Got any spray paint?"

"Nonsense." Star dabbed beige cream on her finger and rubbed the foundation in small circles under Maggie's eyes. When finished, she leaned back and examined her efforts. She winced. "Maybe a little more." She rubbed more of the cream under Maggie's eyes, on her forehead, her chin and cheeks. "Have

you considered that you may not be hung up on him at all? I mean, in the years we've known each other, I can't remember when you've cried over anything, much less a man. Maybe this guy's just a challenge to your pride and nothing more."

Maggie glared at Star's reflection in the mirror. "It's not a pride thing." She crossed her arms over her chest.

Star crouched beside Maggie staring at her curiously. Her eyes widened and her hand covered her mouth. "I can't believe I'm about to say this but I think you're in love." She stood, picked an oval case off the vanity and dabbed beige powder over Maggie's face. "Honey, welcome to the club."

"What club?"

"The first heartbreak is always the worst." Star handed Maggie the mascara. "I don't want to poke your eye out." She stood behind with her hands resting on Maggie's shoulders. "The second and third heartbreaks aren't much better." As Maggie applied the mascara, Star leaned down and whispered in her ear. "What you need is a boyfriend. Nothing serious. Just someone to keep your mind off Cam."

Maggie finished applying the mascara and flung it on the vanity. "You're right."

"Damn straight."

Maggie walked to her closet and ripped a black silk blouse from its hanger. "Friends. What a crock."

"I'm just saying."

Maggie tore an emerald mini skirt from its hanger. "I could have any man in this damn town. I don't need him."

"And Maggie's back."

Maggie laid her clothes on her bed and picked her cell phone off the end table. As she dialed, she looked to Star. "Call Tilly. Tell her we'll be there in an hour."

"But what about Nate?"

Maggie put up a finger shushing Star. "Yes, hello. This is Maggie Stewart. I'm going to need a limo for tonight." She paused. "Yes, charge it to my account. Can you be here in thirty minutes?" Another pause. "Great. Bye."

Star sighed. "When you rent a limousine it usually means you plan on drinking to the point of unconsciousness and we'll have to carry you home."

"Flex those muscles girl. That's exactly the plan."

Do You Remember?

A petite brunette approached the table and set a glass before Ajay. "Jack and Coke." Ajay winked and took a sip of his drink. She grabbed the second glass from her tray and placed it in front of Jags. "Jack and Coke."

"Thank you, Kara."

"You're welcome." She gave Jags another glance. "I like your costume."

His jaw dropped. "See? She knew it was a costume."

Ajay rolled his eyes.

She placed the last glass before Cam. "And Jack and Coke. You guys want to order some food?"

"No," Cam said.

She gave him a small smile and left.

Cam promised to keep Maggie's secret and he intended to do so, but how could he ask Ajay about the incident without risking her secret being revealed? He hadn't dated in years and didn't have any friends, aside from his brothers, so if Ajay met Maggie, he'd probably figure out the girl Cam asked about was her.

But they weren't dating . . . weren't friends . . . so there was nothing stopping Cam from drilling Ajay about the little fuckers.

And even by chance if Ajay did meet Maggie someday, Cam would tell him to keep her secret and Ajay would. That simple.

Cam swiveled his high-back chair. He put a hand on Jags' chest and pushed him backward, giving him a clear view of Ajay. "Do you remember if any of the football players you went to high school with talked about . . ." A bolt of pain shot through Cam's head. He rubbed his temples with his fingertips. ". . . giving it good to a cheerleader from a rival high school?"

Ajay smirked. "Football players constantly bragged about getting laid."

"Four football players." Another piercing pain shot from behind his eyes. "One cheerleader . . . against her will."

Ajay swiveled his chair toward Cam and leaned in front of Jags, bringing his face within inches of Cam's. "That was fuckin' ten years ago. Why are you asking?"

"So you remember?"

Ajay nodded.

In a deep and calm voice, Cam said, "I want names."

"I don't have names. I didn't exactly hang out in the same crowds as the football players. They were usually the ones me and the Hell Pack beat to a pulp."

"You were in the Hell Pack?" Jags asked.

"Was I in the Hell Pack?" Ajay snorted. "The fuckin' Hell Pack reported to me. There were eight of us, including me. And the football players were some of our favorite targets."

"We never talk about this again," Cam said. "Get me?"

Ajay and Jags nodded.

Not Normal

TILLY ASKED, "Well, girls. What are we drinking?"

A waiter passed carrying a glass. Gold liquid rode the sides of the bowl in sync with the waiter's movements.

Maggie's thumb jutted out. "That."

"Margarita," Tilly said. "I could do Margaritas."

"I think I'll stick with iced tea," Star said.

Tilly fished her phone from her purse.

"You calling Nate already?" Maggie asked.

"I just want to send him a text and let him know we got here okay."

"It's not normal."

Tilly sent the message and slipped her phone into her purse. "Don't start."

Star pointed toward the doorway. "Too late. That ship sailed."

Tilly slid off her tall chair. "Sorry girls. I'll get rid of him." She shoved her way through the crowd.

Nate, her tall, blond, gorgeous and infuriating husband spotted her and waved.

Approaching him, she asked, "What are you doing here?"

He pressed his mouth to hers, weaved his fingers through her short hair. When he pulled her closer to deepen his kiss, she grabbed his upper arms and pushed him away.

"Go home," Tilly said.

Nate held her head between his hands and whispered against her mouth. "Just marking my territory."

She pointed to her wedding band. "That's what this is for."

He took a step back. "What are the rules?"

She wiggled her fingers. "Girl's night out. Bye."

Nate flipped open a finger. "One. Don't go to the bathroom alone. Buddy system."

Taking another step back, he flipped a second finger open. "Two. Never leave your drink unattended."

"Go."

"Three. I love you," he said, now halfway out the door.

"I love you too but if you come in here, it's grounds for divorce."

He stepped toward her and gave her a quick kiss. "Four. You're not allowed to divorce me."

She laughed. "Go." The glass door closed. When he mouthed 'I love you', she offered him a small smile and pantomimed 'I love you too'.

Tilly moved through the crowded bar and climbed onto the tall chair beside Maggie.

"Really?" Maggie asked.

Tilly glared at her. "I said don't."

"I'm just saying. It's not normal."

"Maggie."

"All right. All right," Maggie held her hands up in surrender. "I'll shut up."

"Thank you," Tilly said. "Did you order our drinks yet?"

"Nobody's been by." Maggie grasped Tilly's elbow and dragged her from the stool. "Star, we're going to the bar to get drinks. Be right back."

Chapter Sixteen

Warm-blooded Preferable

FOR THE PAST HOUR, Ajay's gaze followed every woman that had passed their table. He was a famished man selecting his next meal. And Cam wanted to punch him in the head. Ajay's dick ruled his life and one of these days it would get him into a heap of trouble.

"So what do you think of Cam's restaurant," Jags asked.

"About time he did something with that old place." Ajay sipped his drink and looked at Cam. "Green, huh?"

Jags wagged his eyebrows at Ajay. "He's got a friend who likes green."

Ajay leaned in front of Jags, closer to Cam. "A friend? You don't have any friends."

"He does now," Jags said.

Cam took a swig of his drink and slammed the glass down. "Shut your trap."

"Glad to hear it," Ajay said. "Celibacy is not for you."

"My standards are higher than yours. That's all." Cam tossed the remainder of his drink down.

"I have standards too," Ajay said.

"What? Warm blood?"

"That's preferable." Ajay finished the last of his drink. "But I'm perfectly capable of warming a woman up." He held his empty glass over his head and panned the restaurant. "If need be."

Kara approached. "Another round?"

"That would be fantastic," Jags said.

Ajay grasped her wrist, "I've missed you, baby."

She smirked. "Liar."

"What time do you get off?"

"I'm sorry." Kara pulled her hand away. "I have a boyfriend now."

"Never stopped us before." Ajay crooked his finger. When she leaned down, he whispered, "We won't tell him."

She gave him a tight smile and shook her head. "I'll be right back with another round."

Ajay watched her walk away.

Jags snapped his fingers in his line of vision. "We're over here."

"Sorry guys." Ajay slid off his stool. "I'll be back."

Jags and Cam watched him push his way through the crowd until he approached the end of the bar. He took Kara by the elbow and whispered in her ear.

"Ten bucks says he does her in the men's room," Cam said.

Jags faced forward and sipped his drink. "I'm going to pass on that bet."

"Look," Cam said.

Jags glanced over his shoulder. Ajay had his arm draped around Kara's shoulder and they walked toward the back of the bar.

"His womanizing days are numbered," Jags said.

"You had a vision?" Cam asked.

Jags laughed. "If I told you about the woman I saw him with, you wouldn't believe me."

A few minutes later, a tall brunette approached. She held a tray with three drinks balanced on top.

"Where's Kara?" Jags asked.

"She'll be back. I'm just helping her out for a few minutes."

"A few minutes," Cam muttered. "Somehow I doubt that."

"Is she okay?" Jags asked.

"She's fine."

Cam groaned. "I bet."

Jags ran his hand down the front of his face and nodded to the waitress. "Thanks." When she turned and left, he said, "You don't think—"

"Yup."

Jags laughed and sat back. "And so the craziness begins."

Do Me

TWO HOURS AND several rounds of whiskey later. Ajay excused himself again. "I'll be back."

"Ajay?" Cam barked.

"What?"

"Really?"

"Relax. I'm just going to get us another round."

Ajay ignored Cam's disapproving glare. He squeezed through the crowd to get to the bar. He leaned over his folded arms and gazed down the long shiny counter searching for the bartender. Behind him the crowd roared. He turned to see what the commotion was about.

A crowd was gathered around a table; mostly men. His curiosity getting the best of him, he pushed and shoved his way through. Ajay found a sexy redhead leaned over a man who was sprawled flat on a table. Her face hovered over his groin and her hands were clasped behind her back. When she lifted her head, he saw a shot glass dangling from her mouth. With a tilt of her head, she poured the liquid down her throat. Another approving roar erupted from the crowd.

"Do me," Ajay said, taking a step forward.

The man she was just leaning over, sat up and glared at him. "Hey dude. What's up?"

Ajay, almost as tall and almost as scary as his big brother, towered over the man. "You don't want to fuck with me."

"Asshole," the man said as he scrambled through the crowd.

She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. Her eyes roamed up and down Ajay's tall body. With a scoff, she pushed past him.

Ajay followed her to a nearby table where two other women were seated.

"You brought back a pet," one of the women said.

Ajay offered her his hand. "Hi, I'm Charlie."

She accepted and they shook hands. "I'm Tilly." Gesturing to the woman beside her, she said, "This is Star."

Sensing Star's shyness, he simply sent her a warm smile then turned his attention back to the redhead. "You are?"

The red head rested her elbows on the table, her hands holding her head up. "Drunk."

He brought his face under hers. "Why so glum?" When she didn't reply, he looked to the other women.

"Nursing a broken heart," Tilly offered.

The redhead turned to look at him, her palm on her cheek holding her head up. "He wants to be . . ."

She closed her eyes. ". . . friends."

"Friends can be a good thing." Ajay said.

She groaned and turned her gaze back to the table.

"Friends with benefits?" Ajay asked.

"I tried that."

Ajay frowned. "Is he gay?"

"I know. Right? That's what I thought."

"So he is gay."

She sighed. "I don't think so."

Ajay took a deep breath basking in the scent emanating from her mouth: Patron and Triple Sec. He scooted himself between the redhead and the table. "Hi."

She leaned back trying to put distance between them. Her eyes narrowed. "Have we met? You look familiar."

"I'd remember meeting you."

With a wave of her hand, she said, "You're cute, but I'm out of your league." She shoved him aside.

He scooted back in front of her with a look of contempt. "Out of your league? What the hell does that mean?"

"I'll talk slower."

With her face close, he couldn't help inhaling, reveling in the potent aroma of tequila and the scent of lime.

"I'm. Too. Good. For. You."

"I'll make you a deal."

"Not interested."

He leaned closer, whispered in her ear. "You'll be screaming my name before this night ends. I promise you that. And the name of that guy that wants to be friends will be a distant memory." She looked at him. Her expression, one of boredom. "Let me be clearer. Fuck off."

He breathed a warm breath on her neck. "I can make you feel good. Really. Really. Good."

She opened her mouth for what was sure to be a verbal lashing but hesitated. Shrugging, she jumped from her stool. "Let's go."

"Right this way."

"Maggie!" Tilly called after her.

"I'll be right back. This won't take long."

Ajay snickered. "I wouldn't be so sure about that."

He Doesn't Deserve . . . You

MAGGIE WANTED TO hook up, if only to get her mind off Cam and this guy was as good as any. That was what she tried to convince herself, anyway. Then why did she want to go home, change into an oversized shirt and climb into bed. When Charlie took her hand, she blinked back the tears and told herself this was what she needed, just like Star had said, a friend, a distraction.

He led her to the men's room and pulled her inside. As he locked the door, she wrinkled her nose. Yellow dripped off the raised toilet seat. The room reeked of ammonia, the telltale scent of urine derived from a diet of mostly meat and few vegetables. Her hands went to her hips. "I know you don't think this is happening here."

He shoved her face-first against the paneled wall, brushed her long hair to the side and nibbled on the back of her neck.

She tried to wiggle loose but he pushed his hard, tall body against hers.

"I'll take care of you baby," he said. "Trust me."

She heard the sound of a zipper.

He slid her skirt up and snapped the G-string on her panties. Charlie smacked her ass. "Nice."

Maggie shrugged him off and turned to face him. Tugging her skirt down, covering her herself, she said, "Listen dumb ass."

The door vibrated with three hard knocks. A familiar voice boomed from the other side of the closed door. "Put your pecker away and let's get the hell out of here."

"Cam?" Charlie said.

"No, it's Santa Claus, asshole."

Maggie covered her mouth. Circling around him, she stepped backward until her back was against the opposite wall and she could add no more distance between her and Charlie. She eyed his fatigues, his black hair and olive skin.

"I'll be just a few minutes," Charlie said.

Maggie shook her head and crossed her arms over her chest.

"You got two," Cam said. "Then I leave your ass here."

"Where were we? Oh yeah." He snapped his fingers. "I was about to give you a fuck you'll never forget."

Maggie smacked him across the face then kned him in the groin.

Stumbling backward, he groaned. "You bitch!"

"Your name's not Charlie, is it?"

"Why the hell do you care what my name is?"

She pinned him with narrow eyes. "You're Cam's brother, aren't you?"

He stood to his full height, towering over her, a look of curiosity on his handsome face. His gaze lowered to her green skirt. "Oh fuck."

"Nice to meet you, Ajay," she said with a venomous sneer.

He shook his head. "Does Cam know what a whore you are?"

Maggie slapped him again.

Ajay palmed his cheek. A slow smile formed on his face. "Next time I hit back."

"Fuck you."

"No thanks," Ajay said. "I like my body parts to remain intact so I make it a rule never to fuck my brother's girlfriends."

Maggie scoffed. "I ain't his girlfriend."

Ajay's eyes widened. "Maybe you should let Cam in on that little secret." He unlocked the door. "I don't know what the deal is between you two." Ajay tapped his head against the closed door. "But he hasn't dated in a long time and for whatever fucked up reason, he's fallen for you." Ajay glanced over his shoulder at her. "Fallen hard. If you don't feel the same, then tell him so. He may not seem like it on the outside, but he's a good guy and doesn't deserve . . ." He smirked. ". . . you."

Before she could respond, Ajay opened the door and left, leaving her alone, standing in the men's room of this crappy podunk bar. A flickering fluorescent bulb barely illuminated the urine on the floor and the cigarette butt in the sink. Beer cans and bottles littered the floor.

Cam had fallen for her? Then why hadn't he called? She groaned at her own stupidity. He hadn't called because she gave him the shove off.

She glanced in the mirror. Her mascara had begun to clump. The heat and humidity had flushed her cheeks. Her hair lay matted with sweat.

With the backdrop of urine and stale beer, she had nearly fucked Cam's brother.

She was a mess inside and out.

Another knock on the door.

Maggie wiped a tear and opened the door.

A cowboy glared at her. "You're in the wrong one, sweetheart."

Maggie smiled.

He frowned. "You okay? One too many?" The cowboy glanced around the crowded bar. "You here with friends, sweetheart? Someone I can call for you?"

Maggie stepped past him into the crowd.

"You gonna be okay?" the cowboy called after her.

She'd spent the last decade trying to convince Tilly, Star, her dad and her brother that she was okay. They'd been overprotective, constantly bailing her out of shit she'd gotten herself into. The more they tried to shelter her from the big bad world, the more she looked for trouble.

"Yes," she said to the cowboy. "I'll be okay."

And for the first time, she actually believed it.

Chapter Seventeen

He Still Hasn't Called

The next day Jags arrived at Cam's house early. Tilly was due to arrive soon for Gramps' sitting duties. Ajay had plans with one of his many fuck buddies, so Jags and Cam would be on their own tonight.

As sure as he was that the Jacksonville Jaguars would come in dead last this season, he knew Cam and Maggie were meant to be together. Cam hated Jags meddling in his life, but this was too damn important. Human beings were pack animals, not meant to be alone. He rubbed his hands together. Let the meddling commence.

When he saw Tilly's car turn into the gravel driveway, he jumped from his truck and knocked on her window. "Can we talk?"

"Sure." She reached for the door handle.

"Out here." Jags rounded her car and climbed in the passenger side. "How's Maggie?" he asked as he sat and shut the door.

Tilly's smile vanished. "Why do you care?"

"Okay. I'll start. I think Cam is lost to her, but he won't admit it and I think she feels the same way about him."

Tilly sighed. "He hasn't called her."

"I know. What would you say to giving love-slash-fate a goose?"

She smiled. "I'd say yes."

Jags clapped his hands. "Fantastic. Here's the plan. My dad's gonna relieve you of grandpa-sitting duties. You'll call Maggie and drag her to Critters. I'll do the same with Cam."

She shook her head. "I can't do that to my husband. You know how he is?"

"But Nate loves me."

"It's not you," she said. "It's your brother. Nate doesn't trust him."

Jags grimaced. "I understand."

"But."

"But what?"

“What if my sister went with Maggie, instead of me?”

He clapped his hands. “Good. Good. Yeah. Whatever.”

She laughed. “Why don’t you call your father and tell him he doesn’t have to come over anymore?”

“I’m only paying you to work until eight but I don’t want Cam to have a curfew tonight. Get me?”

She smiled, approvingly. “Sure thing.”

No Small Talk

CAM HAD BEEN nursing a hell of a migraine all day. He had called Jags and tried to get out of going out tonight but the little bastard wouldn't take no for an answer.

Cam set the blender to liquefy, closing his eyes at the sound of the blender whirring. He heard a knock on the door and bellowed. "Come in."

Tilly opened the door, walked to the kitchen and sat at the table. He shut the blender down. "Jags isn't here yet."

"No problem."

He sat across from her and drummed his fingers on the table. "Nice weather we're having."

"It's been raining for three days."

He shrugged. "So . . . how are things?"

"Things are fine. And you?"

He stood, opened the refrigerator and grabbed a bottle of beer. Looking over the top of the refrigerator door, he asked, "Want one?"

She shook her head. "I'm on the clock."

"Right. Sorry." He leaned back against the counter. "How's . . . what's his name?"

She smiled. "Nate?"

"Yeah, him."

"He's fine. Thanks for asking? And how's Jags?"

"Hopefully he's not wrapped around a tree." He checked his watch for the third time in the last two minutes.

"You're not very good at small talk. Are you?"

Before he could respond, Jags burst through the door and strolled to the kitchen. "Hello, Tilly. How are you?"

"I'm fine. And you?"

He clapped his hands and rubbed them together. "Fantastic." He looked at Cam. "Ready?"

Cam slammed his bottle of beer to the counter. "Yup."

Pool Anyone?

SITTING ON A TALL bar stool, downing the remainder of his third beer, Cam spotted Maggie. Already a tall woman, she towered over her friend in high-heeled brown boots. Her friend wore khaki slacks with a white sleeveless silk top. Her blonde hair was bound tightly at the back of her head, her face gentle and her eyes kind.

Jags lifted his drink toward the entrance of Critters. "Look who's here? It's Maggie and she's with . . . hey, I know her. She works at Chase. I think she's an engineer. What are the chances we'd meet up with them here?"

Cam's face tightened. The little fucker had set him up. "What are the odds?" He pulled his phone from his pocket and checked the time. "We gotta get going. It's almost eight."

"I asked Dad to sit with Gramps tonight. Relieve Tilly at eight."

"No shit? Really?" Cam glanced at Maggie. Her white tank top hugged her breasts. Her erect nipples poked through the thin fabric. What the fuck!

His eyes watered and so did his mouth. He turned his focus to the tabletop and willed his hormones to a sudden death.

He'd never wanted anybody with the passion he felt for her. His groin throbbed with just the sight of her. The things he wanted to do to her should be illegal. And probably were in some states.

Jags jumped from his stool. "I'm going to ask them to join us."

"No shit. You're going to ask them to join us? Really?"

Jags ignored Cam's sarcasm and worked his way through the crowd. Approaching the women, he waved his arms over his head, as if hailing a passing airplane from a deserted island.

As he pulled Maggie into a hug, she glanced over Jags' shoulder and her gaze met with Cam's.

Jags released Maggie and stretched his hand out. "Hi, Star. Small world."

"You work at Chase, right?" Star asked. "Third floor? Web Developer?"

"And you're an engineer and work on . . ." He threw up his hands. "I have no idea."

She smiled. "Second floor."

Jags wrapped his arms around their waists and guided them through the scattered high-top tables. "Join us."

"That doesn't sound like a request," Maggie teased.

"I insist." Approaching the table, he said, "This is my brother. Cam, this is Star." He kissed the top of Maggie's head. "And I think you know this one."

"We've met," Cam said with a grimace.

Jags clapped his hands. "Who's up for a game of pool?"

"Girls against guys?" Maggie suggested.

"Heck yeah!" In delicious delight, Jags rubbed his hands together.

Nearing the pool table, Jags turned toward Maggie. "You want to break?"

"Sure." She chose a stick from one of the many pinned to the wall and leaned over the table, her green beaded necklace disappearing into the shadow between her breasts.

Cam swallowed.

Sliding her stick backward, she readied her shot.

He shifted his weight.

The stick glided through her fingers.

Shifting his weight again, Cam propped one foot up on the wall behind him. "Take the damn shot."

"What's your problem?" Maggie said without looking up.

He stomped around the table and shoved his hip against hers. "Move. I'll break." He sent the cue ball at the triangle and scattered the balls across the green felt. A solid ball dropped into a corner pocket. One striped ball dropped into a side pocket.

"Solids," he said.

Jags nudged his elbow into Star's side. "You're up Sugar."

Star leaned over the table. When she moved the stick forward the tip jutted up and completely missed the cue ball.

"Let me help." Jags spooned behind her. "Do this." He made a circle with his left thumb and index finger. When she did as he instructed, he said, "Perfect." He guided the stick through the hole she created with her fingers. "With these three fingers . . ." He pressed her pinky, ring and middle finger to the table. "Now spread your fingers for better support." With his right hand on the end of the stick right behind hers, he paused and inhaled. "You smell great." He tilted his head and pressed his lips against her neck. "You're very pretty."

Cam rolled his eyes at the sight of his brother wooing Star. Jags was a bit of a player, much like his other brother Ajay, but Jags genuinely loved and respected women, unlike Ajay whose favorite saying was "They all look the same upside down."

“I have a boyfriend.” She looked over her shoulder and gave him a cursory glance. “You’re making me uncomfortable.”

“You guys need a room?” Maggie teased.

With a finger to his lips, Jags hushed her. “We need to concentrate.” With his left arm wrapped around Star’s waist, he shifted their position. “This is a better angle.” He guided the stick forward, and together they sent the cue ball smacking into the fourteen ball. The ball spiraled vertically across the table and dropped into a corner pocket. “You’re a natural.” He took a step back. “Take another shot.”

She took her next shot and inadvertently sank the seven ball. Jags gently elbowed her. “You’re supposed to be aiming for the stripes.”

Cam strode to the end of the table, aimed his stick and took the shot, launching the cue ball into the five ball. The ball rolled to the side pocket and stopped just shy of the pocket.

“You’re having an off game.” Jags aimed for the five ball and scratched.

Maggie moved around the table and stopped across from Cam. Gliding her stick back, she paused to retrieve the green beads from between her breasts, leaving them to dangle over the table.

Cam pulled at his navy tee, fanning his heated body. A drop of sweat rolled down the side of his face. He moved to stand behind her, blocking his vision of her breasts, breasts he planned to lick before the night ended.

She shifted her position to better her angle and the delicious curve of her left ass cheek sank just below the hem of her very short, jean shorts.

Cam forced his gaze from her luscious ass and stared across the table at Star and Jags.

Star leaned into Jags. “Is your brother okay? He looks a little pale.”

“He’s sick alright,” Jags said. When Cam’s eyes narrowed, Jags laughed. “But he refuses to take his medication.”

“I hope it’s nothing serious,” Star said.

“Depends on your definition of serious.” Jags pulled an orange pack of gum from his pocket. “Want one?”

“Thanks.”

Jags tilted his pool stick in Maggie’s direction. “She’s the medication.”

Cam flipped him off.

“Ah. I see,” Star said, not seemingly bothered by Cam’s gesture. She smiled at Jags and asked, “What’s the illness?”

Tilting his stick toward Maggie, he said, "Same as the medication. Her."

Cam stepped forward. Maggie's bare legs pressed against his stained jeans. Spooning behind her, he gripped her hips and wrenched her backward. He tilted his hips and nudged his arousal into the small of her back. Bringing his mouth against her ear, he asked in a low voice, "What are you doing to me?"

She flipped around and rested her butt on the side of the pool table. "I don't know what you mean."

He cocked his head and leaned forward, his snarling lips against hers. "Don't play games."

"I'm not playing a game. This may be hard to believe, but—" Her hands waved over her body. "—this is who I am. I'm not putting on a show. Don't flatter yourself." She flipped around and readied herself to take the shot. "I've made no secret how I feel. You're the one playing a game." She slid her stick forward, sent the cue ball into the thirteen and dropped it into a side pocket. She looked at him. "If you want to fuck, just say so."

Cam glanced across the table and gave Jags the 'get lost' look.

Chapter Eighteen

Frustratingly Blank

Jags slid a stool from under the tall round table.

Star sat down on the offered stool and set her purse on the table. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." He climbed on a neighboring stool, propped his elbow on the table and rested his chin on the heel of his hand. He watched as she peeled the white sticker off the rolled napkin to free her silverware. She folded the napkin and set it and the fork to her left.

Grinning, he slid her fork and napkin to her right, waggled his brows and winked at her.

Her eyes narrowed as she slid her napkin and fork back to her left.

"Creature of habit?" he asked.

"I suppose I am."

Stunning! Breathless! Thin, pouty lips, tight ass and solid D cups. "But that's so boring,"

"According to you, maybe."

He swiveled her stool toward him and wedged her knee between his thighs. "What's the last thing you did that made your heart race." He leaned closer. "That made the air in your lungs disappear."

She leaned back. "Crazy is not for me."

Placing his hands on her knees, he said, "Microwaves, Silly Putty, Slinkys, potato chips, Play-Doh, Penicillin. What do they all have in common?"

"I'm sure you're going to tell me."

"They were discovered accidentally because someone was willing to think outside the box." He tapped the side of his head. "Think crazy."

She straightened her posture. "What does any of this have to do with where I place my fork and napkin?"

He smiled. "Absolutely nothing." Raising his hand high over his head, he flagged the waitress. "Ready to order?"

"Yes," she said. "I'm starving."

He winked. "Good. Me too."

The waitress approached. "What can I get you?"

Jags gave Star a nod. "Ladies first."

"I'll have a chicken Caesar salad."

"Anything to drink?" the waitress asked.

He winked. "Get crazy."

She avoided eye contact with him, her focus remaining on the waitress. "I'll have an iced tea."

"Hi." He grabbed the waitress's hand and they shook. "I'm Jags. You are?"

"I'm Casey."

"Good to meet you, Casey." He glanced at his open menu. "I'll have the potato skins and the Volcanic Cheeseburger, but if I could get onion rings instead of fries that'd be great . . . and," he looked up, "Do you have any soup?"

"No."

"No matter. I'll just have . . . heck just give me a side of fries. And a Jack Daniels and Coke."

"Just so I have this right. You ordered potato skins, the Volcanic Cheeseburger, onion rings, a side of fries and a Jack and Coke."

He closed his menu. "Perfect. Oh. Make that cheese fries."

"You're not really going to eat all of that are you?" Star asked when the waitress left.

"I'll share."

She laughed. "Where do you put it?"

"I get a lot of exercise." With his forearm resting on the table, he leaned toward her and grasped her hand. He sighed, long and heavy. "How come I can't read you?"

She frowned. "I'm not following."

Head tilted to the side, he focused on her. "Blank." He shook his head. "What's wrong with you?"

Star pulled her hand from his grasp. "Where's Cam and Maggie?"

A woman walked by, long mousy hair, tight jeans and low-cut fitted top. Star glared at her, her mouth curling into a pout.

"Do you know her?" Jags asked.

Star fidgeted with her napkin and fork. "No."

"Why do you say it like that?"

"Like what?"

"Like the idea of knowing her is repulsive."

She let out a huff. "She's white trash."

Jags sat back, his fingers flexed on his thighs. "What exactly is white trash and how do you know that's what she is if you don't know her?"

With a flick of her hand, she said, "Just look at her. She had to have smothered herself in grease to get those jeans on and look at her make-up. Somebody needs to teach her that less is more. Ten-to-one, she doesn't have a job. If I had to take a guess I'd say she has a child and doesn't know who the father is. She probably brings him or her shopping in a diaper and no shoes, and a hundred bucks says she lives in a trailer with three cars in the backyard and most likely none of them run."

Jags leaned forward. "You got all this by looking at her?" When Star said nothing, he said, "Do you think my brother is white trash?"

Her smooth complexion crinkled in distaste. "I don't even know your brother."

"Cam has no job and there are two non-running vehicles in his backyard. He doesn't live in a trailer, but almost and since he doesn't have any kids, I can't say if he'd dress them to take them shopping or not."

She grimaced. "You mean any kids that he knows of?"

Jags gave her a tight smile. "Haven't you ever heard the cliché don't judge a book by its cover?" He took a breath. "What kind of person would you say Cam is . . . hypothetically speaking of course."

"You're getting upset. I think we should change the subject." She glanced around the restaurant. "Where's our food?"

He patted her hand. "I'm pretty good at reading people and I'm fascinated by your ability to do the same. I won't get upset. I sincerely would like to know what you see when you look at my brother."

She cocked her head, conveying her doubt. "You won't get mad?"

He wrapped his hand around hers. "I promise."

Pursing her lips, she said, "Well, I'd say . . ." She hesitated, grimaced. "I can't do this. Let's talk about something else."

Jags sucked in a breath. He slowly released it, forcing his posture to a more relaxed position. "Why don't you tell me about your boyfriend?"

"Well, his name is Tye. He's a construction supervisor for—"

"I didn't ask for his resume."

She groaned. "What then?"

"What do you like about him?"

"I love him."

“Love is a word many use carelessly, never understanding the depth of their proclamation.”

“What’s your point?”

Jags clasped his hands on the table, fingers laced, smile genuine. “What do you love about him?”

“Lots of things.” She grabbed Jags’ roll of silverware and removed the sticker that held the utensils together. “He’s very considerate of others.” She placed the fork and napkin to his left. “He’s patient, understanding, funny, romantic—”

“Wow. Sounds like a keeper.” He snagged both napkins, crunched them in his hand and slid the napkins and forks to the other side of the round table.

“What was that for?”

“You were telling me how terrific Tye is.” He tilted his head and looked into her gaped mouth. “Great tonsils.”

Her mouth snapped shut. “Do you have a girlfriend?”

“Yes.”

“What do you love about her?”

“I like her sense of humor. I like her honesty. I love her ass.”

Star frowned. “You’re making me uncomfortable again. Could you refrain from being so crude?”

He scooted his stool closer. “I’ll try, but I wasn’t trying to be crude. I was answering honestly. Don’t ask if you don’t want to hear the answer.”

She panned the restaurant. “Our food is taking forever.”

“Did you know by touching a person, I can sense the depth and color of a person's soul? I can see the parts of a person that lie deep beneath their subconscious.” His gaze swept over the length of her body. He grasped her wrist and looked under the table so he could consider the whole package.

Was she some kind of abomination? He couldn’t read not one damn thought. Her mind was a black hole of nothing.

She continued to pan the room. The commotion of chatter, cell phones ringing and country music filled the silence between them.

Hell. He didn’t need his sixth sense to sum her up. “Want to know what I read in you?”

She glared at him. “No.”

“You take the safe route. You like things predictable and simple. You’re with your boyfriend, because it’s comfortable. Easy.”

Not one strand strayed from the tightly-balled hair at the nape of her neck. She must have used an entire can of hairspray to get it mannequin perfect. Her nails were painted a pale shade of pink, her complexion concealed with plastic precision. "Do you ever let your hair down?"

Her rigid lips conveyed blatant contempt. "Why do you care?"

"No need to get nasty. Just curious." He pulled a strand of her hair loose. "Oops." He covered his mouth. "One got away. Call the Pentagon."

She tugged the loose hair behind her ear. "At least I have a hairstyle." Her eyes darted to his head. "What cut is that? Scooby-Doo? Oh. I'm sorry. Do you even know what a hairstylist is or for that matter, a hairbrush?"

Jags felt his face flush. He took pride in that not many people existed in this world he didn't love or that didn't love him. But all he felt for this woman was contempt. Perhaps, a small part of him was attracted to her but that was before she opened her mouth. "You know what your problem is?"

"I'm sure you're going to tell me."

"You need a good fuck!" She had turned him into someone he didn't recognize. Lewd and crass were simply not his style. Giving her a sidelong look, he asked, "What's your boyfriend's name again?"

Her brows knitted. "None of your business."

"Well, none of your business is obviously not getting the job done. Because nobody can be as uptight as you are if they've been fucked inside out." His hands flew to her head, tugging and yanking, unshackling her hair from its cage. Leaning back, he admired his masterpiece. "There. Now we match."

Her jaw dropped. Tears filled her eyes. "You're such a . . . a . . ."

"Searching for the right word, Sugar? While you're thinking, let me tell you what you are. You're an uptight, pretentious, frigid, snob." He hopped off the stool, slid his wallet from his back pocket and dropped two twenty dollar bills on the table. "I'm out of here."

Untie the Dog

Cam dragged Maggie to a hallway near the restroom. He pinned her to the wall with his body and swirled a cloud of whiskey-flavored breath across her lips.

“I have a theory about your anger problem,” she said.

“You have my attention.”

“What happens to a dog when you tie it up for too long?”

“Shut your trap.” He fastened his lips over hers.

She jerked her head to the side. “I’ll tell you.”

His tongue licked the neckline of her tank top. “I don’t care.”

“The dog gets mean.” Her hand grazed his inner thigh and cupped the bulge in his jeans. “Let me help you untie the dog. You can’t tell me the last time we were together didn’t ease some of your tension.”

He grasped her hand and led her through the crowd. They found Star sitting at a table. But she was alone.

“Where’s Jags?”

Star wiped her nose with a napkin and sniffled. A tear rolled down her cheek. She shrugged.

Maggie sifted through Star’s messed hair.

“What are you doing?” Star asked through tears.

“I’m looking for the eggs. Any bird who went through the trouble of building a nest like this must’ve laid some eggs.” When Star exploded into hysterics, Maggie climbed onto the tall stool beside her. “What happened to you?”

“Jags happened to me.” Star slid off the stool and grabbed her purse. “I’m going home. You coming with me or . . .” She cleared her throat and glanced at Cam. “Do you have other plans?”

Cam took Maggie by the elbow. “If you see Jags, tell him to find his own way home.”

“I’ll call you tomorrow.”

Star nodded.

Shut Your Trap

Cam led Maggie through the crowd and into the dark parking lot. He opened the passenger door of his Expedition, gripped her hips and placed her on the seat.

“Where we going?” she asked, as he turned onto the highway.

“I don’t want to take you against a wall in a bar. I want you in my bed.”

“Oh. So then we’re going—”

“Unless you want me to pull over and take you into the backseat, I need you to shut your trap.”

Maggie glanced out the side window, hiding her smile.

See a Doctor

Cam veered into his driveway and parked. He got out and opened her door. He followed up the walkway and to his front door.

He reached around her, shoved a key into the lock and turned the handle. They entered the small cottage home. A middle-aged man stood from the couch and with a remote turned the television off.

The man eyed Cam, suspicion blatant in his shit-eating grin. He rushed toward Maggie, scooped her into his arms and twirled her, much like Jags had with Tilly the day Maggie met Cam.

“Beautiful.” He held her at arm’s length. “I’m Cam’s father. I’m so delighted to meet you.” He glanced at Cam and scowled. “Aren’t you going to introduce us?”

“Maggie, this is Douglas Wolfe, my father. Dad, this is Maggie.”

Cam’s father hugged Cam, clapping his back twice. “When were you planning on informing me you had a lady friend?”

Cam laced his fingers behind his head and groaned. “Dad, it’s not what you think.”

“Nonsense. Look at her. Darn, how long has it been since you’ve been with a woman? I was about to suggest you see a doctor.” He winked at Maggie. “But apparently all your body parts are working fine, otherwise how could you get such a beautiful young woman.”

“Dad!” Cam paced in front of the door, his hands clasped behind his head. “Do we have to do this now? What the hell.”

Maggie recognized a strong resemblance between Jags, his father and Gramps, but Cam’s disposition and dark hair and olive skin were the exact opposite of them. Maybe he was adopted.

Cam’s face flushed. Was he embarrassed? Maggie turned her head and hid her smile.

“Is Gramps in bed?” Cam asked, his boots clicking on the hardwood floor as he stomped back and forth.

“Fast asleep.” Doug walked past Cam, opened the front door and glanced back. “When you come up for air, give me a call. We need to talk.”

“Dad!”

Laughing, Doug left and shut the door behind him.

You Can't Say It and That's Okay

Cam grabbed her hand and led her down a short corridor lined with photographs of Cam, Jags and Ajay. The boys looked older in most of the photographs, she guessed late teens. Two closed doors faced each other on either side of the hallway. He opened the door on the left and they entered the room.

Cam yanked his shirt over his head, folded it and placed it on a cherry bureau.

“Take off your clothes.”

Centered above the bureau, a dozen or so cooking books lined a shelf that hung on the wood paneled wall. The room was immaculate, no clothes on the floor, the comforter pulled tight across the full-size bed, not a wrinkle in the fabric.

Stepping out his jeans, he glanced over his shoulder. “What are you waiting for?”

When she pulled her top over her head, he grunted in satisfaction, folded his jeans and set them on the bureau. He removed his boxers and socks and placed them on top of his jeans.

Laying across the bed, he laced his fingers behind his head, his erection reaching for his stomach.

Maggie unsnapped her shorts and drew the zipper down.

“Faster. I'm not in the mood to be teased.”

She pulled her zipper back up.

“My little fireball.” He grinned. “You want to play?”

Maggie flipped him off.

Cam laughed and took himself in his hand. “Woman. You're killing me.”

She laughed. “It's not like you don't deserve it.” Her shorts hovered around her knees.

He stroked himself with long and slow pulls. “I love you.”

Maggie stared at him.

Cam crooked a finger. “Come here, baby.”

She shook her head. “I can't.”

His brows raised in question. “No?”

She didn't love him. But she liked him a whole lot, and the thought of losing him made her insides tremble. Needing a man so completely was scary enough. Why couldn't they just keep things simple? Regular fuck buddies without the complications and pressure of proclamations of undying love.

“I mean, I'm the one not good at relationships,” she said.

“You can't say it and that's okay.”

“You sure?”

“I said, take your clothes off.”

Smiling, she finished undressing and crawled between his legs. She hovered over his groin. Her eyes met his.

With her tongue, she tickled the sensitive slit on his shaft. Circling her tongue around the rim, she licked the salty cream from the head of his cock. With her fingers curled around the base, she began working him in and out of her mouth with lazy, sensuous strides.

Cam pulled her up his body. He reached down and plunged two fingers inside her. “I'll wait for you.”

She moaned, swiveling her sex against his plucking fingers.

“But,” he gritted against her ear, “until you see it my way, you need to know this tight little cunt of yours is all mine.”

Unable to speak, she nodded.

“Use your words, Maggie.” He spoke in a strained and low voice.

“Yours,” she panted.

“Don't fuck around on me.”

“Yours,” she repeated, her voice shaky with desire.

Cam flipped her on her back and positioned himself between her thighs. Lying on his stomach, he draped her legs over his shoulders and glided a finger down her sex. He growled and every pore of her skin hummed.

He dipped a finger inside her and licked her pussy, flicking his tongue along her clit. With his legs hanging off the end of the bed and his head buried between her thighs, he reached up her body and cupped her breasts.

Knotting her fingers in his thick black hair, she crushed his face against her core. The hairs of his unshaven face tickled her folds and her body vibrated with pleasure.

He lingered and suckled, as if savoring a decadent dessert.

No rush.

No urgency.

An orgasm slammed into her. Her body jolted. Curling her fingers tighter in his hair, she swirled her pussy against his wicked tongue.

Cam jumped up her body and plunged his cock inside her. The walls of her channel clenched as her orgasm lingered. He rocked his body and took her mouth in a slow kiss, giving her a taste of herself.

The rhythmic pulses of her climax faded. Tension eased from her muscles. She wrapped her arms and legs around him, embracing him in the cocoon of her body. Concentrating, she squeezed herself around his cock. "Can you feel that?"

Cam lifted his upper body up and stared down at her. When she smiled, he collapsed, and pounded, his thrusts powerful, relentless, only the weight of his massive body keeping her from bouncing clear off the bed. Maggie felt the muscles in his back tense. His ragged breath swept warm across her neck.

His body stilled, his cock buried to the hilt. "Fuck!"

Quiet filled the room as his body twitched with sensitivity. Would he curse every time she made him climax? She hoped so.

Cam rolled off her and collapsed to his back.

When Maggie wrapped her body around his and rested her head on his chest, he gave her a squeeze and kissed the top of her head.

Maggie traced her finger in figure eights on his bare chest. "Only you," she whispered.

"Jags and I are taking Ajay out tomorrow night. He's home on leave for the week. You remember me telling you about him?"

Unfortunately, she thought and nodded.

"Can you meet me at Critters about eight o'clock. You can meet Ajay. We'll have a few drinks then come back here."

She rolled on top of him and trailed kisses down his chest. "What will we do when we get here?"

"Get naked."

"Naked?" she teased.

"Yup."

Chapter Nineteen

Dying to Dish

The next night Maggie met up with Tilly at Critters. They decided to get some drinks before looking for Cam and his brothers. Tilly and Maggie made their way through the crowd and to the bar. The bartender stood at the other end of the counter, flirting with two women dressed in tight jeans and low-cut shirts. Maggie waved trying to get his attention but he never looked her way.

She nudged Tilly. "Flash him."

"No way."

Maggie drummed her fingers on the counter. "Guess we'll have to wait."

"Star says you went home with Cam last night." Tilly waggled her brows. "Do tell."

"Star has a big mouth."

"Don't play with me. We both know you're dying to dish."

Maggie laughed. "How'd you get Nate to let you out tonight? I thought he didn't like Cam."

"No changing the subject. I want details."

Maggie felt a tap on her back and glanced over her shoulder.

Rane stood behind her. "Long time no see."

Maggie turned and faced him. "Not long enough."

He eyed Tilly. "I've always had a thing for blondes."

Fuuuuuuuuuk!!

CAM SHOOK HIS HEAD as he watched Ajay leave the men's room for the second time in the last hour. The man was a menace to the female species.

"Ajay's done," Cam said to Jags. "I'm gonna hit the head."

Jags nodded and Cam made his way through the crowd. As he neared the narrow corridor near the back of the smoky room, he spotted Maggie at the bar. It was only 7:30. She was early.

A tall blond man stood close to her.

Too close.

Maggie scooted off the tall chair and pressed her body against his, bringing her face inches from the man he planned on beating to death. Against his better judgment, Cam marched toward them.

"How about I scream again for you?" Maggie said. "How's tomorrow sound?"

Cam forced himself to remain calm and think before he exploded, but with every second that passed, his anger only multiplied.

Just hurt him.

Don't kill him.

Don't kill him.

Fuck!

I'm going to kill him!

Shoving between the bastard and Maggie, Cam gripped the fucker under his arms, took two large strides and slammed him against the brick-faced wall.

"Hi," Cam gritted through clenched teeth. He swirled a stream of whiskey-flavored breath at his eyes.

The man blinked. "What's your problem?"

The sound of his vile voice cracked Cam's resolve. A shiver snaked through him. Moisture swelled in his eyes as images of the bastard between Maggie's thighs danced through his head.

Maggie shoved her way between him and her would-be lover and clung to Cam's neck. "It's not what you think, baby. Let me explain." Tears streamed down her face.

He shifted his hold on the fucker to one hand and pushed him higher up the wall, bringing him a foot off the floor. Grinning, Cam slid his free arm around her waist.

With his lips close to her ear, Cam whispered, "You're mine or have you forgotten?"

Jags grasped Cam's arm and Ajay clutched the other. A spear of pain shot from the back of his skull and exploded behind his eyes. An uncontrollable rage took possession of his mind and body. Growling and writhing, he struggled to break from his brothers' hold. To no avail.

They dragged him away from Maggie and her would-be lover.

The fucker straightened his blue and green striped collared shirt, glanced at Maggie and blew her a kiss. "Until next time."

Summoning unnatural strength, Cam tossed his brothers like beach balls. Ajay and Jags scrambled to their feet, barely catching him before he reached his target.

Maggie rushed toward the bastard. "Just go."

He gave her a mock salute and gave another to Cam before leaving the bar.

Maggie's cold hands framed Cam's sweaty face. "Let me explain."

Cam glared at his brothers still dangling from his arms. "You can let me go now."

When Maggie nodded, they released Cam. He raked his hands through his hair, pulling the skin tight around his eyes. Turning away from her, he shoved through the crowd. He flipped a table, toppling the young couple's drinks to the floor. Cam heard someone yelling, but he might as well have spoken in gibberish. Cam's mind couldn't process anything but his old friend Rage. It was a comfortable friendship. Easy. Simple. And it felt good having him around again. He and Rage back together again.

Cam jerked the door open. "Fuuuuuuuuuck!"

I've Lost Him

TEARS BURST FROM Maggie's eyes. She covered her face and fell to her knees. "I've lost him."

Jags crouched before her. "What happened?"

Her hands slid down her face. "He thinks I'm sleeping with that man. But I'm not. I would never. You have to believe me."

Jags wiped a tear from her cheek. "I don't doubt you for a second." He sat on the dirty wood floor, took her in his arms, and positioned her sideways across his lap. "We'll fix this. But first you have to tell me everything." He put a finger under her chin and lifted her head. "Can you do that? Can you trust me?"

Maggie nodded, buried her face in his shirt and burst into hysterics.

Amongst a crowd of nosy onlookers, Jags rocked her in his arms. "Good girl."

A Friend in Jack

CAM SAT IN THE driveway, hands gripped around the steering wheel. A sharp twinge erupted in his chest, twisting and circling his organs. He stumbled into the house and stopped to clutch his stomach. Groaning, he hobbled to the bathroom. He dropped to his knees and hurled into the white porcelain bowl. When the rolls slowed, he got to his feet, turned the knob on the sink and splashed cool water into his mouth.

Leaning against the door jamb, he closed his eyes. His arm cradled his abdomen. Images of Maggie fucking the bastard raced through his mind. Cam could see the man's hands gliding over her naked body as if they were sprawled out on the floor right before him. His stomach rolled again. Whirling around, he dropped to his knees and vomited again. With both hands gripped on the lid, he hung his head and waited for the churning to stop.

Gramps darkened the doorway. "Ajay?"

Using the rim of the bathroom sink, Cam hoisted himself to his feet, his gaze on the shiny silver encircling the drain of the sink.

"Cam?" Gramps asked.

"Yup." Gently, Cam pushed past his grandfather, went to the liquor cabinet behind Gramps' recliner and crouched. Bouncing on his haunches, he grabbed a bottle of Jack. He glanced up at his grandfather and squinted.

The glare of the five-light ceiling fan prodded at his dry eyes. "Where's Dad?"

"I sent him home an hour ago," Gramps said.

Cam punched a fist into the beige shag rug. "I don't want you here alone." Grunting, he unscrewed the cap and guzzled. The Tennessee Whiskey burned a trail down his throat. The burn brought a smile to Cam's face.

Gramps stepped closer and Cam glanced up. From the top shelf of the liquor cabinet, Gramps grabbed a rocks glass.

"Son. What's wrong?"

Cam took the glass, set it on the carpet and, with a trembling hand, filled the glass, a three-finger pour. He sat on the floor and tucked the bottle in the center of his crossed legs.

Holding the glass by the rim, he dangled the dark liquid before his face. His eyes narrowed and his head drifted to the side as he gazed at the liquor swirling in a hypnotic and graceful motion. Cam tossed the entire contents back, coughing as the whiskey glided down his throat.

The room spun.

He grabbed the bottle from the clutches of his own legs. The rotation of the room increased its speed. Using both shaky hands, he steadied the bottle over the glass and refilled his drink, a four-finger pour then tucked the bottle between his crossed legs.

“There’s Coke in the refrigerator,” Gramps said.

“No Coke tonight.” He swirled the whiskey and dipped his nose in the glass. “Jack Daniels. Happiness in a bottle. No complications.” Cam turned his blurred focus toward his grandfather. “Did Meemaw ever hurt you? I mean really, really hurt you?”

“What’s happened?”

“Maggie hurt me.” When Gramps put a hand on his back, Cam clutched one of his grandfather’s legs. “She really, really hurt me. Stick a fucking knife through me. Gut me like a fish. Put me out of my misery.”

Chapter Twenty

Kill Him

The next morning Cam gave Gramps his medication then laid on the couch and draped a cool cloth across his own forehead. He stayed like that all day, nursing a monster hangover. Currently, the TV was tuned to the Discovery channel, an episode about killer bees.

Relaxing in his blue recliner, Gramps took a bite of his peanut butter and banana sandwich.

A door slammed. Cam rolled off the couch. The cloth dropped to the floor. Groaning, he picked it up and set it on the coffee table. He walked to the window and peeked past the drapes and through the blinds.

Jags was headed up the walkway. Cam pulled his phone from his back pocket and checked the time. 12:15. Jags must be on his lunch hour.

One quick knock and the front door opened. Jags bounded in and crouched beside the recliner. He rubbed the top of Gramp's head. "It's Jags. You remember?"

Gramps' face scrunched. "What kind of question is that? Of course, I remember." He waved Jags off in obvious annoyance and focused his attention back on the television.

Cam dropped on the sofa, his forearms braced on his thighs.

Jags slid a chair from the kitchen and set it in front of the sofa. Straddling the seat backwards, he balanced his chin on the back. "I need to speak with you about Maggie."

"I'm not going to like what I'm about to hear?"

"Why would you say that?"

"Because if you were here to tell me Maggie's fucking somebody else than you'd either be armed or insane. I'm guessing neither. The only other explanation must be that she gave you a solid reason why she propositioned a man to make her scream."

"She had a reason but I'm not sure you're going to be happy to hear it. But know this, it's not what you think. If I tell you what it is, you have to promise not to do anything stupid."

Cam leaned forward and whispered, "Define stupid."

"Kill him."

"Can I fuck him up?"

"I'm going to say no to that."

Cam sank back into the sofa. "You're no fun."

"On the contrary," Jags said, "I'm an extremely fun person. I just don't find humor in visiting you behind bars. We're getting off topic. You want to hear it or not?"

"Can't be worse than thinking the bastard was between her thighs, so yeah. Hit me."

"It's actually about Tilly."

"Tilly?"

"Maggie told me the man had flirted with Tilly and I guess Maggie knew him and that he wasn't a very nice man. Actually, her words were a little more colorful but you get the drift. She said he assaulted a friend of hers when she was in high school. She was trying to lure him away from Tilly so Tilly didn't fall to the same fate as her friend."

"By sleeping with him!"

"Not exactly." Jags rocked the chair back on its back legs, bringing them nose-to-nose. "I need you to reiterate that you won't do anything stupid."

"I'm losing my patience," Cam pushed the heel of his hand against Jags forehead, forcing the chair on all four legs. "Spit it out!"

Jags sighed. "She planned on surprising him with a gun. She planned on killing him."

Promise Me!

ARRIVING TEN MINUTES LATE, Maggie pulled into Critters' parking lot. She was relieved when Cam called and asked her to meet him. She circled for a bit and scanned for Cam's Expedition. After driving one more loop, she veered into a parking spot on the far left of the parking lot and shut off her car.

Lifting her new olive and khaki Coach purse from the passenger floor, she rummaged through, looking for her cellphone.

The passenger door flew open.

A huge person wearing a black ski mask plunked on the passenger seat and slammed the door shut. Based on the enormous size of the person, not a female.

He turned on his side and looked at her.

Maggie looked at him, one hand frozen inside her purse. The windows fogged as her breathing quickened.

Why was he just staring at her?

Could it be that she'd lost her mind?

Could this be a nightmare and she'd wake at any moment?

The mask hid his face, but she sensed a wide, arrogant smile beneath the black fabric.

Suddenly, he slapped gloved fingers over her mouth. She clawed and kicked as he wrestled her to the back seat with ease.

"I'm here to make you scream."

As he crawled over her, she inched her hand down her body toward the pepper spray tucked into her sock. He clutched her wrist and squeezed until she winced.

"No. No." Wagging his finger, he shook his head. "None of that."

If she was going down again, she refused to cry like a girl. How could this be happening?

Maggie spit in his masked face. "Fuck you!"

"Why do you think I'm here? To fuck you. Then kill you."

The genuine sincerity and calm in his words threw her heart into overdrive and her body into convulsions. Tears rained down her face, breaking her promise not to act like a girl. She struggled and writhed, whimpering through gritted teeth.

The man easily pulled her into a sitting position and propped himself over her hips. Her frantic sobbing escalated to hyperventilating. Her chest heaved, compensating for her erratic gasps for air.

With her waist trapped between his knees, he stared at her. A torrent of emotions danced in his dark eyes: raw fury, a deep unfathomable sadness and an agonizing level of frustration.

The anticipation of what was to come ate at her. If she had a gun, she'd gladly put it to her own head and pull the trigger, ending the torture he inflicted without even touching her.

Then he whipped off his mask.

She looked into the face of the man she loved. "How could you!" She squirmed but he pinned her hands to the leather bench seat. "I hate you!" Her chest heaved as she struggled to breathe under his massive weight. "Why! Why!"

Cam stared at her.

"I will never forgive you." Her body went limp, her eyes closed. "I don't know what kind of sick game you're playing and I'm sure I don't want to know." She stared out the side window.

"Don't go near them."

She looked at him. "What?"

"The fuckers that raped you. I don't want you going after them. I don't want you even talking to them. Get me?"

Tears rolled down her cheeks. "I don't understand any of this."

"You were planning on going after one of them. Weren't you?"

"Yes!"

"If you even think about going near one of them, talking to one of them, looking at one of them . . ." He swirled a whiskey flavored breath across her cheek.

"Why?" she cried through more tears. "How could you, knowing what you know?"

"You needed a reminder of how dangerous a man can be."

With a closed fist, Maggie swung but he caught her wrist and flung it to the side. "You're about to find out how dangerous a woman can be."

Cam squeezed his red eyes shut and palmed his forehead. With a grunt, he crawled over the seat to the driver's side, pressed a button, gliding the seat backward. After adjusting the mirrors, he turned the key and jumped on the gas.

Using both hands, she drummed on his head, slapping him over and over. "I hate you!"

Steering with one hand, he reached to the backseat and grasped one of her flailing arms. "You're gonna get us in an accident. You want to beat the shit out of me, fine, but wait 'til we get home."

"We get home? Take me to my house, not yours." She sagged back in the seat, crossed her arms and leaned her head against the window. Tears slid down her face, a relentless stream of unending fear mixed with fury. With every minute that passed, her anger escalated. Finally, the car slowed and veered into his driveway.

What!

She opened the car door and stood outside his driver's side window, her hand held out. "Keys."

Cam stepped from the car. He pressed her against her car, his body tight against hers.

Trapping her between his arms, he covered her lips with his own, no love in his kiss, only rage. When she jerked her head to the side, he braced her head between his hands.

"I can't live without you." Cam spoke the words slow, his voice deep and quiet. "Don't ever think about doing something so stupid again." He gave her another brutal kiss. "Promise me!"

Maggie stared at him.

Cam punched a closed fist into the back window. The glass shattered, showering shards on the ground and seat of the luxury sedan. "Promise me!" When she nodded, he gripped her upper arms and shook her. "Use your words!"

Cam's trembling hands rivaled that of an epileptic suffering a grand mal seizure. Sweat saturated his dark hair. Lines of red riddled the whites of his empty, dark, soulless eyes.

Maggie prided herself on being a strong woman who feared nothing and nobody but, for the second time since she'd met him, she feared him. Her instincts screamed it wouldn't be the last time. Looking him in the eyes, she absorbed the menace permeating her like water to a sponge. "I promise."

Saliva sprayed from his tight lips. "Again!"

"I promise."

Grunting, he stepped back. "I think I broke my hand. Can you drive me to the hospital?"

Maggie placed her hands on his shoulders, smiled, and kneed him in the groin. "Go to hell!"

His body wavered, he stumbled back. She slugged him across the face. He fell to his knees and rolled to his side, curses streaming from his mouth.

Maggie jumped behind the wheel of her car and sped away.

Hospital

CAM SLAMMED THE front door of the house. Laying on the couch, Ajay woke and sat up. When Cam finished his tirade, cursing and marching around the living room, Ajay drove him to the hospital.

Cam's hand wasn't broken but it was cut up good. The doctor bandaged him and gave him a shot for pain. As the contents of the needle raced through his veins, Cam's vision blurred and he nearly fainted. Seconds after the injection, a blissful state possessed Cam's consciousness.

No pain.

Three hours later, Cam and Ajay headed home.

When Jags found out what happened, he explained to Cam that women generally favored apologies, especially when they were greatly warranted, this being one of those circumstances.

But Cam didn't have the words. What could he say? "I'm sorry for terrifying you. It was an accident. Didn't mean for it to happen."

A week passed.

Cam hadn't called Maggie.

She hadn't called him.

The pain medication was gone and his bandage had been removed. Time to get his restaurant up and running.

For the next two weeks, Cam and Jags met every Monday, Wednesday and Friday from six to eight. They painted walls, drilled stainless steel shelving and muscled chairs, tables and booths.

One night, before they had the carpeting installed, Jags flung paint from his brush at him. Cam continued painting, but he should've known better. Jags would only up his game.

Cam was crouched low painting near the bottom of the wall when Jags picked up the gallon of green paint and swung it forward, dropping a good portion onto his back. Cam hurled a slew of creative curses, followed with tackling Jags to the ground.

The paint can toppled.

Fists, elbows and legs thrashed until green paint covered them, head-to-toe.

Panting, chests heaving in unison, the men circled each other, like boxers in a ring. Jags bent over, braced his hands on his knees and burst into laughter. "Now I know how mud wrestling chicks feel."

Shaking his head, Cam allowed himself a good laugh, the first time he'd smiled in days.

Jags was barred from doing any more painting.

A week later, Jags put a nail gun to his head and threatened to shoot himself out of boredom. But his finger slipped, inadvertently sinking a nail into his skull!

Cam cursed all the way to the hospital. Fortunately, no permanent damage was done. The doctor said Jags was lucky. That sentiment should be tattooed across his forehead. Jags must shit four-leaf clovers because the guy was the luckiest son of a bitch Cam had ever met.

They passed a nurse in the hall. Jags introduced himself. Her name was Betty and she proceeded to tell them her life story, at Jags insistence of course.

Cam held his patience.

The second nurse, Nancy, told them about her daughter's ballet recital, her slouch of an ex-husband and the ten pounds she was desperately trying to lose.

Cam held his patience.

When they neared a janitor pushing a utility cart, Cam grabbed Jags by the elbow and jerked him close. "You can get his name. Nothing more. Get me?"

Jags nodded.

No more power tools for Jags.

Two days later, Cam threw some meatballs on a sheet pan. He peeled and cut potatoes, coated a cast iron pan with olive oil, tossed the potatoes in and seasoned them with salt and pepper. While waiting for the pan to heat, he went to the back of the restaurant and unpacked glasses.

Halfway through the carton, Cam heard an ear-piercing scream. Startled, he dropped the glass, sprinted to the kitchen and saw Jags cradling his hand, jumping up and down.

Cam screamed over his brother's girlish wails. "What happened?"

Jags screeched and hopped from foot to foot.

Cam spotted the cast iron pan upside down on the floor. His breath caught in his throat.

"Did you pick it up without a mitt?"

"Ah huh."

Cam grabbed Jags by the back of his shirt and dragged him to the Expedition, spouting all new creative curses.

Since Jags was on a first name basis with the hospital staff, not to mention, they all loved him, he was waved right through. He had that effect on everybody. Cam never met a person that didn't eventually fall under Jags' spell.

As the doctor applied salve, they learned the doctor was expecting his second child, his grandmother had passed away and his first-floor air conditioner had just crapped out.

The doctor bandaged Jags' hand and gave him Vicodin for the pain. The painkiller took effect before they even left the hospital. By the time they arrived at Jags' apartment complex, he was barely conscious. Cam carried him to bed.

Jags was barred from the kitchen.

The following Monday Jags brought Zeke Chase to the restaurant.

Zeke was the owner and founder of Chase Industries, an engineering firm he founded when he was twenty-one. The company expanded from engineering industrial electronics to manufacturing them as well. Chase grew and so did Zeke's popularity, rocketing him into a world of paparazzi, talk shows and extravagant charity events. After six years, he moved the company from Los Angeles to the small town of Cut n' Shoot, Texas, hoping to get some semblance of his privacy back.

The town's population grew from four hundred and four souls to just over a thousand, half of which worked at Chase Industries.

In short, Zeke owned the town.

He was also Jags' boss and close friend. His long black hair was tied back. He wore a black dress shirt accented with a thin white tie and black slacks.

When Zeke introduced himself, Cam only glared at his outstretched hand. It usually took months if not years to gain Cam's trust, Jags holding the record at just a few short weeks.

The three of them sat in a booth and talked about the essentials of owning a business.

Zeke advised Cam about hiring and firing personnel, the kind of insurance he'd have to carry, which insurance companies were the best, which ones to avoid and tricks to lowering his taxes. He suggested ways to reduce labor costs and how to calculate what prices would bring in the most profits.

Later that night, Cam crawled into bed and contemplated life. Things had progressed uncomfortably well. He wasn't used to everything falling into place. Certainly, not this easily. For the first time, he felt hopeful, excited and . . . empty.

He closed his eyes and pictured what Maggie was doing right now. He glanced to the small digital clock on his bed stand. Ten-thirteen. She was probably asleep. But what if she wasn't asleep? What if she had a boyfriend and was with him right now?

Fury swept over him. His face burned hot, his hands trembled and his stomach churned, which only solidified his reasoning as to why he could never have her. He turned on his side, cradled his stomach and willed a deep sleep to drown his thoughts and rage away.

Chapter Twenty-one

Wink's Place

Winks' Place was a cozy dive of a bar nestled all alone at the back of Old Fairview Drive. The joint could've comfortably sat over twenty but most times was only filled by half that..

An old-fashioned jukebox was tucked in the corner. It played everything from old country-western and southern rock to the saddest blues and the darkest jazz -- all any self-respecting drunk needed and nothing more.

The three measly tables sat empty much of the time. Most sat at the long bar-top while waiting for their next round. Or waiting for their chance to talk to the man himself.

Because most came to talk to Winks.

He was a 50-something fellow with a round belly and genuine smile. He was also a great listener.

Whether it was 1pm or 2 am, Winks always seemed to be manning the place. Pouring drinks, wiping down the bar, sweeping the floors and taking out the trash. Wink's Place truly lived up to its name.

Cam wondered when the guy slept. The less main-stream music, lack of flashy colors and the sparsity of its patrons made it the perfect joint for the older crowd, as opposed to the wild partiers that packed themselves into Critters.

Shady, smokey and dark.

Fuckin' perfect.

Because after a long week of killing themselves with painting, drilling, and muscling booths, Cam and Jags were tired as fuck.

The darker, the better.

Easier on the eyes.

Easier on the soul.

Jags opened the door to Winks Place, swept his arm across his chest and bowed. Cam rolled his eyes and entered the bar. Tonight, like most nights, Cam had no patience for Jags' theatrics.

They'd killed themselves for the past few weeks getting the restaurant ready to open.

Every muscle in Cam's body ached. He needed a strong drink, maybe two, then he'd go home and collapse onto his bed.

Jags moved through the crowd, waving Cam on.

"There's a table right here," Cam said, as they passed an empty booth.

"Come on."

Approaching the back corner of the restaurant, Cam spotted Maggie and Star at a small table. He grabbed Jags' wrist and swung him around. "You son of a bitch. You did it again!"

With his free arm, Jags clutched Cam's arm and twisted it behind his back. He shoved Cam against a wall, Jags' forearm across Cam's throat. "I'd kill for you," Jags gritted. "I'd die for you."

The pain in Jags' eyes tore at Cam's insides. He didn't want to hurt Jags but it was his life, and none of Jags' business. Cam knew what was best and Maggie wasn't it. Cam was gasoline and Maggie was the spark that could ignite him. Their relationship would never be anything more than destructive. Why couldn't Jags see that?

Cam looked his brother in the eye. "I don't want you to die or kill for me. The only thing I want is for you to leave me alone. Let me live my life. I'm not trying to be a prick but mind your own fuckin' business and stay out of mine."

Winks, owner of the small-town bar, leaned over the shellacked bar top. "Hello, Jags."

Skin dark as night and teeth white as daylight, Winks waved and laughed. "What's your brother got your panties all in a bunch about?"

Jags sighed. He released Cam and jogged toward Winks. Standing on the gold horizontal pole running along the base of the bar, Jags leaned over the countertop and the men embraced, patting each other on the backs.

"How's the little woman?" Jags asked.

"Not so little." Winks tucked his thumbs in the waistband of his jeans and puffed out his chest. He wore a black patch over his left eye, where a bungee cord had ripped it from its socket four years ago. "Not due for another month but I think my little girl might make an earlier appearance. Doc says no. What do you think?"

"I haven't seen anything in a vision, if that's what you're asking."

Cam took a seat at the bar.

Winks filled a glass with ice, Jack Daniels and Coke and set it before Cam. "On the house. You look like shit. What'd you do to make our man—" Winks inclined his chin at Jags. "—so upset?"

Cam ignored Winks and sipped his drink.

Jags took a seat beside Cam. "I'll have one of those, please."

Winks made another Jack and Coke and moved to the other end of the bar to attend to other patrons.

Jags swiveled his stool toward Cam. "Talk to her. That's all I ask. If she tells you to go to hell, I'll drop it, right here, right now."

"Why?"

"She's the yin to your yang, excuse the cliché."

Cam shook his head.

"You're thirty-one years old," Jags said, "For almost two decades, you've been living in the past. Let it go or you'll end up living the rest of your life alone."

When Cam looked at him, the color drained from Jags' face. Tension eased from Jags' body like air from a tire.

"I won't let you live out your days alone." The exasperation clear in Jags' tone a moment ago had vanished. He spoke the words in his usual soothing manner. "You haven't seen what I've seen. I know the future and you know this to be true. Have I ever been wrong?"

Staring into his drink, Cam muttered, "No."

"Then why do you doubt me now when I tell you that you are no threat to Maggie."

"You didn't see her face that night. I knew I was scaring her and I did it anyway." Cam sipped his drink. "The idea she'd go anywhere near those monsters." He sipped his drink again. "She deserves better than me."

"Does a man exist on this planet who will love her more than you?"

Cam glanced over Jags' shoulder, through the sea of people drinking, smoking and talking on their cellphones.

Maggie wore a pale pink, short sleeve sweater. The sides of her red hair were pinned back. Star leaned close, whispered and Maggie laughed.

Cam smiled.

What he wouldn't give to hear her laugh.

Maggie not only put up with his shit, she gave it right back and he loved her for it.

Jags glanced over his shoulder at Maggie then back at Cam. "Does she deserve to be with anyone other than the one man who can love her like no other?"

"I scared her," Cam said into his glass. "Real bad. How can I expect her to love a man she's afraid of?"

"Didn't Maggie hurt you when she risked her own safety and tried to lure a dangerous man to a remote location? Weren't you angry?"

“Yup.”

“Because you thought you might lose her?”

“Yup.” An image of Maggie as a young girl sprawled in the back of a pickup flashed in his mind. Sweat bubbled on his forehead. His hands trembled. He looked at Jags and gritted, “I’m pissed as hell.”

“They’ll be a time for rage but it’s not now.” Jags smiled and grasped Cam’s shoulder.

The temperature in Cam’s body lowered. A calming, almost tangible energy crumpled Cam’s anger, like a baker kneading dough. A wave of peace swept over him, a level of calm only death could rival.

Cam frowned. “How the hell do you do that?”

“Will you talk to her?”

“Like I have any choice. We both know you’re not gonna stop until I do.”

Jags’ brows lowered. “So why the hell are we still arguing? Get your ass over there.”

Cam knocked back his drink and sighed into his glass.

“Are you gonna talk to her?” Jags asked.

Cam stood. “Yup.”

Hate

MAGGIE SPOTTED CAM striding toward her. His dark red shirt stretched tight across his chest. He wore faded jeans with one knee blown out and black boots.

She imagined this scenario many times over the past few weeks. Derogatory insults had been carefully chosen ahead of time.

Despite the anger in his stride, his eyes expressed only sadness.

Maggie met his heated stare as he stopped beside the table. Cam never looked at Star or acknowledged her in any way, just pierced Maggie with his dark eyes.

Frogs didn't dance in her stomach, instead wild horses trotted. His familiar scent kicked her horses into a frenzy. Not an overpowering aroma. Clean. Masculine.

Relationships had been simple, that was until she met Cam. Usually, the most complicated decision was where, when and for how long.

But not with Cam.

The sex was cosmic, nothing like she'd experienced before, but Cam's flash temper, height and bulk were intimidating, even to Maggie, who often claimed nothing scared her.

But Cam terrified her.

"How have you been?" she asked.

Cam took her hands and pulled her from the chair. As she stood, she stepped back.

Cam reached for her but she took another step back. He gripped her wrist, wrapped her arm around his waist and growled, "Never run from me."

Maggie struggled for profound, insightful words, but only three little words came to mind. "I hate you." Her chest tightened. Time slowed. Or did time stop. She couldn't be sure.

Cam took her chin. "I'm sorry." He lowered his head, pressed his mouth to hers and, abandoning good sense, she lowered her resolve.

Tongues explored, teeth scraped. An ache throbbed between Maggie's legs. In seconds, Cam had zapped every ounce of determination to hate him.

Tears poured down her face.

He stopped kissing her, held her head and looked down at her. "I'm really, really sorry."

Nodding, she wiped tears away.

“I tried to tell you when we met,” he said, “But you wouldn’t listen. What if I can’t change? What if it’s like this for the rest of our days? I don’t want to hurt you and if I was a real man, I’d leave you so you could find someone to love you like you ought to be loved. But that would mean my certain death.” He sighed and hung his head. “We’ve come full circle. My life is once again in your hands.”

Maggie could admit that she'd ignored his warnings. A small portion of her anger, she suspected, would follow her to her grave, never able to fully forgive him, a small price to pay compared to living without him.

Maggie hugged him, the side of her face on his shoulder. Her fingers knotted through his thick black hair. “We never mention it again.”

Strong arms jerked her close, squeezing the air from her lungs. “Mention what?” His mouth captured hers. A deep growl rumbled from his chest. His kiss grew more intense, more forceful, more demanding. “Come home with me,” Cam whispered against her lips.

Maggie nodded.

“Give me an hour to take Jags home. Still have a key to the house?”

Maggie nodded. “An hour?”

“Yup.”

Cupcake!

Cam strode through the crowd, grasped Jags by the elbow and yanked him from the stool. "Let's go."

"What happened?" Jags asked then toppled forward into Cam. "Whoa!"

Cam caught Jags and lowered him to the floor. "Talk to me."

Jags took a breath. "I don't know." He grasped Cam's wrist and cried out, "Cupcake!"

Cam cupped Jags' chin. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"Cupcake!" Jags curled into a ball on the hardwood floor. "It feels like a thousand needles stabbing me all over my body." He groaned and clutched his stomach. "It's coming from you. You're doing it to me. I can't explain it."

Cam scooped Jags off the floor, one arm under his neck and one arm under his legs. "I'm getting you out of here." He shoved his way through the crowd.

"Make it stop!"

Cam sprinted toward the exit, screaming and cursing at people to get out of his way.

As they neared the door, Jags whispered, "I'm okay. Put me down."

"The fuck I will." Cam ran faster.

Jags wiggled from Cam's hold and brought his feet to the floor. "I'm okay."

When Jags' body swayed Cam gripped his shoulders and righted him. "The fuck you are."

"Really. Just give me a sec."

Cam slid his arm around Jags' waist and helped him to the nearest table then—as if Jags was a complete invalid—lifted him off his feet and placed him in the chair.

Jags gripped the seat of the high back chair and gave Cam a thumbs-up. "Rock solid."

Cam took a seat next to him. "I've seen corpses with more color. We need to get you to a hospital."

Jags gripped his brother's wrist. "A hospital can't help me."

"Then what?"

As if a switch had been flipped, Jags straightened his posture, clapped his hands and said, "Fantastic."

"Jags?"

"I swear. I'm good."

"If you're lying—"

Jags tapped him on the hand and tilted his head toward the door. "Come on. Let's head home. I want to hear what happened with Maggie."

Some days Cam really hated what Jags' supposed gifts did to his stepbrother. The outcome of the visions he had couldn't be changed, making them fucking useless. Some days, it seemed Jags' gifts were more trouble than they were worth.

Jags was a lot of things, but a liar wasn't one of them. If he said he was okay, then he was okay.

Cam stood from the chair and noticed a man at the table where Maggie and Star were seated. The man talked with Maggie but she never looked him in the face, just stared at her hands, which were wringing a napkin.

This man had extinguished his little fireball's spark. He instilled her with something he'd recently seen. The night Cam kidnapped her in her own car.

Fear!

Cam snatched Jags' forearm and started toward them.

Rival Team

"I thought we were leaving," Jags said.

Cam snaked through the crowd. When he reached the table, Maggie gave him a small smile. He didn't return the gesture, just cocked his head.

"This is Cam," Maggie said. "That's his brother Jags. You know Star. Guys. This is Steven. He's an associate of my father's."

"Without Mayor Stewart's support, I couldn't have won the election for City Council." He turned his focus back on Maggie. "We should get together. Sometime soon. Call me."

Maggie slid off her tall chair and nudged her way under Cam's arm.

Her body trembled against his. A piercing pain shot from the back of his skull, erupting behind his eyes. He rubbed her arm. Maggie's cool skin pebbled beneath his warm fingers.

"Sure," Steven said. "I understand."

"Let's call it a night," Star said.

When Steven took a step, Cam put his hand on Steven's arm. "Wait. You look familiar. Did you play football in high school?"

"Yes. Did you go to Trenton High?"

"The Hornets?" Cam asked.

"Yeah."

Cam forced a smile. "Did you know Maggie used to be a cheerleader in high school?"

"Sure. We were rivals. Played against each other all the time."

Maggie pushed against Cam, gesturing toward the exit. "We should get going."

Cam grabbed Jags' wrist and yanked him toward Steven. He forced Jags' hand onto his shoulder. Before Steven could protest, Jags' body convulsed.

"Whoa!" Jags collapsed onto the wood floor.

Cam's body temperature soared. The most horrific migraine he'd ever experienced slammed behind his eyes. He stepped away from Maggie and Jags, who was slowly regaining composure, and grabbed Steven by the front of his polo shirt. He tossed him over two tables, crashing him into the third. The girls at the table jumped back. Their drinks crashed to the floor.

Cam leapt onto Steven's back, pushed his face into the floor and twisted Steven's arm behind his back until he heard him groan.

Maggie fell to her knees. "Cam!"

He turned to her. "Tell me he's not one of them."

"He's not!"

Cam pulled tighter on Steven's twisted arm until he groaned again.

Maggie would never tell him who hurt her and the only way he could get his revenge would be to put a hurt on each member of the team, or maybe that was just his way of justifying fucking this guy up.

"I don't want this." She clawed at Cam's arm but he never budged. "I don't want this!"

Cam leaned down and whispered in Steven's ear. "I never want to see you near Maggie again. That means if you walk into a restaurant and she's there, then you eat elsewhere."

"Fuck you!"

"I prefer my lovers a little more butch. To continue, if you're in a restaurant, not even halfway through your meal and she walks in, you pay your bill and leave. Immediately. Get me?"

Steven eyed Maggie. "What did you tell him?"

Cam slammed Steven's face into the floor. Blood poured from Steven's nose and puddled on the hardwood floor. Cam twisted his fingers in Steven's hair and yanked his head back. "I'm goin' to fuck you up. Bad. When they carry you out of here, just remember, I went easy on you. The next time you won't be so lucky."

Maggie grappled at Cam's arms. "Stop this now!" When Cam didn't budge, she said, "You promised. You promised!"

Cam rolled off Steven, grabbed him by the collar of his shirt, yanked him to his feet and slugged him across the face. Blood spat from between Steven's lips. Cam punched him in the stomach. Steven swung and hit Cam's jaw.

Cam grinned. "That the best you can do?" He grabbed Steven by the scruff of his shirt and tossed him into a neighboring table.

As Steven shook his head, trying to focus his vision, Cam pushed him back to the floor, flipped him to his back and sat across his hips. Cam hit him in the stomach and the head, again in the stomach, again in the head.

A crowd gathered.

Another punch.

Another.

In the side of his ribcage.

Head.

Face.

In the face again.

And again.

Jags gripped Cam under his arms and yanked but Cam barely noticed. He never slowed. Jags wrapped his arms around Cam's flailing limbs, creating a human straight jacket. Saliva dripped from the side of Cam's mouth. His chest heaved with his every breath.

Jags whispered in his ear. "I think you got him."

Through a bloody mask, Steven's breath wheezed from his flattened nose and bloody lips. The guy seemed to struggle to breath.

Good, Cam thought.

"Enough," Jags said.

"Not yet," Cam growled.

"Get off him," Jags said. "Or I'll make you get off him."

"I'll never forgive you," Cam snarled.

"Get. Off. Him," Jags said.

Two police officers burst through the front door of the bar, their guns drawn. Jags released Cam.

Cam stood and laced his fingers behind his head. He bent over a table and pressed his forehead against the shiny tabletop.

A policeman cuffed him.

Maggie crossed her arms over her chest and scowled.

She was furious.

Cam hung his head and laughed. She's so damn sexy when she's mad.

A policeman took Cam by the elbow and led him to the door. Jags followed.

"Jags," Maggie called out.

"I know," Jags said. "I'll take care of him."

Bad Guy?

JAGS LEANED INTO the steel bars separating him from Cam, his forehead pressed between two pipes.

"I can't get you out tonight. Court's not in session on Saturdays either so I'm not even sure tomorrow is an option. Might have to wait until Monday."

Cam dipped his head forward. "Sorry about . . . you know."

"You suspected he was a bad man?"

"Yup."

"Good enough."

"Any more cupcake episodes?"

Jags shook his head. "You mind telling me what that was about?"

Cam leaned his back against a side wall and propped a foot behind him. "I can't."

"Can't or won't."

Cam always suspected his temper was dangerous and bordered on uncontrollable but since he'd met Maggie, his suspicion had turned to clarity. Cam was a menace, he had no doubt. Before he met Maggie, he struggled to control his anger, but that paled in comparison to the fight within him now.

"I need you to promise me something," Cam said.

"Anything."

"Never pull another stunt like this, setting me and Maggie up. I never want to see her again."

"Why?" The question lingered in a pathetic whine.

"Did you not see me beat that man half to death? If you weren't there, I probably would've killed him."

Cam paced to the back of the cell and dropped onto the cot. "She's not safe with me. Nobody is." He punched the yellowed thin mattress. "I can't control it. I don't understand why you don't get that."

"You're telling me that you're a monster. And you want me to agree with you? Are you fucking kidding me?"

Cam lay on the cot, his hands clasped behind his head. "You see what you want to see. You'll never see the real me. I'm beginning to realize that now. Some empath you are."

"Such bullshit!" Jags kicked the steel bars with his orange sneaker.

"Promise me you'll give up your obsession with getting me together with Maggie."

Jags squeezed his face between two bars. "She's really getting to you, isn't she?"

“Promise me.”

“Admit that she’s getting to you.”

Cam rolled off the cot and stepped up to the steel bars. Gripping two of the steel pipes, he squeezed his face between them. “You want to hear me say it? Yeah. Maggie’s getting to me. And if I hurt her, you’re the first person I’m coming after. Get me?”

“You’re not going to hurt her.”

“Promise me that you won’t pull anything like this again.” Cam took a step back, paced around in a tight circle and gripped two of the cold metal bars. “Or I swear we’re no longer brothers.”

Jags shook his head, his mouth twisted into a snarl of disgust.

Cam slapped his open palms against the steel pipes. “Promise me!” He slapped his palms against the metal pipes again. “Promise me!”

Jags stepped backward. He dropped onto the wooden bench across from the cell, his hands on his thighs. “I promise.”

Cam hung his head. “Good man.”

Chapter Twenty-two

Brothers

Cam's eyes popped open. Swinging his feet to the cement floor, he pressed a hand to the small of his back and groaned. A dull pain drummed on his lower spine. Another night on this cracker-thin mattress just might cripple him.

The big metal door opened and a frantic Jags strode in front of Cam's cell, pulling his long hair toward the ceiling.

"Think." Jags paced.

Cam laughed. "What's up your ass?"

"Think." Jags yanked his hair tighter. "Think." He jumped in the air, bringing both purple sneakers high off the floor. "Think."

"Buddy. What's up?"

"I can't get you out."

"That's okay."

"You don't understand."

"Then explain it to me. You're starting to freak me out." Cam stepped closer to the steel bars.

"Steven Walker died before the ambulance even reached the hospital."

The monster had finally taken possession. He killed another man and felt no remorse.

Cam only wished he could do it over. Steven's death was too quick, should've suffered more. He won't make that mistake again. "Good."

Jags squeezed his face between two of the cold pipes. "If I have any chance of getting you out of here, you can't say stuff like that."

"Maybe it's for the best."

"Fuck you!" Saliva sprayed from Jags' mouth. "Think." He shook his fists. "Think." He continued to pace.

"I've already killed two people—"

Jags pushed his face against the metal pipes, an expression not unlike Jack Nicholson in *The Shining*.

"Would you shut the fuck up?"

Cam glanced to the surveillance camera and back at his brother. "How many people do I have to kill before you admit this is where I belong?"

"Tell me why you started a fight with him."

"The why is something I can't tell you. And I didn't just start a fight. I ended it too."

"My brother's going to die in prison and I don't even know why." Jags knotted his fingers through his hair, elbows out. "We'll ask dad for the bail money. Then we'll hire the best attorney twenty dollars can buy."

Cam pointed. "Do not ask Dad for money."

Jags shot Cam a smug smile. "You don't get to call the shots from in there. I'm getting you out and if I've to sell my body on a street corner to do it, I will."

Cam moved to the back of the cell and sat on the edge of the cot. "Well, I'll make myself comfortable then."

"I'm glad you find this amusing." Jags plopped on the bench across from the cell. With his head in his hands, he stared at his sneakers. "Sometimes I really hate you."

Cam stood, strolled toward the steel bars and stuck his arm through. Jags lunged across the cement floor. He clutched Cam's forearm with both hands and dropped to his knees, bringing Cam down with him.

With Jags' forehead pressed against their forearms, he whispered, "Brothers."

Cam placed a hand on the back of Jags' bent head. "Always."

Rich Daddy

JAGS PACED BESIDE HIS truck. He whipped out his cell phone and dialed Maggie.

She picked up on the third ring. "How's Cam?"

"Steven Walker is dead."

Maggie paused before whispering, "No."

"Cam won't tell me why he beat on the guy but I have a feeling you know."

Maggie was silent.

Jags scowled. "My brother's going to die in jail and it's because of you and you can't even tell me why? Really?"

"Jags."

"Don't Jags me. Tell me!"

"I'm sorry," Maggie said. "I can't."

"You bitch!"

"I'll talk to my dad—"

"Oh sweetie, this isn't red tape." Jags ran his hand over the top of his head. "Your rich daddy can't save the day this time."

"I'll fix this. I don't know how, but I will."

"I think you've done enough." He hung up then punched the door of his truck. A crease formed in the metal, adding to the other imperfections of dents, scratches and sun-faded paint.

Jags climbed behind the wheel, took a deep breath and gripped the steering wheel. Think.

Cam was always there for him and Ajay. Now Cam needed help and he planned on doing whatever was necessary, in or outside the law, to free his brother. He watched Cam go to prison once ain't no way he'd watch that again.

He jammed the key into the ignition, started the truck and jumped on the gas. The bed of the truck slid sideways as he peeled from the police parking lot.

Twin Brother

HENRY GLARED THROUGH the bars at the man who killed Steven, his twin brother.

Cam took a step toward the bars. "They told me you were dead."

A twinge of dread pierced Henry's heart as he glared at the colossal freak of nature that stood just six feet from him. Poor Steven never stood a chance. Henry envisioned what Steven must have endured at the hands of this barbarian.

"Steven is dead. I'm Henry, his twin brother."

"Come to see the man who killed your brother?" Cam took another step toward the steel pipes.

Henry met the glare of the savage that stood before him, doll-like eyes, empty and hollow. "Yes."

"You don't seem too broken up."

"Everybody has their own way of dealing with a tragedy." An involuntary shudder vibrated through Henry. "I want to know why you jumped my brother."

Cam smirked. "Because he's a waste of oxygen."

Despite the terror the brute instilled in him, Henry's patience thinned and his frustration rose. With a tone of indifference, he asked, "You got any family?" Henry grinned. "It'd be a shame if something was to happen to one of them."

Cam leapt at the bars, reaching through.

Henry jumped back. "Struck a nerve, did I?"

"This is between you and me," Cam gritted. "Leave my family out of this."

"All I want to know is why you killed my brother." Henry sat on the bench across from the cell. "If you had a brother and someone killed him, wouldn't you want to know why? It's a reasonable request."

"He raped a friend of mine." Lines of red riddled Cam's eyes.

Henry shook his head. "This must be about Maggie." She'd gotten herself raped in high school and now was hanging out with the likes of this guy. Dumb bitch. "You're willing to go to jail for the rest of your life for that whore?"

Cam's hands tightened around the cold metal bars. "You fuck!"

"With any luck you'll get the death penalty."

The barbarian stormed to the back of the cell. He pressed his palms against the rutted cement wall. Removing one shaky hand, he held it before his own face.

“Steven said she was a screamer.”

A drop of sweat rolled down the side of Cam’s face.

Henry bent one leg over his knee. “Maybe I should find out for myself.” He slapped his hands on his thighs as he stood. “I need to get going.” Yanking the thick steel door open, he said, “I have a funeral to attend, oh and a date with a redhead to plan too. So if you’ll excuse me.”

The door closed, the clang of metal meeting metal echoed off the police lobby’s walls.

Henry winced at the sound of Cam’s muffled roar.

“Fuuuuuuuck!”

Help

Jags sprinted to the front door of the cottage house. A surge of nausea blurred his vision. Gripping the knob, he waited for it to pass then opened the door. Stumbling, Jags bellowed, "Dad!"

His dad hurried from the end of the hall and set his hands on Jags' shoulders. "Son. What is it?"

"Cam's in jail."

"What on earth for?"

Jags hesitated and searched for the right words.

With a tight smile, his father led Jags down the narrow hall and turned into the living room. They sat on a blue and pink floral sofa centered under a bay window. "Tell me what happened."

With his elbows propped on his thighs and his head in his hands, he said, "Cam's being charged with murder."

His dad leaned back and covered his mouth. "Dear heaven." He let out a breath.

"It was an accident," Jags said. "Bar fight that got out of hand. The bail is \$100,000. Can you get it?"

His father crossed the room and stopped before a brick-faced fireplace. A line of three-by-five frames were set on the ledge above it. He lifted one and showed it to Jags. "This is my favorite picture of him." A long black snake was wrapped around Cam's shoulders. The picture snapped just as the snake bit Cam's thumb.

"Your reaction was funnier," Jags said. "You burst into tears, convinced Cam would drop dead at any second. You were hysterical for over an hour."

He placed the picture back on the shelf. "I can't get that kind of money."

"Can't you get a second mortgage on the house?"

"I already did that."

Jags jumped to his feet. "What for? Where's the money?"

"I gave it to Cam for the restaurant."

Jags scrunched his long hair in his fists. "You gotta be kidding me!" He trekked to the kitchen, grabbed a beer from the refrigerator and cracked the cap. Dropping into a chair at the kitchen table, Jags guzzled. His father sat beside him.

Jags gripped the bottle between his thumb and forefinger. He gazed at the tinted glass. "You said you inherited the money for the restaurant from Uncle Jack."

"If I had told Cam the truth, he never would've taken the money."

"What about your 401K? Can't you borrow against it?"

His father sighed. "I already did that. The house only valued at \$110,000. It wasn't enough."

Jags shifted his focus from the beer bottle and glared at his dad. "We are not leaving him there."

"We'll figure something out. In the meantime, you need to calm yourself. It's not safe until I can figure out what's going on with you. How are the nightmares?"

Worse but he wouldn't worry his father needlessly. Especially since there was nothing anybody could do for him. He just had to find a way of following the vision to completion, no matter how painful the violence of the images tortured him.

"Off and on," Jags lied. "Not too bad. But I'm getting dizzy spells now."

Jags' father gripped his forearm. "Maybe you should see a hypnotist to help you through this vision?"

Jags sipped his beer. "I'll be fine." His phone rang. He slid the phone from his breast pocket. "What?"

"I heard what happened," Zeke said.

"How?"

"Small town. Word's spreading like crazy. I called to see if you need anything."

Jags chugged the remainder of his beer. "Just \$100,000." He quietly burped. "And while you're at it, throw on another \$100,000 for attorney fees."

"Who do I write the check to?"

"We're Fucked, Incorporated."

"Jags."

Jags shook his head. "I can't take your money."

"You sure?"

Jags propped his purple sneakers up on a neighboring chair. "Yes."

"Anything else I can do?"

Jags tossed the empty bottle across the kitchen and into the trash bin. "I'll let you know." When the bottle made its mark, he shot his fist over his head in a display of victory. "My head's spinning. I can't really think right now."

"I understand."

"I'm overwhelmed that you even offered, something I'll never forget."

"You'd do the same for me," Zeke said. "Take all the time you need off from work. I'll call if something comes up and I need you to come in."

Jags brought his feet to the floor. He went to the refrigerator to get another beer. "I don't know what to say."

"Just promise you'll call if there's anything I can do."

"I will." He cracked the cap.

"You have a lot of friends," Zeke said. "Lean on us. We're here for you."

Jags sat and threw his feet to the neighboring chair. "You don't even know my brother."

"I know you. If you say he doesn't deserve to be there, that's good enough for me."

Just a Punk

MAGGIE PEERED INTO the family room where her father sat on the luxury leather sofa with a remote in his hand. "Got a minute?"

Her father glanced at her. "Four hundred channels and nothing's on."

"I need a favor." Maggie sat beside him.

"Another property need rezoning?" He gave her a teasing look.

Forcing a small smile, she shook her head. "A friend of mine is in jail. I need your help getting him out."

The amusement in her father's grin faded. "What did he do?"

"Why do you assume it's a man?"

He smirked.

"Alright," she said. "It's a man."

"Now that the gender of said criminal has been established," he said. "Tell me why he's in jail."

With her hands on her thighs, Maggie bumped her knees together. "Murder."

He sat forward. "This isn't about Cameron Wolfe is it?"

Maggie froze. "How did you know?"

"The whole damn town knows." He stood and glowered down at her. "They're after blood on this one. He was a city councilman for heaven sakes. His father is well-known and respected throughout the community. Your friend's in big trouble."

"I know. That's why I need your help."

He sat and grasped her hand. "Is this the Copper Creek guy?"

"You got to help him."

He flung her hand away. "I'll do no such thing. He killed a twenty-five year old man. I've never appreciated the kind of people you associate with but this is low even for you. You want me to help a cold-blooded murderer escape prosecution?" When she looked at him blankly, his posture slumped. "Why do you surround yourself with the dregs of society?"

"He doesn't have money. That doesn't mean he's a bad guy. Don't be such a snob."

His smile held no joy. "I have no idea how much money this man has. My impression of him was based on his actions, not his bank account. But it seems it matters to you. And what do you consider 'bad' because most would consider a person who kills another to be a bad person."

“Soldiers and policemen kill people every day.”

“He’s neither a soldier nor a policeman. He’s a punk who picked a fight in a bar.”

She glanced down at her new green sandals. “Sometimes things aren’t what they seem.”

Her father glided his hand down the back of her head. “Do you have an intimate relationship with this man?”

She snickered. “Tell me how that’s any of your business.”

With a finger under her chin, he turned her head and forced her to look at him. “I never want you to see Cameron Wolfe again.”

Maggie tilted her head, pressing her face into her father’s palm. “I’m begging you. Please help him.”

He jerked his hand away. “I play golf with Steven’s father, for crying out loud. I’m sorry. I just can’t. It’s out of my hands.”

“You’re friends with the governor. You could ask for a pardon.”

“He has to be convicted before he can be pardoned. And friends is too strong a word; acquaintance would be a better word. And that’s beside the point, because I have no intention of helping this man.” He rose from the couch and took a step toward the entryway. With his back to her, he said, “This time you’re on your own.”

My Sweet

RANE OPENED THE flimsy screen door. "My sweet. I'm home." He dropped two plastic bags on the counter. "I got the apple juice you asked for." He lifted a plastic cup from the stack piled behind the sink, poured juice and carried it to the bedroom. Opening the closet, he crouched.

Jewels' hands and feet were bound. Rivets of raw skin bled onto the rope from where the frayed thread dug into her skin.

Rane brought the cup to her lips. "How was your day dear?"

With one eye swollen shut, Jewel looked away with the other.

"Want to stretch?" He yanked her from the closet, untied her ropes and stretched her naked and bruised body across his bed. She curled on her side into a ball.

"Did Kipp take good care of you today? Give you potty breaks?"

Jewel nodded.

Rane unbuttoned his blue and white striped shirt. This had been their routine for the past month. At first, she fought back. But after beating her, leaving her barely conscious, she never resisted him again.

Rane finished disrobing and climbed toward her, his knees straddling her hips. "I missed you." He drew back his fist and slugged her across the head. Jewel's limp body fell across the bed. Rane grabbed a hunk of her hair and yanked backward, exposing her neck to him. His cold tongue traced a path down her chin. "I've been thinking about this moment all day. I could hardly wait to get home to you." Rane licked the tip of her nose. "Did you miss me?"

Jewel nodded.

He dragged his finger across her shivering lips. "My sweet."

Chapter Twenty-three

It Hasn't Even Begun

Jags set his coffee mug beside his keyboard, sat down and pushed the power button on the computer. Zeke had told him he could take time off, but after he struggled all weekend with boredom, he just couldn't stay home.

He had watched television, played Xbox and watched movies.

Nothing helped.

For the first time, Cam was in trouble, instead of him or Ajay. Well, technically it was the second time. The first was years ago when he went to prison for beating a man to near death.

Jags heart hurt at the memory of visiting his brother behind bars.

Somehow, he had to help Cam and not just because of the many times he'd bailed Jags and Ajay out of some tough situations. But just because.

Jags finally had a chance to protect his older brother. But how? Cam killed a man in a crowded bar. He was guilty and the whole damn town knew it.

The computer finished booting up. Jags stared at his monitor in a catatonic state.

Memories of all the things Cam had done for him flooded his mind.

He'd never forget the time Cam rescued him from his twisted car after he'd crashed it into a street sign. Since the steering wheel was in Jags' lap, it took some creative maneuvering to get his cell phone from his front pocket. He called Cam, because that was who he always called when he got his ass into a jam.

Cam answered on the first ring.

"It hurts!"

"Tell me where you are before I reach through this phone and—"

"East on 105, just over the line into Cleveland. I hit a stop sign. Glass everywhere. My arm hurts like a muther."

"Dumb shit! Don't move. Don't call anybody else. Don't blink. In fact, don't even breathe until I get there. Get me?"

Jags had no clue how long it took Cam to arrive. He suspected he lost consciousness.

Glancing to his left, Jags saw his furious mammoth of a brother standing beside his car, peering into the what-used-to-be his driver's window.

Ajay leaned in the open window on the passenger side and laughed. "If you live through this, Cam's gonna beat your ass good."

"Laugh it up, asshole," Jags said. "Wasn't it only last week that he beat your ass when he caught you smoking."

Cam groaned. "Stop talking about me like I'm not here."

Once Cam freed Jags from the wreck, he helped him to his pickup and fastened his seat belt. Red and blue lights flashed across the dark sky. Cam grabbed Ajay by the elbow and muscled him behind the wheel. "Punch it!"

Ajay drove off with Jags, leaving Cam there alone. Cam told the cops he was driving.

They gave him a sobriety test which registered minimal alcohol levels, but it was enough to get him six months of community service. Despite his guilt, Jags didn't fess up because he'd already had two DWIs on his record.

Zeke tapped on the cubicle wall, tearing Jags back into the present. Zeke sat in the chair beside the desk. The eccentric millionaire was dressed in blue jeans, a red button-down shirt with white stripes and Carhartt work boots. His long black hair was tied back in a loose ponytail.

Zeke glanced at his watch. "Monday. Eight o'clock. You didn't even take an hour off, never mind a whole day."

Jags swiveled toward Zeke and offered him his hand. Zeke accepted and they shook.

"How's Cam holding up?"

"A lot better than me." Jags surrendered to the pull of the tunnel jutting him deeper into his keyboard. "I can't lose him."

"It's not over. It hasn't even begun."

"You don't understand. I can't lose him."

A plump mature woman passed by at an unnaturally slow pace. She gave Jags a small smile as she continued past the partition. Jags jumped to his feet and glanced over his cubicle wall. "Come back you ninny! Got something to say?"

"Sit," Zeke said. "She didn't mean anything by it."

He gave Zeke a sidelong look. "No?" Jags shoved his keyboard to the side and climbed on his desk. "Hear ye. Hear ye." He clapped his hands. "Can I have everyone's attention please?" The office fell quiet.

“Before you dig out your pitchforks and torches, you should know that Cameron Wolfe is the most honorable person I’ve ever known and anybody who says otherwise will have words with me.” He wagged his fingers toward the ceiling. “Come on. Come on. Let’s hear it. Clear the air.”

Silence.

“You’re all a bunch of fake, back-stabbing—”

Zeke grabbed Jags’ wrist and yanked.

“. . . gossiping, stuck-up, boring—” Jags succumbed to Zeke’s pull and stumbled off the desk. Zeke caught him under the arms and righted him.

“In my office,” Zeke snapped. “Now.”

When they got to Zeke’s office, he shut and locked the door. “Sit.” Zeke circled his desk to his chair. “If I didn’t know you better, I’d say you did some serious drugs last night. At the height of my drug-using days, I never had eyes like yours.” He dropped into his executive chair and rolled to his desk. “Seriously, you should see Nate. I think you popped a blood vessel.”

Jags hung his head and clasped his hands behind his neck. “I can’t lose him.”

“Pull it together. This isn’t helping your brother.”

Jags looked up and grinned. “Did I ever tell you about the time my girlfriend hit on him. I guess she didn’t realize that Cam didn’t date or even leave the house. I was in deep with her and Cam knew it. He ordered glow-in-the-dark paint online. This was back in the day before everyone and their grandmother knew what the internet even was. He actually went online and ordered the stuff and waited for it to come in the mail. Then painted slut in big letters on both sides of her car. We drove around for hours for the next few nights, hoping to see her car, but no such luck.”

“That’s what brothers are for.”

“I cried my eyes out for that woman. Cam understood for the first fifteen minutes. Then he dragged me out to the front yard—in the pouring rain mind you—and proceeded to beat the crap out of me. I have no idea how long we fought but I never laughed so hard in my life. The only clean part on us was our teeth.”

“I thought you were a black belt?”

“Not for fighting.”

“Then why do you do it three to four times a week?” Zeke asked.

“Keeps me in shape. It’s good for concentration too. It’s my yoga.” Jags wrapped his hands around the back of his neck and tilted his head back. “Ugh! I can’t lose him.” He rocked forward and back. “I can’t lose him.”

Zeke crossed the room, opened a closet door and pressed a sequence of numbers into the keypad of a tall safe. He retrieved a small metal box, went back to his desk and grabbed a joint from inside. From the top drawer of his desk, he grabbed a lighter. Pinching the slender rolled paper between his thumb and forefinger, he lit the end and inhaled then offered it to Jags. "It's just weed."

Jags took the joint. "I haven't smoked since college."

"It's been a while for me too."

Jags melted into the leather chair. He tilted his head back and blew out a breath of sweet-scented smoke. "I stayed out past curfew every Friday and Saturday which was no big deal. Dad never seemed to notice. But when Dad married Cam and Ajay's mom, Cam moved home for a bit. Caroline, the woman I came to call Mom wasn't as easy to fool. Not sure why, but Cam covered for me whenever he could. After he would help me climb in the bedroom window, he'd always say the same thing. This is the last time I cover for you. One time, he caught me pantomiming his words. He beat me pretty good that night too."

Zeke plucked his cellphone from the clip on his jeans. "How about we start with the basics? You need an attorney." He dialed. "This guy's a shark. I've known him since college. He's the best around."

Zeke left a message on his friend's voice mail, detailing the situation and Cam's contact information. After he hung up, Jags handed back what was left of the joint.

Zeke rounded his desk and opened the door. "I'll be by about 11:30. I'm taking you to lunch."

On My Way

FOR THE NEXT HOUR, Jags sat at his desk, getting some work done. Not much, but some. Normally, he would spend a good part of his day socializing. Jags knew everybody he worked with on a personal level. He would hop from cubicle to cubicle and question each of his coworkers about their weekend or about their loved ones or simply tell them a joke. Jags knew how old they were, where they went to college, if they were married and to whom, how many kids they had and if their kids had won the game on Saturday.

Zeke had spoken to him several times about talking less and getting more work done, but he just couldn't help himself. By all accounts, Jags should've been fired by now, but Zeke allotted him more leniency than he deserved.

Jags' phone vibrated. He snatched the phone from the corner of the desk and read the caller ID. Gasping, he answered, "Cam!"

"Yup."

Jags leapt from his chair and jumped high. "How?"

"I made bail. I assumed you were the one—"

"It must've been Zeke." Jags grabbed his keys. "Where are you?"

"I'm with Gramps."

"I'm on my way."

"I won't be here."

Jags pitched his keys at the corner of his desk. "Where will you be?"

"I have to see Maggie," Cam said. "I just wanted to call and let you know I was out."

"I think Maggie can wait. We need to get you an attorney and—"

"Maggie can't wait."

Jags let out a frustrated breath. "I get it. I'll come by after work."

"I'll be here."

On My Way

VISIONS OF HENRY beating and raping Maggie danced through Cam's mind for the past two days. He was barely sane with frustration and rage. Cam may go to prison for the rest of his life or be put to death but for now, he was free and God help Henry if he laid one finger on her. He dialed Maggie.

She answered on the second ring. "Cam? You're out of jail?"

"Yup. I need to see you. Where are you?"

"I'm home."

"Where's that?"

"I'll text you the address."

"On my way."

The Truth

Cam followed the curvy walkway through the freshly manicured bushes. He banged on the tall door, three hard whacks. When Maggie opened it, he stepped past the threshold and into the house. He took her wrist and wrenched her against him.

“You’re shaking,” she said into his shoulder.

“Are you okay?”

Maggie leaned back. “Me? I should be asking you that question.”

A thin gray-haired man approached. “Is this the Copper Creek guy?”

Maggie stepped out of Cam’s arms. “Daddy. This is Cam. Cam. This is my father, Mayor Stewart.”

The Mayor pointed. “Get the hell out of my house.”

Stepping backwards, Cam seized Maggie’s hands.

The Mayor gripped his daughter’s shoulders. “My daughter stays here.”

Cam crooked his finger. “Come with me.”

“Just give me a minute.”

“Don’t leave this house with him.” He glanced at his watch. “Damn, I’m late.”

Standing behind Maggie, Cam slid his arms around her waist, and with his chin on the top of her head, shot her father a challenging look.

Shaking his head, her father opened the door and left the luxury three-floor colonial.

Maggie took Cam’s hand. “Come on.”

He followed her down a long hall and into a spacious kitchen. Black and white checkered tiles covered the walls. A stainless steel electric stove was at one end and two stainless steel refrigerators at the other.

Maggie’s beige wedge sandals clicked across the tile floor. She opened the refrigerator and bent over. “I have Coke, Sprite, or raspberry wine coolers.”

Standing in the middle of the ginormous kitchen, he asked, “Why do you have two refrigerators?”

She inclined her chin at the refrigerator on the right. “That one’s for wine. Drink?”

“No.”

Maggie shut the refrigerator. She took a seat at a round glass table centered in front of a floor-to-ceiling window. She twisted the rod and opened the blinds, allowing a clear view of fenced-in

pastures, cows, horses and a two-floor barn, big enough to fit inside Gramps and his house three times over.

She gestured to the chair beside her. "You said you needed to talk."

"Did you know Steven had a twin brother?"

"Have a seat."

"Answer the question."

"Yes."

"Has he been here to see you?"

"No, why?"

Cam crouched on one knee in front of her. He took her hand in his. "Move in with me."

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Cam grimaced. "This is the part where you giggle like a schoolgirl and hug me."

"We can't be friends anymore."

Friends? What the fuck was she talking about? She had to be fucking with him. He crooked a finger.

She leaned down.

"We were never friends, Maggie."

To say what they had was mere friendship was as crazy as suggesting a person smoked crack cocaine as a dietary supplement.

Maggie had no control over the chemistry between them, a concept Cam planned to drill into that pretty little head of hers.

Cam stood, took her hand and pulled her close. Sealing his lips over hers, he ravaged her mouth in an angry and possessive kiss.

How could she deny the insatiable love and lust that had bewitched both of them?

Maggie wanted him as bad as he wanted her. Cam knew it and he planned to make sure she knew it too.

He cupped her ass and lifted her off her feet. When she wrapped her legs around his waist, he nudged the knot in his groin against the crotch of her khaki shorts. "We can fuck right here or you can show me where your bedroom is."

Maggie sucked in a breath. An audible hiss echoed. "I don't think—"

“Don’t think, just show me your bedroom before I lay you across the floor, tear off your clothes and fuck you like you know you want me to.”

When Cam lowered Maggie to her feet, she gripped his hand, led him back down the hallway and up the spiral staircase. They reached the top, continued down the corridor and turned into the third room on the right.

Across from them was a black wrought-iron bed, canopied with pale green fabric. She crossed the room and sat on the edge of her bed.

Maggie was no longer an indulgent, but a necessity. He needed three things to survive: food, water and Maggie.

Cam closed and locked the door.

As he approached, Maggie stood and held up a hand, palm out. “I think we should talk first.”

The idea she could hold him off with such a simple gesture was comical. Stifling a laugh, he splayed his hands on each side of her face. “I’m going to fuck you until you’re too dizzy to walk. And you’re going to let me. Want to know why you’re going to let me?”

She nodded. “No.”

“Because we’re not friends. We were never friends.” She opened her mouth but he folded his fingertips to his thumb, conveying his message to shut the hell up. “We’re lovers.”

“It’s just that—”

“Shut your trap and look me in the eye and tell me you don’t want me.”

“I do want you. It’s just not that simple.”

He scooted her backward and toward the headboard. Lying in the center of the ridiculously large bed, he positioned himself over her hips.

His eyes on hers, he tucked his fingers under the waistband of her shorts and yanked. The clasp sailed over the side of the bed.

“Hey!” she growled.

Her brows lowered and her inviting succulent lips twisted into a scowl, a look he found incredibly sexy.

“Those were my favorite shorts. You got to learn some restraint.”

Grinning, he rolled off her and tugged her shorts and black lace panties down the length of her legs. “Lift your arms.”

In defiance, she sat up and crossed her arms over her chest.

Gently, he laid her flat. Crawling on his hands and knees, he positioned himself over her then dipped a finger inside his little piece of heaven. Wet. Soft. Warm. "That pretty, little head of yours may not want me, but your hot little pussy does."

The annoyance in his little spitfire's face melted. Maggie lifted her arms. In a fluid motion, he whipped her shirt over her head and pitched it to the floor. He unclasped her bra and removed it.

Cam dragged a finger down her taut abdomen, a slow touch grazing over her cool skin. He unclasped his jeans and drew the zipper down. "Do it."

Biting her bottom lip, Maggie tucked her fingers in his boxers and freed his erect cock. Still fully dressed, he collapsed his full weight on top of her. Ramming into her with furious thrusts, he kissed her neck, drawing her soft skin into his mouth.

Maggie wrapped her legs around the small of his back.

Slowing his thrusts, he delved deeper, pausing then withdrawing at a leisurely and sedate pace. "I'm so glad you don't want to be friends," he rasped close to her ear. "I don't fuck my friends." With his palms on the bed and his arms straightened, he lifted his upper body and withdrew his cock, leaving only the head of his shaft inside her.

"Cam, please." Her hips tilted up.

"It's you and me against the world." Cam gave her his full length. "You get me like no other."

With angry jerks, he drove into her, venting his frustration at her denial of their unmistakable passion and love. He'd convince her they were meant to be together. How he'd convince her, was still a mystery. Until he devised a plan, he'd seduce her, reminding her often of their wild and crazy love, a love blatant to him.

Maggie turned her head. She let out a high-pitched shriek.

Sucking in a breath, Cam clenched his teeth and exploded. "Fuck!" As her channel milked his cock, he tucked his head beside hers, pressing his face into the soft bedding. Their satiated bodies lay pressed together in an intimate embrace, her nude body covered by his still clothed body.

Maggie shoved at his shoulders. "Let me up."

He rolled off her.

Maggie shot off the bed. She retrieved her black panties from the corner of the room and used them to wipe Cam's semen from her inner thighs.

Cam swung his legs off the side of the bed. He tucked his partially erect cock inside his boxers and zipped his jeans. "Talk to me."

From a tall white dresser, Maggie retrieved green panties and a bra. From her walk-in closet, she selected a red skirt and a top to match and finished dressing. "You broke your promise." She looked at him, waiting for a response.

"What are you talking about? I didn't tell anybody your secret."

"You need to leave."

Cam popped off the bed, gripped her by the shoulder and flipped her around. "I love you!"

She shook her head.

Cam took a step back, his eyes wide, his mouth gaped.

Maggie didn't love him and never would, the realization slammed into him like a bat to his gut.

"Things are just complicated right now. With my father being Mayor and—"

"Me being the most hated man in the town, it just wouldn't be good PR."

Was he standing? Sitting? Was it today? Or Tomorrow? An eerie emptiness swallowed him, leaving him void of emotion. Drifting in a surreal existence.

In his young life, he fought his aggressive urges. As he aged, the rage escalated but was controllable. The night he killed Steven, Cam graduated to a level where all control was gone.

For the finale, he'd gone numb. Put simply, he'd become an uncontrollable numb monster.

Maggie should run for her life.

"Why couldn't you just leave it alone?" she said. "If you'd just stopped like I begged you to."

"If I find the others before I go to prison, I'm going to take them out. Just thought you should know."

She stood on the tips of her toes and got up in his face. "You will not touch them!"

Cam grazed his lips across hers, his palm on her cheek. "I'll kill anybody who hurts you."

"Listen to me."

"You have my attention."

"One apologized to me. We talked about it. He said he didn't want to hurt me but was afraid what the others would think if he didn't go along with it."

"Sucks to be him."

"He's got a wife now and a baby on the way."

"I don't give a fuck," he said plainly.

"If you keep up like this, people are gonna start asking questions, questions that I don't want asked!." Sighed. Defeated. "If you love me you won't do this."

"I'm doing it because I love you."

"You have a warped sense of love," she said.

"This coming from someone who's never been in love." Sighed. "You and me . . . we ain't all that different."

"I'm not stupid enough to kill a man in plain sight."

"Huh, should I have made a date and offered to scream for him?"

"Fuck you!"

"Why are you protecting them? And don't tell me no line about saving your father's career. We both know that ain't it."

"I hate you."

"Yeah, that much I got."

Shook her head. "I'm not telling you who the others are."

He brought his mouth close to hers. "I figured out who Steven was on my own and don't forget I met the man you offered to scream for. That's two of the bastards. With any luck, I'll find the last two."

Maggie's hands moved to her hips. "How did you know Steven was one of them?"

"I wasn't sure." His eyes narrowed with unwavering arrogance. "But now I do."

She stomped her foot. "You can't go through life killing everybody who makes you mad."

"I have a favor to ask." He put his finger under her chin. "The next time a man tells you he's not a nice guy, consider the possibility he's speaking the truth."

An uncontrollable, numb, monster.

Always a Choice

Cam eased the front door open and saw Gramps awake in the recliner. He plunked onto the sofa and leaned over, his forearms balanced on his wide-spread thighs. "Gramps."

Gramps lifted his head from his World War II book. "Cam?"

Gramps asked Cam at least a dozen times a day what his name was, but if you asked him to tell you about the Battle of Saipan he could recite the events minute by minute, as if it happened yesterday. "Yup."

"Doug said you'd been arrested. What happened?"

"Has he been by to check on you?"

"He just left."

Spending the rest of his life in jail paled in comparison to telling Gramps he'd have to move out of his own home. Cam sighed. "You're going to have to stay with Dad. I'm going to be leaving for a while."

Gramps shifted in the recliner. "The only way I'll leave here is in a black plastic bag."

"You can't stay here by yourself and I have to go away."

"You don't have to do a damn thing or go a damn place."

"I have no choice."

"There's always a choice. Always."

Cam walked to the bookshelf behind Gramps' recliner and picked up a black and white photograph of his grandfather in his World War II uniform. "Not always."

Gramps glanced over his shoulder. "That was taken right before they shipped us to Saipan. Did I ever tell you about that battle?"

A hundred times. "No."

Gramps picked his coffee cup off the tray and took a sip. "Two thousand good men died on the first day, but by nightfall twenty thousand of our soldiers made it safely to shore. It took us six days to secure the beaches and less than a month to secure the entire island."

Smiling, Cam sat on the couch. Even though he'd heard the story many times, it never got old. The pride his grandfather felt for his country and fellow soldiers was made vibrant by his detailed account, as if it was the first time he had told the story.

A ping of jealousy struck Cam. Would he ever do something so admirable? Things he'd accomplished so far: dropping out of school in the eleventh grade and killing two people.

Impressive.

“Does you leaving have something to do with that nice girl you brought here?” Gramps asked. “I wish you’d bring her around again. What was her name?”

“Maggie.”

“Yes. I remember now. Such a sweet girl.”

“I’m pretty sure you’re the only one that’s ever found her to be sweet.”

Gramps hung his head. “Don’t make me leave my house. Please.”

This larger-than-life man who gave so much of himself for his family and country, had been reduced to begging a loser like him for the small favor of being able to stay in the house he’d lived in for more than thirty years.

“Did I ever tell you the story about how I met Meemaw?” Gramps asked.

Two hundred times. “No.”

Gramps covered his face with his hands. The tears fell. Cam strode to the liquor cabinet behind the sofa, grabbed the bottle of Chivas and poured his grandfather a shot. He set it on the tray stand.

Gramps’ hands slid down his face. “What were we talkin’ about?”

“I don’t remember.”

“Did you bring me any cigarettes?”

“You don’t smoke.”

“I don’t?”

“No.” Cam took the empty cup. “Want some more coffee?”

Gramps patted Cam’s hand. “You’re such a good boy.”

No I’m not.

Cam’s cell phone rang. “Yup.”

“May I speak with Cameron Wolfe?”

Cam walked to the kitchen. “This is him.”

“My name is Richard Webster. I’m your attorney.”

Holding the phone with one hand, he used the other to open the dishwasher. “I don’t remember hiring an attorney.”

“I work for Zeke Chase.”

“I don’t take charity.” Cam’s grandfather’s words flashed in his mind. *There’s always a choice. Always.* Cam grabbed a glass off the top rack of the dishwasher and placed it in the cabinet.

“I make a thousand dollars an hour which amounts to seventeen dollars a minute. Do we really want to spend Mr. Chase’s money arguing about whether you need my services or not? I’m very good at what I do, Mr. Wolfe, and I’ve read your case file. I can tell you with certainty, you need my services.”

“I’m hanging up now.” Cam grabbed another glass and set it in the cabinet. “I’ll send Mr. Chase a check for seventeen dollars.”

“We’re at two minutes.”

Cam groaned. “I don’t need your services because I’m pleading guilty.”

“That’s your prerogative, but I have to strongly—”

“I killed him and I’d do it again. I’m sorry to have wasted your time.”

Cam hung up.

Being Real

Star pushed back from her desk and let out a huff. Why couldn't she get Jags out of her head? The guy was a rude and egotistical jerk. Still, his brother was arrested for murder. Jags must be going through hell. Why she cared, she had no clue. Maybe a small part of her thought Steven got what he deserved. A decade too late, but sweet justice just the same. She rode the elevator to the third floor and followed the corridor.

As she turned into his cubicle, Jags said, "You're on the wrong floor."

Star sat in the chair beside his desk.

He glared at her. "Please. Make yourself at home."

A bit sarcastic but who could blame him? He must be worried to death about Cam.

She said, "I'm sorry about—"

"My brother!"

No hint of his usual cheery smile, only contempt.

"Yes."

"You cold-hearted bitch! You got steel running through your veins?"

Star's jaw dropped.

Tilting his head, Jags peered into her gaped mouth. "I take it back. Your tonsils suck."

Star forced the tears back, unwilling to give him the satisfaction of making her cry again, at least not in front of him. However, she had no qualms about hiding in the bathroom later and wailing 'til her heart's content. But not now. Please!

"I don't understand. I was just—"

"What?" He stretched his neck, his eyes wide. "We both know you don't give a flying fig about me or my brother. So take your rehearsed, politically-correct sympathy and shove it up your backside."

"Tell me what the right thing is to say and I'll say it." She clasped her trembling hands on her lap.

"If you weren't so superficial, you wouldn't have to ask a question like that. I'd have way more respect for you if you told me you hope my brother sizzles like a big breasted bimbo at South Beach in the dead of summer." He grunted. "I'd call you a fucking bitch, but I'd have more respect for you."

"You don't think I'm being real?" Star swallowed.

"Was I mincing my words? I tried to be as clear as possible."

"I didn't come here to upset you. Despite how you feel about me, I don't hate you. I just wanted—"

“What reason have I given you to like me? If I recall, the last time we were together I called you a number of uncomplimentary names. Or have you forgotten?”

“I wish I had forgotten and as to why I like you . . .” She looked down and sighed. “I ask myself that very question more often than I’d like to admit.”

Jags’ eyes narrowed. “Is the non-superficial Star peeking its head out?”

Star glared at him. “Maggie is my best friend and if something happens to Cam, she’ll be upset, to put it mildly. So you can rest assured my concern for your brother is genuine, since it’s for somewhat selfish reasons. On top of that, I know why Cam did what he did, or at least I have a strong suspicion as to why.” She stood. “You want real. Well, here it is. You’re a jerk!”

Like a bull after a red flag, Jags jolted out of his chair. His face inches from hers, she scented the spearmint in the gum he chewed.

“I want to know why my brother jumped Steven.” His teeth clenched. “And you’re going to tell me.”

“You can’t be serious.” Now her legs trembled. What was next? A full-blown seizure. “You’ve been nothing but rude and now you want something from me?”

“Sugar.” Jags grinned. “My eyes are up here.”

She sucked in a dramatic breath. “I certainly hope you’re not insinuating I was looking somewhere further south.”

“You were looking at my mouth.” Jags’ grin widened. “You want me to kiss you.”

When he leaned in, she jerked her head back and shoved past him. “You arrogant jackass. I love Tye and I’m marrying him. You’re the last person on this planet I want to kiss.” Traipsing down the corridor, she waved her hand over her head. “Have a nice life.”

Jags stepped into the corridor. “You did that on purpose.”

Star turned to face him.

Heads rose over the cubicle walls.

Jags gave his nosy coworkers a cursory glance and turned his focus back on Star. “Just so you could turn me out.”

“Yes I did.”

Jags tilted his head toward the onlookers. “We should charge admission.”

“Why would I want to kiss a boy—?”

“Man.”

She rolled her eyes. "Boy that just insulted me?" She wasn't good with witty comebacks, unless of course, she had a few hours or even days to think about it. For that reason, Star hated confrontation and desperately wanted to win this battle of wits.

"So you refused as punishment for my behavior?"

Her hand went to her hip. "There are so many reasons. For one, I don't kiss boys before noon on Mondays. Ever." She laced her trembling fingers in front of her.

"Come see me after lunch."

"I also don't kiss boys who have smiley faces on their tie."

Jags loosened his tie, whipped it over his head and dropped it.

"White button-down shirts are a turn off too."

He unbuttoned the top button.

"I think this has gone far enough. Unlike you, I actually came here to work." Star turned and walked away.

Because . . .

She had won!

And boy did it feel good.

Hannibal Lecter

JAGS LOOKED UP AT the spectators. "Show's over."

What was it about this woman that drove him crazy? He couldn't read her like he read other people. Not once had he come across somebody he couldn't see through.

He strode to the elevator and jabbed at the down arrow. "Come on. Come on."

The bell dinged. The fat door slid open at an insufferably sedate pace. Jags gave it a shove, entered the elevator and selected the 2nd floor.

When the elevator reached its destination, he stepped out, turned left and snaked through the corridor, glancing into each cubicle and office. Turning a corner, he spotted her in an office at the end of the hall.

Star looked up just as he crossed her doorway.

"You have an office," he said.

"If you spent more time working and less time chatting, you'd probably have an office too."

A quick double knock on the open door prompted him to look over his shoulder.

Star rose from the chocolate leather chair. "Rane." She waved him forward.

Rane gave Jags a curt nod and handed Star a manila folder. "Here are the TIP reports you asked for." He looked at Jags. "Sorry about the misunderstanding the other night."

The guy almost looked sincere. Jags wasn't one to hold a grudge and if possible, he avoided conflict with most people. But something about this guy wasn't quite right. And he couldn't help wondering what exactly this man did to hurt Maggie's friend.

Touching this man could pitch him into a convulsive seizure, but cursed with an insatiable curiosity, he offered his hand. "I'm Jags."

They shook.

A vision played. A young girl curled on the ground in front of a ratty pickup truck. Her long dark hair lay strewn across her bloodied face. A sharp pain singed Jags' fingers and hand as if he'd just stuck a fork in an electrical outlet. Hissing, he snatched his hand away and shook it.

"Check the last page." Star handed the folder back to Rane. "The dimension changes we discussed in this morning's meeting are not reflected." She pulled her chair under her and sat. "The display screen

needs to increase from three to five inches. Make the appropriate changes and get back to me with the correct report." When he turned to leave, she added, "I need the report before you leave today."

Rane gave her a mock salute and left.

Her impatient gaze turned onto Jags. "As you can see, I'm busy so I'd appreciate it if you left."

"Has he worked here long?" Jags asked.

She shrugged. "A month or two. Why?"

"Stay away from him."

She scoffed. "I'm his boss. I can hardly stay away from him."

"The guy is whacked. Ask Tilly. I can read people and I know this guy is tipping the scale from disturbed and crashing into psychotic."

"You're telling me this because you're worried about my well-being? You hate me and we both know it."

"Maybe, but that doesn't mean I want you devoured by Hannibal Lecter either."

"I need you to leave."

His eyes narrowed. "You tear me down in front of everyone I work with and now you dismiss me as you would a child."

She clasped her hands on top of the desk. "I came upstairs to offer my support, not to be insulted or play flirtatious games. I don't know what kind of game is going on between us, but I'm done playing."

Placing his palms on her desk, he leaned in, his long ash hair falling forward. "Sugar."

She leaned back, increasing the distance between them.

He said, "The game has yet to begin."

As he stormed from her office, he heard her let out a breath. He grinned, realizing just how much he intimidated her.

He may intimidate her but she confused the hell out of him. One minute he wanted to suck on her toes, the next he wanted to spray paint her fancy-schmancy office with blues, greens and pinks. Stealing the phrase from one of his favorite shirts, he'd write: *Hey bitch, try sex. It really works.* She was a snob and he so looked forward to shoving her off her pedestal.

And why the hell couldn't he read her?

His phone vibrated. "Hey?"

"Ready to go to lunch?" Zeke asked.

"You have no idea."

Have You Met Me?

PEEP'S CAFE WAS unusually busy for a Monday, nine of the ten tables already taken. Zeke and Jags managed to secure the last.

The waiter approached and handed them each a menu. "Can I start you off with something to drink?"

Jags offered his hand. "Hi. I'm Jags."

The waiter shook his hand. "I'm Cooper."

"Good to meet you." Jags pointed to the menu. "I'll have a Dr. Pepper, buffalo fingers, a side of coleslaw, and a side of green beans. Do you have any soup?"

"Broccoli Cheese."

"Fantastic. I'll have a bowl of that and a side of cheese fries."

"I'll have an iced tea and the Asian chicken salad," Zeke said. "With the house dressing."

When the waiter left, Zeke said, "You seem like you're feeling better."

"Thanks to you, Cam's out of jail. I can't tell you what a relief that is."

"Glad to hear it," Zeke said. "But I'm about to bring you down again."

"Could you wait for dessert before you bust me in half?"

Zeke smiled. "Cam turned down my attorney friend. He's pleading guilty."

Both Jags' fists tightened on top of the table. "He's not pleading guilty."

"Cam says he is."

"I don't give a . . ." Jags clasped his hands behind his neck, elbows out, and leaned back. "I'll talk to him."

"You think you can change his mind?"

Jags splayed a hand over his heart. "Have we met?"

Zeke laughed. "Okay. I'll tell my friend to hang on for a while."

"Please do."

None of Your Business

After lunch, Jags and Zeke returned to Chase Industries. They entered the extravagant lobby and pressed the up arrow. The elevator door slid open. Inside, Star stood beside a tall, brown-haired man wearing stained jeans, a blue plaid shirt, work boots and a brown cowboy hat.

A real-life cowboy. Jags resisted a snicker. Not that he had anything against genuine cowboys but any man who would put up with her had to be a real loser.

Jags and Zeke stepped aside and let them pass then entered the elevator. The couple approached the glass double doors that led to the parking lot. Before the fat metal door finished closing, Jags stuck out his hand. This is just too delicious to pass up. "Zeke, I'll meet you up there."

"Star!" Jags shouted. The couple turned. "You must be *none of your business*."

"Excuse me?" the cowboy asked.

Jags' focus danced toward Star. "Aren't you going to introduce us?"

She rolled her eyes. "This is Tye."

Jags offered his hand. "Hi. I'm Jags. A friend of Star's."

Tye eyed Jags briefly before accepting and shaking his hand.

Jags tightened his grip, keeping a solid grasp.

Waiting.

Waiting.

With a clipped laugh, he let go of Tye's hand and slapped his thigh. "Hot damn! Linda?"

"I'm sorry?" Tye asked, his brows furrowed.

Jags blinked. "I mean, I just remembered I need to talk to Linda in . . . accounting?" He gave Tye a sideways look. "That's what department she's in, right?" The heel of his own hand slammed into his own forehead. "Silly me. How would you know? You don't work here."

Frowning, Star pulled Tye toward the door. "Come on. Let's go."

Jags waved. "You kids have a good time." Smiling and shaking his head, he pressed the up arrow.

Not Doing It For You?

A little more than an hour later, Jags heard his name from across the room.

“Excuse me. Could you tell me where I could find Jags?”

Jags popped his head over the top of the cubicle partition, his hand waving over his head. “Hey, Tye.”

Shuffling toward Jags, Tye glanced at the floor.

“What brings you by?” Jags waved his hand across the empty chair beside his desk.

“What can I do for you?”

Tye wiped his palm along his jean-clad thighs. “How did you know?”

“How was lunch with Star?”

“It’s not what you think.”

“I’m thinking it’s exactly what I think,” Jags said. “I sure hope you’re wrapping that rascal. Linda’s had more ass than a last row seat in a movie theater.”

“It was only once. It’ll never happen again.”

Jags held up his hands. “None of my business.”

“So you won’t tell Star?”

“Your secret’s safe with me.”

Tye rose and stepped toward the corridor.

“But can I ask you something?”

Tye nodded.

“If she’s not doing it for you, why don’t you move on? I mean life’s too short.”

Tye sat back down. “She does do it for me.”

Jags took a sip of his coffee. “Apparently not.”

“After we get married, everything will be better.”

“What kind of logic is that? How does marriage make sex more satisfying?” Taking another sip of his coffee, he caught Tye’s sheepish grin over the rim of the ceramic mug. Coffee sprayed from his mouth and nose, prompting Tye to jump back.

“Oh gosh. I’m sorry.” Jags used his smiley face tie to wipe the coffee off the corner of the desk. “You guys don’t—”

“Soon enough. We’ll be married. Everything will be better.”

Jags blew out a dramatic breath. He leaned back.

Tye stepped toward the corridor and looked back. "Do you know Nate?"

Jags forced his gaze from the tunnel pulling him deeper into his monitor. "He runs the on-site medical clinic. Of course, I know him."

"Don't tell him either."

"Don't tell him that you're not sleeping with his sister-in-law or that you cheated on his sister-in-law?"

"I don't know how well you know him, but he can be a little over-the-top when it comes to Tilly and Star. You have no idea how difficult he could make my life."

Jags forced his focus from another bout of tunnel vision swirling him into his desk. "How do you think Star would react if she walked in on you and Linda? Hypothetically speaking, of course."

"She'd be upset, I'm sure."

Jags smirked. "How profound."

If Tye noticed Jags' sarcasm, he didn't show it. "Listen, I got to get to work."

"Would she leave you?"

"Of course not! We've been together for five years." Tye stepped out of the cubicle. "I really have to go." He paused in the corridor and glanced back at Jags. "So you're not going to say anything?"

"Star and I aren't the best of friends," Jags said. "Even if I did, I doubt she'd believe me."

"It won't happen again."

A trickle of laughter escaped Jags. "You're so cute."

"Excuse me?"

"You actually believe what you're saying."

Always a Choice

CAM HEARD THE FRONT door burst open and slam shut.

“Where are you?” Jags called out from the living room. “Where the fuck are you?” He strode into the kitchen where Cam was just finishing loading the dishwasher.

Cam closed the door to the dishwasher. “Aren’t we in a good mood?”

“You’re pleading guilty?”

Jags was the emotional one of the crew. Realizing this, Cam tried to be understanding of his feelings but this time was different. He simply didn’t know if his conscience would let him plead not guilty. “I’m not doing this with you.”

Jags grabbed him by the scruff of his stained white shirt and threw him across the room, planting him flat on his ass. He wagged a finger. “You are not pleading guilty.”

Cam scrambled to his feet and tackled his brother at the waist. Rolling around the cold tile floor, they crashed into the kitchen table, toppling it upside down. Punches and kicks continued. Blood trailed from both their mouths and noses. Curses streamed throughout the twelve hundred square foot cottage home.

“Bastard! I won’t let you do this.”

Fuck, this was some immature shit, Cam thought as he lay on his back kicking at Jags. “It’s not up to you.”

A glass sailed over their heads and shattered against the refrigerator.

Gramps stood in the doorway. “You always have a choice. Always.” He turned and shuffled back to the living room.

Jags and Cam sat on their butts, wheezing and panting.

With the back of his hand, Jags wiped blood from his chin. “What the hell does that mean?”

Cam propped his elbows on his bent knees and buried his face in the palms of his hands. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

“Then don’t plead guilty.”

Mumbling into his knees, he said, “But I am guilty.”

“I don’t give a shit. If you do this for me, I’ll never ask another thing from you as long as I live.”

Cam lifted his head and laughed. “I’ve heard that once or twice before.”

A smile slid across Jags' face. Wrapping his arms around Cam's neck, he gave him a shaky hug. "Not guilty. Please. For God's sake. Please!"

Cam gently pushed him away. He didn't want to hurt Jags and he sure as hell didn't want to roll around the floor for the next five or six hours either, which was exactly what Jags would do if Cam didn't concede.

He'd rather deal with a guilty conscience the rest of his life than hurt either of his brothers. Besides, the evidence against him was strong. No matter what he pleaded, he was surely going to prison for a long time, if not put to death. If he pleaded not guilty, at least he could give Jags the satisfaction of knowing he tried to help himself, and if he gets convicted his conscience would be cleared.

"Not guilty." Cam grasped Jags' forearm. "Brothers."

Jags' smile beamed as he returned the gesture. "Always."

Intense

Henry had been shaking hands and hugging strangers for three hours. His suit was tight in the shoulders and arms. Shifting his weight, he shook his left foot, then his right. If Henry heard *I'm sorry for your loss* one more time he might just vomit.

He stepped out of the receiving line, crossed the room and peered out the window. The line of people waiting to give their respects snaked out the door and down three blocks.

Groaning, he went back and took his place beside his sobbing mother.

Henry shook another stranger's hand and noticed the man standing beside the stranger, a familiar face, somebody who actually knew Steven.

Rane offered his hand. "Sorry, man."

As they shook, Henry said, "Thanks." He whispered to his mother. "I need a break."

Henry motioned Rane away from the crowd. They found two empty chairs near the back of the room.

"How you holding up?" Rane asked.

"I've been better."

Rane inclined his head at the coffin. "What's up with his hair? He looks like one of those grease monkeys from the fifties."

Henry snickered. "It's pretty bad."

"I hear they arrested the guy that did it."

"About that." Henry grimaced. "There's something you should know. Wolfe killed Steven because of what you guys did to Maggie Stewart."

Rane's brows lowered. "After all these years? It doesn't make sense. I didn't think she told anybody."

"It would seem she told him." Henry pinched the crease in his black dress pants. "And he's not happy about it."

"She doing him?"

"It's a good assumption."

Rane stared thoughtfully at Steven's coffin. "The case against him is good, right?"

"Yes."

"Then there's nothing to worry about."

"He's out on bail," Henry said.

Rane gave a gentle pat on Henry's back. "Then I guess things are about to get interesting."

Henry blew out a breath. "I went to see him, rattled his cage, hinted at taking my revenge on Maggie. I just wanted to rile him up. But the guy's intense. Whatever happens, I want nothing to do with it."

"You should've thought of that before you threatened Maggie. I'm thinking you're in it just as much as the rest of us."

"He killed my brother. What was I supposed to do? Shake his hand?"

Rane shrugged. "All I'm saying is that it seems you're the one who should be watching his back."

All Worked Out

THE SUN HADN'T yet crested the horizon when Maggie left her house. She wore blue shorts with a green stripe down the sides and a gold tank top. She adjusted the buds in her ears, clipped her iPod to her wrist and began her morning jog.

Taking her normal route, she jogged to the end of Acton Street and turned onto Macintyre Ave.

A yellow pickup pulled up beside her. The passenger window rolled down. "Hey, babe."

Maggie peered into the vehicle. With one arm folded across the open window, she reached with the other and slid a black canister of pepper spray from her sock. Her arm dangled by her side, the weapon concealed in her closed fist.

Of the four men, he scared her the most. Several times during the attack, the others had asked Rane to end it, but he kept her for several more hours. As terrified as she was of him, she refused to give him the satisfaction of knowing just how much he frightened her.

"You're looking good," Rane said. "Still want to scream for me?"

"What do you want?" Sweat trickled down the bridge of her nose.

"I heard your boyfriend is out for revenge on your behalf."

She scowled. "You heard wrong."

"I thought we had this whole thing worked out."

Worked out? As if they'd come to some kind of compromise. Maggie kept her silence for one reason and it had nothing to do with him. "We do."

"If this was all worked out, why did you tell your new boyfriend about us?"

"I don't know what you heard but I haven't told anyone anything."

"Then why did your boyfriend jump Steven?" Rane asked.

"I don't know."

He leaned across the passenger seat. His brows arched. "If he wants a war, he'll get one."

"He doesn't."

Rane reached for her hand but she jerked it away.

He laughed. "It was nice seeing you again, Maggie."

The truck rolled away from the curb

Maggie stuck her head back in the vehicle. "You're not going after him, are you?"

Rane shifted to park. "Why should I? He doesn't know anything. Right?"

"Right."

"Unless I find out different, there should be no problem. As far as I'm concerned, it's ancient history. What's done is done. After all, it's been years. I assume you feel the same."

"Yes." When he shifted to drive, she stuck her head back in the open window.

He shifted to park and gave her a lazy smile. "We have to stop meeting like this."

"If you touch him, I'll kill you."

Rane's eyes twinkled with condescension. "A bit dramatic. Don't you think?" He gave her a wink before driving away.

Hello, Maggie

THE MAYOR OPENED his front door. "Henry. Please come in. I'm so sorry about your brother."

Henry smiled. "Thank you."

The Mayor shut the door behind Henry. "What can I do for you?"

"I was hoping to see Maggie."

"I wasn't aware you two knew each other." Suspicion lined the Mayor's tone.

"I understand she was with my brother the night he died."

"Yes, she was."

Henry had to be sure she kept her trap shut concerning his brother. Henry wasn't close with his brother but that didn't mean he wanted the family name dragged through the mud either.

"Could I speak with her?"

"Of course." The Mayor led Henry to the living room. "Sit. I'll get her."

"Thank you, sir."

Henry walked to the far end of the room and glanced out a floor-to-ceiling picture window.

An Olympic size swimming pool was off to the left. Decorative masonry boxed in the pool in the way of a three-foot wall. A pine playhouse looked as if it had more living space than his first car.

The click of flip flops caught his attention. He glanced over his shoulder to find her standing in the doorway. "Hello, Maggie."

Fear swelled in her eyes which wasn't his intention. Henry didn't want any trouble with her boyfriend but if necessary, Henry was prepared to defend himself. Not even Cameron Wolfe could outrun a bullet. If Maggie didn't agree to keep his brother's secret, he was prepared to threaten her, making the fear in her eyes legitimate.

She blinked.

Henry took a seat on the end of the leather sectional. "I wanted to talk to you about the night my brother died."

Maggie moved past him and sat at the opposite end.

"I understand the man who killed my brother is a friend of yours."

"Yes."

Henry scooted closer. The leather creaked. "Why didn't you report what my brother and his friends did to you all those years ago?"

She frowned. "Why does it matter?"

Henry scooted further down the sofa, now only inches from her. "I don't want it coming out in court?"

"I don't either," Maggie said.

He set his hand on her knee.

Maggie visibly shivered. He felt goosebumps form on her naked thigh.

"You're a beautiful woman." Henry glided his hand under the crease of her shorts. Her open hand swung at his face, but he snatched her wrist.

Henry's grip tightened around her slender thigh. "I'm glad we agree. If things change, I'd hate to have to come back for another chat."

Maggie yanked out of his grasp and pinned him with narrow eyes. "Is that a threat?"

"It sure is."

Not Even Maybe

THE MAYOR WATCHED and waited for Henry to leave before he entered the sitting room. "Honey?"

Maggie flinched. "You scared me."

"Was Steven one of the boys who attacked you?"

"You were eavesdropping?"

He sat beside Maggie and smiled. "I'm in my own house; you could hardly call it eavesdropping. Now answer my question."

She shook her head. "No. He wasn't."

Her father grimaced. "What was he talking about then? What did Steven and his friends do to you?"

Maggie rubbed her eyes with the heels of her hands. She walked toward the stairs "I'm going to take a nap."

"Maggie?" He stood, walked toward her and, with his hand on her shoulder, turned her to face him.

"Henry said he didn't want it coming up in court. Steven and his friends must've broken the law and it has something to do with you. As a father, you can imagine my suspicions are wild right now. I'd like you to put them to ease."

Maggie patted his shoulder and gave him a tight smile. "Not even maybe."

I'll Wait

MAYOR STEWART'S SILVER cufflinks sparkled in the sunlight that peeked through the blinds. Sliding his cell phone from his pocket, he dialed his office.

"Mayor Stewart," the woman answered.

"Susan. I need the address and phone number of Cameron Wolfe. We just settled a legal matter with him concerning the Copper Creek property."

"Certainly, Mayor Stewart."

"I'll wait."

"Of course."

Now

CAM TURNED THE mixer off and swiped the mashed potatoes with his finger. Deciding the potatoes were salted and buttered to his taste, he slid a casserole dish from the middle rack in the oven and placed it on top of the stove. The heat leaked through the thin mitts. He pitched them at the cracked counter and cursed. As he slid two dinner plates from the cabinet, his phone vibrated.

Cam set the plates on the counter and answered his phone. "Yup." He pulled two serving spoons from a drawer.

"Cameron Wolfe?"

"Yup." He spooned a generous helping of mashed potatoes on both plates. "Who's this?"

"John Stewart."

Using the second serving spoon, he scooped a generous portion from the chicken and sausage dish.

"What can I do for you, Mayor Stewart?"

"I'd like to speak to you about my daughter."

Cam grabbed two forks from the drawer. He grabbed a plate and walked to the living room. "I've stayed away from your daughter, just as you asked." When he placed the plate on the tray stand. Gramps gave him a thumbs-up.

"Not on the phone," the Mayor said. "Can you meet me?"

"Where?"

"Anywhere and as far as when goes, now would be preferable."

Cam walked back to the kitchen. "1602 Creighton—"

"I know where you live."

Santa Claus

Clouds of white peeked through the cracked vinyl of the faded blue sofa. The Mayor carefully sat.

Cam leaned against the bookcase behind Gramps' recliner. "What can I do for you?"

"Steven Walker and some of his friends did something to my daughter. Did your disagreement with Steven have something to do with Maggie and what they did to her?"

"Yup."

"So you know what they did to my daughter?"

"Yup."

"I want to know," the Mayor said flatly.

"Not my place."

The Mayor jumped to his feet. "You son of a bitch. I'm her father!"

"Not my place," Cam repeated with the same tone of indifference.

The Mayor crossed the room and stood nose-to-nose with him. "I demand to know what happened to my daughter."

Cam swirled a whiskey flavored breath in the Mayor's face. "Sucks to be you."

Gripping him by the scruff of his shirt, Cam's body swayed like floss in the Mayor's grasp. "Hit me! Put me in the ground right next to Steven."

"What?"

The Mayor shoved Cam backwards. "You'll understand when you have a daughter of your own."

"Then I guess I'll never understand because I'm going to die in prison."

The Mayor loosened his red silk tie, stomped toward the kitchen and sat at the table, one elbow resting on the back of the chair, the other resting on the table. "Why can't you tell me?"

Cam leaned against the doorjamb, his arms crossed. "Maggie."

"She said not to tell me?"

"Yup."

The Mayor whipped his tie over his head and pitched it to the table with a dramatic fling. "Can you at least tell me why she doesn't want me to know whatever it is that happened to her?"

"I have a feeling you have a pretty good guess as to what happened to her."

The Mayor studied Cam's hard expression. His mouth fell open. "Before now, I . . . suspected." He stood and slapped the table. "Why the hell does she insist on protecting these bastards?"

"Because of you."

Mayor Stewart's chest heaved. His breathing deepened. He crossed the room and leaned over the sink. "I think I'm going to be sick."

"I know the feeling."

Mayor Stewart flipped around, his hands gripping the rim of the sink. "Who are the others?"

"I don't know."

"You knew Steven Walker was one of them but you don't know who the rest are?"

"I didn't know Steven was one of them."

"I don't understand. You just said that's the reason you attacked him."

"I wasn't sure. I am now, but I wasn't then."

Mayor Stewart shook his head. "You mean to tell me you beat a man to death because of a hunch?"

"Yup."

"Do you know how many?"

"Does it matter?"

"Hell yes!"

Cam stared at him.

"You're not going to tell me?" the Mayor asked, his voice low and calm.

"I promised her."

"I'm not asking you for names. I'm asking for a number."

Cam stared at him.

"I assume since you attacked Steven over a hunch that you're somewhat desperate to see my daughter's assailants punished."

"Assailants?"

"Yes," the Mayor snapped. "Assailants."

Cam let out a soft laugh. "Interesting word choice. I prefer barbaric, savage pigs that should burn in hell. But if assailants works for you, we'll go with it."

"We're on the same team. Stop treating me like the bad guy. I want them worse than you do."

"Not likely."

“I’m going to try to find the bastards who hurt my daughter and prosecute them for their crime, but it would help a great deal if you could tell me how many I’m looking for. Think about it. I know a lot of people in this town and the Houston area for that matter. I still run my law practice out of Houston. If you want them, let me help.”

Cam’s arms dropped to his sides.

The Mayor grabbed his tie from the table. “Tell me this.” He pulled the tie over his head and tightened it. “How old were you when you found out there was no Santa Claus?”

A slow smile slid across Cam’s face. “Four.”

The Mayor gave Cam a curt nod. “Thank you.”

Cam followed the Mayor to the front door. “Mayor?”

“Yes.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Why?”

“I want in.”

The Mayor shook his head. “I think you’re in enough trouble already. Let me handle this.”

“I think we both know I’m fucked. How can things get worse for me?”

“I said I’ll handle it.” The Mayor widened his eyes at Cam, a questioning but threatening look. “Okay?”

Cam nodded. “Yup.”

Chapter Twenty-four

My Sweet

RANE OPENED THE closet door. "My sweet. How was your day?" He pulled Jewel to a stand, untied the ropes and shoved her at the bed. "Did Kipp let you stretch and take you to the little girl's room?"

Jewel nodded.

Rane turned and undressed. When he turned back around, Jewel held Cupcake by the neck.

"I want to go home." Tears streamed down her swollen and bruised face. "I won't tell anyone anything. I just want to go. If you don't let me go, I'll break Cupcake's neck."

Rane smiled. "If you break her neck, I'll break yours." He crawled onto the bed.

Jewel scooted back. "I'm serious. Come any closer and I'll break her neck."

He was tiring of her anyway, thinking about getting someone new, but he didn't want to sacrifice Cupcake in the process. He held up his hands, palms out. "Go."

Jewel stepped from the bed, both her hands still around Cupcake's neck.

When Rane's sweet Cupcake wiggled in the bitch's grip, he launched at Jewel, tackling her to the hardwood floor. She landed face down, Rane's body covering hers. He palmed the back of her head and slammed her head against the floor. A loud crack echoed off the wood-paneled walls.

"Bitch!" He twisted his hands around her throat, snapping her neck.

Cupcake's lifeless body lay a few feet from him. That bitch! Rane threw Jewel across the room. Her body thumped against the far wall and toppled to the floor. Rane sprinted to her and kicked her in the stomach. Jewel's body rolled, leaving her face up, eyes open.

He scooped her up. With her body draped over his shoulder, he walked outside. He dropped her on the grass, retrieved a shovel from the shed and dug a shallow grave. With a kick, he rolled her into it.

After wrapping Cupcake in his best dish towel, he buried her on the other side of the yard.

Gazing at Cupcake's grave, he considered his options for replacing Jewel. He'd have to find someone quick because Kipp would be upset that he didn't get to kill her.

Star was a possibility. He hated the way she talked to him, like he was beneath her. But he didn't much like blondes. Plus, that'd raise too much suspicion since he worked for her. He had to find somebody more random, somebody they couldn't trace back to him.

Chapter Twenty-five

Piano

Mayor Stewart opened the heavy oak door to the police station and approached the metal desk. “Is Detective Felton in?”

The officer looked up from his Stephen King paperback. He slammed the book down, as if he just got caught cheating on a test. “Mayor Stewart. Yes, of course. The sheriff is right this way.” He led the Mayor to an office near the back of the room and knocked on the open door.

“Mayor Stewart.” The detective stood. “This is a surprise.” He waved the Mayor forward. “Please. Come in.”

The Mayor stepped into the office and shut the door in the officer’s face. The young recruit didn’t even look old enough to buy himself a drink. The Mayor sat in the chair across from the desk, pressing his hand against his chest to keep his maroon tie from falling forward. “We’re both busy men so I’ll get right to it. How’s your case against Cameron Wolfe?”

The sun-tanned skin under the sheriff’s eyes drooped low on his cheeks, making him look a decade older than he really was. “Rock solid.”

“Drop the charges.”

His eyes grew round. “I must be hearing things or I’m going insane but I could’ve sworn I just heard you say to drop the charges against Cameron Wolfe.”

Mayor Stewart’s elbows rested on the arms of the wooden hard-back chair, his hands clasped over his chest. “Your hearing is fine and so is your sanity.”

The sheriff jerked back in his chair. “Impossible. There would be a community outrage like never before. I’d never be able to eat at a restaurant or shop in this town again.”

“I have my reasons.”

The detective groaned and pushed back from his desk. “There’s just no way.”

The Mayor reached inside his suit jacket and pulled out four eight by ten photographs, dropping them on the desk.

“What’s this?” Pulling himself back to his desk, the detective and sheriff for this small town bent over and inspected the photographs, audibly gasping when he saw the lewd images of him with children. “This is an outrage! They’re doctored!”

“Maybe.”

“There’s no ‘maybe’ about it. You can’t possibly think—”

“No. I don’t.” The Mayor smirked. “But the rest of the community might not be so easily convinced.”

The detective flipped the photographs over. His expression turned from shock to anger. “Where did you get these?”

“That’s not important.”

“The hell it’s not.”

The Mayor massaged the back of his neck. When he told Mr. Wolfe he’d handle things, he never imagined he’d do something to this extreme and his intention wasn’t to help Mr. Wolfe escape the charges against him. He only wanted to find the other men who raped his little girl and make sure they paid for their crime, but things grew substantially more complicated after Mr. Chase called.

“You’re blackmailing me,” the detective said.

Mayor Stewart gave him a sidelong look. “Absolutely.”

“I could be wearing a wire.”

“If you were . . .” He laughed. “You wouldn’t look like you were about to faint.”

“He killed a young man in his prime. At least tell me why you want the perp to walk.”

“Are you dropping the charges or not?”

“You got to give me something,” Detective Felton said. “Anything so I can sleep at night.”

“I wish I could.”

Rocking back in his chair, he shook his head. “I’ll take my chances. I’ll have the pictures reviewed by an expert, prove my innocence.”

The Mayor leaned over the desk, his voice deep. “Even if you did, you honestly think your life would ever be the same? There will be those who will always have their doubts.” He leaned back. “Always.”

Mayor Stewart rose and wandered to the ivory painted wall behind him where a dozen framed pictures were hung. “Mr. Chase called me.” Scanning the pictures, he said, “He expressed concern over Mr. Wolfe’s situation, all but threatened to take Chase Industries elsewhere if Mr. Wolfe didn’t walk. Half the town would be out of a job, not to mention the tax revenue we’d lose. You must understand the position that puts me in.”

Detective Felton slammed his palms on the desk and stood. "This is crazy." He wandered to the picture window behind his desk. Absently, he peered out. "Why does Mr. Chase want this guy to walk?"

"I have no idea."

A picture of a little girl dressed in a Mickey Mouse costume caught Mayor Stewart's attention. Four Halloweens in a row Maggie dressed as Cinderella. "Is this your daughter?"

The detective turned from the window and smiled. "That's my granddaughter. It was taken last year."

"She's beautiful."

"Thank you."

"What would you do to somebody who hurt her?"

The detective's eyes squinted with disapproval. "Are you threatening me?"

The Mayor couldn't refrain a smile. "Not at all. I can't believe you just asked me that." He walked back to the chair and sat. "Steven Walker hurt my family. I can't give specifics and I can't prove it, but if it helps you sleep at night then know he wasn't innocent in all this."

The detective stared into the corner of his office. "This goes against every oath I've ever taken. You're asking me to sell my soul."

"To protect and serve. That's your job. Steven Walker's crime went unpunished and I can't let the man who did to him, what I'd have done had I known, go to prison for the rest of his life, better yet get the death penalty."

"And I can't condone vigilantism."

The Mayor's lips tightened into a thin line, his eyes narrowed. "Let me put it another way. If you don't help me, these photographs will seem like a playful tap on the chin. But I'm prepared to drop a piano on your head, if I have to." He rose from his chair. "If Cameron Wolfe doesn't walk, these photographs will be the least of your worries." He tugged at his suit jacket. The Mayor slammed the door as he left.

I Love Her

CAM'S PHONE RANG. "Yup."

"It's Mayor Stewart."

"Yup."

"The charges have been dropped."

"How?"

"Steven Walker was pumped with enough Cocaine to kill a dinosaur. That was the cause of death."

Cam glanced at his grandfather sleeping in the recliner. "I don't think Steven was high. I don't even think he was drunk."

"Mr. Wolfe. Just go with it."

"Did you have something to do with this?" Cam asked.

"All you need to know is that you're a free man. As far as the particulars on why you're a free man is something I have no intention of sharing with you."

"I don't know what to say."

"You could say that you're not going to touch the other three, if we ever find out who they are. You could say you're going to let me handle this from here on out, handle it with lawyers and judges, not fists."

Clearing his throat, Cam plunked on the sofa.

The Mayor tapped the receiving end of his phone. "Hello. Is this thing on?"

"I can't promise I won't put a hurt on them."

Mayor Stewart grunted. "You're honest, if nothing else."

"It wasn't my intention to kill Steven. I just wanted to make sure he'd stay away from Maggie but when he marched up to her that night like he was her best friend . . . the thought of him being on this side of the state with her is bad enough, but to know he could be so close . . ." Cam sighed. "I lost it."

"That's why I'm worried about you putting a hurt on somebody else. And whether it was your intention or not, a twenty-five-year-old man is dead because of you."

"I don't know what to say."

"You could say that you at least regret it."

Closing his eyes, Cam leaned his head back on the sofa. "I can't say that."

"More honesty?"

“Yup.”

“Since you’re being so forthcoming, let me ask you what your relationship with my daughter is.”

“I’m in love with her.”

“Does she feel the same?” The Mayor tapped the receiver. “Hello . . . Is this thing on?”

“No.”

“I see.”

“I don’t want to kill anyone else,” Cam said. “That’s the best I can give you.”

“I guess it’ll have to do. But know this, if you do, I won’t help you.”

“I understand,” Cam said.

“For what it’s worth, I probably would’ve done the same thing, had I known. Maybe not kill him, but as you say, put a hurt on him for sure.”

“It’s worth a lot.”

Chapter Twenty-six

Roses

JAGS SPOTTED Star at the far end of the company cafeteria. Her face was swollen and pink. She'd obviously been crying. Maybe his vision had come to pass. He should mind his own business but he was never good at following the rules of social etiquette. Shrugging, he approached her. Before he could say anything, she looked up and said, "So not in the mood."

Jags sat across from her. "How about a truce?"

"Is that your attempt at an apology?"

"I've nothing to apologize for. I just thought we could be adults and stop making faces at each other as we pass in the hallways."

"Please go away."

When she glanced to her left, Jag followed her gaze. Tye was walking toward them holding a vase of red roses.

"Please go," she said.

With a grimace, Jags smacked his palms on the table and walked away. Waiting in line for the salad bar, he couldn't refrain from looking her way. The roses were set on the table. Star and *none of your business* were hugging. He sighed. They deserved each other.

Dr. McKendrick

TILLY KNOCKED ON Nate's open door and walked in. "Busy?"

He looked up. "Were we supposed to have lunch?"

"Do I need a reason to visit my husband at work?"

Nate circled his desk with his arms wide. He pulled her against him and kissed her. "Of course, not." He glanced at his watch. "It's almost noon." He walked around his desk and sat. "I haven't eaten. Would you like to have lunch?" He turned his focus back to his laptop. "Just give me a minute to finish this up."

Tilly followed her husband around the desk and leaned back with her palms braced on the desk. "I *should* keep my strength up."

With a scowl, he popped to his feet and gripped her shoulders. "Are you ill?"

"I'll is probably not the right word."

"Stop playing games and tell me what the hell is going on."

Tilly held out a hand, palm up. "Pink." She held her other hand out, palm up. "Or blue? Which do you prefer?"

The anger in his eyes softened, replaced by tenderness. Nate pressed his open hand against her abdomen. "Are you telling me you're having my baby?"

"Actually, it's a toss-up. I'm fairly sure it's yours or could be the UPS guy's."

He flipped open a finger. "One. No screwing UPS delivery men."

She pressed her lips against his and smiled. "And two?"

Nate scooped her up, placed her on the desk and kissed her. "I love you." He pressed his forehead against hers. "Do you have any idea how happy you make me?"

She gave him a mischievous smile. "Maybe."

"I would love to have a little Tilly. She'd be beautiful just like her mom."

"One Tilly isn't enough for you. You need another one?"

"Baby." He slid her off the desk and walked her to the door. He peeked out of his office, all while keeping her locked in his arms, as if she might run away. "Shelly. I need ten minutes."

"Yes, Dr. McKendrick."

Nate kicked the door shut and locked it. They stumbled backwards toward the desk.

"One Tilly is more than enough." He unsnapped his pants with one hand and slid his fingers through her hair with the other. "I can't get enough of you."

Tilly hopped up on the edge of his desk. "Dr. McKendrick? Do you want to make love to your wife?"

Struggling with the snap of her pants, he growled, "Maybe."

Chapter Twenty-seven

Christmas Party

The sun's light shined bright in the elegant dining room of the Northgate Country Club, a private establishment in Houston with a twenty-seven-hole golf course, eight tennis courts, three swimming pools and five restaurants.

Her father sawed a piece of pork off the bone, stabbed it with his fork and brought it to his mouth. He chanced a quick look at his daughter who was stirring the salad in her bowl. "Mr. Wolfe," he slid a cloth napkin from his lap and wiped his mouth. "Your friend. The charges have been dropped."

Maggie gasped. "That's impossible."

"There was a time when my little girl thought there was nothing I couldn't do." He smiled and brought another piece of pork to his mouth. "When exactly did I lose my Super Dad ranking?"

"Why would you help him? What were your words, something like cold-blooded murderer, yada, yada, yada?"

"Why Daddy . . ." He spoke in a high-pitch mocking tone. "Thank you so much for saving my friend, something I asked you to do. You're the best. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you." His tone returned to normal. "Why you're so welcome, dear. Anything for you." He stabbed at the asparagus on his plate and bit it in half.

She scowled. "Did you talk to Cam? Did he tell you anything?"

He wiped his mouth with his napkin. "Tell me anything? I'm sure I don't know what you mean. Do you need more lemon for your salad?"

"He promised." Tears welled in her eyes.

Gripping her hand, his teasing grin softened. "Mr. Wolfe told me nothing."

"Then why do you like him now?"

"I never said I liked him. The man's got a lot of growing up to do."

"So you did talk to him."

From the wicker basket in the center of the table he picked up a buttered croissant. "I don't suppose I could get you to eat this? I understand your desire to be thin—I really do—but lately you've been looking

pale. Pale might not be the right word, sickly is probably the word I'm looking for. And you look like you've lost weight which I didn't think was even possible."

She chucked her fork at the table. "Tell me what you and he talked about."

An older gentleman approached, his hair bleach white and his round belly strained the thread that held the buttons to his peach button-down shirt. "Mayor Stewart." The man stretched out his hand.

Her father stood and shook the man's hand. "Mr. Walker. Let me say again how sorry I am about your son."

Mr. Walker nodded. "We're considering filing a civil suit."

Mayor Stewart tugged at his suit coat. "That's certainly within your right but let me offer you some free advice. As an experienced attorney, I can tell you that'd be a waste of money and time."

"My son didn't do drugs. I'm sure of it."

Mayor Stewart shook his head. "That's not what the autopsy report showed."

"I don't give a damn what that report showed."

"The jury will give a damn. I've been an attorney for thirty-five years. I know what I'm talking about. How are Mrs. Walker and Henry holding up?"

"Good as can be expected."

"It's only been three weeks. It's going to take some time." Her father motioned toward the four empty seats at their round table. "Have a seat. Join us."

Maggie eyed her father, her suspicion that Cam revealed her secret fading. If her father knew what Mr. Walker's son did to her, he surely wouldn't invite him to dine with them.

"My wife's here," Mr. Walker said. "I need to get back to her. I saw you and just wanted to say a quick hello."

"I appreciate that. The annual Christmas party invitations have just been sent out. You should be getting yours in a day or two."

Mr. Walker gave the Mayor a small smile. "Your wife throws the best parties. We are looking forward to it. Under the circumstances, it may be just what we need."

"A little fun can go a long way," her father agreed.

Mr. Walker nodded at Maggie then at her father. As he walked away, her father looked at her, his head cocked and one brow raised. "You okay?"

Maggie pushed back from the table. She moved to stand behind him. Gripping his shoulders, she tucked her head beside his and kissed him on the cheek. "Thank you for helping Cam."

Her father brought her hand to his lips and kissed her palm. "I love you."

She sat down in her chair. "Yeah. Yeah. Don't get all mushy on me." She stabbed at her lettuce.

He smiled. "Wouldn't dream of it."

“L” Word

When Maggie finished lunch with her father she walked to tennis court number five. Star had already arrived and unpacked her racket from her duffel bag.

“It’s December,” Star said. “Why is it still so hot out? Feels like ninety.”

“It’s the humidity. Want to cancel our game?”

“Let’s try it.” Star tossed Maggie a ball. “You serve first.”

The yellow ball sailed over the net.

...

Temperatures rose as the day progressed.

...

Sweat dripped down Maggie’s forehead.

...

Tightening her ponytail, she glanced at her watch. They had only been playing for twenty minutes.

Star moved her hands to her hips and hung her head, wheezing like a sleazy crank caller.

“You’re rock star today,” Maggie said, wheezing her own version of a crank caller, from across the court.

“You think?” With the back of her hand, Star wiped the sweat from her forehead

“Maybe I’m just having an off day,” Maggie said. When Star laughed, Maggie glared at her. “What?”

“You almost gave me a compliment. You’re definitely having an off day.”

“Ha. Ha.”

Star threw the ball in the air. “40 — 30”.

The ball sailed over Maggie’s head and landed out of bounds. She retrieved the ball and tossed it back at Star.

Star tossed the ball up. “Game point.” She struck the ball with a textbook forehand stroke.

Maggie missed.

As they shook, she said, “You threw the game.”

“I’m fricken’ hot,” Maggie said.

“I hear you.”

“Let’s get cleaned up.”

Star slung her gym bag over her shoulder. "Sounds good to me."

"You going out with Tye tonight?"

"He's supposed to call but he might have to work late." They walked for a moment in silence. "What do you think of Jags?"

Maggie's hands flew up. "Whoa!"

"What?"

"You're hot for him."

"Just because I asked about him doesn't mean I'm hot for him. That's your style. Not mine. I'm marrying Tye. And you couldn't be more wrong. He hates me and I hate him."

"Then why did you ask about him?"

"It bothers me that he doesn't like me. He seems to love everybody but me." Star gave Maggie a curious glance. "And he thinks I'm boring."

Maggie gasped. "No!"

"Can you believe it?"

Her hand covered her heart. "I can't."

Star scoffed. "Cool the sarcasm."

Maggie wrapped her arm around her friend's shoulder. "I'm sorry. You're not boring. Not at all."

Star stopped walking and eyed Maggie as if a purple tree just sprouted from the top of her head. "You just apologized to me."

"What of it?"

"You've never done that before."

Maggie waved her friend forward. "Don't get used to it."

Apologies and proclamations of love just wasn't something Maggie was good at. Made her feel weak. Her thoughts drifted to the day she told Cam they could only be friends, the day he walked away from her. She opened the door to the exclusive Country Club and held it open for Star. "I'm so stupid."

"I'll play along. Why are you so stupid?"

They descended the stairs toward the women's locker room. "Cam told me he loved me."

"That's usually a good thing."

Maggie shrugged.

Star stepped in front of Maggie, blocking her path. "You never said it back?"

Maggie closed her eyes.

“Did you?”

Maggie stepped around Star. “I know. I know. Please don’t say what you’re thinking.”

Star fell in stride beside her. “I was just thinking that you need to tell him.”

“I know.”

Star opened the door to the locker room. A swirl of perfume, hairspray and steam saturated the air.

“You’ve never said the ‘L’ word. Have you?”

Maggie shoved past her.

Star squealed and clapped her hands together. “He’s your first!”

“Shut up.”

“You’re a love virgin!”

Maggie smiled. “I suppose I am.” She punched in a four-digit code into the padlock, opened her locker and pulled out a green duffel bag. “I forgot shampoo. Can I borrow yours?”

“You really think I’m boring?”

“You’re sweet and loving and the best friend a girl could ask for.”

“In other words, boring.”

Maggie tapped her forehead against the cold metal of the locker. “If it wasn’t for you.”

Star slipped the black band from her hair and let her pony-tail fall flat. “Don’t go there.”

If Star and Tilly hadn’t been out walking their dog that morning, Maggie—barely conscious and covered in blood—might have bled to death. She lay motionless in the high school parking lot, curled in the fetal position.

Star wasn’t a nerd in school but she hadn’t hung with the popular kids.

And Maggie was very popular.

Before that day they hadn’t spoken more than a dozen words to each other. But after that day, well . . . the superficiality of everyday life felt . . . cartoonish. A gang rape had a way of keeping things real.

Maggie hugged Star. “I don’t deserve you.”

“And that’s the problem between you and Cam.” Star pulled from the hug to look at her. “You don’t think you deserve him either.”

Maggie wiped at her tears.

“You’re one in a million,” Star said. “You were dealt a bad hand at a young age and you handled it selflessly and courageously. I’m just wondering if he deserves you.”

Maggie hugged her again, more tears fell.

Star frowned. "I've never seen you like this."

"Like what?"

"Vulnerable."

Maggie wiped the remaining tears from her face, slung her duffel bag over her shoulder and walked toward the showers.

Star followed, whispered, "Go get him."

Maggie looked over her shoulder and smiled. "You're right."

"Maggie?"

"Yeah?"

"You're going to have to say the 'L' word."

Chapter Twenty-eight

Eric

Maggie walked into the large foyer of her home. The door closed behind her. The clang echoed throughout the vast home. Her parents sat huddled together in the living room. Tears streamed down her mother's face.

Maggie jogged toward them. "Mom? Dad?"

Her mother pulled back from her father, wiping tears from her eyes.

Maggie crouched in front of the leather sofa. "What is it?"

Her mother took Maggie's hand into her own icy hand. "Your brother and Shauna were killed in a car accident."

Eric, her brother, mentor and protector, was gone. Since the day he, his wife and their seven-year-old daughter Bree moved to Phoenix two years ago, Maggie had spoken with him every day.

Just a few hours ago, she'd confided in Eric that she thought she was in love. Eric had told her that he trusted her judgment and that he hoped to meet Cam someday soon.

Most of her friends and family thought she was reckless but not Eric. He had always told her how smart she was and that one day she'd figure things out.

A chill swept through Maggie. She covered her face and burst into tears. The person she loved most in this world, more than her parents or Tilly or Star, was dead.

Maggie's hands slid down her face. She sucked in a breath. "What about Bree?"

"She's okay," her mother said. "Her collar bone was fractured but it should heal on its own. There's nothing more they can do for it."

"Bree's in foster care," her father said.

Maggie popped to her feet. "What!"

"Your mother and I are booked on the next plane to Phoenix."

Maggie sprinted for the spiral staircase. "I'm going to pack. I'm coming with you."

Her father dialed on his cell. "I'll see if I can get another ticket."

Don't Work Like That

With Star's pep talk fresh in her mind and her brother's last words of approval echoing in her head, Maggie had to talk to Cam before she left, otherwise, she might lose her nerve. This might be her last chance to fix things, if it wasn't already too late. She went to his house but didn't see his Expedition so she asked the limousine driver to take her to Copper Creek.

"I'll only be a few minutes," Maggie told the driver when he stopped in front of the restaurant.

The driver glanced back. "The plane leaves in three hours, Miss Stewart. We really should get going if you want to get to the airport on time."

A dozen or so cars were parked outside the restaurant. Maggie eased the front door of the restaurant open and peeked inside. Emerald green everywhere. She smiled.

Cam was at the far end of the dining room. He sat on top of a table, his booted feet dangling off the edge. A crowd of young adults, mostly girls, sat in chairs all around him.

Cam looked toward her then turned his attention back to the people surrounding him.

He'd seen her.

No turning back now. Maggie stood by the door, not sure if she should leave. She'd obviously interrupted some kind of meeting.

Cam hopped from the table and walked toward her. As he approached, his dark eyes met hers. Her breath caught in her throat. Her heart pounded in her chest. The same giddy feeling that tickled her insides for her third-grade crush had returned. Pathetic.

But Cam wasn't a crush.

A mixture of uncertainty and nerves fluttered in her stomach as he stopped before her.

"Restaurant looks great," she said.

"You think so?"

Maggie's eyes darted to the people behind him. "I'm interrupting. I'll go."

"I have a minute." Grabbing her elbow, Cam led her to a booth, waited for her to sit and sat across from her.

"I heard the charges against you were dropped."

"Yup." Leaning back, he stretched his arm along the back of the booth.

Maggie scanned the room. Stacks of green plates lined stainless steel shelves. A hunter green carpet patterned with crimson roses blanketed the floor. Various size pictures were hung around the room, pictures of Cam, Jags and Ajay. Hung by the entrance was a poster-sized black and white picture, a young man in a navy uniform standing on a cement platform, a US Navy ship behind him.

“Are you going to tell me why you’re here?” Cam asked.

She looked at him, took a breath and . . . *I love you*. Three simple words. Any second. You can do it.

“Now that the charges are dropped,” he said. “It’s okay to be seen with me?”

“I’m sorry.” Maggie covered her eyes with the heels of her hands. “For everything.”

“You came here to apologize?”

Maggie shook her head.

He let out an audible sigh. “I didn’t go to you. You came to me, so why am I the one doing all the talking? And what exactly are you sorry for? For being ashamed of me?”

Her hands slid from her face. “No!”

Cam peered over his shoulder, looking at the people growing restless at the far end of the room. Bringing his focus back on her, he laced his fingers behind his head and leaned back. “Remember the night we played pool? I asked you not to play games and you told me that I was the one playing games because you had made your feelings clear?”

Maggie nodded.

“The situation has reversed. I’ve made my feelings clear and now you’re the one playing games. Here’s the short of it. I killed Steven. I’d do it again.” Cam’s voice lowered to a chilling whisper. “Do you really want to be with a killer?”

Maggie opened her mouth to respond. He held up a hand and folded his fingers to his thumb. “I’m not done. My future is uncertain. If I find out who the others are, I’ll not hesitate to fuck them over.” He arched his brows. “Have you heard everything I’ve said so far?”

Maggie nodded.

“Life with me will not be easy,” Cam said. “I’m not right in the head which I’m sure you’ve figured out by now. There’s a good chance that I’ll screw both our lives up. This is me not playing games, laying it all out there. Now tell me why you’re here.”

He sure wasn't making this easy. “I’m going to Phoenix.”

Cam laughed. “I just poured my soul out to you and your response is to tell me that you’re leaving the state?” He shrugged. “Vacation?”

“Not exactly.”

“When will you be back?”

Her phone vibrated.

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Cam inclined his chin toward her purse. “You going to answer that?”

“Shit.” She dug her phone out, read the screen and put the phone to her ear. “Hi, Dad.”

“You should be here by now,” her father bellowed. “I called the driver. He said you’re at Copper Creek.

Are you coming or not?”

Cam cocked his head as if he could hear both sides of the conversation.

“Yes,” she said. “I’m leaving right now.”

“If you miss the plane, you’re on your own. I don’t have the patience for your games today.”

“Got it.” She hung up.

“Breaking my heart once wasn’t enough for you?”

“That’s not it.”

Cam stood. “You need an ego boost, honey. Here it is. I still love you and probably always will. Does that do it for you?”

Maggie’s lips parted but the words escaped her. She stood and looked up at him. Her eyes shifted to his mouth. She leaned in, her mouth close to his.

“I told you, I don’t work like that.” Cam strode toward the double swinging doors. He punched them open and disappeared to the back of the restaurant.

And she let him go.

Bree

Maggie and her parents landed in Phoenix. They rented a car and drove to the address of the people 'caring' for her niece.

Maggie dashed from the car and knocked on the duplex door. Just as her parents caught up to her, a man opened the door. His long black bangs were pulled back with an elastic band.

Maggie shot him a menacing look and shoved past him. "Bree!"

Four children ran in from the next room. They all appeared to be the same age as Bree. Her niece rounded the corner. Maggie dropped to her knees with her arms spread wide.

Bree slammed into her. Maggie fell backward onto her butt. They hugged. Bree's quarter-size ringlets brushed across Maggie's cheek. Palming the back of her niece's head, Maggie squeezed her tighter.

"Did that man touch you?" Maggie whispered.

Bree shook her head. "Where's Mommy and Daddy? Why do I have to live here?"

Maggie ran the back of her hand down Bree's cheek. "I'm going to take care of you." Scooping Bree up, Maggie strode toward the door.

A woman with dark hair cut in a chin-length bob stepped in front of her. "You can't just barge in here and take a child from this house."

"Watch me."

Her father pulled a stack of papers from the inside of his suit coat. "I have the paperwork you need," he said to the woman. "Go Maggie. I'll handle this."

Maggie jogged to the mid-size sedan they'd rented, put Bree in the back and climbed in beside her.

Bree climbed over Maggie and sat across her lap. "We were in a car accident."

"I know. How's your neck?"

"It only hurts a little. Where's Mommy and Daddy?"

"We'll talk about that later."

"I was so scared. The policeman had a gun,"

Maggie cupped Bree's chin. "The policemen are the good guys. Don't be afraid of them."

"Can I go home now?"

Maggie hugged her niece. "Yes."

Texas!

They drove to the hospital and retrieved Eric and Shauna's personal belongings. Nearing her brother's house, Maggie pointed out the window. "Recognize that place?"

"That's where I live," Bree said, an edge of excitement in her voice.

"That's right."

When they opened the door to the two-story home, Bree ran to the kitchen and pulled a paper plate from the front of the refrigerator. Thin strips of orange paper protruded all around the plate. A lion's face was drawn in the middle.

Bree held it out for her grandfather.

He scooped her up. "This for me?"

"Ah huh."

"I know just where I'll put it."

"Where?" Bree asked.

"On the wall in my office."

She wiggled and writhed in his arms.

When he lowered her to her feet, she took his hand and pulled him toward the kitchen. "Come see what I made for Mommy?"

He scooped her up, placed her on the couch and sat beside her. "There's something we need to talk about."

"Dad," Maggie said. "Do we have to do this right now?"

"Waiting a few hours or even a day or two is not going to change anything. She deserves to know. You can either stay or you can leave if it's too difficult, but I'm doing this now."

Maggie's mother, Janet, sat on the other side of Bree and took her hand. Janet's hair was the same shade as Maggie's but cut short in a boyish but still feminine style.

"It's about Mommy and Daddy," Janet said. "They were hurt real bad in the accident." She pulled her granddaughter across her lap. "And because they were hurt so bad, God decided to take them home." Janet gave her granddaughter a warm smile. "They live in heaven now."

"They're not coming home?" Bree asked.

Maggie's mother shook her head. "No."

“Never?”

“They can’t come back. But I know they would if they could. They love you very much and I’m sure they’re watching over us right now.”

“Can I talk to them?”

“Nobody is sure if people in heaven can hear us or not, but I believe they can.”

Bree leaned against her grandmother. “I don’t want them to live in heaven.”

Janet stroked Bree’s curly hair. “I don’t either.”

The Mayor pulled his granddaughter back across his lap. “You’re going to come live with us in Texas.”

Her tiny body stiffened with resolve. “Do I have to?”

The Mayor nodded. “I’m afraid so.”

Bree jumped off his lap. “What if Mommy and Daddy come back? They won’t know where I am?”

“They’re not coming back.”

She jumped in place. “I hate Texas! I don’t want to go. Please don’t make me.”

Maggie knelt before her and wiped the tears from Bree’s face. “You don’t have to go.”

“Maggie,” the Mayor scolded.

“I’ll stay with her.”

“Do you have any idea what you’re saying?”

“It’s bad enough she lost Eric and Shauna but to rip her from the only home she’s known is too much to ask. In a few months, she may be more open to the idea. She just needs a little time and time is something we both know I have plenty of.”

He gazed thoughtfully at her. “Are you sure you’re up for this? It’s a big responsibility.”

“Let me do this one last thing for Eric. Besides, you need someone here to tie up loose ends, right? I could help with that. Aren’t you going to sell the house?”

The Mayor grimaced. “Yes, I suppose so.”

“I could go through everything and decide what we want to keep and what to give away.”

“You’re sure you want to do this?”

“Never been more sure of anything in my life.”

Maggie’s father heaved a dramatic sigh. “Why do I have a feeling this is going to come back to bite me in the ass?”

“Watch your language,” Maggie said, a gleam in her eye. “There’s a child in the room.”

Bree jumped into the Mayor’s lap. “Please Papa.”

He scowled. "She has that same look in her eye that you get when you want something from me."

Maggie pushed her cheek against Bree's. "We are family."

He wagged his finger. "Check in weekly to let me know how things are going and I'm reserving the right to change my mind at any time, and with no advance warning."

"Okay."

The Mayor hugged Bree. "I love you."

Maggie whispered in Bree's ear.

Bree looked at him, a devilish grin on her face. "Yeah. Yeah. Don't get all mushy on me."

A tear fell from his eye. He hugged her tighter and shot Maggie a playful yet heated glance. "Wouldn't dream of it."

Chapter Twenty-nine

Mom

Maggie's parents stayed a week and helped her learn Bree's routine. Together they found Bree's school and introduced themselves to her teachers. They visited the studio where Bree took ballet lessons so they could figure out what days and times she attended.

They went shopping and bought a few gifts for each other so they could celebrate Christmas together, since Christmas was only a few weeks away.

Shauna's minivan was totaled in the accident so Maggie had to use Eric's Toyota pickup, only she didn't know how to drive a standard. Every day that week her father took her to an empty parking lot where she practiced driving. On the first day her father teased that he should probably replace the transmission before he left. By the end of the week, she'd greatly improved her standard driving skills but not mastered it.

Her parents were scheduled to fly home hours after the funeral.

As Maggie drove her parents from her brother's grave site and to the airport, she had no regrets about her decision to stay in Phoenix, but as she waved goodbye, her stomach churned with apprehension. She could barely take care of herself and now she was responsible for a seven-year-old, a little girl that was the very heart of her beloved brother and his wife. She couldn't screw this up.

She wouldn't screw this up.

From the driver's seat, Maggie waved goodbye and drove away from the airport curb.

"Aunt Maggie," Bree said.

"Yes, honey."

"Thursday is Breakfast with Dad day. Santa's coming too."

"What's Breakfast with Dad?"

"It's the day that daddies are supposed to come to school and have breakfast. Mrs. Perkins said that if somebody's daddy can't make it then mommy could come instead."

"I'll come have breakfast with you." Maggie steered toward the on-ramp.

"But you're not my mommy."

Maggie put her blinker on and merged into traffic. "No. I'm not."

“So you can’t come.”

“I’m sure Mrs. Perkins wouldn’t mind if I came in place of your mommy.” Some jerk cut her off. Maggie slammed on the brake. “Shit.”

“You said a bad word.”

“Yes, I did.” Maggie glanced in the rear view mirror at her niece. “Don’t ever say that word.”

“I’m going to be the only one there without a mommy or daddy.”

Maggie glanced again at her rear view mirror then at her side mirror, trying to give Bree the impression she was busy driving and that was why she hadn’t responded.

Bree spoke before any words of wisdom crossed Maggie’s mind.

“Could we pretend that you’re my mommy? I don’t want all my friends knowing that I don’t have a mommy or a daddy.”

“Don’t they know what your mommy looks like?”

“A few, but there’s lots that don’t.”

The idea that Bree wanted Maggie to pretend to be her mommy sent shivers down her spine. She wasn’t the mothering type and doubted she ever would be. Bree deserved so much better. Maggie shot her niece a glance in the rear view mirror. “If that’s what you want, I’d be happy to pretend to be your mommy.” She veered toward the off-ramp. “We have to make a quick stop.”

Maggie drove to a mall where she spent the next two hours picking out new clothes. If she was going to be a mother then she should dress the part.

Two hours later, she found herself scowling at a pair of black slacks. “Do you like these?” she asked Bree.

“Are we almost done?” Bree asked. “I’m hungry.”

Maggie chucked the pants into the already full cart. Hopefully, with time, these clothes would grow on her, but right now, she wanted to stick her finger down her throat and vomit all over them. Boring! How could women stomach clothes like these? She scooped the clothes onto the counter.

The cashier began removing the clothes from their hangers. “Did you find everything you were looking for?”

“Unfortunately.”

Carina

The front door of Copper Creek opened. Cam looked up. A woman with long dark hair smiled and walked toward him.

He blinked. "Carina?"

"It's been a while."

Try almost twenty years. He could hardly believe his eyes. She was as beautiful as he remembered. "Yup."

"Got a minute?"

With a tilt of his head, Cam gestured to a booth. "Have a seat." He waited for her to sit and sat across from her. "How's your dad?"

"He passed three years ago. Heart attack. I'm here about the front-of-the-house manager position."

His mind in a fog, reeling from the news that Mr. Moretti had passed, Cam stared at the tabletop. "I can't believe you're here." He looked at her. "When did you move back?"

"Just a few days ago." She grasped his hand. "I understand if you hate me."

"I don't hate you," he said. "Not even close."

Carina panned the restaurant. "My dad would've loved this."

Cam flipped open a menu and pointed.

"Spicy chicken and sausage casserole?" Her face glowed with pride. "Is it his recipe?"

"I know it by heart. I make it all the time for Jags." He squeezed her hand. "Your father was a great man. I hate that I hurt him."

Carina squeezed back. "We hurt him."

Cam took his hand back. "Want something to drink?"

"Water would be great."

He returned with her water and slid into the booth. "So you want a job?"

For the first time in weeks, ever since Maggie left Texas, he didn't feel so alone. Carina's friendly face was a welcome reprieve from the hateful words and glances he got all over town.

"Yes," Carina said

"It doesn't pay much."

"I don't need much."

“Experience?” Cam asked.

“Dad opened a new restaurant south of Boston. I worked there most of my adult life.”

“You have a problem working fifty plus hours a week?”

“No.”

“How flexible are you?” Cam asked. “Can you work weekends and nights?”

“The more hours the better. I need the distraction.”

He considered her for a moment. “Why did you come back after all this time?”

She grimaced. “My husband and I just got a divorce. He has a life in Boston but I don’t. The only family I have left is my sister and she lives here.”

Cam leaned back, his hands on his thighs. “Ever been arrested? Do you have a record?”

“No and no.”

With his hand stretched across the table, he said, “Welcome aboard.”

“Really?”

“If it wasn’t for your father, I wouldn’t be here right now. The least I could do is offer his daughter a job.” He glanced at his own outstretched hand.

Carina’s hand shot out with enthusiasm. “Do you have any other positions open?”

“I still need a few line cooks.”

“I was thinking more along the lines of bus boy,” Carina said.

“The wait staff is responsible for bussing their own tables. Why?”

“Jake. My son. He needs a job.”

Cam smiled. “He’d have to talk to my front-of-the-house manager.”

Carina stared into her glass of water. “I’m just not sure he’s responsible enough to be a line cook.”

“How old is he?”

“He’ll be eighteen next month.”

Cam shrugged. “It’s up to you but I think you should give him a chance.” His eyes narrowed. “Your son is seventeen?”

Carina shook her head. “He’s not yours.”

Cam raised a brow.

“On the memory of my father, I swear to you that Jake is not yours.”

He nodded. “Just the same, I’d like to meet him.”

“I’ll get him. He’s in the car.”

Carina returned with her son, a tall, rail-thin boy with short caramel unkempt hair.

Cam took a deep breath. The boy reeked of Marijuana.

“Jake,” Cam said.

When Jake rolled his bloodshot eyes, Cam laughed. The kid was a punk and he so looked forward to getting to know him better. Was it that long ago that he was just like this kid with a truck full of attitude balanced on his shoulders?

Cam showed Jake around. He put him to work unpacking dry goods in one of the back rooms. Then he sat Carina down and explained the trouble he’d been in and his doubts as to the success of the restaurant.

He might have beat the charges but many people suspected foul play, actually from the stares he got all around town, he’d guess most people suspected foul play. The likelihood of them giving their patronage to a murderer who escaped prosecution was slim.

Carina didn’t seem bothered by the high chance of failure or with Cam’s questionable recent past. They talked for a while longer and reminisced over the past. Then she asked him to put her to work.

They worked until dark, split a pizza and laughed at Jake’s obvious disgruntlement. Several times, Jake expressed his desire to leave, but Carina remained firm and explained they needed the money.

As they finished the last of the pizza, Carina asked Jake to label the shelves where he stacked the dry goods.

“I’m outta here.” Jake pushed back from the table.

Cam grabbed him by the scruff of his shirt, slammed his back against the wall and blew pepperoni-flavored breath at his face. “Your mother asked you to do something. I guess you didn’t hear her.” He placed the boy back on his feet and pointed. “Dry storage is that way.”

Yup. He definitely looked forward to getting to know this boy a lot better.

Get Real

Copper Creek had been open a week. The first three days only six people crossed Copper Creek's threshold.

On the fourth, both Zeke Chase and Mayor Stewart went to Copper Creek to dine. The press was frenzied. The man who ran the town and the man who owned the town had shown their support. Word spread and by the end of the week, the head count grew to a hundred.

Things were going well for Cam and Jags couldn't be happier. Well, one thing could make him happier, but he promised not to interfere between his brother and Maggie and he intended to keep that promise. After all, the last time he tried, things hadn't gone well.

He'd managed to convince Cam to go for a drink after Copper Creek closed for the evening. The bar was crowded tonight. After a couple drinks, Jags headed for the bathroom.

He snaked his way through the herd of cowboys, drunks and sluts, following the sound of a familiar voice until he found Tilly and Star sitting at a small round table, two iced teas before them.

Tilly slid from the stool. Jags scooped her up and twirled her. A vision played in his mind.

Tilly looked at him. "What's wrong?"

Jags kissed her on the cheek. "Nothing." He tapped playfully on Star's hand. "How goes the wedding plans?"

"You just can't help yourself. Can you?" Star nudged Tilly. "Nate's here."

"Another man who can't help himself," Tilly said.

Jags watched Tilly walk away then turned toward Star. "I wasn't trying to be a wise ass. I was just trying to make conversation." He put his hand over hers. "Everything okay? You look kind of down."

Her hands covered her face. Jag tugged at her hands but Star held them firm.

Jags let out a small laugh. "Star."

"Go away," she whimpered.

"Look at me."

Star shook her head.

"I know about Tye and Linda."

Her hands slid down her face. "How?" She gasped. "Does everybody know?"

"No. No. It's not like that."

“Well, then how do you know?”

Jags took her hand in his. “What can I do?”

Rolling her eyes, Star wrenched her hand from his grasp. “I don’t want your help.”

“You’re going to stay with him. Aren’t you?”

“Not that it’s any of your business, but yes. We’ve been—”

“Together for five years. Yeah, I know.” He shook his head. “You’ve wasted five years so what’s another fifty? Do you have an ounce of self-respect?”

“I have enough self-respect to stay away from people like you, who just make me feel worse about myself.”

Jags smirked. “Because Tye makes you feel great about yourself.” He raised a brow. “How’s that working for you?” He narrowed questioning eyes at her. “How old are you?”

She looked away.

“I’m going to guess somewhere around twenty-two which means you’ve been with Tye since you were what . . . seventeen or thereabouts. Am I warm?”

Star looked at him.

He mourned for people like her, who simply endured life, forsaking the opportunity to bleed it of every challenge, adventure and risk life had to offer.

Like gravity, her beautiful pouty face drew him in. He took her face in his hands and kissed her. With barely a touch, he nipped, slipping his tongue inside her mouth.

And Star didn't slap him.

“I’m sorry about what he did to you.” When he kissed her again, Star’s posture stiffened. With his hands framing her face, he said, “You make me crazy. When I don’t want to shake you, I want to eat you alive. Please tell me you feel even some of what I’m feeling.”

Star pushed on his chest. “I can’t do this. I’m not going to throw away five years.”

“You mean he’s safe, routine, and comfortable?” Jags leaned in to kiss her, and she let him. “Do I feel safe, routine, comfortable?” He glanced down and noticed her fingers gripping her stool.

His lazy, tender and lingering kisses were not unlike his love making, a realization he hoped she grasped and would someday experience for herself. When her tongue explored his mouth, his desire rocketed. With his hands splayed on either side of her head, he braced her for a harder, wilder kiss. “Safe isn’t always best.” His smile pressed against her lips. “Sometimes you just need to take a chance.”

Star took a breath. “And lose the man I’ve loved for five years.”

“Do you want a roommate or a lover?”

“Both.”

“Not me. I want a lover, somebody who makes me burn, somebody who still takes my breath away even in the retirement home, somebody to grope in a crowded restaurant because I can’t stand another second without touching her. A woman that makes me hard with her smile. When *none of your business* smiles, does it make you wet?”

Grunting, she pushed him away.

Jags stumbled backwards. He scrunched his long hair in his hands. “I can’t stand people like you. I’m out of here.”

“You can’t stand people like me?” Star asked. “And what kind of people would that be?”

“Fake people. I can’t stand fake people. You want me and we both know it. You can’t even be true to yourself.” He tapped a waitress on the shoulder. “Excuse me. Do you have a pen?” He took the offered pen and wrote on Star’s naked wrist. “That’s my number. Call me when you want to get real.”

No Secrets

Tilly threw herself into Nate's arms.

"What's wrong?"

"Will you take us home?"

"Of course." Nate kissed her. "I wasn't expecting this reaction."

"It's just that . . . Star's not having a good—"

"What the hell." Nate started toward Star and Jags. "Jags is kissing Star. No. I take that back. I think he's trying to swallow her whole."

Tilly latched onto his wrist. "Don't."

"Are you crazy? I'm not going let Jags seduce—"

"Nate. Let it go."

He gripped her shoulders. "What aren't you telling me?"

She shrugged.

"We don't keep secrets," Nate said.

"It's not my secret to tell."

"She's getting married in a few months."

Tilly shook her head. "I'm not so sure about that."

He grimaced. "What did Tye do to her?"

Tilly smirked.

"That son of a bitch!" Nate roared. "I'll tear him up!" He stalked toward Star.

Sighing, Tilly leaned against the door jamb and waited.

Get Real

When Nate reached Star, Jags had already left. He seized her hand and pulled her toward the door. “I want to know what that asshole did to you. And don’t give me a story either, because Tilly all but admitted Tye was a sleaze, so I want the truth.”

Star let herself be dragged through the bar by her sister’s overprotective husband. When she met Tilly’s apologetic smile, her sister shrugged pantomiming ‘sorry’. But Star was too tired and confused to be angry.

Kissing Jags had turned her mind to cotton but all new relationships had that bubbly giddy feeling in the beginning. Her relationship with Tye was matured. This was their rough patch and they’d get through it.

Call me when you want to get real.

Chapter Thirty

Pleeeeeease!

For the past two months, Maggie performed the part of mommy with gusto. She didn't much like the clothes but tolerated them nonetheless.

She didn't know how to cook and had no interest in learning, since she wasn't much of an eater herself. Pop-Tarts were served in the morning, McDonalds served in the evening. A cheeseburger Happy Meal for Bree. A strawberry parfait for Maggie.

She cleaned house, did laundry, attended parent-teacher conferences and had actually started to like playing the part of mommy. Every weekend they went for a nature walk at Lyman State Park located a few miles from where they lived.

Maggie climbed from the truck, opened Bree's door and frowned when Bree reached for her Hello Kitty backpack. "Do you have to bring that?"

"What if I get hungry?"

"We just ate and we'll be back in less than two hours."

"Please."

The girl was a master manipulator. Bree made Maggie's tactics look amateurish. She supposed she was getting her comeuppance for everything she put her father through. "Fine," she said. "Whatever. Let's just go."

Run!

An hour into the hike, Bree stopped and screamed.

“What?” Maggie said.

Bree pointed. A large cat stood not ten feet from them. Maggie put a protective arm around Bree and took a step back. “We probably shouldn’t run. I read that somewhere once.”

The cat leapt at them. “Shit.” Maggie screamed. “Run!”

But Bree had already darted through the woods. Maggie ran and caught up with her. The cat pounced and together the three of them tumbled down a steep hill. The cat bit into Maggie’s shoulder while its back claw sunk into her leg. Maggie reached in her pocket and pulled out a can of pepper spray. “Bree! Close your eyes!”

She sprayed!

Cam Waited

Cam walked the hospital corridor. When he saw Mayor Stewart exit a room, he broke into a jog.

The Mayor held both hands up, palms out. "She's going to be okay."

Cam stopped before him. "Thanks for calling."

The Mayor nodded. "She just got out of surgery, but the doctors assured me she'd be okay. They're keeping her sedated a while longer, but she keeps waking up. And every time she does, she asks for either you or Bree."

"Surgery for what?"

"The animal left a six-inch gash, tore the muscles in both her quadriceps."

"But she's going to be okay?"

"Why don't you go see for yourself?" He smiled and waved his hand toward the door.

Cam entered her room and walked to the foot of the bed. A white bandage ran down her left cheek. Inch-wide gauze circled her right wrist. A maze of scratches covered both arms.

Mounds of white blankets covered her tiny body. She looked so damn pale.

He took a seat in a padded armchair parallel to the bed.

A monitor measured her pulse, EKG and blood pressure. The rhythmic ding it emitted calmed his nerves as much as it rattled them.

Maggie was hospitalized.

But she was alive.

She would be okay.

The door opened. A young girl with long curly hair stepped into the room. A pink rectangular gadget was in her hand. She looked at Maggie then at him. Her brows furrowed and her head tilted, a questioning look on her face, as if she was calculating a complex math problem.

Cam straightened. He'd never spent time around kids and had no desire to start now. Children were to be seen and not heard, an old adage he wholeheartedly agreed with.

She walked up to him. "Are you her friend?"

Cam sat in the oversized cushion chair. "No."

"You're funny." She crawled up his body and situated herself across his lap then opened the pink gadget.

A tiny screen displayed a purple, talking ball. Using a pen-like instrument, she bounced the ball up a green hill, down a slide then on top of an orange crate. The box exploded, wings sprouted from the purple blob and it took to the baby blue sky.

She offered him the pen. "Want to play?"

"No."

The monitor maintained its rhythmic beep.

...

...

The little girl slept.

...

...

And Cam waited.

...

...

Always

Maggie opened her eyes. A monitor with red and green jagged lines running horizontally across the screen beeped beside the bed. An IV bag hung from a tall pole. A clear tube ran from the bag to her hand.

Familiar voices entered her consciousness.

“Want to play thumb wars?” Bree asked in a sing-song tone.

“How do you play?” a deep voice responded.

Maggie jerked to a sitting position.

“Mommy!” Bree leapt off Cam’s lap and onto the bed. Maggie embraced her. She pushed Bree to arm’s length and looked her up and down. “Are you hurt?”

Bree shook her head, her curls swaying about her face.

Maggie held her close. “Baby, girl.” Running her hand down Bree’s hair, Maggie panned the room. Cam glanced from his phone and their eyes met.

“Just texted your father. He and your mother will be here soon. They’re in the cafeteria.”

He walked to the foot of the bed and crossed his arms over his chest, a scowl on his unshaven face.

“I’m glad to see you.”

Cam shook his head.

Maggie situated Bree beside her. “What’s the ‘you’re-a-dumb-ass’ look for?”

“Not a ‘dumb-ass’ look. A ‘you-scared-crap-out-of-me’ look.”

Maggie softly laughed. “This is my friend, Cam.”

“He said he wasn’t your friend,” Bree said.

Maggie hesitated. Nodded. “He’s right. He’s not my friend. He’s the man I love and I should have told him so a long time ago.”

Cam rounded the bed. He sank onto the mattress and took her hand. “Marry me.”

She looked at Bree then at Cam. “I can’t leave Phoenix. I can’t leave Bree.”

“I didn’t ask you to leave Bree.”

Bree turned in Maggie’s arm. “I want to live in Texas.”

Cam shrugged. “She’s a talkative little thing, just like you. I know you’ve been looking after her and I know why. I told her I planned to marry you then move you and her to Texas. She didn’t like the idea at first but after she beat me in a couple games of Zonga, she caved.”

“You’re not worried that you might hurt me anymore?”

He pressed his forehead against hers. “I could never hurt you.” Abruptly he pulled back. “And I’ve been thinking. You’re not my mother.”

With the back of her hand, Maggie swiped the invisible sweat from her forehead. “That’s a load off.” She frowned. “I wasn’t aware you were getting us confused. No wonder you didn’t want to sleep with me.”

Cam grimaced. “If Tony didn’t die when he did, she would never have left him.”

“Who’s Tony?”

“He was my father.” Cam glanced at Bree. “He wasn’t very nice to us. He died some years back.”

“Why are you telling me all this?”

“What would you have done in my mother’s place?” he asked.

“I would’ve packed my crap, kicked the bastard in the teeth and told him to kiss my rosy rear end.”

Cam laughed. “That’s what I wanted to hear.”

“But I can’t have children. Don’t you want children?”

“I could be wrong but she looks like a child to me.”

“Are you sure?”

He gave her a soft kiss. “There’s something else. Jags drove me to a sleep clinic in Houston.”

“Okay.”

“I’ve been on medicine for three weeks and it seems to be working. I haven’t had any nightmares, none that I can remember anyway. We’re going to have to sleep in separate bedrooms, just for a little while. I want to make sure they’re really gone. I can get really violent, like that first night of our hike. If you’re near me when I have one, you could be hurt. I could even kill you.” He gripped her chin between his thumb and forefinger. “Do you understand what I’m saying?”

Her expression grim, she nodded.

Cam gave her a quick kiss. “We don’t have to start the night out in separate bedrooms, just end the night in separate bedrooms. And don’t get any ideas, because I’m going to have a lock on my bedroom door.”

“We don’t have to live with Gramps. Do we?”

“Yup. Is that a problem?”

Maggie groaned. “Other than not wanting to live in a dungeon?”

His shoulders slumped. “How can I fix it?”

“Drapes would be a start.”

"I can live with drapes."

"New carpet and kitchen flooring next. And don't even get me started on the tobacco-stained white walls. There should be a law against white paint."

He grinned. "You were thinking green."

"Anything but white."

"I love you."

Maggie pointed. "Don't try to sweet talk your way out of this. I'm serious."

He faked a frown. "Of course."

"So you'll make the renovations?"

"I don't know if I can afford all that right now. But we'll work through your list. Just give me some time."

"And I hate diamonds," she said. "Pick another stone."

"Anything else?"

She frowned, thinking and said, "Will you go to the gift shop and get me some chocolate?"

"Yup."

Dedication

Max Redford is the coauthor of this series, my husband and my soul mate.

He drowned in the summer of 2021.

I miss him every day.