

Chapter 1

I was *not* going to cry.

I sat there behind the wheel of Alex's car with the engine ticking loudly as it began to cool off from the twenty-five minute drive. All around me the darkness pushed against the windows making the interior of the car feel far more intimate than it really was. My hands were clamped to the steering wheel so tightly I am sure my knuckles were white. I sat and stared straight ahead at the tiny reflective glare of the porch light on the windshield and tried not to think.

"I'm not going to cry." I said out loud, and my voice sounded more sure of itself than I was feeling at the moment. No, at the moment I felt as lost and empty and weak as a small child who had just discovered that Santa Claus was not real and, more importantly, I wasn't getting any presents. Only this seemed to hurt a lot more.

No, I was not going to cry over him. He was a jerk and he would not get my tears. He'd had seven months of my life, and that was all he was getting. Taking a deep, steadying breath, I let go of the steering wheel and reached for the handle to open the door.

Turning my head, I looked into the window expecting to see my own face reflected back in the black glass looking as lost and pained as I felt. Instead what I saw was a strange man's face; a smiling one that was so close to the window that it fogged as he exhaled.

"Hello, princess." The face greeted me before I did what any girl would have done in my situation; I let out a loud scream of panic. "Now, now, there's no need for screams yet." The face chided me before it disappeared into the dark and was quickly replaced with a fist that connected soundly with the window.

Not waiting to see if his hand or the window broke, I hit the button that locked all of the doors and tried to scramble out of the front seat and away from the man when another loud crack echoed through the confined cab of the car, and the whole jeep seemed to rock forward with the impact. The windshield looked like it had been hit with a baseball bat.

The safety glass had done what it was supposed to, it cracked but it had not shattered – yet. Many more hits like that and I knew it would cave in. At a loss for what to do exactly, I screamed again and climbed quickly over the seats and into the back, trying to get as far away from the man as I could and away from the almost shattered glass. My heart was beating so fast I could hear the blood rushing in my ears, and feel my pulse beating against my throat like it was going to leap right out of my neck.

The next hit came from the side, and it felt like the car was literally knocked up on two wheels it rocked so forcefully. Surely the neighbors would hear me scream, the beating on the car? I knew Alex and Lynn were out of town – I was housesitting for them in their absence, so they weren't going to be any help. Dear God let the neighbors hear! “What do you want?!” I screamed as I tried to think of how to get out and away from him.

“Why, you, of course.” Came the response followed by another loud crack as something else hit the window behind me. Screaming again, I hunched forward and crammed myself on the floor between the front and back seats in an attempt to make myself as small a target as I could if they broke through any of the glass. “Come out, princess, and we'll promise to quit vandalizing your car.” The man's voice called, almost chanting to me. Yeah, because that was really going to persuade me to come out.

I searched the floorboards around me, trying to find something to use as a weapon, but nothing was there. I was going to die because Alex was so freakish about keeping his car clean? This seemed so unfair. All of the tools, the jack, everything useful were in the very back! There was another crunch and the whole car shook with the force of the impact. The keys, which still hung from the ignition, swung freely and jingled softly and drew my immediate attention.

On the key fob was the remote for the door locks and the panic button.

“Come out, come out, come out.” The voice chanted again, this time sounding like he was somewhere around the back of the jeep. I guess he was thinking about the tools, too. Pushing myself up between the two front seats, I made a desperate grab for the keys, but my legs got caught on the armrest and tripped me up along the way. Just as my hand closed around the steering column, there was another loud crash followed by a rain of a million diamonds all around me.

I had just a moment to think, “How pretty,” when I felt something grab the back of my shirt and try to yank me through the now completely shattered windshield. Using my legs, I wrapped myself around the chair back to keep myself in the vehicle as I fought to find the panic button on the stupid remote.

One mash of my thumb and suddenly the night was alive with flashing lights, and the horn blasting over and over again. The hand on my shirt let go nearly as abruptly as it had grabbed me. I took full advantage of my sudden freedom, and threw myself back into the rear seat where I bounced against the passenger door. In one quick motion I had it unlocked and opened and I had fallen out onto the hard, cold pavement of the driveway, knocking the wind out of my lungs.

Not bothering to try to get to my feet, I rolled to my stomach and army crawled my way under the jeep, trying to get as close to the center as I could without burning myself on any of the hot engine parts above me. Around me voices were yelling at each other in confusion when there was another loud crunch, the jeep pitched forward, and the night was again silent and still.

“That was clever, princess.” The smiling man said somewhere around the front of the jeep. “Unfortunately no one will be coming to help you. Why don’t you come out and save us the trouble of dragging you out?” He asked as his feet slowly moved around the side to my right, coming to a stop beside the open door I had fallen out of.

Someone *had* to have heard the alarm! Someone had to be coming, right?

“Just another car alarm going off in the middle of the night.” The voice floated down to me as if he had read my mind. Who was this guy? “No one is coming, princess; no one, but us.” If he called me princess one more time, I was... probably just going to start swearing at him in my head. I wasn’t in much of a position to do anything else. Oh God, why had I not just started the car and driven away? It could have been the fact that I was afraid he would break through the glass and my head would have been the target. More than likely, though, it was just that I had panicked.

Trying to worm my way further up towards the engine compartment, I felt a hand close tightly around my right ankle and pull. With nothing to hold onto to keep myself there, I felt the pavement dig into the skin of my arms and my stomach as I screamed, trying to find something, anything to grab. My hands closed around a rod near the rear

tire, and for a moment I was slid back and forth across the pavement as we engaged in a freakish game of tug-o-war as they tried to jerk me loose. The stinging pain across my abdomen was fast becoming too much to stand when with one final jerk, my fingers slipped and I was being pulled along the concrete again.

The cool night air washed over me as I was freed from the heated underside of the jeep and rolled over. The few stars that managed to be seen this far in the city winked down at me pleasantly as new hands grabbed the shoulders of my shirt and hauled me bodily to my feet. I did the only thing I could think of which made me feel pretty darn helpless. I screamed as loud and as long as I could, and kicked and swung with everything I had until they hit me.

Having never been hit with a closed fist in the mouth before, I had no idea how to protect or prepare myself for it. Tiny stars exploded across my vision and I felt as if I had slipped my own skin for a moment. It didn't hurt right away, but I knew it would. It's like when little kids fall and you know they really hurt themselves when they don't cry right away. They're still in too much shock from the pain to react.

The same hand that had struck me grabbed hold of my chin and turned me to face him. My eyes didn't want to focus; especially with the way he kept wiggling my head like he was. His face was very wide and flat looking – like someone had hit him in the face with a shovel and never tried to fix it. His eyes were tiny squints lost in the vastness of his face as he smiled at me. If what he was doing could be called smiling. There was a cosmetic dentist out there somewhere who could have made a fortune off this guy.

“No screaming.” This new man said in a voice that was so deep it sounded painful to speak. “You understand?” He asked, his fingers digging painfully into my jaw as he held my face only inches from his. In the dim light from the street lamps, I could see his eyes were a mud brown. I was so close, in fact, that I could see the flicker of surprise that filled those brown orbs moments before a tiny silver point exploded from the front of his throat in a wash of hot blood.

As quickly as it had appeared, the blade point was gone and the grip on my jaw and shirt loosed enough that I managed to take a stumbling step back. The man's body slowly collapsed to the ground into a heap at my feet, leaving me standing breathless and terrified.

“Damn it, don’t stand there – run!” Brandon yelled, giving me a good shove in the shoulder to get moving. With a dead man at my feet and my co-worker holding a bloodied blade in his hand, I didn’t need much more persuasion than that. I took off for the front porch in a dead run when it suddenly felt like I had been clothes lined.

My legs flew out from under me as my shirt collar cut painfully into my throat and for a moment I was weightless and flying. This was before I hit the ground hard enough that I winded myself for a second time that night, and my head crashed against the compacted earth. I thought I was going to see stars again as dark things swam around the edges of my vision, but I managed to take a breath that burned all the way down and things righted themselves slowly.

“Not so fast, princess!”

“Crap.” I croaked as the same face that had grinned at me through the window now loomed out of the darkness and into my vision. “What do you want?” I asked, my voice sounding harsh with fear and abuse.

And then he was gone.

I closed my eyes and held my breath and waited for the shower of blood that would accompany it like the other man’s, but there was none. When I finally opened my eyes, there was just Tim’s pale face very close to mine looking extremely worried. Had I lost time? How hard had I hit my head?

“Brogan?”

I closed my eyes and swallowed hard. If this was a nightmare, I was going to wake up now. I would open my eyes and I would be on the sofa downstairs in the office where I fell asleep doing my homework. And that’s Tim waking me up so he can give me a ride back to my dorm. “Brogan, can you open your eyes?”

I opened my eyes and saw relief ease the lines in his face. At that moment he looked about ten years older than I knew he was. Only if he looked relieved, then this wasn’t a nightmare. This was real and there was no escaping it. “Are they gone?” I choked out – it hurt to speak.

“Yeah, now quit lying there like some prima donna and get moving.” Brandon’s voice called out from somewhere near the jeep. Nice to know he was still alive, too.

“Jackass.” I called out, triggering a brief coughing fit that made my stomach sting sharply for some reason. I couldn’t remember why it would be hurting. I didn’t think that was a very good sign for me.

“Can you walk?” Tim asked, one arm slipping around my shoulders as I sat up

“She better. I’m not carrying her.”

If I hadn’t thought it would hurt, I would have rolled my eyes at Brandon. And he wondered why he didn’t have a steady girlfriend. Instead, I looked around at my surroundings to make sure I really wasn’t dreaming; everything looked so normal it was disconcerting. Well, normal except for the banged up jeep and the two bodies.

Plenty of things on me were hurting now that the adrenaline was fading. My jaw and head especially pounded out a nice painful rhythm, which I was taking as a good sign. Pain meant I was alive which is fantastic when compared to the alternative.