

Prologue

~Crushing pain is the only way to describe it. It's as if a car was dropped on your chest. The ripping and tearing of your organs is only the beginning as the pressure of the weight consumes you. Tidal waves of horror, despair, and loneliness bury themselves in your heart and brain like sand crabs. The retched stickiness of tape oozes in between your lips. Realization that you are going to die if you are not freed claws its way up your stomach. Then pins and needles start. It's that state before numbness. Hands and feet bound. The numbness comes as a breath of fresh air. Not being able to feel is multitudes better than this. The only coherent thought left... Daddy, where are you?

Chapter 1

Derek and Kara:

The sun was setting and they both knew that it was time to go back...back to their lives without each other. The football game was tonight. Just thinking about what he had to do made bile rise to the back of his throat. Tommy and his gang would be waiting for him.

No one could know.

No one could see them.

Kara's father would kill Derek if he ever caught them together. Derek would never understand why a father would send their daughter to a school when he knew sicko drug dealers were there. Derek never planned on falling for Kara. It wasn't in the mission. He was supposed to be focused on his job.

Joy:

The excited fever that came off in waves at a high school football game was addicting. Even though I hadn't been in high school for two years, I still felt it when I came to the games to take pictures of the new stars of the Pittsfield High team. Being a photography student at the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD), I was hired to photograph high school sports at Pittsfield. It didn't pay well, but it was something.

The night's game was against the Pittsfield rival team, Meriden High. I had positioned myself under the left side bleachers for the best action shots. I liked to stay out of the line of sight of the players and spectators and could get pretty creative to find the most obscure and intense angles. Tree and rock climbing were among my favorites, but that night it was *bleacher crouching!* From my spot, I zoomed in and got some great close-ups of the quarterback and the coach in a yelling match with a ref. The cheers were deafening from where I sat huddled on the cold ground. The only light was coming from the blinding night field lights. October games could get pretty chilly. My fingerless gloves were good for nothing because what really got cold were my fingers, not my palms.

I moved my camera in a fluid motion with numb fingers and caught a group of guys who looked like they'd be more comfortable in a gang fight than at a high school football game. Bandanas, tattoos, and low-hip jeans adorned them. They appeared to be scanning the crowd, not paying too much attention to the game.

I zoomed and saw one of the dark-haired ones had a tattoo on his neck.

Ouch! I snapped some more close-ups. Zooming, it looked like a cupcake with a birthday candle in it. *Wait, no, that can't be right.* More twisting and zooming, and I could finally see the tattoo clearly...a skull with an axe wedged in the top of it. *Yikes! That kid was definitely not running for class president.*

I took in the other three guys. One was definitely cute in that bad boy way, although he didn't carry himself like the others. Mr. Cute had sandy brown hair, was tall, and was all leathered up like he rode a motorcycle. *Typical!* I weaved the lenses to get an eye color...nice, liquid blue. I lowered my camera and sighed.

The spectator's fervor escalated, and I once again focused my camera on the action. With the other side of the field's bleachers as a backdrop, I captured the highlights of the game. The crowd took on a personality of its own, and my camera continually clicked pictures with slight presses of my finger on the shutter button.

The game was in its final two minutes, and the Pittsfield quarterback sent the ball flying toward the end zone. The crowd flew into frenzy as the tight end ran the ball in for a touchdown. It was a remarkable play...now captured forever with my camera.

I kept snapping pictures as the crowd celebrated and disappeared to the parking lot to head to whatever after party they had planned. I took my time, letting the crowds disperse. I don't like crowds.

I felt around in the darkness to gather my stuff. The zipper on my camera bag was jammed. *Damn it!* I tugged and pulled, determined to fix it.

Come on, Joy! I chastised myself, fiddling with it. My camera was my meal ticket, and I didn't like it when it wasn't snuggled in its holder. I pulled, tugged, and swore some more under my breath.

I finally freed the zipper. *Yay!* I let out a whoosh of relief.

My head shot up as I heard voices coming closer. I strained to listen as sounds of someone struggling crept towards me. I craned my neck to peer over to the other end of the bleachers I was under. The tattoo kids I saw earlier were dragging someone. They pulled him under the bleachers. My breath hitched, and I held it.

They were talking roughly, their voices gravely, and I listened to them. My eyes went wide when I heard them yelling at the guy they yanked under the bleachers. It was very hard to see, but I heard a kick...then another. Fists hitting bone, again and again.

I clutched my mouth to keep from screaming. The shadow continued to move and bellow, as grunts and threats permeated the air. The boys were yelling something about money. Panic built with every second that went by.

What do I do? Should I run? Will they hear me?

I had to get help. I shuffled around in my bag for my cell phone as quietly as I could, never taking my eyes away from the scene.

"Stop. Wait," one of them said forebodingly.

I thought that one of them had come to their senses before killing the poor guy...but no. He was looking in my direction.

"Did you hear that? What's over there?" He pointed right at me.

I screamed. I couldn't help it. I jumped up, whacking my head on the bottom of a bleacher. My hand flew immediately to the lump forming, and I started running while bent in half. I tried to get out.

I didn't.

Suddenly, my hair was yanked back. I shrieked as my hands automatically went to the back of my head at the site of the pain. My heart raced in terror.

I bent backwards from the yank and then fell to my knees.

"Who are you, bitch?" my assailant huffed into my ear. I felt his cheek against mine as he whispered to me.

The field lights went off with a loud click. It was dark before, now it was pitch black except for a tiny little light coming from the parking lot.

“Tommy! What’s going on? Who’s that?” I heard one of them call out.

The beaten guy moaned, and I heard the shuffle of footsteps on dirt come closer as more guys moved towards me and...*Tommy*.

“I don’t know, guys. Maybe this bitch was fooling around with her boyfriend under here, and he left her,” he hissed in my ear. “Or maybe she’s a hot stalker who was following me. Hmmm...Honey? What is it?” he said and pulled my hair harder, snaking his arm around my waist.

I couldn’t talk. I cried and struggled, trying to get out of his grasp. It was such an awkward position to be in, crouched on my knees on the ground under the bleachers with this guy’s hand wrapped in my hair.

He wouldn’t let go. His breath continued to trail by my ear and on the side of my face. His hand on my waist moved up slowly, not releasing any pressure.

He groped me hard.

“Oh! Dude, not cool,” Mr. Cute yelled.

“What’s the matter, Derek? You don’t have the stomach for this? You didn’t have a problem beating the shit out of that loser,” Tommy said as he tossed his head in the direction of the beaten kid.

“Fuckin’ up loser drug addicts that don’t pay is one thing. Fuckin’ with girls who are traceable is another,” Derek said as he moved closer to Tommy and me.

“So what do we do with her?” one of the other guys asked, looking around trying to see out into the darkness.

Derek stole glimpses in the direction of the kid they beat up. I stopped thrashing to take in my surroundings.

“I don’t know,” Tommy said in my ear. “What do you think, chick?”

I cringed at his words as his breath feathered over the sensitive skin of my neck and ear. Tommy motioned with his head to Derek, and he grabbed my breast so hard that I let out a yelp.

“Derek doesn’t think you’re worth doing, but I think you’re hot. You’d bring a good price.”

I tried to turn my head away and saw Derek take a step, as though he was going to go after Tommy but thought better of it. It was so subtle that I didn’t think anyone else noticed it.

“Look Tommy, let her go and let’s get the hell out of here before someone hears her screaming. I can’t get arrested again. My old man will put me

away for good,” Derek spit out, looking around to the other guys for affirmation.

“Yeah, Tommy, let the fuckin’ bitch go so we can get the hell out of here,” the nervous one said.

Tommy made no move to lessen his grip as they went back and forth deciding what to do.

“No way, man. She’ll see us at school. We have to take care of her.”

“Are you shitting me? What, man, are you crazy!? She doesn’t go to school here. I would’ve noticed her before,” Derek shouted, disgusted with Tommy.

“Yeah, Derek is right, Tom. I would’ve noticed her, too,” said the nervous guy. “Taking girls from here is a bad fucking move. Now, let’s go!”

Tommy shoved me so hard away from him that I face planted a good four or five feet away. My jaw and neck jolted with a burn and hurt I had never experienced before. I was stunned. My cheek rested against the frigid earth.

“Don’t get up, bitch! If you go to the police, I’ll find you and kill you.”

Tommy looked over to his friends. “Hey, find her cell phone and take it.”

I moved my hands to cover my face as I lay still, face down in the dirt. I heard them all rummaging around in my camera bag.

“Here it is,” Derek said as he handed it to Tommy. Someone kicked my camera bag like a football, and it landed with a thud. A whimper escaped me. The click of a lighter sparked a cigarette to life.

“Come on,” nervous guy said. “Hey, where’s Brian?”

“He had some shit he had to do for me...” Tommy’s callous voice trailed off into the dark of night as they slowly walked away.