

## C H A P T E R 1

Even in the dim light of the bar, I could see the bruises.

Beginning just below one eye, they spread down the side of her face and neck, tinged the blue rose tattoo above the swell of her left breast, and seeped beneath the plunging neckline of her scarlet halter.

She paused inside the door, hugging herself. Her gaze swept the room, lit briefly on one face, then another. Looking for something, or someone. Or maybe for someone's absence.

I looked away before she could catch me staring, and when I glanced up again, she had squeezed onto a slick red stool between two beefy bikers whose low-slung jeans revealed the top third of their buttocks.

One of the bikers tilted his head toward her, murmured something I couldn't hear.

She flinched away from him and drew in a ragged breath. Said something that made him scowl and turn back to his drink. Then Dani, the bartender, brought her an amber liquid over ice, and she hunched over the laminated bar stirring her drink with one finger. The fingertips of her other hand rubbed gingerly at her cheek. She flicked her tongue across a split in her lower lip and blinked hard.

Not my problem, I told myself, even as I felt my fingers tighten around my glass. There were a thousand reasons why a woman might come to a bar with bruises on her cheeks and tears in her eyes. Most of them didn't even involve a jerk with a sour temper and heavy fists.

I tore my gaze away and told myself again: Not my problem.

It was a sweltering June night, and I was sweating my *cojones* off at a corner table of the First Edition Bar and Grill and trying to forget that Maria, my wife of thirteen years, was spending her first anniversary with a man who wasn't me.

She'd waited a decent year before remarrying, but it still wasn't long enough to keep my heart from aching like a broken tooth whenever I imagined her with someone else. D.W was a good man, but I didn't want to think about his hands on her, his mouth against hers...

A quavering voice interrupted my darkening fantasies. "Hey, Cowboy. Buy a girl a beer?"

I looked up to see the woman in the scarlet halter top, and the first thing I thought was, *Cowboy... Maria called me that.*

The second thing I thought was, *Why the hell not?*

"Sure." I gestured to the empty seat across from me, and she squeezed past a lanky man in leather and slid into the chair. "What's your brand?"

"Bud Lite." She gave me a watery smile and patted her stomach, which was as flat as a whippet's. "Got to watch the weight."

I edged through the crowd to the L-shaped bar and ordered the Bud and another Jack and Coke from Dani. She pushed a limp blond lock behind one ear and slid two glasses toward me with a nod toward the table I'd just left. "Looking to get lucky?"

"I don't know. She seems a little...fragile."

"Afraid she'll glom on?"

"Plenty to be afraid of before it gets to that."

"The boyfriend's out of the picture, if that matters. Or so she says."

"So she says."

"Seemed to me like she could use a little comfort."

"Maybe. But why me?"

"Look around, sweetie." A smile flitted across her face as she reached across the bar and smoothed the front of my shirt. "Believe me, you're the pick of the litter."

I managed a thanks, left a couple of dollars in the beer mug she'd set out for tips, and wended my way through the sweat-sour crush of bodies and the cigarette haze back to my table, where a burly man who looked like someone had Super-glued a tumbleweed to his face was putting the moves on my new acquaintance.

She waved him away as I set the beer in front of her.

He watched me sit down, adjusted his crotch with one massive hand and mumbled, "Aw, he ain't man enough for you." He ambled toward the pool table,

throwing a gap-toothed, tobacco-tinged grin back over his shoulder. “You want a real man, give me a holler.”

She scooted her chair closer so I could hear her over the din. “Cockroaches. If there’s one in the room, he’ll find me. You come here often?”

I smiled at the cliché. “I stop by for a beer and a burger most Friday nights.”

“No beer tonight.” She nodded toward my glass.

“Nope.” I thought of Maria, and a bitter taste came into my mouth. “Tonight called for something stronger.”

She let that pass. “I’ve never been here before. Seems pretty rough.”

The First Edition was originally conceived as a retreat for journalists and reporters—cozy and intimate, with a clientele that wore tweed jackets with suede patches on the elbows. It had changed hands several times since then and had finally evolved into a cramped sports bar catering primarily to good ol’ boys and bikers.

The decor retained vestiges of its past. Ancient printing presses and yellowing early editions of *The Tennessean* and *The Nashville Banner* shared shelf space with NASCAR photos and neon Bud Lite signs. A Jeff Gordon ball cap hung from the half-empty potato chip rack, a rubber arm jutting from beneath it.

Beside the bar, a bulletin board labeled “Wall of Shame” was covered with candid photographs—a grinning man in a neon pink construction helmet, a shot of someone mooning the photographer, a bearded man at the pool table shooting the cue ball into the V of a young woman’s spread legs.

No pictures of yours truly.

The lettering on the front window read, “First Edition Bar and Grill. Bikers Welcome.”

“It’s not as rough as it looks,” I said, pointing to a sign beside the Wall of Shame. It said, *No vulgar language*. “They don’t even allow cussing in here.”

“It’s noisy, though.” She slid her hands beneath her hair to rub the muscles of her neck. Then she leaned forward and placed her forearms on the table, giving me a good view of her cleavage. “Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

Her cell phone rang, and she startled, rummaged through her purse and fished out a shiny silver phone that looked like a miniature spaceship. She looked at the name on the screen, and a shudder ran through her body.

“Oh, God,” she said.

I felt my eyes narrow. “Is that him?”

She nodded.

“Tell him to fuck off.”

Her voice was a whisper. "I can't." She fumbled to answer it.

I laid my hand over hers. "Ignore it then."

"I can't." She flipped open the front cover and held the phone to her ear. "Hello? Baby?"

I couldn't make out the words, but I could hear him yelling from where I sat. She blinked back tears and listened, her whole body trembling. "No, sweetheart, I didn't mean...I didn't..."

I gave her three minutes. Then I took the phone away. "Back off, buddy," I said into the speaker. "The lady wants to be left alone." Then I hung up.

"Oh, God," she said again. "He's going to kill me."

"You're not thinking of going back to him?"

"No, no, you don't understand. He'll find me." She flicked her tongue across her injured lip again and crossed her arms across her breasts. "What am I going to do?"

"The first thing you do is get a restraining order."

She gave a sharp, bitter laugh and gestured to her battered face. "I had a restraining order when he did this. For all the good it did."

"I have friends on the force. I'll check on it tomorrow. You'll file charges."

It wasn't a question.

She gave a hitching sob. "I can't...I don't know...I mean, okay. Only...Will you stay with me? Tonight? You don't know how he is."

She was looking for a protector, not a lover. Still, there were probably a million reasons to say no. I considered telling her I had a previous engagement and getting the hell out.

But there was no previous engagement.

"Why not?" I threw back the rest of my drink and pushed away from the table as the alcohol burned its way down my throat. "You want to take one car or two?"

"Let's take yours." She wiped at her eyes and forced another smile, revealing a smudge of cherry lipstick on one tooth. "He'll be looking for mine."

Since the parking lot was packed, I'd left my truck a little farther up the street. We walked past the antique boutique and the Tae Kwan Do school (where I took lessons and occasionally taught) to the strip mall where my black and silver Chevy Silverado sat glistening like a water bug beneath the street light.

"Nice wheels." She ran a loving hand over the front fender. The diffused light of the parking lot softened the hard angles of her face and made her almost beautiful. "You okay to drive?"

"I'm okay." I opened the passenger side door for her, and she slid across the seat as I closed the door behind her. When I climbed behind the wheel, she wriggled into the hollow under my arm. Her hair still smelled of cigarette smoke, but underneath that was a musky perfume that, combined with the whiskey I'd been drinking, made it hard to think clearly. "I don't even know your name."

"It's Heather." Her fingers squeezed my knee, trailed up my thigh.

I closed my hand over hers. "You don't have to do that."

"Sssh." She lifted her other hand and pressed the index finger to my lips. "I want to."

Maybe she wanted more than a protector, after all. I had a feeling I was headed for a night of raw and meaningless sex that I should probably feel guilty about but didn't.

"I'm Jared." I tried to keep my voice steady as her hand continued its northerly migration. "Jared McKean."

"I know. I asked the bartender. Jared McKean, Private Eye." This time, her smile was wicked. "Or should I say, Private Dick?"

## C H A P T E R 2

We stopped to pick up a bottle of Sangria and a couple of wine glasses. Then she directed me to one of the seedy motels off Lebanon Road. Waterbeds, twenty-four hour porn, rentals by the night or by the hour.

Nothing classy about it, but that was just as well. Class would have been wasted on us.

By the time she slipped the electronic key into the slot and pushed the door open, I was lightheaded with alcohol and muzzy with lust. I like to think of myself as a fairly centered, thoughtful kind of guy, but by then my center had drifted considerably south.

I thought briefly of Maria and felt a pang of guilt. But hey, I wasn't married anymore. I wasn't even dating anyone. And it wasn't like Maria wasn't giving it up to old D.W., probably at that very moment. So what difference did it make if I had sex with someone I had hardly met?

We had just squeezed inside the room when Heather pushed me back against the door and pressed herself against me. Her tongue explored my mouth, flicked across my lips and fluttered down my neck. Her breath was ragged with excitement, warm, and scented with beer. Her hands were everywhere.

I pulled away long enough to gasp, "You don't have to do this. I'll stay anyway."

"Don't," she whispered. "I need..." Her voice trailed off.

I thought of Maria again and nodded.

I needed, too.

Let's just say it took us a while to get to the Sangria.

I remembered the condom, barely.

There is a kind of sex where two people have learned each other's preferences and rhythms, where one person's curves fit into the other person's spaces like the pieces of a puzzle. It's a slow, comfortable sex with a rightness and intensity, and it takes years of time and love to get there.

But there is another kind of sex, all animal ferocity and passion, sweat and thrust and howl and moan. Heartbeats pounding like primeval drums. Your body rises and she's there to meet it, and you think she might devour you, and you wish she would. Heat. Shuddering. Her legs around you, and you feel each tremor of that drenched and pulsing place between her thighs.

Three guesses which we had.

Afterward, we lay entangled with each other and the sheets. The sweat cooled on our bodies, and the room smelled heavily of musk.

"Mmmm. That was nice." She leaned over and planted a wet kiss firmly on my lips. "Wait here and I'll go get us a drink." She peeled the condom from between my thighs, kissed the place where it had been, and swung her legs over the edge of the bed. "I'll get rid of this on the way to the fridge."

I watched as she padded to the wastebasket, then to the refrigerator. She was thinner than my ex-wife, with sharp, jutting hipbones and a small, flat behind. Her breasts were soft and pear-shaped, with long pink nipples that stood up like the ends of a big man's thumbs. I could count her ribs and the vertebrae that ran like a knotted chain down the center of her back.

She had two tattoos in addition to the rose on her left breast. One was a circle of barbed wire and blue roses around her right ankle, the other a small yellow butterfly on her left shoulder. Her lipstick was smeared, and there were dark smudges in the hollows beneath her eyes where her mascara had run. Her hair was tousled, and since I was the one who had tousled it, I found it both erotic and endearing.

"Service with a smile," she said, and held out a brimming wine glass. She slipped beneath the sheet and sipped her drink, holding it delicately, between two fingers and a thumb. "I know it's not expensive, but I love sweet wine. Don't you?"

"Mm." I nodded noncommittally.

"So," she said, "what's it like being a detective? It sounds exciting."

I traced my forefinger around the outline of the butterfly on her shoulder. "Sometimes. Mostly, it's a lot of waiting."

"Waiting?"

“Waiting for a cheating spouse to come out of a motel room. Waiting for a guy defrauding his insurance company to sneak out of his wheelchair and go dancing. Waiting for interviews. We talk to a lot of people. That’s about it.”

“You think about it being car chases and murder mysteries.”

“P.I.’s don’t do murder,” I said. “Missing persons, insurance fraud, personal injury claims, spousal misconduct...that’s the kind of stuff we do. We leave the homicides for the cops.”

She made a wry face. “Too bad. I think a murder would be interesting.”

“Honey,” I said, “I worked homicide for seven years. And believe me, murder isn’t interesting. It’s nothing but a waste.”

We moved on to other topics then. She told me she had met Ronnie, the soon-to-be-ex boyfriend two years ago, during a casting call for a country music video.

“He seemed so sweet.” She wrapped one arm around her knees and sipped her Sangria with the other hand. “Guess you never know, huh?”

“Guess not,” I said, though there had probably been signs.

“Here, hold this.” She handed me her glass and headed off to the bathroom.

When she came back, we had another glass of wine, made love again, and sometime after that I drifted into sleep, her body curled against mine like a Siamese cat’s. I woke up once, with my head spinning and my stomach roiling, realized it was still dark out, and sank back into a sleep too deep even for dreams.

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Morning. A sliver of sunlight sliced through a gap in the curtains and seared through my eyelids, setting off a small nuclear explosion in my head. I scabbled for the digital clock beside the bed and squinted at the readout. 10:45.

Great. I had to pick up my son Paulie at noon. I lay with my palms over my eyelids long enough to realize that my bladder was also on the brink of implosion. What a dilemma. If I got up, my skull might blow apart. If I stayed put, my bladder might burst. God. I clenched my teeth, pressed the palms of my hands to my temples, and stumbled into the bathroom to take a leak and inspect my tongue, which was coated with a white scum that reminded me of dryer lint.

Heather was gone. She’d taken the wine glasses and the bottle of Sangria, and on the table she had left a note.

“I’m sorry,” it said.

Shit. How could I have been so stupid?

I picked up my jeans. My belt hung from the loops, my cell phone still clipped to it. I checked my wallet. Everything was there. I felt for my keys. Still in the pocket.

So, sorry for what? For not saying good-bye? She hadn't left a number, so I guessed we'd had a one-night stand.

Too bad. I wondered vaguely if she'd ever get away from Ronnie, and if she did, if I would ever know about it.

Then I told myself there was nothing worse than a maudlin, thirty-something single guy with a hangover. I'd gotten laid, and if the worst that could be said was that the lady liked her sex with no strings attached, who was I to try and complicate things?

Still feeling muzzy-headed, I showered, dressed, and went down to the lobby, where a canister of stale coffee and a pile of day-old bread and pastries masqueraded as a continental breakfast. I couldn't manage much but coffee and dry toast, but even that calmed my churning stomach. While I ate, I skimmed a couple of sections of the *Tennessean*, which someone had left on the corner of the table.

There was an article on the legislation to remove the waiting period from handgun permits, a questionnaire for football fans, a story on The Society for Creative Anachronism, and a column on the RC and Moon Pie Festival in Bell Buckle, which was where I'd planned to take Paulie this afternoon.

According to the article, the festival had been a great success. I shook my head and read the article again.

Had been. As in, having already occurred. As in, something was terribly amiss.

I glanced at the date at the head of the page, and a hollow feeling settled in the pit of my stomach.

It was the wrong day.

As I scooped up the paper, a headline on the front page of the local section caught my eye. "Woman Slain in Hotel Room. Ex-Policeman Sought for Questioning".

I was still numb enough and disoriented enough to wonder if it might be anyone I knew. I'd lost touch with most of the guys I used to work with, but I still felt connected to the force. Once a cop, always a cop, as Maria used to say. I'd skimmed most of the other stories, but I read this one word for word.

The victim was Amanda Jean Hartwell, age 25, known to friends and family as Amy. The grainy photograph showed a smiling, bespectacled young woman, a few pounds overweight but still attractive. Her hair, a tumble of shoulder-length curls pulled back by two barrettes, was either light brown or dark blond. It was hard to tell from the black-and-white photo.

Her body, which had been shot and mutilated (no details), had been found at the Cedar Valley Motel in Hermitage. Survived by a husband (Calvin J. Hartwell), two daughters (Katrina E. and Tara D. Hartwell), and a sister (Valerie C. Shepherd).

Her lover was wanted “for questioning” (a euphemism for “we know you did it, son, we just can’t prove it yet”), and a description of the lover and his license number followed. NRL-549.

A trickle of ice water seeped through my bloodstream and settled in my bones. NRL-549. That was the number on my license plate.

And the name at the bottom of the article...*Wanted for questioning: Jared McKean*...that was mine too.