

# SAVING GRACE

First Five Chapters



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## WARNING

This book contains sexually explicit scenes, references and adult language, this might be offensive for some readers. PHW Love novels are intended for ADULTS ONLY, as defined by the laws of the country in which the purchase was made. Please take care to save such books safely where underage readers cannot access it.



# Author's Note on Language

## **It's the old non American dialect disclaimer.**

I'm giving fair warning I'm from a little known, two island country deep within the Southern Hemisphere - New Zealand.

As such, the version of English that is standard here is what I'll be subjecting you, the lovely reader to.

Yes, it means an often weird and eclectic mix of both American and British dialect. Don't be confused seeing 'recognise' or 'apologise' instead of the covert 'z.' It's not that we don't like 'z' but with our fondness of 'u' in words like 'colour' and 'neighbour,' we don't want to be hoarders of all the end letters in the alphabet, now do we. Shall I mention we also have a fondness for double 'L.' Some vices can never be overcome.

I should also note while most of us describe our height in feet and inches. In the quaint, middle of nowhere, blessed country where I live, we use the metric system. Pounds are not used to describe weight; metres determine length, so on and so forth. I try to incorporate both in my stories, so don't feel I'm being inconsistent, I am paying homage to my up bringing while acknowledging my lovely fellow readers from different spaces.

We Kiwi's are a unique bunch, and I hope you enjoy reading from a land where six degrees of separation is more like two, and whole heartedly believe togs aren't undies until you cross the street.

Love and Light  
PHW Love





## **\*Disclaimer\***

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### **Please NOTE:**

This book has trigger warnings.

Violence, discussion of domestic abuse and rape, homelessness, BDSM themes, bondage, and explicit adult interactions.

Reader discretion is advised. Please be kind to yourself

*This book is for adults only.*

## **What Romance are you reading?**

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**A** Alien/Sci-fi

**B** Batting for the same team/Bi

**C** Contemporary

**D** Dark

■ **E** Erotic

**F** Fantasy/Paranormal





This book is dedicated to all of those who at  
times feel there is no

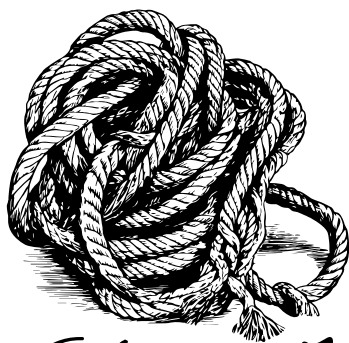
*Happily Ever After*

Love and Light you beautiful souls.









# Chapter 1

How much could one hate a city? Austin would call it hell. And he'd just entered the belly of the beast. Next time his lawyer could come to him when paperwork required signing, he bloody paid him enough. Perhaps he'd then get his money's worth, he grunted, thrusting the stick into park before turning the engine off. He really hated the city, and gripped the leather steering wheel, white-knuckling into more sighs as his forehead rested on the tension turning his fingers numb.

Just why?

How did he agree to this?

That bloody slick, smooth-talking lawyer—that's how. The rotter would make a better hostage negotiator if the pay was more lucrative. He blew out another sigh, lifting his head to gaze out the windscreen towards the horizon blurring against the concrete landscape. The incoming storm was steamrolling in, and with the dark, ominous colour of those clouds, he could add fiercer and faster than first predicted.

A grunt found his breath, did he wish it held the strength to blow it away? No. It'd be wishful thinking, and his grip tightened, turning towards the restaurant out his passenger window. Just why on God's green Earth did he say yes? Now he'd be stuck in the company of a woman for several hours, who'd probably be more interested in luxury five-star dining than getting to know more than his bank balance or unwanted popularity.

Five minutes, that's all it'd taken.

Five-bloody-minutes for his lawyer to corner him.

The more he considered his lawyer's slick manipulation, the bastard had arranged all but the location, knowing he'd organise a table at a restaurant fortunate enough to get his beef. His grip tightened despite the numbness, following the contour of the leather, his glare fixating on those swanky, dark wooden and glass-paned doors under the just-as-flashy burgundy footpath awning. Such awkward goddamn pomp and pageantry.

Damn. Just why, his breath growled again, pushing off the steering wheel, his head crash-landing on the seat's headrest. His gaze returned to that foreboding menace steamrolling in, forcing him to shut himself off from the view. Guess he should count himself lucky he'd been given a VIP parking spot outside. It'd be easier to leave. But Jesus—just why? Could he leave now? Another rumble erupted from his chest, knowing he couldn't. It'd be rude.

More sighs, he'd become pathetic. Worse, he knew it'd be far from his last tonight, and he tilted his head back, grabbed his hat grunting as he exited. He put it on considering it wasn't just the pressure he'd found himself under, cornered by his lawyer who had a schoolyard bully as an alter ego. No, the city's fast-cooling, smog-filled air did a bang-up job reminding him of things yet to come.

He marched around the rear of his black Chevy pickup, tapping along the cool metal of his truck before rechecking the secured crate of covered apples. That storm front was racing in on a Trojan horse, it wouldn't be his friend later. That'd be his excuse to leave sooner. In fact, the second he could use it to put rubber on the road, getting his sorry rear closer to home, he would. It'd make facing the full brunt of that deluge bearable. Double points for ending his blind date sooner, too.

Before his boot hit the sidewalk, his frustration caught a waitress glimpse his approach through the restaurant's Georgian windows. His growl would match the incoming thunder as she darted out of sight and his hand tapped the tail-end of his pickup.

Damn-it, just how?

As he reached the obnoxious fancy front doors, one was yanked open while reaching for the handle. The maître d' ushered him straight past the host podium to a cosy, private corner booth. Her grin matched a clown's expression, shifting his growls to feral roars, tempting the rest of him to leave.

He honed in on the table, finding candles, wine glasses, and a small vase filled with fresh flowers. Before he managed a word, the owner Jaques slid up beside him. He'd better not be there on his account. "What's this?"

He cautioned, backing his abrupt tone with his hand towards the romantic arrangement in front of him.

“You said dinner for two. I assumed it was a date... Or am I mistaken, monsieur?”

While glad the Frenchman spoke slowly so he’d understand his thick accent, it didn’t budge his tone. “No, not mistaken, but it’s a blind date. You’ve gone a tad overboard, don’t you think?”

“Monsieur Austin... Overboard. You forget I’m French. If anything, it’s undercooked!”

He clutched his hips while rolling his shoulders into uncomfortable sighs, counting in his head while setting aside Jaques eagerness. “With your accent, not a chance!” He squared Jaques’ excitable expression. Just why? Should he leave? “Let’s just agree, no more.” His eyes darted around the restaurant, before landing at the bar to the left, ignoring his chest tightening at the growing awkwardness. Why—again, why? “Has she arrived yet?”

“No, no, mademoiselle as yet.”—Jaques gestured with his hand—“Please sit. I’ll get wine and menus.”

“Long as you send out a triple vodka.” He tossed his hat on the benched seat before plonking himself down. Was it wrong he ensured it meant he sat on the seat’s edge so his ‘date’ wouldn’t get any funny ideas. But as the Frenchman bounced off, it crossed his mind, he’d better check. If they didn’t have any, he’d be annoyed. It’s why he chose the place. “Better have some of that chocolate fudge cake, for later.” Lucky for the restaurant and Jaques, the Frenchman waved his hand high in the air before disappearing behind the counter.

Agitation, though, crept in, rattling his festering foul mood. His leg bounced in a sprint race as his vacant stare shifted outside. Jaques gave him their best booth, he’d a view of that damn storm and his truck, and the booth’s position meant ample privacy from prying people strolling by. And with how dangerous the horizon had become, turning the darkest shade of grey, whipping down the sidewalks as it rattled windows with its howls, sooner rather than later he’d be leaving.

His thoughts were distracted, sensing a presence beside the table. The maître d’ had returned with a tall, brunette woman. He immediately rose, notioning to the bench seat opposite him. “Please take a seat.” Only once she appeared well seated with her pretty smile, he redirected his attention towards the head waitress. “How far away are those menus?”

“Yes, Mr. Carlson. Right away.”

His attention turned towards his date who held a curious gaze, and he waited until the waitress left before returning to his seat. No denying she was a pretty thing. If he took a guess, mid to late-thirties, like him, and worked out—or ate rabbit food. Guess she’d answer that over dinner. But her big brown eyes fixating on him, brought memories of chocolate fudge cake. And he sure as hell liked that cake. Her black dress he considered an interesting wardrobe choice, though if caught in the rain, it had the least risk of becoming see-through. Perhaps she was smart, like his bloody lawyer.

He’d need to pay attention, not that fluttering eyelashes or flirty smiles would railroad him. No, it was their awkwardness when he rejected them he didn’t much care for. As her gaze shifted to said discomfort, it’d been his faux-par, having been staring like a fool. “I’m sorry. Rick didn’t offer your name. I’m Austin.” His arms rested on his thighs, seeking refuge as he leant against the seat’s backrest, wanting the space between them to grow. Only she extended her hand to shake his.

“Yeah, he’s renowned for that. I’m Dana.” Her heart busted a vessel. Impeccable dress sense, what an understatement. The way those blue jeans hugged his thighs like a second skin meant his rear would have the same spectacular view. The rest of his attire was just as impressive against his body, and his crisp, white business shirt under his dark tan suede jacket, perhaps she’d get to unwrap him like forbidden candy, and see the treat underneath.

“Nice to meet you, Dana”—he leant forward—“Gentlemen don’t shake hands with a woman they’re on a date with. Or am I mistaken, and is this business?” Her hand recoiled faster than a spring, so did her gaze, now glued to the table. He considered breaking the tense silence, but she beat him to it.

“No, not business at all.” Dana shifted her gaze to the handsome view. He was every bit as ruggedly gorgeous as the photos in the tabloids portrayed. His mannerism, though, bore what Rick warned her about, and she couldn’t understand why. Did she chalk it up to this date being thrown at him, last-minute, curve ball style, or him in a nutshell? Unable to decide, she became caught between lust and longing when he ran a hand through his thick, wavy brown hair, and his stunning green eyes held his focus out the window. When his attention remained distant, she shifted to see.

“Apologies... That incoming storm I’ll be driving home through tonight.” He hadn’t meant to be rude. It wasn’t her fault he’d rather be

elsewhere, or that his legal counsel had somehow blindsided him. But as she faced him with a grin, he wondered what she'd say next.

"If the weather gets worse, I have a spare bed." Dana hoped her suggestive tone would hint at her offering. It wasn't quite the truth. Yes, she had a sofa bed. But she rather wished the date went well enough she'd be under his muscular body for hours on end.

He was slightly taken aback by her forwardness. It wasn't he found it inappropriate, he'd just not expected it. "Generous as your offer is, my ranch doesn't run itself."

His polite decline was broken by Jacques, who'd returned with a tray. The second he spied that vodka, he notioned with a crazy wave, ripping it from the Frenchman before sculling the triple shot, barely touching the sides. And before Jacques had reached for the wine, he thrust the shot glass back in his direction. Hmmm. Still, it wasn't enough. Did he ask the staring Frenchman as he fought the bitterness for another?

Damn. He restrained his bad mood and gestured for the wine and menus. As he took the bottle, his attention shot to the label, wanting eyes on what the wiry Frenchman had chosen. Bloody hell. He choked back the breath caught in his throat. About to growl, Jacques scurried away. That dirty playing Frenchman. He'd get him later, and his dark frown drifted back towards the infringement.

A bloody 1997 bottle of Domaine Leroy Latricieres-Chambertin Grand Cru. It'd still be every penny of the five thousand it was last year. And the only reason he knew that shit, Jacques gave him a bottle as a thank-you for selecting his restaurant over the dozens that'd applied for trade. No longer grunting or growling, he'd shifted to cursing under his breath, regretting mentioning to the French cupid it didn't taste half bad—for wine.

Again, his ragged behaviour caught Dana's eyes. Bugger, he didn't mean to come across as a complete arsehole, or cheapskate, so tipped the bottle in her direction with the label facing her. "Would you like a glass?" Her soft nod, with a brewing smile, probably matched said wine's journey, and he wondered what she was thinking.

"Please, I'm quite fond of Domaine Leroy. Have you tried their Roumier Musigny Grand Cru?"

Just as he suspected, she had expensive tastes. How did she know that damn slick lawyer of his? "No, not much of a wine drinker. Been given the odd bottle, though." He half-filled a glass before handing it over. When their hands

touched, her breath hitched somewhat into a full blush across her face. Great. Not ideal, and certainly wouldn't help his fast exit.

"Thank-you." The shockwave of their connected flesh electrified Dana's already pounding chest. Rick filled her in on everything she needed to know about Mr. Austin Carlson. Not that she needed an introduction, the media and high society loved him. Rick said famous people, presidents, and royal families messaged Austin's ranch's social media after failing to gain direct contact with the cowboy producing the finest beef in the world. Her brother-in-law also mentioned several sent him contracts as the ranch's lawyer, hoping to get Austin's signature. He also mentioned some called the office, hoping to achieve the same goal. Just last week, an invitation to a European royal wedding arrived. But Rick said Austin wasn't interested, ignoring all requests, and that's how Rick and his law-firm became the go to.

It wasn't what Dana found most appealing despite it being quite the lifestyle. No. He was eligible, rich, and deliciously handsome. The golden trio women dreamed of in a bachelor, and not one of his previous conquests had tamed him. Rick suggested the gorgeous gentleman in front of her had been clear, he didn't have time for dating or relationships. And yet there he sat in a restaurant, on a date. "Are you not having any?"

His gaze drifted out the window, corking the bottle. "No, one vodka's enough. I'm driving later." Her expression became consumed by its blush and fluttering eyelashes. If he was interested, she'd certainly garnish the attention she wanted, and her attempts deserved. Sadly, for her, she sparked nothing other than a pretty face to appreciate and converse with over dinner.

"Well, my offer still stands. Even if it's because you decide to have a few drinks. I'm only a ten-minute walk from here."

He returned the smile, despite knowing he'd do no such thing. To move her attempts along, he handed her a menu before opening his own, darting straight to the ribeye cap steak he'd sent plenty of two days ago.

Only he didn't even see it on the menu, forcing his grunting disdain to echo in the near empty restaurant. His hand thrust in the air, more than aggressive in its demand to get someone, anyone's attention from behind that damn counter. If they didn't have any, he'd be leaving, date or not. While waiting, he caught her shuffle in closer, though his eyes still hadn't left the indiscretion printed in front of him. What did she want? He had far bigger problems.

"You okay?" Dana couldn't deny his furrowed brow, while handsome as hell, concerned her. Their date had to be perfect. Otherwise, she mightn't secure a second.

"That remains to be seen." Now his narrowed stare drifted towards the counter, fast shifting to the *maître d'* who hastened her pace to his table. He leant forward towards the incoming apprehension, notioning with his bent finger as she leant in. "Why... Don't I see any ribeye cap steak!" Aware his bark sounded equally bad as his bite when both women startled.

"It's become VIP order only. I'll be right back, Mr. Carlson."

Perhaps all was not lost, and he leant back into the seat, catching Dana watching him with a cautionary gaze. "This meal might be cut short." It wasn't fair she wore his ever rising bad attitude, so redirected his glare towards the counter. His impatience ate his restraint while waiting for the smooth Frenchman, would Jacques lack the balls and send his staff? If yes, he'd string him up and cut the contract.

"Is everything okay?"

Now he heard a slight tremor in Dana's tone, but his focus remained fixated until he had answers. "We'll soon see." Ahhh, there he was. Though, as the Frenchman scuttled towards the table, his brows wrinkled into canyons seeing Casanova's expression. Which became permanently etched crevices when he couldn't make heads nor tails of the out-of-breath accent rattling off a million words a second.

"Monsieur Carlson... Please do not be concer—"

"Speak slowly Jacques. I can't understand a word you're saying." His tone remained way off, but he was hungry, moody, and tired.

"Oui, oui, monsieur." Jacques took a breath, and started again. "I was forced to remove it from the menu. Too many people—a mad house, monsieur. Only regulars now, or you know... Of status can order your finest steak."

"Ohhh, I see..." He took a moment, his bad. "So, am I to assume it means you still have at least one cut left?" That'd better be the case.

"Yes, Monsieur. We cancelled half the bookings tonight, so we'd have all you desired. And if people knew you were here, well monsieur, my restaurant... You understand."

"Sadly yes, thank-you Jacques." Damn-it, his sighs returned. At this rate, he'd fast reach a million of them when this kind of bullshit refused to give him a break. Didn't help he was behaving no better than a brute. "Do you remember how I like it?"

“Monsieur, Please... Usual sides?”

“Thank-you Jacques.” He paid the Frenchman’s disgruntled tone no attention, turning to his date. Workouts versus rabbit food was about to be answered. “Have you decided what you’d like, Dana?” Her face contorted. Unsure why, but just in case. “Dinner’s on me tonight. Please choose whatever you wish.”

Dana gushed into a smile at his manly offer. “That’s very kind of you. Though, I’m happy to go-dutch.” Despite it costing a week’s pay, no more, maybe two. Shit, way more if including that wine.

“No date of mine, blind or otherwise, pays their way. It’s ungentlemanly.” His smile backed up his genuine offer.

“Thank-you Austin, it’s very generous.” Dana wondered if his words held a second date promise. It bubbled low in her core, pounding her heart faster than ever as she turned to who must be the owner with how he behaved. “I’ll have a Franc-Comtoise salad. What’s soup of the day?”

Jacques huffed, agitated. “We Don’t Do ‘soup of the day’ mademoiselle! This is a five-star establishment! However, if it is soup you wish for. As an appetiser I recommend our Bisque. If you’re fond of seafood, our Consommé is also well received. Or do you wish a vegetarian dish?”

She’d had Consommé once before. It was expensive for a reason. “A half-serve of Consommé would be perfect, thank-you.”

“Half-serve mademoiselle?”

He caught Jacques’ confusion. It’d be best he interrupted their conversation before he went rabid from hunger. “Dana, cost isn’t something to worry about.”

“Thank-you Austin. While I’m conscious Les Befteck Maison’s a very expensive restaurant. It’s just, umm, I’m trying to... Well—”

“Say no more.” He understood. Rabbit food and probably an ample amount of workouts it was, and he smiled, hoping to ease her awkward discomfort. “Half-serve for the young lady, please.” His disinterest in her romantically didn’t mean she couldn’t do with a compliment or two. It never ceased to amaze him how often women suffered from low self-confidence.

That bloody Frenchman ground his already tempered gears. First the wine, then hiding meat cuts from the menu, and now the rate at which he’d rushed off. The man was probably afraid he’d yank the restaurant’s trade agreement. He returned his gaze to his date, her cheeks had reddened full bloom. Thankfully, her unease would be easier to temper, and he leant in



to maintain privacy. “You should indulge more often. Life is for living—not existing. You’re a beautiful woman.”

Dana’s cheeks flared like the fire-truck lights that just whizzed past. Her heart she questioned sounded as loud as its sirens, too. Any attempt to make eye contact failed when he leant in, and her words became terribly flustered. “Tha-thank-you.” It didn’t distract her from the out-of-control train-wreck building. “Seems we could both do with more living, I’ve been told you work too hard, often at the expense of life.”

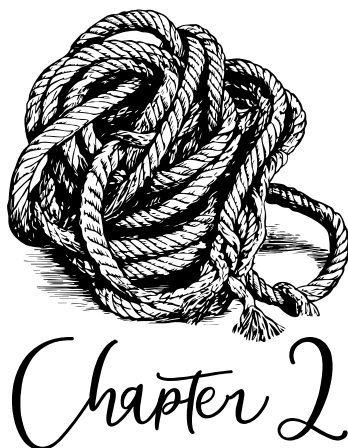
He jerked backwards into his seat. Damn if she wasn’t direct. But then so was Rick, and a grunt rode his own question. “And, Just What Else... Has my lawyer disclosed!”

Ohhh no, Dana needed to backtrack before she ruined everything. “Not much actually...” It was her first lie to him. She prayed it’d be her last. “He just mentioned, you could do with some company, you’re always working...” Dana quickly thought on the fly, hoping it’d work. “It’s how he convinced me to go on this blind date.”

His shoulders relaxed as he glanced out those bloody fancy windows. “Two reluctant souls partaking in something they—”

“I didn’t say I was reluctant to have dinner with you. More. His words touched my heart.” Dana hadn’t intended to cut him off, but he’d not left her much choice. He might’ve called it short then and there.

“I see...” He didn’t get any further, their dinner arrived.



He found their dinner uneventful, laced with nothing more than small talk, and fortunately for him, no more directness. It's not that he'd believed it wouldn't find him, she'd already propositioned him twice. But there'd been nothing. Did she not feel any connection, either?

Wouldn't that be his saving? He could do with it, his ranch really didn't run itself. The rain and wind pelting the window spoke how fast and ruthless that incoming storm was advancing. It forced his hand, and time to close out their date, and have what he'd been salivating over since he arrived. "Shall we order dessert?"

The wine Dana downed fast made her a tad tipsy as the room spun a little. She'd tried tempting him to have a glass, so he'd stay. That's what landed her in this sticky predicament. But he'd not had a drop. Now he'd offered dessert, which would be decadent. She'd already eaten and drunk well beyond the calories she'd planned for. "I'm full, but thank-you."

He dead pan met her eyes to determine her truth. He'd call her words a fib, but they again reminded him of the delicious cake he was about to devour, having held out long beyond long enough already. "You should live a little?" He extended the dessert menu, hoping to tempt her reluctant expression.

Dana scanned the menu again. Those calories would have her living at the gym for a week solid. No, even that mightn't be enough. "I consider living a little. Would be you and I having a nightcap somewhere private." Had she been too forward, he'd paused? Wasn't her fault, he'd not given any hints he was interested in her over dinner.

He'd bloody jinxed himself. Did he address or ignore it? "Surely a fruit salad wouldn't sacrifice your plans? Like I said, you're beautiful. Don't be a slave to your body." Why did she torture herself, why did any woman? She'd stifled moans with every mouthful of her appetiser, and by her main course they'd turned to groans with little restraint. But neither dish did she finish, and he was certain she wanted too. Then her face grimaced, and he considered a compromise. "How about a half-serve?"

"Thank-you, I really am full, but about that nightcap..." Dana drew in her breath that shifted her shoulders. It'd been the second time she'd lied to him in as many hours. She wasn't getting off to a great start. It'd have to stop. Rick always said start as you intend to finish.

Bloody hell, he'd have to address it. "While your offer's very generous, Dana, my ranch really doesn't run itself. Now, are you certain you don't want any? I intend to order. Is that going to be a problem?" Her expression screamed disappointment as she shook her head. In his bones, he knew it was about him, not dessert.

Not that his decision would be swayed by her pouting expression. What he did want... Was that decadent chocolate fudge cake. Pronto. His hand waved in the air, knowing the *maitre d'* would understand his request. "Make sure it's a double! Some cream wouldn't go astray either." With his need sorted, he returned his attention towards Dana, with a question that'd been nagging all evening. "How do you know Rick?"

"He's my sister's partner." Dana answered, but she had more pressing issues. Like the wine threatening to make its own escape. "If you'll excuse me, I need to use the ladies' room." As she stood, he matched her movement. Her heart sizzled under fire, he was such a gentleman.

He sat once she disappeared from his line of sight, grateful for a momentary reprieve. It'd allow him the space to plan his exit. Which would be straight after his planned attack on that bloody cake and cream. His mind and tastebuds spiralled, they were mere minutes away from bliss. And right on cue, it arrived before Dana. He contemplated waiting, though in the face of her declining dessert, it wasn't like he'd be waiting for her to eat.

Less than three large mouthfuls in, she slunk into her benched seat. His manners demand he chew—fast, as he stood despite her rear already on the leathered seat. He managed to swallow, feeling foolish, like he'd been caught eating a stolen cookie. But she offered a shy smile at his position, and he returned in kind, accepting he was guilty as charged. But it also didn't go

unnoticed she seemed surprised by his actions. Had manners died in this concrete shithole?

New mouthful, new hard attempt he tried swallowing in new speed records. But the damn thing lodged in his throat, or was it the approaching topic? The one that'd likely have her making another pass to secure that private interlude. "How do you plan on getting home?"

Dana smiled at how old school his manners were. Though she hoped it might be he'd changed his mind of that nightcap, and it was his covert answer. If she played her cards right, she might succeed. "I'm close by, I just planned on walking."

"This late at Night!" He choked on his next mouthful. Only it wasn't food that'd stuck. No! Clear as day, it'd wedged itself in there thanks to her answer. He had to cough to clear it. "In this weather! And this late. Not on my watch!"

It was the first time Dana felt his broodiness directed at her, but his reaction, she wanted. Hopefully, it meant he'd offer her a ride. "I said earlier, I'm only ten-minutes from home."

He stopped eating that heavenly treasure to ensure his attitude conveyed exactly how inappropriate it was. "Yes, I remember! But you're not walking home. Not alone—not at nearly 10 p.m., and certainly not in this storm!" He didn't know whether to growl or sigh as he gazed at the cake. Neither, he decided. Both would stop him, and forked off another morsel far larger than needed. "I'll take you home."

Dana wanted to high-five herself, one step closer to her goal of spending a glorious night of sex with him. Rick had told her he liked, well, more than enjoyed frolicking between the sheets. Something about them having the same old haunts, whatever that meant. But she'd take the help, if it lured Austin in. "You sure? You said you had to drive through said storm?"

"Yes!" He inhaled another monstrous mouthful, scrambling to find the bright side. Least she lived on the way towards the highway if her directional wave was correct. The other bright side—all this talking shovelled and swallowed that damn dessert quicker than he thought possible. "I won't have you walking home alone. Not on my watch!"

"That's very kind of you, Austin. Thank-you." Dana knew she had to fast work her next move. On her trip to the bathroom, her walking had become unsteady. Perhaps he'd offer to be a lean-to until she reached her front door. Or, perhaps if she couldn't work the keypad to her apartment building's

entrance, that'd garnish his attention, too. She'd have to be careful with how she approached this.

Still grunting while inhaling what he preferred to indulge in at a much slower pace, she took the wine, and parts of that chocolate heaven stuck to his teeth as he stopped. Was she trying to delay leaving? It irked him no end. First trying to walk home tipsy, then adding more fuel to those flames by making said walk dubious. Cities chewed you up and spat you out, they took no prisoners. She needed to be more goddamn careful.

His focus shifted to a spoon she'd taken, now twirling between her fingers. She looked bored, but he was trying to eat fast. Really, he was. Not that he'd regretted indulging in a double serve, but if they were ever to free themselves of their date, he'd have to speed up somehow.

To his shocked horror, her bloody spoon came in stealth bomber style with ninja speed, sneaking or not, stealing a chunk of his damn cake. His eyes widened, watching in dumbstruck stupor as she drew it to her bloody mouth. "Hey! What the Hell!" Now beyond pissed, he Never—Ever! Shared his cake.

Dana struggled to swallow the unchewed mouthful, nearly choking as she cleared her throat. "You said live a little... It looks delicious. I didn't think you'd mind." Boy-oh-boy, she didn't see that coming. She hoped he'd find it cute or something, showing she wanted to share her space with him.

"You know what they say about assumptions! If you wanted some, I'd have gotten them to get you a piece of your own!" He couldn't stop growling, she took some of his Bloody Cake! How dare She! It was the only indulgence he hadn't walked away from! As such, he'd become quite protective of it. No sharing. Period!

Dana fast realised he was beyond upset. Over chocolate cake, though? She didn't know whether it was adorable, or scary. Perhaps both, maybe a distraction would help. "Actually, I haven't heard. Tell me, I'm interested to know."

He leant into that damn backrest, taking his plate of heavenly goodness with him so she couldn't steal more. Her attempts to seduce him, dancing her tongue against that spoon while cleaning it of its frosting and cream, fell on deaf hormones. No way would she get a single morsel. No Way. She'd reduced him to forking the largest mouthful that could well end up in a trip to the ER, their date was over. "Makes an ass... Out of you and Me!"

“Ohh, makes sense. I’m sorry, I didn’t realise you were protective over your food.”

His mouthfuls had gotten so large they both knew what he was doing. As he collected the second to last bite, he cast his gaze out the window while he spoke, unable to look at her. “Food no, not at all... But chocolate fudge cake. It’s the one indulgence I have left. Hence why I don’t share, let alone off my plate. If you’d asked, I’d have arranged a piece of your own.”

Bugger. Dana knew it’d spiralled, with little way to halt it. “Yeah...? Sorry, it was poor form of me to just take your food. I’m sorry, I only wanted a mouthful. It looked incredible. Tastes it too—” Her words stopped when he shot upright while staring out the window, doing his darndest to swallow the giant mouthful he’d just shovelled in.

His attention squared in on the figure lurking around his truck. He couldn’t decide if they were a car thief, or an opportunist believing the crate taking up most of his truck’s deck held some secret treasure. Unable to pry his eyes off the cloaked deviant, though the shitty weather made following every movement difficult. What was clear, whoever they were didn’t wear an ounce of wet weather gear, or have a pathetic umbrella.

The more he stared, he noticed they’d some weird protrusion from their chest to their waist. It was altogether the strangest looking human he’d ever seen. Just what the hell were they doing? They weren’t testing the handles, so he eliminated a car-jacker. No, they appeared more concerned with avoiding being seen. They should be more concerned with their exposure to this shitstorm, they were being nothing short of foolish.

Dana sucked in her breath when his brow furrowed, wondering what’d gained his steely glare. When his nostrils flared, she knew it’d be bad. “What’s wrong?” He didn’t acknowledge her, so turned to see what’d captured his attention.

He may’ve been devoid of words, but his grunts and growls came in thick and fast. More so when he watched the hooded perp cast another shady glance before putting their hand under the crate’s cover, pulling out an apple. When they slipped it through the neck of their hoodie, he tilted his head, trying to understand why? As they went for the second, he both snorted and realised they were homeless. No one steals the world’s shittiest tasting cooking apples on the planet to eat.

Without taking his eyes off the unfolding situation outside he lowered the plate, fork, and sadly, his last mouthful of heavenly cake on the table. “If

you'll excuse me, seems an opportunist's loitering around my pickup." He caught the tail end of Dana's hastened tone, but not her words. There wasn't time for her shit. "I'll get Jacques to order you a cab."

Speed racing towards the front doors, the staff stared with blank expressions as he rolled his shoulders and turned up his collar. "Jacques, Now!" As the Frenchman came into his peripheral, he'd reached the doors. About time. "Send me the bill. I'll pay it when I get home. And order the lady a cab!" He hadn't really intended to bark across the man's restaurant. Wrong, not entirely true.

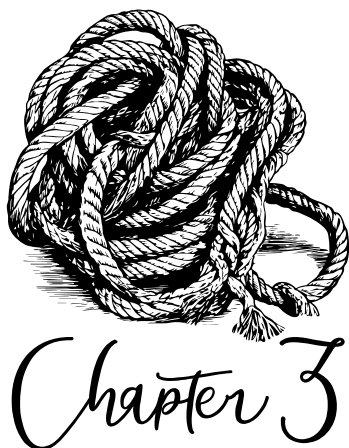
Jacques darted his eyes towards the woman who'd began a slow, cautious stroll towards the front doors, too. "Monsieur Carlson, it's on the house. Is everything okay?"

"Remains to be seen. Someone's getting friendly with my truck!" He flicked his hand through the air to match his escalating bad mood. "I don't work that way, Jaques—surely you know that!" As he grabbed the nearest doors handle, Dana landed beside him. Least he'd been saved that nightmare. "It was a pleasure to meet you tonight, Dana. Thank-you for your company and a lovely evening." She tugged at his forearm, halting his movement and shifting his gaze from the intruder hovering against his truck.

Dana hadn't intended to make contact with him, it was more instinctual when her options were fading into that storm. "Don't you want them to call the police?" He offered her nothing but a shake of his head, reaching for that handle. "I could wait for you to finish." Her lip came under fire, hoping he'd agree.

"They're homeless Dana! They don't need police, they need food, warmth, and shelter!" His attention shot over her head to Jacques, who had the phone to his ear. "The owner's ordering you a taxi. Take care of yourself. And no more walking the city streets alone after dark."

Dana spun to catch who was on the phone, finding the man who'd tended to their table, fisting his hair rather fearful. Owner and friend, it seemed. "I don't mind waiting. I'm—" Her words cut short when her hand she'd not removed fell away. She watched him step through those grand doors, her heart sinking with each defiant stride he marched towards a pickup while putting on his hat. The gust of wind that flew in and the sound of the rain, her arms shielded themselves from the blistering cold, yet he'd not flinched. Unable to grasp how their date had tanked into nothing. Rick would have to organise her a second date.



The icy blast that hit him when he opened the restaurant's door chilled his bones. How the hell did the lurking thief not feel it? As he marched in his steps, the wind whipped him in unrelenting slaps, forcing him to dip his head so not to lose his hat—and shield him from the shitstorm. Thanks to the chaotic noise lashing them, his approach held a silence under the brewing thunder and lightning in the distance. And as he reached his truck, the strange appearing thief was pulling a second of those god-awful apples.

He paused mere inches behind them. His head tilted, curious, their hand was small and feminine. Frustration simmered, this concrete hellhole ruined lives, namely a woman, or worse, a young teenager currently living on the street. It sealed his lawyer's fate, he'd never venture into this shithole again, you could never unsee the atrocities littered on every corner.

His runaway disdain blew down the street alongside a gust of wind as she took a bite. The rain was taking no prisoners, and said wind lashed with punishing whip force. Yet, instead of seeking shelter, her hunger drove her needs over the frosty storm or being caught red-handed. A street was no place for a woman, let alone a hungry one. So he cleared his throat. Pity the wind stole it, forcing a second attempt—louder.

Ohhh no, she knew she'd get busted sneaking a second, and spun her head and shoulders, hoping to heaven it wasn't the police. While doing so, she was confronted by sour bitterness hitting her taste buds, and she emptied it into her hand while still holding the disgusting piece of, what was clearly not an apple!



As a dark tan jacket came into her view, she thanked whoever listened upstairs, it wasn't a cop. But in this foul weather, he wouldn't be braving a gale force thunderstorm unless he was the pickup's owner she'd just stolen from, so she'd probably end up in front of law enforcement, anyway.

Patience wasn't his friend as she shuffled her feet to meet the rest of her facing him. Nor was it present when she didn't meet his eyes. Perhaps being caught red-handed had somewhat embarrassed her.

So it should.

Homeless or not, stealing was wrong.

He knew, surely she did too, of shelters and food banks that'd help her. But now he held her attention, he leant in, his voice at a whisper, but still loud enough amidst the rumbling skyline and heavy rain. "You know... Stealing's a crime." Was she listening or ignoring him? She hadn't flinched, not that he'd invaded her space. Either way, her actions seemed odd, and while waiting for her response, an icy shudder traced his spine from the heavy weight of soaked clothes clinging to his skin.

His attention then sharply honed on the wriggling under her hoodie, and her dismissive attitude now made sense. Stunned, no, she'd shocked him tugging the neck open, leaning in to mouth or talk. Unsure if he'd have made sense of it, anyway, when his mind swirled equally as the storm. That fallout then continued as her hand momentarily disappeared before pulling out the first criminal offence. What he then saw dried his mouth, which was no small feat in this storm.

Tiny but distinct.

A bite mark.

Aware she'd have to address the gentleman, perhaps all could be forgiven, and she adjusted her arm supporting her most precious cargo. Before facing her fate, and his chest, she sighed, using her cold shaking hand to place both those sorry excuses for apples where she continued to stare. While she waited for him to take them, her embarrassment turned into a violent knot in her stomach. She was in the deepest of doodoo, and her gaze drifted towards the concrete footpath, while rocking the fretting inside her hoodie.

"I don't want them now. You've bitten them." He leant in further, pushing against her hand, and an uneasy rush cornered, her fragile body buckled under barely any pressure. It didn't help his words weren't true either. His stallion couldn't care less, never picky about treats like him, but as time

dragged on, an inkling grew. She'd been brazen out in the open, taking those apples. Her homeless position mightn't be by choice.

His head cocked when her posture didn't change, and when cupping the culprits, the gravity of their predicament thundered in like that storm. Forget drowned rat, she, and whatever she hid under her drenched clothing had to be darn-well waterboard drowning. It grew a raging overwhelming demand to get her shelter from the dangerous weather, and he tugged her under the awning. Her immediate defiance ensued, forcing him to use his strength to remove her from the storm only she fought harder.

His breath blew out, brushing steam into the deathly chill, and silence followed as time slipped into something he couldn't gauge. Not until the chill biting the air turned his clothing into a death trap. His brain, he'd argue was also fast succumbing to the same fate. Plans needed to be made, and he scanned the nearly deserted street for his next move, noticing she was making her own plans. So he prepared for her bolting, too.

Her heart pounded at being manhandled, forming tears that no one would notice as they merged with the falling droplets from her hoodie. Again she adjusted her cargo, before rummaging through her track-pants pockets. Her breath stilled against the sting as the soaked fleece brushed her thigh. It spoke of her fate if she didn't find warmth and safety, forcing her numb fingers to clutch her last precious few soaked dollar bills. The best she could hope for... If she paid, he'd let her indiscretion go.

It pained her to relinquish any, but what choice did she have? None. That's what. She needed him to move on before he noticed. So, she demanded her shaking hand meet her lips, using her teeth to free one. Again, the chill of her pants bit at her skin while shoving the rest back, before thrusting her offering towards those shitty apples or was it his hands? She couldn't tell without looking.

When his hand still holding the evidence met hers, he was certain hers suffered from frostbite. It stoked his burning desire to get her out of this shitty weather, those damn clothes, and downing a hot meal. His mind circled, vicious in its shark nature on how he'd achieve it. Perhaps baiting her? He just hoped shelters took dogs, because if it was a child, he'd lose his stomach.

Scrap that, he'd lose it regardless when he leant in, and her arms buckled further. "Do you honestly think a dollar's enough for those apples? Do you have any idea who you've just stolen from?" Never one to use his position, something compelled him to help her before that clothing fast

became her tomb. Sadly, the chill wasn't helping, coming up blank on how to secure a good outcome. He'd have to convince her, she had no other option but to accept his offer.

Her numb ears tingled in a bitter sting when his dark tone fretted her nerves and her precious cargo. Didn't help standing still was seeping the cold into her bones. Neither of them could afford to get sick on the streets. Had this become the moment she'd dreaded for the last six-weeks. It forced her hand, and she gave up her last precious few, placing the crumbled pile at his chest. "I-I... I'm so-so... sor-sorry." Not that she sounded coherent when her teeth flew past chattering. This storm was killing them, they needed somewhere safe so she could wring their soaked clothing, find warmth, and hopefully food scraps.

He didn't hear a word she'd mumbled, and placed his free hand to her chin, tilting her gaze to face him. "I can't hear you."

It took less than a second after that...

Caught in the undercurrent of something he couldn't define. He no longer wanted her answer, but something else entirely as he drank in the most beautiful and terrified woman he'd ever seen. It became harder to look away, detonating his long abandoned possessive need before crash landing into something else entirely, when volatile shivering and chattering teeth from fear and impending death raked over her. He instinctively became primal, no, caveman-ish, beyond determined in the outcome. She'd never deter him now. "Repeat yourself, clearly this time. Otherwise I'll call the police." He'd called her bluff, desperate times...

She closed her eyes when he'd guided her head in his direction well before her embarrassment wet them. Inched closer than ever to tears, she had one option left. Yes, it'd cost her everything, but the weather, and their soaked clothing would land them in more trouble than mere police. So, she forced her trembling hands to find her last three measly dollar bills, placing them at his hands still holding what'd left the worst lingering aftertaste.

She'd argue her attempt held no strength as the subzero chill in her limbs barely landed against those foul culprits. Even they were warmer than her, all she had were words while trying to free her chin from his thumb that evaded her attempts. "I-I-I sa-said so-sor—" The wriggling from inside her jumper encouraged a tug hard enough she freed herself, and she ignored the sting, opening her hoodies neck again.

His frustration fast threatened the storm at her rapidly rising chill, and irritation she'd pulled away. Until she whispered into that damn hoodie. He had to prove to himself it wasn't a child, and yanked the neck from her grip, moving closer to peer in.

More revelations cornered him.

A tiny face—just like their mothers.

Staring, terrified, back at him.

A solid lump wedged itself in his throat as more wrath exploded, lunging him into a weird tailspin. Two vulnerable souls, two! His thoughts were ripped from that path when she did the same with her hoodie, taking a step back before bolting into the rain and past his truck.

Never had he been so grateful it only took a few giant strides to catch her by the arm, but he'd taken the one holding the small, terrified child. And when she ripped it free, trying to catch a sliding toddler down her thighs, he knew better than to stop her.

Unsure if they'd heard his grunted disdain after seeing those tiny legs in pink tights equally soaked as her mother. No way would he allow it to continue. Not on his watch, and he did a better job reclaiming her bicep. "You'll do exactly what I say... Otherwise, I'll call the police!"

Her cold aching body instinctively fought for freedom. He was no different than the man she'd finally escaped from, and her daughter's screams demanded she fight harder. Sadly, it turned them into blood curdling terror. She'd never allow her baby to witness her mother being beaten again, but as fear trickled into her racing heart, she was cornered by both memories and being pulled back under the awning. What else did she have but whisper into her jersey. "I'm so-so-rry, ba-by."

Rage he'd long caged heaved through every vein. No, that was the understatement of the fucking century.

It wasn't about the apples.

It'd never been about the god-awful fruit.

No, what'd infuriated him. She repeatedly attempted to escape his help. He wasn't a damn monster. The possibility then cornered his concrete filled and now icy cold brain. Damn-it. He sucked in a breath, something, no, someone, pushed her into homelessness. She must fear for her life, she'd not have done it with a child in tow otherwise.

But he still needed answers. "Do you have a home? One I can drive you to?" He'd take a woman's refuge or, better, a hostel over the streets. No—

not true. Horrid as it was to think, he hoped she really was homeless. It'd force her to accept his offer.

She first considered lying, but it became a no when he'd want details, she'd been forced to disappear without a trace for a reason. Otherwise, he'd find them, and the cowboy hovering could ruin her. What could she do that'd guarantee him walking away? Her daughter was now shivering, they needed shelter from this blistering icy wind and rain before it killed them.

She now faced two problems. One would be easier, her daughter always came first. The second. More of a nightmare really, and her chest heaved as his intense stare turned into an angry predator glare. She definitely needed space from him and pulled open the hoodie finding her daughter's chilled little body flooded with tears. "It's ok-ay ba-by, we'll find some-where, safe and wa-rm...so-on." If she believed they still had time to find shelter, her chattering words screamed otherwise.

He leant in to hear her conversation with the young one. The closer he got, their shivering and her incoherent chattering told him the woman was beyond the point of knowing how dangerously close to hypothermia they were. Worse, he wasn't helping by keeping them out in this shitty storm. So, once they'd finished their private conversation, he'd pursue his plans.

"It's ok-ay ba-by, mu-mum-my isn't being, ta-ken aw-ay from you. I won't put you do-wn." Her lips rested on the drenched hoodie, adjusting her daughter by changing the arm shielding her, wrapping her now numb one as a reminder she was staying put.

He thought his attitude was raging before, now he'd never describe the fury her words incited. Who the hell sent her running to the streets? Fortunately, the rational side of his brain kicked in. Safe and warm first, Q and A, later. If he hedged his bets, she'd have zero trust in organisations, or law enforcement to end up on the streets. And while that worked in his favour, convincing her he wasn't anything like what she'd run from might end in his bloodshed.

To get his plan underway before they all froze, including himself, he interrupted their whispered discussion. "Have you forgotten... You stole from me? You have reparation to pay and that starts by getting in my truck." He finally caught a flash of her stunning blue eyes as they darted around, but the fear consuming her grew his newfound protective obsession. He'd gut the fucker who'd hurt her like they did to cattle on his ranch.

Fuck.

He'd not had those thoughts since...

If tears didn't show her vulnerability, she'd have let them flow. Men were nothing but cruel, abusive animals, and the one in front of her would claim her—claim them both as his next victims. She had to consider her options and inched a step backwards towards freedom, she'd never be at the mercy of a man. Not again.

She'd been so careful. It was only her desperation in needing a safer location after the influx of other homeless souls seeking shelter that she chanced somewhere new. Could spurting out another sincere apology that'd failed twice before make a difference? It was worth a shot, and with every inch of remaining strength, her eyes met his chest, solely focused on making her words sound coherent. "I'm sorry, I to-ok them. Please let us go. I'm re-ally sorry. It was only... My dau-ghter'ss hungry. I know... I shou-ldn't have taken the sec-ond one. It's just... I haven't had any-thing... In. Two days."

His blood became lava, smouldering his restraint at what some fucker reduced her to. He'd have to double down and corral her into that corner with lightning speed. "Wonder what the authorities would think of a young child on the street? Pretty sure they wouldn't look kindly on it. Perhaps I should call them too." Bugger, it didn't have his desired outcome.

Her legs lunged into action without permission of her mind. She couldn't allow that to happen. The second those 'authorities' had her baby, she'd be handed over to her monstrous father. If he happily used her as a punching bag, he'd eventually start hitting their daughter, too.

When the cowboy who just wouldn't relent retook her arm and spun her to face him, her breath also vacated without permission. Unafraid to beg, she fell further into her humiliation as she came to a standstill, her shame had already tanked, anyway. "Ple-ase, just, let us g-go. Do-n't hurt us. Let us g-go. We-we aren't wo-rth it." Surprised he'd heard through the wind and pelting rain drowning more than her ruined clothes when his eyebrow cocked. She then realised he was distracted, contemplating something, and her body barked its demands.

More shock filtered through her when he didn't follow. Had it worked? Perhaps. Hopefully, then she'd gain some distance from him. Would one last plea ensure it'd stay that way? "Ple-ase don't say any-thing. We on-ly hav-e each ot-her. She me-ans every-thing to me. An-and with-out her mother, she'll be-come dis-traught." He remained motionless, other than his eyes burning a hole right through her, and she demanded her legs move faster.

If she could just emotionally guilt bomb him to seal the deal, his eyes had narrowed. She needed whatever had entered his thoughts to leave. “I-I pro-mise... I-I’ll ne-ver steal ag-ain. No, ma-matter how hun-gry, we g-ge-get.” Nearly free of his reach, should she say more to distract him? Or run like the wind she was failing to escape.

Stuck in a stupor and fast sweeping chill, his body couldn’t be compelled to move, even as she opened the space between them. Or when her body uncontrollably shook as a terrified chill started draining her of life. His head leant forward, but he got no further than his mouth opening and head tilting as he closed it. What the hell could he say? Other than he was fast losing ground.

She understood his expression while snaking her wobbly steps backwards. If he could just contemplate her words a smidge longer. Unless... Would laying it on the line while gaining those last few steps work? “I-I pro-mise plea-please, jus-just let us g-goooo.”

Normal thought no longer worked for him, not now. Probably due to emotions he’d never suffered from now consumed his head, chest, fists. Try everything. Unable to describe the brewing internal thunderstorm, well, he had a fair idea, but it was irrelevant. Not when they both had more pressing issues, and his large stride in her direction matched her panicked ones backwards. The second he held her arm in his grip again, he dragged her to the passenger door, unlocking his pickup with the alarm. The trembling through her clothing, and terrified youngster, only doubled down his determination. “Get in!”

Her legs buckled under the weight of her position. She was no match for a man his size on a good day, and today was one of her worst on record. They were in serious trouble. “Plea-please, I-I’m begg-ing you. Plea-please, let us go. I don-n’t, wan-nt my dau-daughter hu-rt.”

“I have no interest in hurting either of you. Get in!” His sharp tone jolted her, but that also could’ve been because his breath connected with her face like the still howling wind. “But you stole from me. It has consequences!”

Her sobs melted into the train wreck she’d fallen into as she shuffled away from the door. He’d delayed her from getting somewhere dry, and now she could barely move. Freedom and safety were fast slipping from her grasp. No, faster as her consciousness outpaced how numb parts of her were. He’d backed her into a corner. And the cowboy, as it stood, was their biggest

immediate threat. Perhaps she had to accept the moment she both dreaded and feared had finally found her. "Ok-ay..."

"Okay, what?" He was fast racked with confusion. Though it could easily be from his half frozen brain. Why say okay, but step away?

"Call the po-police, au-auth-orities, who-ever..." Her sobs, though louder, still paled against the weather. "Bu-but we'll wa-wait out-side, the veh-icle." Her lips landed on her baby's head through the hoodie. She'd have whispered her love, but it'd fall victim to the wind and her daughter was succumbing to the chill too.

That cowboy had cost her everything. Not true, her stealing had caused her demise. But the sicko tried taking advantage of her vulnerability, it steeled her death glare into the depths of his eyes. Seemed fitting, that'd be her fate once in custody and handed over to her husband, anyway. "The mo-ment we get in yo-your, tru-ck, we'll nev-never be-he-ard from a-gain." Did he really think her that stupid? That her homelessness was born of her own fool-hearted idiocy. Joke was on him, and she shuffled towards what little shelter the awning gave, but clear of the restaurant's entrance while failing to soothe her daughter.

Oh, the hell he'd allow it to go down like that! He shot after her, dragging her back to the passenger door. She fought with her free arm, causing her daughter's howling to scream. It sharpened against his chest, and once he'd lifted them into his truck, he activated the child lock before slamming the thing shut. He knew he shouldn't be offended. She obviously thought all men were a threat, but damn if it didn't hurt his pride.

He clutched his hips. Yes, while being pelted in rain. He had to as he sighed, convincing himself to take the win. Earlier, when they'd taunted being thick and fast all evening, never did he think this'd be why? Casting his gaze to her when his thoughts did, she'd started shuffling along the black leather bench seat towards the driver's side. Not on his watch he mused, setting the alarm. Her head spun possessed, and her glare didn't fare much better. If he'd ever thought what wishing someone dead looked like, she'd just answered it.

He too could play her 'poke the bear game,' and he held up his keyring. Yes, still in the torrential rain, yes, now soaked through to his soul. But he savoured winning that round, too. His smirk joined in on his victory lap as they held a deadlocked stare, knowing her thoughts were whether the fuss of the alarm going off would gain the attention she was clearly desperate to avoid.



It was time to put rubber on the road, but he got no further than a lowly step when Dana emerged. Damn-it. Her attention squared on the one he'd just thrown in the front seat of his pickup. And judging by her hastened steps, she might be concerned, but he was more interested in keeping an eye on the escape artist.

"What are you doing, Austin? This why you ended our date early, had other options lined up?" Dana hadn't meant to go all stalker possessive and unruly, but she was still reeling their date had ended so abruptly, and Rick hadn't replied to her messages yet.

"Dana... I'm not answerable to you..." He sighed, goddamn-it. His hands landed on his sides, taming his attitude. "She's homeless, I need to get her off the streets, it's no place for women."

Dana shifted in closer, almost touching, forcing her hand to stop from doing the same. "Ohhh Austin, that's so chivalrous." Her attention shifted to the passenger window. The poor woman looked terrified, but... She tilted her head for a better look, something nagged, she knew her somehow. When she couldn't place how, she let the random notion go.

But as it trickled in, Dana wondered if it'd work to her advantage. "She looks scared as hell. I should tag along, sit in the back. You know, help settle her nerves. With another woman..." She paused as the sound of an alarm pierced everyone's ears, but got the rest in when he became distracted. "She's probably afraid you're going to hurt her or something."

"No shit." His tone grunted towards no one in particular while darting round the front of his pickup. Their race was on, and he'd win—reaching his door before she got any further than feet on the ground. As he collided with the door, he kept it firmly in place, blocking her. Their bodies, now inches apart, railroaded him with more of what he didn't understand. Sparks. No, fireworks ignited between them, outmatching the thunderous display above. "Get back in the truck!"

"Plea-please ju-just let us go, plea—" Words failed when she found herself being lifted back into the pickup, reducing her to shaking her head, hoping it'd continue her pleas and he'd finally listen.

He'd had a fucking-goddamn-nough of this bullshit. Her body shivered so violently he was surprised it'd not splintered into icy shards, and the little one had stilled. Neither was good. "Move to the passenger seat, now!" His temper would get the better of him, still unable to shake how their bodies reacted to each other so close. While clothed. Without even touching.

Not that she'd noticed in her state. He'd have to get creative, proving he had no intention of ever hurting them.

He leapt in behind her as she shuffled over towards the passenger seat, turning on the truck and blasting the heat on full. The apples he now wanted immortalised were carefully placed on the seat beside him as he shut his door. And as he turned towards the unfolding terror beside him, Dana's form out the passenger window darted with folded arms towards a taxi that'd pulled up. The gentleman in him flicked on the wipers, watching through the windscreen until she disappeared into the cab.

With that nightmare sorted, he rested his forearm on the steering wheel, taking a moment. While he'd won—he'd also lost. Lost the homeless woman's trust and faith he wasn't like the rat-bastard she was running from. Could he undo it? He had to. That feeling she created still surged through his veins, and he couldn't shake it a damn. If anything, it kept bringing friends.

The cab pulling away, fortunately shifted him from his predicament to the shaking mass of fear consuming his truck. Again, he met with her scathing hatred that wanted him dead. Now his sigh tugged at places that'd lain forever dormant, and he leant his upper body towards the terrified duo. How the hell could he dispel her apprehension? He didn't get a chance. Her startled jolt crashed her head into the window. What a gut punch. How many more beatings would he endure before he got home?

More body wide revolts met with the permanent lump in his throat as he leant past to her seatbelt. It both turned his stomach green and loins on fire in searing heat and pounding rage, demanding he free it from the cage he'd locked it in. Doing the best he could under such confrontational circumstances, he ignored his guests panic while quickly adjusting it over them, though it also provided a timely reminder. "Check her. She's not moving." He'd planned on asking, but it came out rather demanding.

Her head screamed she regroup, but it still hurt from the window attack, and her body had gone on freezer strike. While the seatbelt made sense, but the concern for her daughter didn't. "Sh-e's fin-e. I can st-ill... fe-fe-el her brea-thing." The monster didn't even hold the sense to understand it'd be something a mother constantly did. And being this chilled, she'd moved her, so she'd feel breathing on her skin.

Thank the lord, he knew they'd been in that storm far too long. It'd chilled beyond his bones after mere minutes. Now, though, he'd warm them up. "You need to take off your hood—"

“Plea-plea-se no. D-do-n’t do this.” Unable to hide her fear they were sitting ducks in his truck. They were in so much trouble. “Plea-ple-ase, ju-just let us g-go.”

He aimed the blasting air vents towards them, while silently arguing with his bad temper it had no right to be offended. “The hot air won’t warm either of you through it. That’s all. I told you, I’m not going to hurt you or your daughter.” Perhaps if he said it enough, it’d finally start registering.

Never could she trust a man at his word. Did he really think her that foolish? She loathed to lose a layer of clothing that felt a protective barrier. It’d also expose her daughter to the man who’d barely seen her face. Perhaps what sucked more—sadly, he was right, and she began trying to slip an arm through a sleeve. Several failed attempts later, she nearly jumped out of it when he held the closest sleeve by her door.

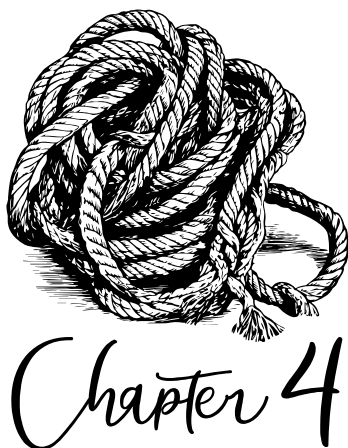
“Pull your arm through.” It equally gutted him watching her struggle, it took all his restraint not to ease her burden. To give her space and prove himself, the second her arm was free, he pulled it over her head, slid it down her other, and threw it in the backseat.

He instantly became sucker punched when confronted with her frail body. The rage at who’d reduced her to living on the streets would never temper until he’d slowly gutted that fucker. But equally catching were her blonde locks. Luscious, thick, and more than a solid handful. Scandalous thoughts of what he’d do while taking a fistful would be the death of him. That was until he caught wind of her tiny daughter. “How old is she?”

“No, ple-ase. Ju-just let us go. I pro-prom-ise I’ll ne-never do it ag-ain.” She considered it one thing doing dastardly things to her. Had she underestimated the danger? Dare she try the window, they’d not left yet. If he was into young children... This couldn’t be happening and she lunged for the window’s button.

What the hell! What did she think he was asking? She’d spiralled faster than a nosediving plane. The fierce wind whipped inside the truck as she lowered the window, and he turned on its lock before putting it back up. Whatever cycled in her mind needed to take a hike. “Not all men are monsters!” He’d not intended for his tone to growl, it stopped her dead. His only saving, it gave him insight into what she was running from. He’d have to tone everything back. Really think before he spoke. And that started with giving himself time to calm his beast, and he put the column shifter into drive, indicated, pulled out, and headed home to his sanctuary.

One that'd become theirs, too.



They hadn't reached the highway when he caught out his peripheral a little body wriggle, and another one of those emotional sighs left his chest. He'd become concerned the cold might've sunk its claws into her. The woman also moved less like a corpse as she stroked her daughter's back. As much as asking about her young child seemed to invoke a wild reaction, he couldn't help himself. "Is she okay, is there a problem?"

She understood successful outcomes with kidnappings usually involved the kidnapper seeing the person they'd taken as human, rather than the subject of their vile intentions. It was worth a shot in what seemed a cruel fate. "She's tired... That's all." No denying the heat had worked its magic, her words now flowed, albeit still minimal.

"And that's a problem, why? She should sleep if she's tired." A smile rose the corner of his mouth, her voice had returned from the brink. Bonus it wasn't begging for a freedom she'd not lost. But its tone, velvety smooth, made inroads soothing what'd ached for longer than he remembered. Dragged from his crazy thoughts when her response hadn't been forthcoming, a quick glance caught her whispering to the little one instead.

She tried keeping her voice low as possible, hating the position she'd gotten them into. How could she forgive herself, and what of her daughter—if he didn't kill them first? While that still threatened like the storm, those fears didn't help her more pressing issue. "It's okay to have an accident."

His temper thundered like the horizon upon hearing that. What the hell was spinning through her damn mind? As they entered the on-ramp, his

attention towards the commentary shifted to the heavy traffic. Damn-it, it'd take longer to get the hell out of this shithole—and them to safety.

How was she going to keep her baby quiet? It wasn't her fault, no matter how she consoled it was okay, her daughter wouldn't let it go. "It's okay, baby. I told you, an accident's okay." She considered telling him, but he was crazy focused on getting to a destination and do whatever he'd planned. "Shhh, it's okay, baby." She'd keep trying, unwilling to poke his anger further.

His tone carried a blistering wrath at what shone brighter than a flare gun through him. How the hell would he settle his ego before they got home? "What does she want!"

Ohhh no, her attempts weren't working. He'd hurt them in the vehicle if she couldn't calm her daughter. Perhaps telling him would satisfy his crazed demeanour. Didn't mean she liked it'd tell her how cruel he'd get. "She wants to use the bathroom." The glare he shot back screamed clear as day. They were staying on the highway, and she could forget leaving his vehicle.

Ahhh, now he understood 'accident.' Relieved it wasn't anything to do with his driving skills or she thought he'd make her assumed disappearance look like. "How old is she?"

She'd never disclose that information, and cowered them towards the door. But her little freedom fighter had other ideas.

"I nearly two big."

That angelic little voice and smile warmed his heart. How could any man mistreat them? More importantly, how could he convey he wasn't one of those men? Perhaps start with a smile? It didn't work, so landed his attention on the road before they had a real 'accident.' Over the years his ranch had been subjected to many toddler 'incidents' from his cattle crew, staff, and neighbour's children. His grin grew, seemed his ranch was in for another round. "Is she still in diapers?"

She pinched her eyes shut. Never. He wasn't privileged enough to know, and her baby didn't understand. So, she cut in before her daughter who still faced him—someone she should fear but didn't said more. "Baby no—"

"Let! Her speak!" Shit, he better rein his attitude in, the little one jumped too. He considered he'd probably screwed up until he heard that sweet little voice again.

"For bed. I a big girl."

The little one's smile washed away the tension consuming his expression. She was the cutest wee thing. Did her mother have what she

needed, though? “Do you have any?” He loathed being unable to look at them, but the road and storm made visibility near zero. He just hoped the silence smothering him wasn’t her ignoring the question. Then he caught movement to his side and waited.

“Only, one.” Her shaking arm held it up until its soaked weight won, putting it back in her drenched pocket. Still, it was preferable to nothing. What a mess, she sighed. Why couldn’t she escape this nightmare? “It’s okay baby, just sleep. Accidents are okay.” The kisses to her daughter’s head weren’t soothing the need any longer.

His mind ran with ideas that came up naught until he caught the exit sign. Unable to ignore the perfect timing, it was the last one for miles, but he only recalled a vague memory of the area. He’d have to fast find a shitty all-night supermarket. Heck, even a service station. No, whatever came first would do. Moments later, his prayers were answered as a gas station’s neon lights glared through the pelting rain and whipping wind.

Pulling into the forecourt, he parked by a pump, considering how this’d work. He’d not allow her to leave with her daughter, and if he’d left his truck, she’d bolt. It was a dreary situation he didn’t much care for, and he stared out his window, running scenarios through his tired but still wired brain. As if fate handed him a lifeline, a teenage couple parked on the other side of the pump. He gauged their usefulness, the young man battled the weather despite being undercover pumping gas, and his lady friend soon arrived behind him. He didn’t like his odds but had nothing else.

With his window down, he notioned with his hand towards the young woman, her boyfriend instantly giving him a death glare. Good lad. To soften the distrust, he offered a smile, but the young man pulled in his girlfriend, cautioning her. It was only fair he let the youngster know. “I just need to borrow your lovely lady’s, female shopping talent. That agreeable with you?” The lad gave him a weird look. “We’re all soaked. Got caught in the storm.” Fingers crossed that’d be enough for them to overlook anything else.

He smiled as the young lady touched her boyfriend’s arm before skipping over. Thank the heavens, and he yanked his wallet from his back jeans pocket, handing a hundred-dollar bill out his window. “We need a pack of toddler pull ups, a range of snacks—dealer’s choice, two bottles of water, and a hot chocolate, please.” She took the note, smiled back and, without skipping a beat, headed in. To sweeten the pot, he tilted his head out the window. “If

you're quick... You can keep the change, and I'll give you another hundred." Never had he seen young feet move so fast.

"Please, let us go." Her cold shivering had stopped, allowing her words to resemble a normal conversation. That, she hoped, meant he'd listen. "I can take her to the bathroom inside."

He'd not let her derail his plans, she'd scatter into the winds, and put his window to half-way before leaning over the steering wheel, facing the still fearful woman. "No, you'll run, and that's not happening. You stole from me. I won't hesitate to call child services, or the police."

"Okay..." she whispered, "it's better than the fate awaiting my daughter and I, once we get where you're heading."

What the Fuck! He threw the truck into park, leaning towards his accuser. "Get that crazy idea outta your head. What have I said or done to give you the idea I'd hurt either of you?"

Her own anger brewed under the surface. Pity it surfaced as fear, hearing him goad her. "Kidnapping, refusing a toilet, questions about a minor..." She faced out her own window, watching the sky flash with fork lightning. Dare she wish it'd strike him dead, she'd just sealed her fate. With a bit of luck, it'd be over before she thawed completely.

"Get that outta your head! You hear me!" His bad attitude needed reining in, she'd startled again, knocking her head as she shuffled away from him. They both had to move on for different reasons, and he used a calmer tone. "Do you need to go, too?"

She offered a nod. His barking tone triggered her trauma, nearly removing her need to use a bathroom, and just wetting herself and his seat. Which still might happen.

"By all means go, but your daughter remains here. That way, I know you'll come straight back and not try anything stupid."

She'd never leave her alone with that monster. "I can't leave my defenceless daughter with a man who kidnapped us." She wished her anger would ride her words and destroy him. But her husband had killed her strength. Once upon a time she'd have fought, now she knew better.

Noted, and as much as he hated it, she had a point. In her mind, no matter what he said, she believed he'd hurt them. "Well, it'll be another three-plus-hours before we reach our destination... So—"



“And where exactly is that?” The more intel she gathered, she could leave a better breadcrumb trail and ensure he spent the rest of his god-forsaken life rotting in prison, whether or not she survived.

“My home, it—” He paused. No everything did the moment terror engulfed every inch of her beautiful face. Something sparked her fear he couldn’t compete with. “You’ll just have to trust me. Your options are pretty slim.”

He was deadlocked in a staring contest until the tap on his window broke it. As he pushed the window button down, he re-pulled his wallet, handing her two hundred-dollar bills as they traded goods, flicking his hand when the change entered his space. “Keep it. You saved me moving these old bones in soaked clothing.”

“You don’t look old.”

His chuckle escaped. “Thank-you.” He then waited as she trotted to her boyfriend who’d finished and tipped his hat in gratitude, utterly grateful he nodded back.

Now he’d get shit sorted before the little one fell victim to an oopsie ‘accident.’ He parked away from the bright forecourt, affording the woman and her child privacy. “You should put her in a diaper.”

“Please let us go. I can’t do that in front of you. She’s just a little girl... Please...” She now wondered how unhinged he was?

The grunt that blew out his mouth, he swore, could smite that damn storm from existence. Without saying a word, he removed his jacket, which was, yes—wet, but it beat that damn hoodie. “Use this to cover her.” As he placed it in the space between them, he turned his gaze out his own window. “Let me know when you’re finished.”

She couldn’t trust him far as she could see him with her eyes shut, but did try ascertain his motive. She came up naught, other than confusion. But he’d moved to a darkened area, given his jacket for privacy, and turned away, waiting for her to finish. He was like her husband, lulling victims into a false sense of security, and then once at their mercy, boom, a full frontal assault. But in the face of it sparing her daughter any indignity, she’d take it.

It was an interesting manoeuvre getting a pull-up on her toddler while keeping them covered. “There you go, baby. Now no accidents.” She kissed her daughter’s forehead as she snuggled back into her chest. “Now you can sleep.” With a bit of luck, she would, and not be awake for whatever he’d planned.

He waited. Then waited some more, long after their little conversation had ended. Goddamn, she was good at forging her own path. "Are you finished?" A disdainful grunt echoed through his ears, and he took that as a yes. He found his jacket over the brown paper bags, it somehow scorned him, and draped it over his lap, taking a bag, extending it towards his guests. "I do apologise it's terrible service station food." She simply turned away. He'd play dirty, and pulled out what lit up the little angel's expression. How could a mere packet of potato chips invoke such joy? It seemed odd as he opened it, handing it to her with a smile.

She snorted into her daughter's shoulder. What the hell did he think he was doing? He was not going to groom her baby into a false sense of security, groom her for anything! Her glare narrowed, wishing it held the power to burn him alive. It didn't work, he returned a smile, and offer of his jacket. She shook her head, not wanting his aftershave lingering anywhere near her no matter how good it smelt. But he just did what he wanted, putting it over her daughter's back before continuing with his strange behaviour.

He kept a side eye on the chip monster as she ate faster than her little fingers could shovel food into her mouth. Much like him with chocolate fudge cake. He didn't like she wasn't secured though. "I'm sorry for not getting her a car-seat. I scanned the walls of the station, I didn't see any. It's unlikely we'll find a place open this late that has one." Another sigh, this time unexpected as she continued to death stare him. Perhaps he should move to a peace offering. "How about a hot chocolate?"

She snorted into her own grunt and turned her gaze out the window, he was deftly insane. Least he gave her daughter something to eat. It'd keep her going for a while longer. It was her only silver lining... Well, that and, this cowboy had helped her escape the city, and further away from her husband.

He didn't much like being ignored, somehow, more by her. "Take the drink."

"I can't..." Every word he said terrified her.

"Why? You allergic or something?"

She shook her head, having reached her limit.

"At least eat." He met with another not on your nelly headshake. "Why?" Still nothing, and he put the drink in the truck's cup holder on the dash. "Suit yourself, but there's food and drink if you change your mind." He sighed. Unbelievable, and put his pickup into drive, otherwise it'd be sunrise before he got home.

It'd been an hour of the only sound hitting his ears were a hungry toddler eating until she fell into a contented food coma. In the brief glances he stole, he swore he'd seen a smile as she slept. His eyes cast towards the hot chocolate that'd now be colder than the storm but it was still chocolate. Why hadn't she taken it? Another glance in her direction, she'd become distressed. No, he'd argue it more resembled pain. "What's wrong?" Her continued refusal pounded through his chest. Had something gone wrong in the thaw?

She let out a sigh, riding her groan, there wasn't any point in conversing with him.

"Tell me, what's wrong? You have to talk to me!"

"Do I?" She instantly regretted her tone and forwardness.

"You stole from me, or have you forgotten? So unless you want to lose your daughter to child services—then yes, you do." Unable to stop his bullshit irrefutable empty threats, he'd fast have to find a way to engage his brain before his mouth. Otherwise, he'd destroy her and ruin himself.

More silence boomed, driving him crazy. She'd either called his bluff or some other mad shit. It'd been a quick glance, nothing more as that storm barrelled up the solid pickup. With how tight she was holding her daughter, how could the poor mite breathe? And those constant peppered kisses. It'd been really wrong of him to use it as a weapon. "So I ask again. What's wrong? Don't make it harder on yourself." His prep-talk had done shit, his days of old were creeping in.

"I need to use the bathroom..." Her shooting pain and his growling caused her tears. They were vulnerable to him, just like home.

"Why didn't you just say?" Relieved it wasn't him, he extended an olive branch. "I'll pull off at the next exit." Though he cautioned. "But nothing changes. You cannot take your daughter in with you." It was clear with the tears she wouldn't. A compromise, perhaps. "But you can take my keys. I won't be able to drive off or lock you out."

Her grip tightened around her baby. How could she leave her alone with him? She had to find the strength her husband beat into submission. "You don't need your vehicle to run off with her."

"True. But it's cold, wet, and we're in the middle of nowhere. What exactly would doing that achieve?" He sighed into his soft tone. She was one fierce Mumma Bear.

Her own sigh flickered her baby's blonde hair. Such a predicament she'd found herself in. The alternative was she peed herself. That'd certainly

have him violently punishing her while making her clean it up. “Guess you leave me no choice.” Another defeated breath, she was beyond doomed.

He had to drive longer to find another exit—and service station, but he wasted no time pulling up outside its front doors. He just as quickly killed his pickup, handing her the keys, which she gingerly took. “Wrap her in my jacket. You’ll then see I’ve not touched her.”

She had to give him credit, it’d been a solid idea, one she hadn’t considered when failing to find a way to know if he’d done anything. She shuffled to unlock her door, realising the kiddie lock was still active, and turned. But he’d already exited the cab, walking around the front of his vehicle. Her mind, like a switch, sparked into escape mode. Could she get into the driver’s seat, steal his truck and leave? Before she’d moved an inch, he’d opened her door.

“You hungry or want something fresh to drink?” He considered waiting outside his truck, but the rain was worse than ever and with no covered forecourt, in the few seconds he’d been in it, he’d nearly drowned.

“No.” She shook her head, it rippled pain through her body, hobbling off before her bladder burst.

“You have five-minutes. Don’t think I won’t know if you’ve spoken to the attendant. It’ll force my hand.” Lies. He’d never. Sadly, her eyes followed by her whole body, startled. It gave him more details of what troubled her. But once in his home, it’d help settle his bullshit and her fear.

Back in the dry safety of his pickup, he glanced at the sleeping angel, again wondering how an asshole could be cruel to such sweetness? His watch said it neared midnight, it wasn’t too late to fire off several important messages, including one home. If they were ever to feel comfortable and safe, they needed help. Next on his list, his damn lawyer. Brief and to the point. Thanks, but no thanks. Last on his list was said date, ensuring she’d arrived home safely.

To his surprise, before he’d closed his messages, a reply lit his phone’s screen and the cab, jolting the tiny sleeping cherub in her sleep. “Sorry, little one,” he whispered before returning to the message. Dana. He tilted his head to the roof before daring a proper read. She thanked him for a lovely evening, would love to see him again, and found what he’d done with the homeless woman noble. A smirk rode the corners of his mouth. She knew nothing of the lengths he’d gone to—or why.

Lost to the glowing screen, he contemplated a polite decline. She was still a woman, still deserved respect, but the passenger door opened sharply, stealing his focus. Again, they eyeballed each other. Only she didn't enter the truck, and her eyes darted between him and her daughter, unquestionably making sure he'd held true to his decree.

She couldn't call it relief. It was more colossal seeing he'd not laid a single finger on her daughter. It didn't relax her from their impending outcome, but it gave her enough space to take a breath. She couldn't trust him, he was just playing the long game. And the smile he offered fell on deaf ears as her foot landed on the step rail. But she halted, if she could just...

He honestly thought a small smile wouldn't hurt. Sure, it hadn't frightened her, that much he understood. No, but his small win burnt to ash. She was harder than herding cattle on foot, or his old bloody hunting ground. Infinitely harder, and he slid his phone into his pocket while extending his hand for the keys. Nothing. Her expression didn't shift either. Trouble brewed.

She considered he appeared distracted, could she use the moment to snatch her daughter and make a run for it? Before she'd made any serious plans to achieve her plan, his hand rested on her daughter's head.

"It'd be in your best interest to stop having those crazy thoughts." He saw her panic, hating it. What else should he expect? But it'd become the only way to get them clean, warm, and well fed. "Get in the truck!" Bugger, that'd failed. She'd panicked, he was failing further every time he spoke. "Hurry up, you're getting soaked. We still have several hours to go!" The dread spreading over her body consumed in wildfire fashion, wounding his pride and emotions. At this rate, he'd never get them home and under his protection.

She slunk back into his truck, and to her horror he'd not moved his hand. Her stare turned ruinous on him before softening on her daughter. He was smarter than he seemed. She'd have to find another way.

"Give me the keys." He extended his other hand, leaning in to receive them. "And close your door." Only when she had, did he exit himself. To his horror, his gut had been right, she'd flicked the child safety lock off. Ohhh, she was better than good, and he winked while shutting her door. Which escalated her unfolding anger, and his finger brushed his lips to shush her words that might wake the sleeping angel.

He'd barely left the gas station when she tried picking up her daughter, it made no sense to him. "You should leave her to sleep, we don't want to be pulled over, she's not in a child restraint."

“The authorities. Even her father...” She swallowed hard at both that idea and her kidnapper’s potential wrath. “Hold better outcomes for her and I...”

His first reaction had been a grunt. Her every word offended his very core. No woman he’d ever been with felt compelled to run from him. It began to sting. “Just leave her. It’ll be more comfortable for her, anyway.” His hands fisted to white knuckles around that damn steering wheel when she faced him. What gut wrenching insult would she throw now?

“You don’t know what’s comfortable for her. For either of us. Please, just let us go.” Her voice remained solemn despite her anger simmering behind it. The further from the city they got, she realised the devil she’d ran from might’ve been safer. The cowboy beside her knew a victim when he stumbled across one. Her trauma, a flare gun in a black sky.

She cut in when his mouth opened. Yes, she might suffer for it later, but what if it secured her freedom, finally seeing them as people, not his next victims. “It’s the only place she feels safe, where I feel safe.” It wasn’t until her words filled his pickup did she realise her error. She’d just handed him a weapon to use against her, and she reached for her daughter.

The blows just kept coming, he’d be a mess for the second time in his life before he finally got home. “Leave her be!” His stranglehold now threatened to break the bloody steering wheel. Would coming from a different angle work? “Soon as we get home, you can curl up with her till your heart’s content. Until then, the last thing you need, in your position, and this storm; is highway patrol.”

If she was ever to use her backbone, the one her husband broke, it was now. “I don’t want my daughter privy to anything you’ve planned.” Fail, and she fought harder, seeking her threadbare lost strength. “Her father’s less of a threat to us right now. Please, just let us go.”

His temper threatened under the surface of fading restraint. Sadly, it didn’t rid his tone from the disdain. “You flatter yourself! When did I suggest I’d anything planned with you?” It was such a lie, and her narrowed to slits glare called him out. “Or... Your daughter.”

Yeah, he knew alright, she didn’t buy it, though the daughter was a low blow. But otherwise, good, because he did. It’d just be at her pace. “I have connections and won’t face a thing. You, however, have everything to lose! Now simmer down and let her sleep.” Goddamn-it, what the hell was

happening to him! He'd never behaved so abhorrently towards a woman before.

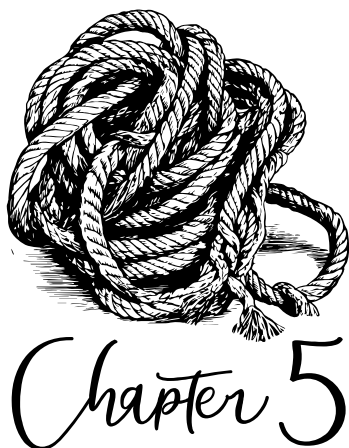
"You know what they say about assumptions..." Her voice trailed off. What else could she say? He'd no intention of calling anyone, and she lay a hand on her daughter, knowing what came next would break her heart long before it did her body.

Well—well—well... He knew she was smart. But what did she mean, exactly? Assumptions about what? That he was lying about hurting her, or her daughter, the police—perhaps all three? If she had contacts, why hadn't she used them? As his thoughts thundered, and her silence grew heavy, he reckoned outside had a better atmosphere.

But he knew... In his bones he understood it'd require defusing before it left them in ruin. Taking the chilled hot chocolate, he without a word, extended it towards her. Nothing, and he nudged it further until her trembling hand accepted his offering. If he'd hoped it'd calm the rocky waters, he failed, railroading her with more. "You cold?"

No, she was bloody terrified she wanted to scream at the stupid bloody idiot! Couldn't he tell?. Wishing she'd a spine like she once did to speak her truth. But that version of her died long ago.

He wasn't sure if her silence held the answer. Surely it had to be a no. The pickup felt like a slow cooker, he struggled to breathe. One thing was becoming clearer, though. He hated all this silence. "You should try eat something. Empty stomachs and road trips make even the most cast-iron variety queasy." He should've banked on getting zero response and blew out another defeated breath. One he'd hoped would shift even a slither of suffocating hot air sticking to him like glue. It irked him he'd not yet convinced her they weren't on death row.



She caught him constantly sneaking side-eye glances, probably checking if she'd lowered her guard enough to fall asleep. Never, and another silent sigh blew out, gazing at her daughter. The clock on the dashboard glared like the only light it was. It'd almost been two hours since their last stop. Time was fast ticking towards zero, and her demise. He'd been right about one thing, cast-iron stomachs were no joke. Hers, though, had fixated on facing her fate, of becoming a victim to the horrors she'd prosecuted countless times.

The pickup slowed, stilling her breath in a panic. This was it, they'd arrived. Bolt upright, her hand slid under his jacket, grabbing a fistful of her daughter's jersey. This'd be her last chance to run. But a more catastrophic fate cornered her.

No. No—no. Please no...

'Carlson Cattle Ranch.'

The monstrous brightly lit bedrock sign screamed she was in the deepest doodoo of her life. Her pathetic lungs still refusing to function as they began hyperventilating. Fate had dealt its answer...

Holy shit! He couldn't catch a break. Her tailspin nearly had him crash into his ranch's sign. In truth, he thought she might've fallen asleep with how still she'd become. "You okay?" No response, though he was unsure if she'd heard him as her involuntarily terror took on a life of its own, fuelling what he'd not tempered. "Answer me! You okay?" Perhaps he should consider she was having a medical event instead.



He connected certain dots as they passed his ranch's sign thanks to her eyes remaining fixated on it. Surely it meant she knew who he was? Maybe. But with zero idea what'd caused her near on cardiac arrest, he went with her worst-case scenario. "No... I'm not butchering your bodies in my slaughter house." Damn. Wrong. She panicked. No worse. Her untouched hot chocolate slipped from her trembling hold. If he thought that bad enough, she keeled over, head now between her knees in a violent mix of hyperventilating and dry reaching, while frantically scrambling for her daughter.

To get a handle on the unfolding chaos, he slowed his pickup, getting better eyes on her. "Hey you okay?" Finally a response, but her petrified stare with streaming tears, became a fifty-calibre to his chest. Before the terror fast filling the cab ended him too, he tried again. "What's wrong?"

She shook her head, returning her focus towards the floor. Shit, the cup was spilling its contents beside her feet. Much like her innards soon enough. Quickly picking it up, her shaking needed several rounds to secure it in the cup holder. And while she heard his grunt, she couldn't engage with him—no matter how often he repeated his question.

How was she to compose herself? Just how? She knew, wiping away her tears that wouldn't relent, while shaking her head to answer. How had she fallen into the devil's den?

The man who broke her.

The one she'd married, and now ran from.

Was this cowboy's lawyer...

Had her cold, numb state failed her? Had her husband sent out flyers. Or found her? Probably the latter, and this cowboy had been sent to retrieve her. Rick would never lower himself to scouring the city's streets. It meant his phone out during her toilet trip was for her husband. Was he on his way? Would she lose her baby, and she'd never be heard from again? Mr. Carlson said he wouldn't butcher her—but Rick would.

Her husband's client list in his portfolio all had immense wealth. If Rick's gloats weren't exaggerated lies, most had 'situations' requiring clever handling. It's how they met nearly a decade ago. She was lead DA prosecuting his law firm's client, and he was part of their counsel. It was only her win that had Rick pursue her. Everything after that became a nightmare as he slowly eroded her fierce will and strength, reducing her to a victim of her own.

Life had screwed her over, deciding to throw in thumb screws, no meat cleavers in her path. Rick would honestly kill her. He was a sadistic,

psychopathic, legal criminal. Of course, she didn't know that initially and fell victim to his charm. No one knew they dated, let alone were married, and he'd estranged her from family and friends. The memories whimpered into a sob along with her still disappearing breath, blurring the wet car-mat. Perhaps the ranch had a gun? She closed her eyes against the strain, Mr. Carlson would be the same.

Shit. He was losing her, she was spiralling at god knows what, and in his truck he couldn't settle the bone chilling panic oozing off her. He needed her inside so they could talk and allowed the truck's auto propulsion in drive to roll them towards the garage. Once close enough, he flicked the sun visor, using the control, and no sooner were they parked, he cut the engine, but didn't dare leave his truck until the garage door closed.

As he exited, shit ran through his rattled thoughts. No question, she was scared shitless. No, that was an understatement. But she'd fast shifted from thoughts of being kidnapped to something else he didn't dare think about.

When he opened her door, he made an exaggerated point of releasing the child lock, extending his hand in an offer to help her exit. Her fear of being hurt still hit him in prized fighter suffocation as something more terrifying consumed her expression. Was it shock? Perhaps terror or unequivocal hatred? Whatever it was, it burnt through him with laser precision. Just what the bloody hell did his ranch sign do? What did it mean?

She only dared move once he got it through his skull her shaking head meant rack-off, and bundled her still sleeping baby in her arms, sliding out. This was it, she sighed into battered nerves, burying her head and the tears into her daughters sleeping body. He advanced a step, and she lunged out of his way, standing by the pickup's back door. Still silent in her nightmare tears as he grabbed the diapers, rubbish, and bag of uneaten food, her body refused to move when he pointed towards an internal door.

This man was her husband's client—a husband who didn't give a single shit about her, and would probably give Mr. Carlson permission to use her body, because he'd be stilling it from life shortly. She'd well and truly become a sitting duck the further into his house she ventured.

This'd alarmed him, too. Didn't knowing who he was settle her nerves? No, he realised, if her thoughts were of being ended. Which would be why she wouldn't move when he directed her. Perhaps he needed to use words

with his actions. “Ladies first...” They both knew it rode other motives, she’d try slink away the moment he turned his back.

She was so screwed. No matter the journey, her destination remained the same. When he raised his hand behind her, she stepped forward, and he followed behind, holding his hand in place. Sure, he wasn’t touching her, but she was being corralled, nonetheless. Her brain needed to work shit out. More than this terrified record it was spinning on, it’d only get her killed.

He blew out another sigh, winning that round—just. Maybe. As they strolled down a hall, he stopped at the wide-open space of the main entrance, giving her a moment. But not a minute longer before putting a gentle touch on her back. It’d be ready by now, or close enough.

Her body jarred at his contact, and she kept doing her darndest to evade it, but he followed her every step. The only revolt was to hasten her pace, and that just speed demoned her to their destination, which could have her husband waiting for them if he’d secured a chopper ride. Even in this weather, it’d be possible. Money talked, no, it screamed its demands.

Should she be worried as they entered a kitchen, she found no such horrors? Just a gentleman fussing round an island bench. Her eyes widened, waiting for him to lunge forward, which shifted to the aroma filling the space. Was he going to feed her? Why? Why feed someone he and Rick were going to torture then end? Or was it for her to watch him eat while her hunger begged for a nibble? No. Unease burrowed low in her chest. Did they want her vomiting while ending her? It’d probably be something Rick would enjoy as he made her clean it up while inflicting those final blows.

Glad when his hand landed on her clothes, they felt dry. It meant they could eat first, and the closer they got to his kitchen, the aroma of spaghetti bolognaise hit his senses. Given that long drive in such a cluster of weird circumstances, he found himself hungry and grateful to have forethought a meal.

“How many, Austin?”

He returned his attention to his trembling guest, giving a quick nod to the angel she still had a death grip on. She offered nothing more than a shake of her head. “Two thanks, and we will take it in the informal lounge.” Benson—or chef, as the man preferred, nodded, and he placed the rubbish and uneaten food on the breakfast bar before moving in the informal lounge’s direction, still using a soft touch to guide her after it’d worked so well before.

But hell, it was slow, painfully slow, getting there. Two things were certain. One, dinner would arrive there before them. Two, she was waiting for a bogeyman at every corner or doorframe. Her behaviour became erratic and beyond unsettling the closer they got. He'd have to get answers that'd explain her revolt at his front gate before his ego took another blow.

In the entrance to the informal lounge, he notioned her with his extended hand still holding the diapers. "Please take a seat, a late dinner. Or I suppose a very early breakfast will be here soon." Only when she managed a step did he, placing his hat on the end table and the diapers on another. His peripheral's remained fixated on her as he used the lamps to avoid the main down lights, so the little angel wasn't woken.

She still struggled to move in any direction. Well aware any of his offerings could have her taking that last breath. As she stood, immobilised, she watched every fussy thing he did while shifting around the room. With his hat off, his wavy brown 'hat' hair became more dishevelled as he raked a hand through it. Despite the seriousness of her impending fate, she nearly broke into a chuckle at his apparent need to fix said predicament. Or panic when he dimmed the lights. This man was her husband's client for a reason, and when his cell-phone made an appearance, her instincts demanded she run. He'd be messaging Rick.

Did he try converse now they were inside, safe, with the warmth they needed. What could he say? She was technically right, he'd taken her against her will. It was something he didn't want to admit. Still didn't. But now they were under his roof, it felt less crazy. Perhaps it'd be a good time to ask what the hell happened in his driveway. But as his gaze cast to her, she stood motionless just inside the doorway. Scrap that. Zero talking might have better luck showing he wasn't about to hurt her. That left him with his phone, and he tried looking busy and unaffected by her.

First was a message from Rick, and his shoulders slumped into a sigh. It read just how he imagined. Give Dana another shot, she made for fine arm candy, and had it on good authority she'd the making of a great bottom.

He questioned Rick's statement. The man's loyalty to his partner when it was said partner's sister. Surely, not? He dismissed the idea, sighing into bullshit he lacked the capacity to care about. It might be a new day—just, but his damn sighs kept rolling in. Why did Rick believe a good submissive trumped love?

Where had the idea an incredible woman, one who'd fiercely protect the fruit of their desires, make their home a safe-haven, one they could fall into gone? How did feeling loved and able to forget the stresses of life come second to kinked sex? Though he'd always welcome the latter, it was the icing, no matter what he'd previously indulged in.

His thoughts were distracted as the chef cleared his throat, paused in the doorway. Without eyes on her, she'd backtracked, and he'd nearly missed her stage left exit. He only managed half-way before her rising apprehension suffocated like it did in his pickup. "Come, take a seat. Our food's here." Still keeping his distance, he pointed to the nearest sofa.

Cornered. That's how she felt. A person behind, and him incoming. She held her daughter in a death grip, waiting for the real reason she was there to arrive. She darted a step sideways, refusing their attempts to make her the meat in their sandwich. Equally frightening, the man from the kitchen whisked a trolley beside Mr. Carlson, then just as quick, left. As he lifted a lid, the smell hit her nostrils, and she inhaled the aroma salivating her thoughts and mouth. As she opened her eyes, she caught Mr. Carlson doing the same, only with a broad, infectious smile. If he thought he'd lull her into a food coma like her daughter, he was mistaken. She'd never let her guard down.

He'd caught on the sly her sensory overload, overriding that terror on her beautiful face. Surely, he'd finally get somewhere with her now? "Put her on a sofa." She did, but almost sat on top of her daughter. Unsure why, though, he probably ranked the reason, and to give her some relief from watching two people, he grabbed two cushions from the opposite couch, putting them behind the sleeping angel facing the sofa's back, being lightning quick about it. He'd learnt the closer he was to her child, the wilder she became.

He shifted on from that cluster of offences before it led him down a ruinous path again, and to the food trolley, taking a tray from the bottom shelf. Now home, his calm demeanour had returned, allowing his smarts to follow suit and placed the smaller serve on her lap clean and swift.

Her eyes never left the plate of food, not since her marriage had she seen such a large serving or smell something as divine as what lingered under her nose. Her stomach already growled in anticipation. It sadly though, didn't mean it wasn't laced with drugs. It made sense, it'd be easier for Rick to take their daughter, tie her down, then end her. While her senses begged she take a bite, how could she trust a man who'd hired the most unethical lawyer in the

country? It was no joke or understatement. Rick's nickname was the 'legal criminal.'

Her space and thoughts were invaded when he re-entered her space with a glass of water, utensils, and a napkin, lowering them down on the tray. She looked up to distract herself from the smell driving her insane, but he unnerved her more when he didn't meet her gaze.

Fast sorting out his own food was the only way to stop the drool. The high stress levels and vast array of emotions over the last several hours had burned all that ribeye cap steak and heavenly chocolate fudge cake into oblivion. Though he tried to act cool, it failed miserably as he sat on the floor at a right angle to her. The smell had driven his tastebuds crazy, and he leant over his tray on the coffee table, shovelling it in like a bear fresh out of hibernation.

When a mouthful that required chewing almost choked him out, he gazed in her direction. While she'd put the fork in her meal, she was just staring at it. "Do you not like spag-bol?" Her head shook in a gentle sway, so he probed further. At least she'd answered him. "Is there a problem?"

How could she communicate she didn't trust him? Or knew her husband was en route, if not already there. Scrap that. He wouldn't be there. Rick had a bullish temper and loathed waiting. His fists would've made contact with her already if they were in the same house.

Her memories and his standing erupted in a trembling straining her body. Which spiked into high alert as he strolled towards her, crouched down and leant his forearm on the armrest. Any remaining adrenaline after living in petrified fear for hours leaked from her veins. It'd take a decade minimum to dissipate, not that she'd live that long.

In the gentlest and softest tone he had, he sighed into his words. "Can you talk to me? I'm not going to hurt you."

She considered he mightn't, but his lawyer would... Rick developed strong relationships with his clients. It's how he made partner at his law firm in less than eight years. She pinched her eyes closed, only to dart them open in wild fright when his hand brushed over hers. Instincts forced her upright and shifting towards her baby. Her meal tray fast tipped on its way to the floor, only he with deft skill caught it, not even the water spilt a drop. With his reflexes that primed, how could she ever hope to secure her freedom?

Surprised he'd managed that interesting feat, he hid the grin at being successful. "Sit down. You need to talk to me." At first he thought she'd listened, but when she coiled an arm around her abdomen, leaning into the

back of the couch, he held his breath. With ninja speed, the tray landed on the coffee table, then swift in his movement back to her. Again on his knees between hers, he leant in, resting his fists either side of her thighs. “Talk to me. What’s going on?”

She hyperventilated as he rushed in. Mere inches apart, her trauma needed him out. “It hurts... That’s all. I haven’t eaten in several days.” Instant relief rushed over her nerves when he stood, and vacated the room without a word. She closed her eyes demanding her body get its shit together. Instead, she curled over into spasms ruling over her. What had they put in it?. She’d only had a few measly mouthfuls.

His mouth dried as he darted out. Her pain hurt his own suffering, he only hoped it’d stop her from leaving. And he hightailed it back fast as the glass would allow, unable to stomach watching her struggle. Least she’d not left, though he understood that wasn’t by choice. On his knees again, he informed her of his presence by clearing his throat. “I’m told it’ll help settle the pain so you can eat.” He then returned to his own meal, trying to remain calm as fuck, despite utterly freaking out inside.

She had his number well pegged. Understood his attempts to act indifferent, but his hawk like peripheral glances told her a different tale. Though, as she sipped, and who could blame her when faced with debilitating discomfort, her plight was currently subsiding. Even if it was potentially laced with something she’d regret later, it might make her too drowsy to notice. She could only hope.

To her surprise, she in fact felt better and the once vengeful food enticed, calling her name. She shuffled to the floor, before sitting at the same coffee table, taking cautionary nibbles of the best meal she’d ever had. If it sent her to heaven or hell, undecided which she deserved, then so be it. Anticipation could be worse than the event itself. Though that probably wasn’t true with being murdered.

His smug as hell grin erupted, hoping it meant she’d not only relaxed but trusted him a smidge. All of him begged to end their silence. Get her to understand why he’d over-reacted. Sadly, it’d not happen—yet, and returned to his own before he drew her attention.

He cleared his plate in lightning speed, only then noticing she stopped some time ago, her head turned just staring at her daughter. That was another thing he wanted. To understand what ran through that pretty head of hers. But he’d have better luck extracting blood from a stone with his bare hands.

As he stood with his tray, her body froze. It still irked him, but he without fuss took hers, placing them on the trolley. "I'll be back in a minute." Unsure if he'd return to an empty room, but he had to start trusting her at some point.

No denying upon his return he swallowed his relief she'd merely shifted to beside her daughter, but it also meant their shared meal did nothing to calm her. He was back to square one. No, still in the negatives, and picked up the diapers, continuing with what he hoped would start working soon. "Collect your daughter and follow me."

A solid grunt boomed off his chest when she recoiled. When would she see he'd never hurt them? The bastard who'd sent her to the streets must've done a real number on her. He'd make the asshole pay double. It'd be the only narrative that'd have him survive this as he stood in the doorway, pointing into the wide hall. "Do as I've asked."

Caution dictated she pick her battles. Despite knowing she'd run out of time, she was cornered by his demands, and her steps became foreign and unsteady. Her feet, like her, begged to run, anywhere. Even the deadly stormy night, if it gained her freedom in other ways. Deciding to keep her daughter in his jacket, she gathered her up, her doodoo was about to come thick and fast. Yep, fast incoming when his hand landed on her back, sending another jolting panic through her bones. And as they entered the main foyer, her chest combusted under the pressure. Certain she was about to face her husband or the slaughterhouse. She hoped neither, but nor did she want to end up in Mr. Carlson's bedroom, either.

His sensibilities were gut punched the more her state of fear rose as they got closer to the main entrance. Whenever it happened, it tempted him to probe further to understand, until he reminded himself he could do nothing to soothe her wild ideas—yet. It'd only be his actions, his truthfulness, and time, that she'd start taking him for what he claimed.

As they climbed the stairs, her relief it wasn't the slaughter house settled some of her fear, but caused it to skyrocket elsewhere so terribly her feet tripped on the hardened marble several times. After her third toe stubbing collision, he both kept his hand on her back, and the other just in front of her daughter. In normal circumstances, she'd have considered it a sweet and honourable gesture. Not here, though.

The further they got down the hall, she swore the air vacated, sending her lungs into a fiery burn. When he slowed, opening a door well before the end, his hand encouraged her to enter. She couldn't, and shook her head,



rooted in place with lungs that'd now turned to ash. Perhaps begging for her daughter's innocence had given him plans. She was such a foolish, bloody legend.

Never did he think ushering her into a bedroom would require such coercion until he realised she might believe it his. His housekeeper had arranged the room with fresh towels and linen, and given it was beyond late, he kept it brief so they could settle. "There's the ensuite, there's a walk-in closet, here's fresh towels." He grabbed his t-shirt that'd been left as requested. "Here, use this to sleep in. I'm sorry I don't have anything for your daughter." Only she stared at him, positive she'd questioned his sanity. "It was too late to call anyone for clothing from their kids." Her eyes narrowed, now calling him bat shit crazy. "But I've arranged for provisions to arrive first thing this morning." He then waited with bated breath to see if she'd engage or ignore.

What the hell? Had she died out in that storm? Had she, in fact, travelled south, and this was her hell-loop? Why was he behaving so strange? "Why are you apologising, we aren't your responsibility?" She held her baby a little tighter. Perhaps the other shoe would finally drop, ending before these sick weirdos did.

He couldn't exactly answer in complete honesty could he? To him, they were his. The moment he saw her face, it stirred something wildly possessive in him. And when her gorgeous blue eyes met his, it sealed her fate. But if he admitted that. Then he'd sound like the kidnapper she believed he was. "No woman and her child should be alone in a cold, wet, unforgiving city. It's no life for either of you, I want to help you free yourself from what landed you there to begin with, and back on your feet." Not quite the truth. Not unless getting back on her feet included him.

Dare she believe he didn't know? If he didn't, he'd not want a bar of her or it. He'd probably hand her over to the bastard. "I'm not a charity case. I don't need your pity. We'll leave come sunrise."

Woah, he had to back her up quick smart. "I take no pity, I assure you, living on the streets would be one of the hardest places to survive. It's not for the weak." Damn, it wasn't working. "Sleep well." Fast travelling towards the door, he closed it before she could say more. He could've reassured her, informed her his day started in four hours, cattle in the north-eastern corner needed rounding up. But now he understood it'd tempt her to bolt.

He, however, hoped she'd become distracted with what he'd organised for his housekeeper to purchase. Which he'd never admit was half a

city department store with everything from clothing, necessities, and toys, on strict instructions they arrive by mid-morning. He didn't pull rank and use his position often, but damn if he hadn't used it twice that evening.

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