

CHAPTER ONE

No one had shot at me in weeks, or beat me up. I hadn't been cut, punched, or slapped. No one threatened me, stalked me, or stabbed me.

It was a nice change.

And that's what I kept telling myself as I headed to my car. It was mid-afternoon, and the humid heat of late June in Indianapolis made perspiration slide down the middle of my back under the thin T-shirt I wore. The backpack I carried didn't help matters any.

The air inside my white Toyota Corolla was stifling and sliding into it felt as though I were climbing into an oven. I rolled down the windows as I drove to my apartment, waiting for the AC to kick in. The air gusting through the windows was hot but cooled my sweat-dampened skin.

I thought longingly of the huge Lexus SUV I'd had the brief privilege of driving. It had been a gift, a wonderful gift that I'd have been happy to keep, if it hadn't cost so much to drive it. Gas was too expensive for me to justify driving the luxury car—especially when I sometimes wondered how I was going to pay my rent—so I'd sold it, using the money to buy a used Toyota and what was left to help pay tuition.

I had just enough time to feed Tigger, my cat, and jump in the shower before I had to leave for work at The Drop, a

bar downtown. It was Friday night and with the heat, I was sure we'd be busy.

In the summer, the owner of The Drop and my boss, Romeo, allowed the girls to wear black shorts and white T-shirts for our uniform. That would usually be a good thing, but Romeo believed sex always sells, so the shorts were nearly Daisy Dukes and the T-shirts tight, with plunging necklines. Not that I could be real choosy about it. I needed my bartending job at The Drop to pay the bills, especially since I was now taking classes during the day at the IU campus downtown rather than working for the law firm of Kirk and Trent.

"Hey, Kathleen! Can you give me a hand?"

That's me. Kathleen Turner, and sometimes I really wished I was *that* Kathleen Turner. I bet she never had to worry about paying her electric bill. Cursed with the family legacy, I had been the last to be named for a famous Turner. My dad was Ted Turner, my grandma Tina Turner, and my cousin was William Turner, though he went by his middle name, Chance. Wish I'd thought of doing that years ago.

"Yeah, sure," I replied to Tish, a waitress at The Drop who was juggling one too many plates of food. I shoved my purse under the bar and hurried to help her take the dishes to a table of five.

I was right. The bar was busy tonight and I didn't have time to even think. I was grateful for that. I didn't want to think. If I did, I'd remember.

"Another round, please."

I jerked my attention back to my job, hurrying to fill the order tossed my way. By the time closing neared, I was

nearly dead on my feet. Thank God. Maybe I'd get more than three or four hours of sleep tonight.

"Have some cheese fries," Tish said, sliding onto a stool and placing a laden plate on the bar. "I'm exhausted," she sighed, picking up a dripping French fry and popping it into her mouth.

I grabbed us each a bottle of beer and leaned against the bar. The cold, bitter liquid felt good going down. My hair had come loose from its ponytail, so I redid it, pulling the long strawberry-blond strands up and off my neck. I hated when my hair got in the way when I was working but liked it too much to have it cut short. Along with my blue eyes, I thought it was my best feature.

"Have some," Tish insisted, pushing the plate toward me.

I shook my head. "No thanks. I'm good," I said, and took another drink.

"Kathleen, you drink too much and eat too little," she said with a frown.

I snorted, my eyebrows climbing. "Yes, Mom," I teased.

Tish didn't smile back. "I'm your friend and I'm worried about you."

"I'm fine," I dismissed. To appease her, I picked up a fry and took a bite.

She hesitated. "You know, maybe you could talk to someone. I have this lady I see every once in a while—"

"No, thanks," I interrupted, taking another swig.

"But it may help . . ."

Tish stopped talking at the look I gave her, instead heaving a sigh as she ate another cheese fry.

I couldn't be mad at her, not really. She cared about me and was just trying to help. Once upon a time, I'd have

probably said the same thing. Come to think of it, I actually had given the same advice in what felt like a lifetime ago. And the recipient had reacted the same way I had.

Why the fuck would I want to do that?

“It’s just a breakup,” I said to her, feeling bad now that she was worrying about me. “Everybody goes through them.” I shrugged and finished off my beer, tossing the bottle into the trash with a loud *clunk*.

“It’s just . . .” She paused and I raised my eyebrows.

“Just what?” I asked.

“You’re . . . different now,” she said, looking slightly abashed. “Harder, I guess. Colder. And I just really hate to see you that way.”

Her words stung. I couldn’t disagree with her, but it wasn’t something I could fix right now. I needed an emotional distance from everyone, including myself.

“I’m sorry,” I said quietly. “I don’t mean to be. I just can’t—”

“I know,” she said, reaching out to rest a hand on my arm. “I know you need to be in this place for now—just don’t let yourself stay there, okay? I miss the old Kathleen.”

I gave Tish a weak smile, but I wondered whether the old Kathleen was gone for good.

“Rough night, eh, ladies?”

I turned to see that Scott, the other bartender for tonight, had grabbed his own beer and leaned against the bar behind me.

“Good tips, though,” I said, stepping away from Tish.

Scott turned the volume up on the television, sipping his beer while he watched. A familiar name froze me in my tracks.

“Gubernatorial candidate Blane Kirk is back in Indy tonight attending a fund-raiser downtown after ten days on campaign stops throughout the state.”

I felt as though someone had sucker punched me. My hands turned to ice. I couldn’t take a deep breath. Even so, I couldn’t stop myself from turning to look up at the television.

Blane.

I’d avoided all newspapers and the television for three months. This was the first time I’d seen his face since that awful day in March. The day he’d accused me of sleeping with his brother and had broken our engagement.

If I’d thought the passage of time would ease the blow of seeing his face again, I was very, very wrong.

I drank in the news footage, which showed Blane shaking hands with people in a crowd, the sunlight making his dark blond hair shine like gold. He had on a loosely knotted tie and a white shirt with the cuffs rolled back. His smile was gleaming white, dimpled, and perfect. A politician at his best. I noticed his smile still didn’t reach his eyes, but then again, it rarely did.

The scene changed, showing Blane now in a tuxedo and entering the Crowne Plaza downtown. A woman was with him, his hand on her lower back. I watched, unable to tear my eyes away, as she turned and the camera caught her face.

Charlotte Page.

Dressed in a long gown of deep bronze, she exuded elegance and sensuality. Her hair was long and nearly black, her skin a warm olive. I’d once likened her to Penélope Cruz and could see the description was still apt. She was a

fellow lawyer in Blane's firm, and together they made a stunning pair.

I couldn't breathe.

"I-I've . . . uh—I've got to go," I stammered, making a frantic grab for my purse under the bar.

"Yeah, sure. I'll close up," Tish hurriedly added. She frowned at Scott, but he didn't notice since he was still watching TV. I couldn't blame him. I'd told only Tish the sordid details of my breakup with Blane.

"Thanks." I managed a grateful smile before beating a hasty retreat outside. I heard Scott calling a belated goodbye to me as the door swung closed.



Once I reached my car, I leaned against it, my arms cushioning my head.

Just breathe.

I drove on autopilot, replaying the images of Blane in my head. It made my chest hurt and my stomach turn into knots. I regretted even the small bite of French fry I'd eaten as nausea clawed my throat.

I thought by now it would have been easier to see him with someone else.

It wasn't.

Tigger met me at the door. My two-story apartment building was in a section of Indy where police sirens were a nightly occurrence, but I hadn't had any problems as long as I'd lived there. At least, no problems that were because of the neighborhood.

I changed into shorts and a tank, opening the windows to give my AC, and my electric bill, a break. Light filtered in from the streetlamps, so I didn't bother turning on any lights in the apartment. After pouring myself a vodka tonic, I curled up on the couch, absently petting Tigger as I stared into space.

It was late, but I knew that if I went to bed I wouldn't sleep. And even if I did, nightmares plagued me more often than not. The ordeal I'd endured a few months ago at the hands of human traffickers had left mental scars, though physically I was fine. So I didn't sleep a whole lot.

My stomach churned and I resolutely took another drink. I did not want to puke, I hated throwing up, but I needed the numbness the vodka was so adept at providing. I needed not to feel anymore.

I thought about what Tish had said and wondered when, if ever, I'd feel like myself again. Normal. When I'd look forward to waking up every morning rather than dreading each new day as something to get through. When the ice inside me would melt.

I was angry with Blane, that much was true. He had believed his uncle's lies instead of me, his fiancée. He hadn't trusted me.

But I was devastated, too. Blane had devastated me, and part of me hated him for that, even as I ached to see him, talk to him. The newscast tonight had been bittersweet to watch.

I finished my drink in one long gulp, pushing Tigger aside as I got on the floor and started doing sit-ups. When the liquor didn't work to quiet my brain, I exercised, trying

to get as exhausted as I possibly could. Sit-ups and push-ups when it was dark outside, running for miles when it wasn't.

I was in great shape. I wish I cared.

Running always made me think of Kade. Kade Dennon. Ex-FBI agent. Assassin-for-hire. Blane's half brother. I hadn't heard from him in months, not since the night he'd kissed me and told me I should be with him, not Blane.

I hadn't counted on how much I'd miss him no longer being in my life.

I glanced at my cell phone as I lay panting on the floor, my abdominal muscles screaming at me. I hadn't been able to make myself delete their numbers, so Blane and Kade were still listed in my contacts. I should get rid of them, and I would. Just not tonight.

A warm breeze flowed through the open window, bringing with it the familiar scent of a summer's night. At the moment, no sirens wailed and I could hear the occasional car pass by. I wondered what Blane was doing, and if it included Charlotte.



Sunlight streaming through the window and a marmalade lump of feline woke me up Saturday morning. I'd fallen asleep on the floor and now my back ached. Tigger used my stomach as a pillow, his clawless paws kneading my flesh.

"Give it a rest," I grumbled at him as I sat up. He meowed a complaint about his loss of pillow and followed me into the kitchen, where I started the coffeemaker. I went for a run and showered before bolting down some caffeine. I had

homework to do and had agreed to meet Clarice for lunch today.

A few hours later, I was winding my way behind a hostess as she led me through a local restaurant to the patio tables. I was glad about that. I'd be able to leave my sunglasses on. Lack of sleep left a toll that makeup couldn't always cover.

Clarice was waiting for me. She stood to give me a hug.

"So good to see you!" she said.

"You, too." My smile was genuine. I'd missed seeing and talking to her every day.

"You look great," she added as we sat down.

"Thanks, so do you." And she did look fantastic. Being in love agreed with her. She wore a long, flowing skirt with a sleeveless top and sandals. She'd been divorced for some years and had two kids. Right before Valentine's Day, the high-school science teacher she'd been dating had proposed.

"So how is Jack?" I asked, scooting my chair into the shade from the umbrella. I'd worn a spaghetti-strap sundress and didn't want my arms or shoulders to get burned.

"Jack's great—kids are good, too," she replied. "They're so excited for the wedding."

"Just them?" I teased.

She grinned. "Okay, me, too."

We laughed. "Two weeks," I said, "and you'll be Mrs. Jack Bryant."

"I know. I can't wait."

Clarice looked so happy, it practically radiated from her. It was wonderful to see and I was so glad she'd found someone who made her feel that way. She certainly deserved it.

The waitress came by and we paused to order. Clarice joined me, indulging in a glass of cold chardonnay.

“Your dress fitting is Thursday afternoon,” she told me. “Can you make it?”

I was also one of her bridesmaids. “Sure,” I said.

We chatted for a while about the wedding plans and where she and Jack were going on their honeymoon—Hawaii. It sounded wonderful. The waitress brought our salads, and it felt nice and normal to be having lunch with a girlfriend.

“So, how are you doing really?” Clarice asked after we’d exhausted the topic of her impending nuptials.

I stiffened. Clarice and I always refrained from talking about Blane or the breakup. I refused to let her. Since she was his secretary, I didn’t want to put her in a bad position, and I didn’t want to be tempted to quiz her about Blane. I’d told her he’d broken off the engagement and that was all.

My smile was forced. “I’m fine. Just takes some time, you know?”

“I know, but I worry about you,” she said. “You’ve lost weight—it seems you hardly eat anymore. I mean don’t get me wrong, you don’t look bad, but I can tell you’re unhappy. It’s written all over you.”

“Well, I can’t say I recommend the breakup diet,” I admitted. “But I’ll be fine. I just . . . want to move on.” I paused. “It certainly seems he has.” I could hear the bitterness in my voice and knew I shouldn’t have said that. I didn’t want to know, didn’t want to hear about Blane. But I also really did, and after seeing him on TV last night, I couldn’t help hoping Clarice would tell me something, even though I knew it would hurt and I’d regret hearing it.

She hesitated, then carefully said, “I don’t know about that.”

My breath seemed to freeze in my lungs. “What do you mean?”

“He’s not the same at all. I mean, yeah, he’s dating other women, but it’s like it was before. Blane’s always been real professional at the office, but he was happy with you. I could see it. Now, I never see him crack a smile or a joke. He’s just constantly on the move, pushing himself. He never slows down.”

I swallowed and readjusted my sunglasses while I digested this. I knew what Clarice meant about it being “like it was before.” Blane had been a playboy for years, always a different woman on his arm. I think the time he’d spent with me was the longest he’d been with someone in quite a while.

“Well, I’m sure he’ll be fine,” I said stiffly. “So he and Charlotte . . . ?” I left the question dangling.

Clarice’s lips thinned. “Yeah, she’s managed to weasel her way in.”

I frowned. “I thought you liked her.”

“I did, when she wasn’t trying to be Blane’s shadow.”

“What do you mean?”

“She’s always there, always wanting to help him or something. Like last night. His uncle insisted he take a date to that fund-raiser. Well, wouldn’t you know Charlotte just happened to be available, so he didn’t have to show up without one.” Clarice’s disdain was clear. “I mean, she couldn’t be more obvious if she tried, but I think Blane is completely oblivious.”

Clarice's mention of Blane's uncle had me clenching my fists in anger. I hated the man. A powerful senator from Massachusetts, Senator Robert Keaston had been reelected so many times, going to the polls was now a mere formality. He was also Blane's great-uncle.

Keaston had wanted me to break up with Blane, had tried to bribe me to do so. When that hadn't worked and Blane and I had gotten engaged, Keaston had lied to Blane about Kade and me having an affair. It made me furious not only that Blane was still listening to his uncle but also that Keaston was apparently being as meddlesome as ever and Blane was just letting him.

"What about you?" she asked. "Are you seeing anyone?"

I shook my head. "No. I don't want that right now. I'm not ready." The idea was ludicrous to me. I was still in love with Blane, no matter how much he'd hurt me. I couldn't just turn that off like a light switch.

Clarice studied the remaining wine in her glass as she asked with deliberate casualness, "Have you talked to Kade lately?" She knew that Kade and Blane were half brothers, though most people did not. It was a little-known fact that both Blane and Kade chose to keep that way.

"No. Why?"

She looked up at me. "Because neither has Blane. I mean, I know they used to talk several times a week. Kade would call the office or Blane would have me get him on the phone, but as far as I know, they haven't spoken since you and Blane broke up."

My stomach twisted into knots as guilt rose like nausea. It was my fault they weren't speaking. I had come between them. Even after Blane had accused me of sleeping with

Kade, I'd hoped Kade could talk some sense into him. If Blane didn't believe Kade's denials, I thought that at the very least he'd forgive him. They were brothers, after all, and history had proven them to be extremely loyal to each other. I was just the girlfriend, and as Blane had proven time and time again, girlfriends were replaceable. Brothers were not.

I couldn't eat another bite of my salad and just sipped my wine as Clarice changed the subject, sensing my distress, I think. I nodded and smiled but didn't hear ten percent of what she said, my thoughts in a jumble.

Should I try to call Kade? Figure out what was going on between him and Blane? My heart leapt at the thought of talking to him again, wanting it so bad it was like a physical need. God, I missed him.

But no, I shouldn't get involved. I was the cause of their estrangement. I certainly wasn't going to be the one who could fix it.

I was getting into my car after promising Clarice I'd be at the fitting on Thursday when I noticed him, a man was loitering near one of the storefronts lining the street.

He appeared to be window-shopping, but every few seconds, he'd glance my way. Before my training with Kade, I probably would never have noticed. But Kade had made me work until I reflexively took stock of my surroundings as though it was second nature to me.

Pretending I didn't see him, I got in my car and started the engine. I fiddled with my hair while I watched him in the rearview mirror as he hurried to get into a blue sedan.

I drove a circuitous route home, always keeping an eye on the sedan that stayed at least three or four cars behind

me at all times. I had no idea who he was or why he was following me, and I certainly didn't want to lead him to my apartment. I mulled over what to do until an opportunity presented itself.

The stoplight ahead was green, so I slowed down. It turned yellow as I drew near, then red just as I hit the line. I gunned it, stomping on the accelerator and shooting through the intersection, barely missing colliding with traffic crossing the opposite direction. Tires squealed and I heard someone honk, then I was through. A glance in the mirror showed the sedan was stuck behind three cars at the light. I drove quickly to leave him behind, glad to have lost him.

Weird.

I spent the afternoon studying and doing homework before heading in to work. I tried not to dwell on the things Clarice had said, but it was futile. Blane with other women. Blane becoming close with Charlotte. Blane and Kade not speaking.

I was even more despondent than usual. But I didn't cry. I hadn't cried since the night Alisha had come over and I'd told her everything. Since then I'd carried on. I worked, I signed up for classes and started attending once the summer session began. I did my laundry, cleaned my apartment, and did all the things one did that said I was living my life.

And I tried to pretend it wasn't a lie.

I was nearly at The Drop when I saw the blue sedan.

He was trailing me like he had earlier, three cars behind. How the hell had he found me?

He must know where I live.

The thought sent a shiver of fear through me, which I quickly shrugged off. How dare he follow me? Try to scare me? The bastard.

I parked a couple of blocks from The Drop and grabbed my purse. Locking the car door, I started walking, taking the back way in between the buildings. It was light—the sun wouldn't set for a few hours—but the shadows were thick in the alleyways.

Pausing, I opened my purse and took out a compact. As I powdered my nose, I watched in the mirror. Sure enough, the same guy had gotten out of the sedan and was following me. I took quick measure of him. He was about five eleven, maybe 180 pounds. Not huge, but not small, either.

I snapped my compact closed and resumed walking. My hand remained inside my purse.

Turning a corner, I slipped into the shadows . . . and waited. When he stepped into view, he was only a foot from me and he had a gun pointed at his chest.

“Who are you and why are you following me?” I asked. The gun was steady in my two-handed grip.

“Whoa, take it easy,” he said in surprise, putting his hands up.

“Answer the questions,” I demanded.

“Listen, lady, I don't know what you're talking about—”

I racked the slide on the gun.

“All right, all right!” he said in alarm. “I'm just doing a job, all right?”

“You're supposed to scare me? Hurt me? Kill me?” I asked. It wouldn't be the first time, which probably explained my utter lack of shock.

“No, I swear! None of that!”

“Then what?”

The guy swallowed, his eyes on my gun. “This wasn’t supposed to be a dangerous job,” he muttered.

“Tell me!”

“Fine! I was just supposed to follow you, keep an eye on you, make sure nothing happened to you,” he said, then added in an irritated undertone, “though it looks like you can take care of yourself well enough.”

“Who hired you?” I asked, trying to process that he supposedly wasn’t following me to hurt me, but to . . . protect me? Why?

He pressed his lips together, refusing to answer. I lowered my gun to point it at his knee.

“You like your knees?” I threatened.

Sweat broke out on his forehead and he swallowed heavily. “Fine,” he said. “Blane Kirk hired me, okay? Now can you put the gun down? Please?”

I reeled, the name dropping like a load of bricks on my consciousness. Confusion and shock was followed quickly by rage.

Lowering the gun, I got in the guy’s face.

“You tell your boss,” I spat, “to leave me the fuck alone. If he sends someone else to follow me, he’ll regret it and so will they.”

I left him standing in the alley while I walked quickly to The Drop, my hands shaking uncontrollably as I put the gun back in my purse. When I reached work, I locked myself in a bathroom stall.

My heart was pounding and tears wet my lashes as I tried to hold them back. I breathed, closing my eyes and trying to get a grip.

Why would Blane have someone follow me? It didn't make any sense. Was he afraid I was going to go to the press about the relationship we'd had? Leak all the sordid details? There were plenty of women who could do that. And if the guy had been telling the truth about making sure nothing happened to me, then what was going on that would put me in danger?

I couldn't concentrate on any of this, my emotions still overruling my logic. Blane still thought of me, albeit in his usual heavy-handed, controlling way. It was pathetic how much of an impact that made on me. *I was pathetic. How embarrassing.*

God, I needed a drink.

I escaped the bathroom and clocked in. We were already busy and I had little time to do more than throw a quick hello to Scott and Tish, also working again tonight. However, I did find time to toss back a shot of bourbon, to steady myself.

A group of four college guys came in at some point during the night, setting up at a table close to the bar. They wore casual clothes that I could tell were expensive brands, which meant they had money. I told Scott I'd take the table and headed over there.

They were cute and funny and I flirted shamelessly as I delivered their drinks. Working for tips required its own kind of skill. I used to be friendly but kept my distance. Then a stripper I'd met a few months ago had given me some good advice.

You've got assets. Use them to your advantage. Men are fools for a nice set of boobs.

I'd taken it to heart and my tips had improved. Even though the uniform Romeo made us wear irritated me, it showed off an impressive display of cleavage. And judging by the college boys' lingering stares as they got more inebriated, it worked. If I was lucky, I'd get twenty bucks off that table tonight, maybe more if they got drunk enough.

Scott and I had a good rhythm when we worked together, and he was fun. He teased me mercilessly, making me laugh. I could almost push the whole incident with the man Blane had hired to the back of my mind.

But not completely, which was why I didn't turn them down when the college guys wanted me to do a round of shots with them. Business was slowing as one o'clock neared, so I didn't feel guilty leaving Scott behind the bar while I hung out with the table of four, though only two of the guys remained. The others were out on the dance floor with girls they'd picked up.

"So, Kathleen," one of them said. I thought his name was Bill or Brian, something with a B. "You busy after work?" He'd slung his arm around my waist as I stood next to their high-top table.

I tipped back the shot in my hand, the whiskey burning a fiery path down my throat to my belly, and tried to concentrate on what he'd said.

"Sorry," I replied. "Gotta get home tonight. Maybe some other time." I smiled to soften the rejection. Just because I wanted to relieve them of some of their cash didn't mean I wanted a date, even if he was a good-looking guy.

"We could have a real good time," he insisted. His hand drifted down to my ass.

“Just the three of us,” the other guy chimed in. I wanted to say his name was Trey.

I looked at him in surprise and he laughed. “Betcha never done that before, right?”

If I’d expected Bill/Brian to object, I was disappointed. He seemed all for the idea. He’d gripped my waist and tugged me back between his thighs so I faced Trey, who’d scooted his stool closer.

“You’re fuckin’ hot, Kathleen,” Bill/Brian said in my ear. “We’ll take good care of you. Don’t you worry.”

I swallowed hard, trying to fight the rising panic in my chest just as Trey leaned over and kissed me. My hands automatically came up to push him away, but they were caught and held by the guy behind me.

Well, fuck. There goes my tip, I thought sourly.

I jerked my head back hard, cracking Bill/Brian in the face. He yelped and let me go. Now free, I hurriedly slipped out from between the two men.

“I’m not into that,” I said calmly from a couple feet away. Bill/Brian was cupping his nose with his hand.

Trey spoke first. “Sorry there, Kathleen. We meant no harm.”

I eyed him suspiciously, but he seemed sincere, for a drunk guy.

“Yeah, sorry,” Bill/Brian said, his voice muffled from behind his hand. “The way you were acting . . . Well, we obviously got the wrong idea there.”

I nodded and headed back to the bar. So I was such an obviously easy lay that a couple of college guys assumed I would be into a threesome one-night stand?

I poured myself a drink.

“Those guys get out of hand?” Scott asked, sidling up next to me.

I shook my head. “Nothing I can’t handle.”

He nodded wordlessly and moved away, Tish handing him an order to fill.

By the time I’d restocked the bar and had begun cleanup, the table of guys had gone. They left me fifty bucks, which I supposed was their way of saying sorry. Whatever. It was much more than I thought I’d get after nailing that guy in the face.

Scott and Tish left after I assured them I’d close up.

“You sure?” Tish asked as she grabbed her purse.

“No worries,” I said. “See you Monday.”

When I was alone, I locked the front door and turned off all the lights but the ones that shone directly down on the bar. I was keyed up, despite the drinks I’d had. The incident with the college guys bothered me and I still couldn’t get Blane out of my head.

Maybe I should’ve gone home with Trey and Bill. Or Brian. Or whatever his name had been.

With a sigh, I eased myself onto a barstool and took a swig of the beer I’d grabbed. I rested my head in my hand, my elbow braced on the bar. My other hand toyed with the beer bottle. I wasn’t in a hurry to get home.

Jeff, the cook at The Drop, had made me a hamburger earlier, and glowered at me until I’d taken a few bites. Jeff was ex-Army, bald, and had tattoos up and down his arms. Romeo was terrified of him, though Jeff had always been nice to me. He was a man of few words, content to cook and smoke his cigarettes, usually at the same time. He’d taken a

particular interest in making me eat lately, which was sweet of him.

I was lucky, I told myself. I had great friends who cared about me. And I was being cruel to them by making them worry. I just needed to get over it already. People broke up, got divorced, or died all the time. I was not the first to experience heartbreak.

A prickling on the back of my neck had me looking over my shoulder at the expanse of windows lining the walls. I couldn't see out, could see only my reflection in the opaque glass as it reflected the dim light from the bar.

Dismissing the sensation, I finished off the beer and tossed the bottle. Time to go home.

The streets were quiet and empty at this hour. I walked slowly to my car. I loved summer nights, when the heat of the day had passed and the warm darkness was like a welcoming blanket. It had rained earlier, leaving the air smelling fresh and clean. The moon peeked from behind clouds that were clearing out and I paused to look at it. Bright and full, it was a good reminder that life goes on, that each day would get just a tiny bit easier until one day I'd wake up and not think about Blane at all.

My keys slipped out of my lax fingers, hitting the ground with the clink of metal against concrete. I grumbled a curse at my clumsiness and bent down to grab them.

A gunshot shattered the silence, making me cry out in alarm. The glass of the car window exploded above me and I instinctively crouched down, covering my head with my arms as the shards rained on me.

I scrambled in my purse, adrenaline flooding my veins. But I hadn't yet taken my gun out when I heard the sound

of gunfire again, except it was coming from another direction. Someone was shooting back, and it wasn't me.

Tires squealed and there were more gunshots. I stayed down, not wanting to get in the crossfire of whatever I'd managed to land in the middle of. Gangs maybe, who knew? Just my luck, though.

It was quiet again, save for the pounding of the blood in my ears. I gradually uncovered my head. A tickle on my face had me swiping my cheek, my hand coming away bloody. A piece of glass must have cut me. Great.

My knees were scraped from the concrete and I winced as I got to my feet. At least it appeared the shooters were gone. I glanced around to be sure, wondering if I should call the cops, then the breath left my lungs in a rush.

A man had stepped out of the shadows and stood mere feet from me, a gun in the hand at his side.

I swallowed hard, before saying, "So, I guess you were just in the neighborhood."