

## Chapter One

'I wouldn't do that if I were you.'

Flick knew she shouldn't have bothered getting out of bed today. The alarm hadn't gone off so she'd been late to get up. Then the shower went on the fritz and she had to wash herself with the trickle of cold water that greeted her.

When she got into work her colleague Tamara Clark delighted in telling her that she had a run in her pantyhose. So that meant a quick trip to the washroom to take them off. Her boss had been waiting for her when she returned to the front desk, clearly perturbed that she wasn't at her post – except he didn't hesitate in removing her from it again to huckle her into his office.

Geoffrey Mustow loved the sound of his own voice, so what should have been a quick chat took up almost an hour of Flick's day. The fact that he was berating her for not completing a previously farmed out piece of work he'd delegated to her took up more of her day than completing said task actually did.

From there the day had gone from bad to worse. But this had to be the cherry on her cake. On her way to a date she hadn't wanted to go on in the first place, the cab had broken down. Her phone battery was dead because she had forgotten – for maybe the first time ever – to plug it into its charger at bed time.

The taxi ride to her date seemed to go on forever, and she wasn't sure if the driver was lost, or if he thought he'd take her on an expensive detour. Whatever the reason, when the vehicle sputtered and stopped all she could do was roll her eyes to the heavens.

The driver shouted in a language Flick didn't understand and got out to pop the hood, though it was clear he didn't have a clue what he was doing. After five minutes of him babbling in her face like it was her fault, she'd turned on her heels and started to walk.

This wasn't a part of town that she knew; miles had passed in the cab since she'd seen anything familiar. So here she was traipsing through a crappy area in the dark, looking for salvation.

No cabs had passed in the mile she'd walked along this deserted street. Her four-inch spikes were nipping at her toes, and if it hadn't been raining she'd have taken them off. Though her feet screamed, Flick was glad she'd elected to wear this particular pair. Topping out at five three she needed the height boost.

All of her shoes were heels – even those she wore to work, though they tended to be wider heels – but most of them were four or five inches to compensate for the height differential between her and seemingly everyone else on the planet.

The first sign of life she'd seen for six blocks was the lights in this corner bar. Oddly, there were no windows on the property. But a sign hung above the door calling the place "Dell's" and with the picture of a beer bottle, Flick knew it was a bar.

Hoping that they would have a phone, or be able to refer her to a taxi company, she reached for the long brass handle. But she didn't get a chance to push it before a deep masculine voice came from seemingly nowhere.

'I wouldn't do that if I were you.'

Flick hadn't been aware of anyone, but she peered into the black of the alleyway to her left. 'Excuse me?' she asked, though she still didn't see anyone.

'Keep walking Red,' he grumbled.

His casual impatience grated on her. 'Last time I checked this was a free country.'

'Check again.'

'Do you own this establishment?'

'No,' he said.

'Then what right do you have to prohibit my entry?'

'Trust me,' he said. 'You want to keep walking.'

'I don't actually,' Flick said. 'Who are you?'

'A good Samaritan.'

'Somehow I doubt that,' she said. 'Excuse me.'

'No—' His impatience was gone in that exclamation, but she ignored him and swung open the door to stride inside.

Immediately she regretted it. Six men sat around one table in the centre of the space. Two more stood at the bar, while there were two more behind it. A group of eight loitered around the pool table. The space was small, dim, and reeked of cigarette smoke. With bare floorboards, no decoration, and a single lazy ceiling fan, this wasn't her usual locale. The unexpected entrance drew the attention of every man in the room.

Flick's parched throat wouldn't allow words to pass. While three of the men at the centre table were wearing suits, the others might not have bathed for weeks by the look of them.

'What the hell is this?' one of the suited men at the centre table exclaimed. 'I thought you had a guy on look out.'

'Don't look like a cop to me,' one of the men from the pool table said. He discarded his cue and began to move toward her with half a dozen others in his wake. 'We'll take care of her.'

Flick's feet took their time to register what that glint in his eye meant. But as soon as they did she turned to flee, except they caught up with her. Circling around, the pack of hungry wolves came in close. Her scream went unheeded as three of them got hold of her, taking her off her feet.

'No!' she shouted and tried to wriggle free while they dragged her past the circle of seated men. 'No! Please! I'm sorry! I'll leave!'

'Not all alone you won't,' the one who had spoken first said.

The gang wrestled her past the pool table, and two tailed off to open a door in a darkened corner. Three of them who carried her through ignored her kicking and screaming. They all snubbed her attempts to free herself and dragged her through another door into a blackened room.

No lights, no windows, no sense of anything, until she was tossed down onto what felt like a thin mattress. The darkness increased Flick's disorientation, hindering her need to flee. Someone snatched her arm, yanked her against a metal bar, and with a grating snick she felt a cuff go around her wrist. Attached to this solid structure, which could only be a bed, Flick was locked in place. The men grumbled and laughed with delight at their apparent good fortune.

'No, please, I'm sorry. There's been a mistake,' Flick said. 'I want to leave. I need to go.'

'We've got uses for a chick like you,' someone snarled.

'No, you don't want to do this.'

When her other arm was grabbed, she tried to wrest free but this arm was stronger than hers, and she was pulled onto her back. Then there was another snick and she realised what they were doing, cuffing her to the bedframe.

'Who's first?' they asked each other.

Tears burned in her eyes, and she tried to pull her arms free, but her struggling and screaming did nothing except make them angry.

'Shut it! You'll piss off the boss, and he'll make us kill you before we get our fun!'

Lying here doing nothing wasn't an option. But she didn't want to be dead. Equally, Flick didn't want these men to have their way with her. The mattress shifted and a hot, moist hand covered her breast and gave her a squeeze.

'Big melons for such a little thing, you think she's legal?'

'You care?'

'No,' the one who fondled her breasts said. 'She'll do.'

'Or we'll do... her!' one of them exclaimed to the laughter of the others.

The hand left her breast, but Flick's sigh of relief was premature because the hand then landed on her thigh and went up under her skirt to touch the lace of her underwear. Flick kept her legs closed, forcing her thighs to bar his entry. He snorted a laugh.

'I think she's gonna fight it,' he said, taking hold of her underwear band.

'I love it when they fight,' another said.

Her underwear was torn, and she knew it had loosened, but Flick kept her thighs together. The bed shifted again, and a heavy body landed on hers, then a wet tongue lapped at her neck.

'Oh you're gonna love what we have in store,' the slobberer said.

Pulling the skirt of her dress all the way up to her waist, he tried to get his hand between the clamp of her thighs, but Flick kicked and tried to scream again.

'Open up for me little thing, you'll love it. I'm gonna take good care of you.'

'Please,' she whimpered. 'Please let me go.'

'Can't do that, you've seen us,' he said, trying to wiggle a finger downward.

Licking all the way to her cleavage, he bit her breast and Flick screamed again.

'It's not your turn!' one of the others said. By the way the body on top of her rocked she knew he'd been shoved by his colleague. 'Yeah! You went first the last time!'

Flick's body shook, her head swam like she could pass out at any second, but still she cried. The disgusting weight of this lump on top of her made her fight but he was bigger, stronger, and her attempt to free herself was fruitless.

The three men started to snipe at each other, but then a door opened. Though there wasn't much more light from the outer room it was enough to see that yes, she was cuffed to the bed, and there wasn't another thing in this room. The space was apparently purpose built to ensure no escape was conceivable. The distraction gave her a chance to battle her bonds, but still to no avail.

'What the hell you doing in here? You're meant to be outside.'

'Your turn on watch,' the silhouette that filled the doorway said.

'Hey no! We got fun here man!'

'Don't worry,' the silhouette grumbled. 'I'll take over here.'

'You?' a second said.

The foul smelling lump on top of her shifted to roll off so he could speak to the silhouette too. 'You never have a go.'

'This one got past me,' the silhouette said. 'Can't have that.'

The mumbling of the man above Flick increased but as he moved away, he fumbled each of her breasts again then stomped out of the room past the silhouette.

'You can go first but you've got five minutes—'

'Out,' the silhouette said. 'Both of you.'

'Now hang on—'

'You make me say it twice, and it'll be the last thing you hear.'

'Ok, but I'm next, and I—'

'I don't share,' the silhouette said to the men who tramped past him.

Though both stopped, evidently ready to say more, the silhouette stepped into the room and closed the door without further thought for them.

The silence unnerved her because in this darkness Flick had no idea where he was, or what he was doing. Chances were that he was freeing himself before his attack. This man was bigger, wider, and far more terrifying than the other three.

The other three had been scared of him, and had done what he said. Would it be worse to have the three of them taking turns? Or this one man who could subject her to she knew not what?

‘Please,’ she whispered. ‘I won’t tell a soul anything I’ve seen. I promise if you let me go—’

‘I told you to keep walking, Red,’ he muttered.

‘I’m sorry. I didn’t understand. If I’d known I... please let me go.’

‘Can’t do that. You’ve made that impossible... Do you want to know what these men do to women?’

‘No.’

‘Whatever the hell they want,’ he said. ‘Not one of them has made it out alive. They take turns. They’ll beat you. They’ll rape you. They’ll make you do every painful and demeaning thing they can think of, and then they’ll torture you; make no mistake, they won’t just kill you. They’ll make sure you know about it. A while back a lucky one was asphyxiated by Skeeve’s cock. He liked that one. He still tells the story of fucking her windpipe. That was the small guy with the creepy eyes. The one on top of you we call Shiv. He likes to cut. He tells the story of one, he amputated her breasts and fucked her with a pocketknife. She bled out for an age before she died.’

Flick didn’t need to hear this but any thought she had of freedom dissolved with his words. Her throat wanted to close. As much as she didn’t want these men to touch her, she certainly didn’t want them to kill her either. The sobbing became unbearable and she screamed out. But she was helpless, chained up here like an animal; she could hardly move.

‘What about you?’ she wept. ‘What are you going to do with me?’

‘Boss is diversifying into trafficking, little thing like you would fetch a pretty good price. I’d get a nod for that, ‘specially if you were untouched.’

‘You don’t have to do this,’ she said. ‘Please.’

‘We’ll be out of here in minutes, business is nearly done.’

‘You’re going to kill me? Now?’

‘I told you it’s not quick,’ he said. ‘Shooting you now would be a reprieve.’

‘So... what are you going to do? My family will notice I’m gone! My boyfriend will call the police! They know where I am! They’ll find you!’

‘No they won’t,’ he said with humour in his voice.

‘Do you think this is funny?’

‘No,’ he said. ‘But maybe next time you’ll think twice about doing what you’re told.’

‘If you had... I didn’t know what was in here. If you’d told me outside—’

‘I tried,’ he said. ‘But you were hell-bent. If it wasn’t so tragic I’d tell you that it serves you right.’

‘You think I deserve this?’ she asked pulling against her restraints. ‘You think any woman—’

‘No,’ he said suddenly very solemn.

‘Let me go,’ she whispered. ‘Please.’

‘What’s your name?’

‘My name?’

Her impulse was to scream, to shout, and his benign question took her off guard. But maybe if she could put a human face on the situation she would be spared. Like naming the stray who comes to your stoop, you choose to keep and care for him once he has a name.

‘Felicity,’ she said. ‘Felicity Hughes. But everyone calls me Flick.’

‘Flick,’ he said.

The mattress moved, and she tensed ready to scream again, but he didn’t touch her.

‘What’s your name?’

‘They call me Rushe,’ he said. ‘What are you doing out in these parts?’

‘Cab broke down,’ she said. ‘I was looking for a phone.’

‘You don’t carry a phone?’

‘Battery is dead. It’s kinda been a day.’

'I'll say. Chances of you getting out of this alive are slim.'

Fresh tears burned her eyes and her wobbling chin tried to contain another scream. 'You can let me go, just now, please, just let me go.'

'To what?' he asked. 'You'll have to walk back through that room, and if they think I'm not... they'll finish what I've not started yet.'

'Yet?'

Three heavy thumps landed on the door startling her again. The bed moved then he was off it.

'I'll uncuff you, but you've got to stay close to me,' he said. 'Do as you're told.'

'You're going to let me go?'

'No. I haven't had my fun with you yet.'

'Please!' she screeched in the desperation from her heart.

Any thought that this man might be better than the others disappeared with those words. The cuffs were loosened and she was pulled up to her feet. Her legs were jelly, and Flick snatched out for an anchor, only to come up against him.

Solid didn't begin to describe this man. Every part of him was hard muscle, but he wasn't bulky. His huge hand curled all the way around her upper arm, and he tugged her body away from his but he kept a hold of her with a vice grip.

The underwear that had been torn by the other man slid downwards and Flick grabbed for it, but she didn't get far because again his hand pulled her up – he obviously thought she was about to pass out.

'Am I gonna have to carry you?'

'No, my... my underwear, your friend tore it and...' Flick didn't want to fall over and smash her face somewhere. If she passed out these men would have free rein.

'Get it,' Rushe demanded and tossed her back to the bed again.

Hooking it off her feet, Flick realised that she'd lost her shoes somewhere, but she didn't care about that. As if he could see in the dark, Rushe snatched the thong from her then took hold of her again to wrench her back to her feet.

It took him two strides to get to the door. But it took her four times that many, and still he didn't slow down. Ripping the door from the frame, he marched out. He was angry, she could tell it just from the way he moved, and still she hadn't seen his face.

But in the gloom of the bar she got a better look at his frame at least. Being small she was used to people, men especially, being taller but he was a clear foot taller, if not more. He had wide shoulders and narrow hips, long strong legs wrapped in faded Levi's.

'You got our toy?' the man Rushe had identified as Skeeve asked practically buzzing with excitement.

There were fewer men here now, only five left including Rushe. Shiv was holding open the door she'd used to enter. One door; how could opening one door change your whole life?

'Glen's first,' Shiv said. 'Then I'm up.'

Rushe said nothing; he dragged her out onto the wet street, and any whisper of freedom disappeared when she was thrown headfirst into the back of a truck that idled by the kerb. Still on her face, Rushe got in behind her and shunted her against the far door. The cold glass of the window came up harshly on her cheek.

'Put your seatbelt on,' he grumbled at her.

Rushe didn't look at her when he said it, but his diligence surprised her, and she did as told. Three others piled in the front and they were moving. The speed would have concerned her if she wasn't desperately in need of a cop to stop them. But soon they were out of the street, and the town, and they were on the interstate.

'If you're not having your go, I'm going now,' Skeeve said from Rushe's other side.

'You'll keep it in your pants,' Rushe said. 'I ain't watching that.'

The three up front laughed. 'Yeah! You'll only embarrass yourself,' Shiv said.

Panic gripped Flick again when she realised how far they were going. This wasn't a quick trip round the corner. They were travelling somewhere. The further they went, the greater her urge to jump out became; except they were on the interstate and had to be hovering around a hundred, so she couldn't leap from the car and hope to survive.

The reality of her situation clawed at her because, unlike she'd tried to claim, her family wouldn't miss her. She hadn't seen any of them for almost a year. None of them kept in touch. She didn't have a boyfriend. Her date tonight was a first date, and he'd likely just think she stood him up. Hayden and she had met in a coffee shop, so he wouldn't notice she was missing from work.

And work, Tamara couldn't stand her, and Geoffrey had been prickly since she'd refused to go on a date with him. Plus, this was a long weekend, and being Friday night now she wasn't due back into work until Wednesday. They'd let her miss a few days without thinking anything other than she was being unreliable. Then the weekend would come, so it would be more than a week before anyone thought about reporting her missing.

'You're gonna be right at home little girl,' Skeeve drawled. 'Right at home.'

Sitting in the back of this truck, she stared blindly at her knees. Rushe took up most of the space, but she was glad that he sat next to Skeeve instead of her.

When she did glance up Shiv was peering over his shoulder at her. Skeeve was creepy and eager but Shiv was evil. With that leering smile and those narrow eyes she could believe he'd killed a woman for no reason other than his own entertainment. Killing someone in the way Rushe had described was not out of necessity. The man at Shiv's side stole glances too but he seemed younger, jumpier, a bit twitchy, and nervous.

'I say the girl's gotta earn her keep,' Skeeve said. He shifted his hips forward and began to fumble with his belt.

'Hey, yeah!' Shiv said from the front. 'Give her something to eat! A taste of what's to come.'

All of the men guffawed. Her fingernails bit into her thighs, and her body was so tightly coiled she wanted to scream and self-combust.

'You don't touch my property,' Rushe rumbled. 'None of you. You not clear on the rules?'

When he spoke, she was never aware of his lips moving, or eyes, or anything. And they weren't words as much as a bassy variety of vibrations from his chest. The third man was nervous; she had no read on the driver; and Rushe... he was unreadable.

Keeping her attention on her knees, she tried to forget her surroundings, the men here, and what lay ahead.

The positive thing about the length of the journey was that it gave her a reprieve. Whatever her future held Flick didn't want to think about what details it could involve.

All of the men muttered, but none of them stood up to Rushe. If he claimed her the others would respect that. Maybe respect wasn't the word, but they wouldn't refute it.

Rushe was broad but lean, and the heat of his rock hard thigh against her made her physically quiver. This man was athletic but agile, and while he might not say much an awareness shimmered around him that spoke of a quick mind.

But these men feared him. His position had to be superior to theirs, or he'd asserted his authority somehow. The muttering continued, but Rushe was unaffected.

The air was thick, humid, and the tension between the men was apparent; in this vehicle there was no honour among thieves.

Hayden would've left the restaurant by now. No one would miss her. He'd be in a cab, on his way home, cursing her name. Flick was alone.

When her family cast her out a year ago she'd learned the hard way what being alone meant. She'd staggered like Bambi on ice, unable to find her feet. After having her purse

snatched on two separate occasions, she'd thought herself independent and bad-ass. Boy did this scenario put that into perspective.

The black of night stretched into the souls of the men in this vehicle, and when it left the highway, they drove for more than twenty minutes into more gloom. Streetlights and civilisation were a long-forgotten dream; darkness and trees were the only things outside now.

The trees thickened, and their vehicle swung around a narrow bend into a side lane. From the bumping and bouncing Flick knew they were off-road. This wasn't a concrete thoroughfare. They dodged trees and the bumping increased. Cresting a ridge, they fell into a dip and Flick came out of her seat, landing on top of Rushe.

Skeeve whooped and took the chance to grab for her breast. Rushe shoved her aside as an inconvenience but that took her out of Skeeve's reach.

Then after a series of mounds the whole vehicle lurched to a stop. All of the men piled out. Rushe reached over her to open the door, then shoved her outside.

Any thought she had about running vanished when mud seeped between her toes and over her feet. Trees barred her view from every angle; all she could see was the truck and a shack.

Calling it a shack was polite. A rickety old porch seemed to hold the walls in place like a belt holding in the beer gut of a darts player.

As she was still stuttering at the view that didn't even allow moonlight through the canopy, Rushe grabbed her arm and regardless of her unstable footing, he dragged her toward the shack in the wake of the rowdy men, who had exited the truck first.

Going up the creaking wooden stairs, Flick knew walking in there was final. Taking the chance, she dug in her heels and tried to liberate her arm. Rushe wasn't perturbed. He hoisted her off her feet, and despite her struggling and screaming, he kicked into the shack and crossed the width of the room.

Without thought for the others Rushe shoved open a door, carried her in, and threw her down onto the floor with a thud. A nearby rope was used to bind Flick's hands, which he then attached to a pipe that ran along the wall.

The room was small, little more than a cell, ten foot square with a single bed, and a small set of drawers at its side. Rushe yanked open the top one and pulled out a folded pair of socks, which he held up to her.

'You gonna keep your mouth shut?' he said.

Rushe hadn't put a light on, so she still didn't get a good look at him. But the angles of his face told her he wasn't to be messed with.

'I—'

'There's no one around here for thirty miles,' he said. 'Scream yourself raw and you'll only piss me off. You want this in your mouth?'

'I got something she can put in there.'

Rushe spun on the man she hadn't noticed either. 'You get the fuck out of here.'

After he hurled the door into its frame he came back to her.

'Please let me go.'

'I'm not letting you go,' he said. 'If you keep your mouth shut and stay put we won't have a problem... are you gonna do what you're told this time?'

Any argument she had died on her lips knowing that reason wouldn't get her anywhere. In fairness, the last time she hadn't heeded his word she'd got herself into this mess, so she nodded.

'Good girl.'

With that he left her alone in the darkness. The finality of that closing door sent tears skittering down her cheeks. She'd never leave this house again, or at least she wouldn't leave it alive – of that Flick was absolutely sure.

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