

Maddox - Chapter One

“I’d be there already if you’d taken out the trash this morning like I’d asked, Ron.” She gripped the heavy bag of trash tighter as she walked toward the dumpster. It was dark and she hated taking it out at night. She didn’t live on the best side of town and more than once she’d read news articles about muggings because of the meth heads in the area. To make matters worse the sky chose that moment to open as a few gentle droplets of rain quickly turned into a hard downpour. Beth picked up her pace. Lightning streaked across the sky in angry jagged lines and thunder rumbled.

Beth had to grit her teeth against the need to curse and hang up on Ron. They’d been married for a little less than two years and they’d spent most of that time arguing. But Beth was the hopeful type. She kept thinking they’d find their rhythm. Marriage was for life, right? Her parents had been married for twenty-seven years and by all accounts they were as happy as ever. Beth wanted that too. Happily-ever-after with Ron? She was probably deluding herself on that score.

“Are you even listening to me, Beth?” Ron shouted, his angry high-pitched voice coming across her cell phone and filling her ear.

“Yes,” she lied. She’d already tuned out his screaming tirade. Something she’d gotten good at. How sad was that? Her friend Cam had said it more than once. Get a divorce. Stop torturing yourself. Cam was her oldest and dearest friend, but when it came to love she was a total cynic. Cam’s father had cheated on her mother. By the time the divorce lawyers were called in there’d been nothing left of their marriage except a lot of tears. Cam had watched her mother sink into a depression before picking herself up and moving on with her life.

Over the last few months, Beth had started to see what Cam meant. The truth smacked her in the face in that moment. Beth and Ron would at least have to be in the same orbit if they were to ever find they’re happy little rhythm.

“I don’t see why you couldn’t finish up sooner,” he droned on. “You work from home, for crying out loud. You set your own hours.” He paused before adding, “and the trash could’ve waited.” She wished just once he wouldn’t belittle the work she did. Setting up websites for artists, musicians and pretty much anyone in the creative world was her pride and joy. And it paid enough to make ends meet. But for Ron it was nothing more than a hobby.

“It’s not the end of the world if we get to the movies late,” she said, trying to placate him. “We’ll live.”

His tirade continued, and Beth’s finger hovered over the end call button. One little push of a button and all her frustrations would disappear. Just do it. Just push it. She was only ten minutes behind schedule. They’d miss a few previews, but they’d still be on time for the start of the movie. Could the man be anymore inflexible?

When she approached the dumpster, Beth realized she'd have to hang up with Ron in order to have the use of both hands. "I'll be there soon," she shouted into the phone before ending the call and shoving the phone into her purse. As she looked back up a tall, dark-haired man stood in front of her. His stare sent shivers down her spine. Something in his eyes seemed off. As if the elevator didn't quite reach the top floor. His hair was soaked and sticking to his head and he looked as if he hadn't eaten in days.

"Excuse me," she said, in the hopes of moving him out of her way so she could throw out her trash and get out of the pouring rain.

He pulled out a wicked looking knife from his hoodie and held it up. "Purse, bitch, now!"

Beth dropped the trash bag onto the blacktop and turned to run, but a hand clamped around her upper arm and yanked hard. A scream welled up from deep within when Beth caught the glint of the knife as it slashed toward her. A burning pain arced across her cheek. "Oh, God!" She clutched the side of her face and swayed. Her vision blurred. In seconds the man was gone along with her purse. She pulled her hand away from her face and saw a pool of blood in the center of her palm. Her legs crumpled and she hit the wet pavement. She heard voices from somewhere behind her, but she couldn't seem to focus. Beth's last thought was of Ron. He was going to be seriously pissed.

Beth blinked and tried to open her eyes, but the lights were bright. A sharp pain shot through her head and she let out a moan. She waited a-moment for the pain to subside then tried again. The room slowly drifted into focus as her eyes adjusted to brightness. Beth noticed a blood pressure monitor and an intravenous bag hanging on a metal pole to her right. The stark, egg-shell white walls. A hospital room. It all rushed back to her in a mass of frightening images. The rain pouring down. The mugger. Her purse. "Oh, no." Out of the corner of her eye she could see a bandage. She reached up and touched it. Gauze and tape covered the entire left side of her face. Her heart sped up as she imagined just how badly she was injured. She leaned up slightly and wiggled her toes. Okay, she wasn't dead. So far so good.

The door to her room opened and Beth attempted to turn her head, but it hurt too much. "Hello?" she said, hoping her visitor was someone who could give her some answers.

"Ah, you're awake." It was a feminine voice. Navy blue scrubs and strawberry blond hair came into view. "I'll get the doctor."

As the woman turned to go, Beth called out, "Wait. Where am I?" For some reason she couldn't explain, Beth didn't want to be alone.

The nurse offered her a kind smile and crossed the room. She pressed gentle fingers to the bandage across Beth's cheek. "You're in Mercy Memorial," she explained. "You were brought in last night with a head injury and some lacerations."

A compassionate soft brown gaze landed on Beth's bandage and for a moment there was a hint of pity. Beth's worries mounted. Just how bad were the lacerations?

"I can see those wheels spinning," she said as she pulled her hand away. "Just relax a moment while I get the doctor. He'll explain everything. Okay?"

Beth couldn't speak past the fear clogging her throat. She nodded and watched as the woman left her alone. Beth's hand went to her cheek once more. She fingered the bandage. There wasn't any pain, but she knew that was probably thanks to the medicine they were giving her via the IV. The cut would heal. She was alive, that was the main thing.

Beth thought of Ron. Had he been told? Probably. He was her husband and her emergency contact after all. Then again she'd had her purse stolen, along with her identification. She might very well be a Jane Doe. She'd need to make some calls. Of course, her mom would panic and want to be by her side when she heard what happened. Their life was in Florida now and Beth knew that on their budget a round trip ticket back to Ohio for both would be costly. It was a mugging and she was alive. People got mugged every day, right? She was lucky. She could handle this.

A few minutes later the doctor walked in. He smiled at her and it calmed her nerves. He appeared to be around her dad's age. He sported a headful of thick, grey hair as well as a slight paunch. His kind eyes sent a note of comfort through her.

"I'm Doctor Carlone and you are very lucky to be alive, young lady."

She nodded, feeling as if she were being scolded by a caring uncle. "The mugger," she explained. "He came out of nowhere."

He nodded. "You'll be glad to hear he's been caught." He pointed to something just out of her sight. "And your purse was recovered. Unfortunately, you sustained a concussion when you hit the pavement."

Okay, so she wasn't a Jane Doe. Good news. The concussion explained the pain behind her eyes. She fingered the bandage covering her face. "And this?"

His smile faltered, and Beth's bravado vanished. "He opened you up pretty good," he explained. "We've done what we can and there wasn't any damage to the nerves, but you'll have scars."

"How bad are we talking?" she asked, trying to hold back the tears. "Like Frankenstein bad?"

He patted her on the shoulder. "Nothing so drastic, but we won't really know until the healing begins. These things always look worse until the stitches are removed. You'll see."

Beth knew he was holding back on her. Suddenly she just wanted to escape. "How soon can I leave?"

"I want to keep you for observation overnight. That concussion is nothing to take lightly. We'll see how your head feels in the morning."

She nodded and closed her eyes. An image of Ron sprang to mind. “Did anyone call my husband? He’ll be worried about me.” As she said the words, she knew they weren’t true. He’d be pissed that she never showed up at the movies. Pissed that she hadn’t listened to him about the trash. But not particularly worried. It was high time Beth did something about Ron.

“He was called immediately and came to see you, but I’m afraid he mentioned something about work and left. I believe he was planning to come back later,” he answered as he handed her the phone. “In case you have others you want to call.” Next, he handed her the control for the nurse’s station.

“Nancy is on call all night.”

Thanks,” she said. After the doctor left, Beth let the tears fall. She covered her bandaged face with a shaky hand and wondered just where everything had gone so wrong.

Beth dialed Ron’s cell phone and he picked up on the second ring. “Hello?”

Hearing his voice should’ve given her a measure of peace. It didn’t. “Ron, it’s me.”

“Well, it’s about time you woke up,” he shouted. “I stood at the theater like an idiot waiting on you when I received the call that you were in the hospital.”

Beth pulled the phone away from her ear and frowned. He started complaining about missing work because of her and Beth had to interrupt him to get a word in. “I’m sorry that my mugging has inconvenienced you.”

She heard him curse. “Whatever. How do you feel?”

“I have a concussion and my face is bandaged up.”

He sighed. “I suppose I should come back up there now that you’re awake.” He paused then added, “I’ll be by soon.”

Beth winced at Ron’s frustrated tone. He acted as if she’d gotten knifed in the face on purpose just to annoy him. Enough was enough. “No. I’m going to be in and out of it all day anyway. I’ll see you in the morning. We need to talk about some things.” Like the fact that I want a divorce.

“Yes, I think we do,” he replied, just before the line went dead.

Not once had he seemed even remotely concerned for her wellbeing. God, what had she ever seen in him? She’d met him at a friend’s New Year’s Eve party. He was good looking, in a wellgroomed, extremely polished sort of way. Light brown hair neatly trimmed. Average height and build. Worked in a bank downtown. He’d made her laugh and they’d hit it off. A few months into the marriage and the laughter had died a slow, quiet death. Yes, it was way past time to give Ron the heave-ho.

Beth placed the phone on the bedside table and closed her eyes. Her mind replayed the incident all over again. The vacant eyes of the mugger. The blood. That awful knife coming at her. Tears spilled down her cheeks. "What a mess."

Camille would know what to say to her right now. Her friend was good like that. Always knew all the right things to say whenever Beth found herself in a crappy situation. She picked up the phone and called the woman she'd known since grade school.

"Hey, B. What's up?" Camille said, as she crunched on something. Probably a bag of chips. Beth could well imagine her slim, five-foot-tall, high-spirited friend with her blonde ringlets hair pulled back into her ever-present ponytail lounging on the couch binge watching Grey's Anatomy. When Camille wasn't working or exercising, she watched Doctor McDreamy.

"Actually, I'm in the hospital," Beth replied, suddenly feeling a lot less alone in the world. From the moment Beth and Camille had become friends in grade school they'd been inseparable. And Beth wasn't too proud to admit she needed Cam now more than ever.

"The hospital?" She shot back. "What the hell happened?"

"I was mugged," she answered, then quickly added, "but I'm okay. A concussion." She hesitated as she touched her bandaged face. "And some lacerations."

"Oh, no, you poor thing," Camille replied. "Which hospital, hun? I'll be there in a jiffy." Beth sighed in relief at the thought of seeing Camille's friendly face. "You really don't need to," she replied, even though she desperately wanted a hug from her bestie. "I'm sure they're releasing me tomorrow."

Camille snorted. "Yeah, yeah. Which hospital."

Beth chuckled. It was so typical of Cam to insist. "Mercy Memorial." She gave her the room number and they hung up. Within forty-five minutes Cam strode through the room with a bouquet of wildflowers and a bag of chocolate chip cookies from her favorite bakery. The sight was exactly what she needed. Touched by the gesture, Beth's eyes filled with tears. Camille rushed toward her and placed her pile on the table next to the bed.

"You downplayed it, B. You look like shit," she whispered as she leaned in and gave her a much-needed embrace.

Beth sniffed back her tears and patted her friend on the back. "Yeah, but I'm alive," she said, reminding herself that it could be worse.

They separated, and Cam sat in the chair next to the bed before taking her hand in her own. "It's a good thing you are, because I'd be seriously pissed if you went and got yourself killed."

A smile tugged at her lips. “Well, all my limbs are intact and in perfect working order. I’d call that a win.”

Camille looked around the room, before her gaze met hers once again. “I assume Ron is simply off getting coffee?”

Beth looked away, unwilling to see the obvious ‘I told you so’ in Cam’s eyes. “He’s coming to see me tomorrow morning.”

Camille cursed. “Couldn’t be bothered, huh?”

Camille had made no bones about her feelings toward Ron. She hadn’t liked his arrogance from day one. She’d only grown to hate him more with each passing day. Beth wished she’d listened to her friend months ago when she’d told her he was a jerk and needed kicked to the curb. “I think Ron and I are over,” she admitted. Unfortunately, there wasn’t even a twinge of sadness as the idea began to really set in.

“Finally!” Camille shouted as she reached into the bag of cookies and snatched one. “The mugging knocked some sense into you.”

Camille offered her a cookie. “No, thanks.” I don’t think it’s going to be too easy to eat with these cuts on my face.” Beth touched the bandage.

Camille frowned, her green eyes filling with concern as she zeroed in on her cheek. “Did the doctor give you any idea how bad it is?”

She shrugged. “Wait and see, he said. But there was something in the way he and the nurse looked at me that worries me.”

Cam sat back. “How do you mean?”

“Like with pity in their eyes,” Beth groaned. “I’m hoping I’m misreading the situation.”

“Aw, sweetie, I’m sure it won’t be all that bad. These things always look bad at first.” Cam winked as she wiped a bit of chocolate off her mouth with her finger. “No matter what happens you’ll always be a total hottie.”

Beth smiled. “Thanks. I needed to hear that even if you are delusional. And I’m glad you didn’t listen to me.” She cringed as she admitted, “I really hate hospitals.”

“Me too,” she grinned as she ate another cookie and leaned back in the chair. “Now, tell me how you plan to annihilate Ron. Don’t skip the gory details.”

They chatted for another hour before Beth started to get sleepy. Camille left with a promise to be back the next morning. Just before drifting off, Beth thought of Ron. He might not have been Mister Right, but the thought of going back to the dating game—and with scars covering her face to boot—seemed entirely too depressing. She yawned. Tomorrow things would look better. They had to.

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