

## Chapter One

Cindy shut off the water and stepped out of the shower onto a soft, fluffy red rug. She grabbed a white terrycloth towel from a wooden rack near the sink and began to sop up the excess water in her hair, before using the same towel to dry her body. She hung it over the shower door to dry, then used another bath towel to wrap up in. Steam coated the ancient, oval-shaped mirror above the sink. Cindy reached up to wipe it away when her cell phone began playing Barracuda by Heart. She didn't need to look at the screen to know who it was. Jessica. The five-foot, one-hundred-pound dynamo with the black spiky hair and the attitude to match. She also happened to be her best friend since grade school and the only person in the world who even knew where she was at the moment.

Cindy tapped the speaker icon. "I texted you last night and told you I made it here in one piece."

"Don't get pissy, woman, I was just making sure the cabin was up to your standards. No critters camping out in the bed or anything?"

Several creepy scenarios bombarded her brain. Many of them involved something covered in fur that hissed. A shiver raced up her spine. "No, or I would've driven right back home."

Jessica laughed. "I haven't been there in ages. I wasn't sure the state it was in."

Cindy picked up her phone and flipped off the bathroom light. "It was a little dusty but nothing major." She glanced around at the small cabin her friend owned. It had all the basics. A wood burning stove for heat, a small kitchen area that held a refrigerator and an electric stove. A bedroom that was only big enough for a full-size bed and a six-drawer dresser. And the bathroom. There was a television in the small living room, but no WIFI and she liked it that way. She'd come to unwind and it was the perfect place for it. "Thank you for loaning it to me for the weekend."

"Sure, sweetie. I wish I could've gotten away and come with you."

"Me too, but I brought a stack of books and lots of hot chocolate. Also, Clarence and Molly are really digging your faux fur rug right in front of the wood burner."

Jess snorted. "I think you love those animals more than me."

Cindy started to disagree with that statement, but hesitated. "I plead the fifth," she answered as she bent and petted Clarence. He'd been a stray when she'd taken him in five years ago. He'd been scrawny and had a nasty case of fleas. A little TLC and Clarence had bounced back like the champ he was. Now he was pushing eighty pounds and seemed to keep growing. Cindy suspected he was at least part German shepherd, but the rest of him was a mystery. Molly, her ten-year old orange tabby, hated Clarence with a vengeance and took every opportunity to

antagonize him. Cindy scratched Molly behind the ear before standing and crossing the room. She would've been lost without her fur family. They'd been with her through all sorts of heartbreak. Cindy unlocked the sliding door to the back deck and opened it wide. A gust of crisp November air hit her the instant she stepped out.

The cabin backed up against the woods. Mature walnut and pine trees made up most of the property with a few cherry and maple trees here and there. The slope of the land meant the deck stood a good twenty feet off the ground. She leaned against the railing and hitched her towel up a little higher. "This place is breathtaking, Jess. I forgot how much I missed it."

"Getting back to your roots is a wonderful way to rejuvenate. And Silverlake is a beautiful area. Do you remember the cinnamon rolls at Nellie's Diner?"

Her stomach rumbled thinking about the fresh-from-the-oven sweetness. "We had a lot of fun times at Nellie's, didn't we?"

She and Jessica had grown up in Silverlake, Ohio. They'd both left after graduating high school, thinking they'd travel and see the world. That intelligent decision landed her in Akron, Ohio where she'd gone to college and worked her ass off to pay bills. And for what? So she could find a job where she was overlooked and underappreciated. Yeah, great plan.

Jessica cleared her throat and said, "Every time a guy broke our hearts we hit Nellie's and hashed out our revenge plot."

She laughed. "That seems a lifetime ago, huh?"

There was a pause before Jess said, "I'm sorry about Grady, hun. He was a dick."

Cindy let out a sigh. Grady Ramone. Her latest failure. She'd really thought he was the one. Until she'd answered his cell phone one fateful day and found out her Mr. Right had been sleeping with not one but three different women from the hospital he worked at as a nurse. That was a fun revelation. She'd put three good years of her life into that jerk. It'd been a week after that horror show that she'd gotten passed over for promotion at H and H Financial Solutions. The kick to the heart by Grady, then the kick to the stomach by her boss. It had been time for some fresh air and a new perspective.

"Grady is the past," She answered, putting every ounce of strength she could muster behind the words. "I'm here to plan my future."

"Now that's what I like to hear."

A loud crash and a furious hiss from behind had Cindy swiveling around just in time to see Clarence leap off a chair near the counter, knocking it over in his mad pursuit of Molly. "Shit,"

Cindy grumbled as she headed for the sliding doors. "Maybe it was a bad idea to bring those two."

"Tell me your demon pets aren't trashing my cabin."

She searched for a plausible response to that stupidly accurate description and came up flat empty.

"Uh, well." Jessica started to curse, but Cindy had already tuned her out. She tried to open the door, but it wouldn't budge. She pressed her nose against the glass and saw why. "Damn it!"

"What now?"

"There's a chair wedged against the door. I can't open the slider." She tried again, putting more force into it, but it was useless. "Clarence managed to knock it into the door. The back half of the chair is lodged against the kitchen counter."

"Can you wiggle it? Maybe it'll move it enough to slide it open."

Cindy did as her friend suggested but still the door didn't move. "It's in there really good." She looked down at her towel covered body and as if right on cue a shiver skated all along her spine. She walked over to the railing and looked down at the ground below. It was far. Too far to jump without breaking a bone. And there were no stairs leading to the ground. Of course not. That would've been too easy. "This could be a problem, Jess."

"You're trapped on the back deck, aren't you?"

"Fuck."

"My guy that takes care of the place is on vacation in Arizona. You're going to have to call for help."

"Maybe if I scream someone will hear?"

"The nearest cabin is a mile away. Those woods are thick. They'd never hear you."

She hitched the towel tighter around her naked breasts. "I'm not dressed. I had just gotten out of the shower when you called."

"So it'll be the highlight of their day. Get off the phone and call 911. Maybe they'll get a locksmith out there. He can get in the front door and rescue you. Maybe he'll be cute. Maybe he'll be single. Not a bad scenario."

She rolled her eyes even as her teeth began to chatter. "I'm trying the door again." As the words

came out of her mouth a chime sounded on her phone. She looked at the screen. “Shit, my phone is about to die.”

“Of course you didn’t plug it in,” Jess grumbled. “Either you call 911 now or I will.”

“This doesn’t qualify as an emergency. I’m not injured. I’m just locked out.”

Her friend was strangely silent a minute before saying, “I have an idea, but you’ll hate it.”

“What? Just spit it out I’m losing battery life here!”

“Dallas. He’s an EMT with the fire department. Call Dallas.”

An image of the sandy-haired bad boy from her past that she’d crushed on all through high school slammed into her head. “Hell to the no. I will not call him. Never. No fucking way.”

“He knows where the cabin is because he’s used it a few times.”

That had her stiffening her spine. “And why would Dallas be using your cabin?”

“Don’t get that attitude. He’s used it alone. Fishing and hunting. Not a sexual escapade with me, dipshit.”

Relief swamped her even though it was unreasonable. Dallas didn’t belong to her. He could do whatever he wanted with whomever he wanted. End of story. “I’m still not calling him.”

“Too late.”

“You didn’t.”

“I texted him. Told him that I have a friend staying there and she’s locked herself out.”

She wanted to be pissed, but the prospect of seeing her high school crush after so many years did have a certain appeal. “Did he...did he reply?”

“Not yet.” A pause. “Wait, he says he’s in the area and he’ll be there within fifteen minutes.”

Fifteen minutes. She could hold out that long, right? No need to fear. Help was coming. No one froze to death in fifteen minutes. “Thanks, Jess, I owe you.”

“Just—”

The rest of her friend's words were lost though. She glanced at her cell phone. Dead. Awesome. Cindy turned toward the untouched beauty of the woods that surrounded the cabin. It'd been so alluring, and it had filled her with a sense of peace that she hadn't felt in a really long time. Maybe since she'd left Silverlake. Cindy clutched her phone in one hand and the front of the towel in her other. "So much for my relaxing weekend escape," she muttered.

As she started across the deck to the slider, her foot caught on a slick spot and she went down. Flat on her ass. "Ouch," she groaned. "Can this day get any worse?"

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