

## ~ Chapter One ~

Cherish Duncan was not the kind of girl you'd want to stop and pick up on a lonely gravel road at ten o'clock at night. Mainly because when she jabbed her thumb out to the side and her scowl showed up in your high beams, it was clear she had some anger issues. And if that wasn't enough of a deterrent and you slowed to roll down your window, you'd get a whiff of pig manure so strong, you'd have to be olfactory-impaired to risk having her in your car.

"Jackass!" Cherish hollered as a rusted gold Cutlass Supreme sped away, leaving her choking in a cloud of dust and exhaust. She gave the driver a hand gesture not normally seen in the small towns in this part of the world. "What kind of people leave a woman to walk at night on a dirt road in the middle of a bloody heat wave, God knows how far out of the next town? Jackasses, that's who!" Her voice was hoarse from yelling at yet another inconsiderate driver.

Cherish's anger surged through her veins like rocket fuel, spurring her to cover ground quickly. She thought of the way Scott had sat on the beat-up, green and white checkered sofa with his left hand down his pants and his right clasping a bottle of beer – his evening ritual. She used to walk in, thinking of nothing more than a hot shower to ease the ache of farm work from her bones while he questioned her about dinner. She'd usually ignored him quite easily but every now and then, she couldn't help but tell him exactly what she'd thought of his lazy ass. He'd worked out of a chair all day – why the hell couldn't he have made her dinner? She was up before dawn and came home after dusk every day.

She considered their last confrontation before the bastard had the balls to break up with her, as she continued on the long road home...

"Really? You're wondering what I'm going to make you for dinner?"

"Yeah, I'm hungry!" He chuckled along with a laugh reel at the sitcom she couldn't even name, because she hadn't had the time or interest to sit and watch a television program since *21 Jumpstreet* was a primetime series.

She grimaced as he scratched himself and simultaneously guzzled from his bottle. Questioning her cognitive abilities over her choice in mates – even temporary ones – was almost an hourly process with Scott. Had the mundane physical work turned her brain to mush? Did fertilizer and chemical sprays cause mutations? She was once considered intelligent, yet the only

mental stimulation she got now was a nightly argument with a skinny prick, that frequently ended in consensual but rough, angry sex.

The bug-eyed but otherwise average-looking man looked at her expectantly. “Well?”

“You’re hungry?”

“Yeah,” he said with a sharp nod. “I saw some pork chops in the deep freeze.”

“If you saw some pork chops, why didn’t you cook them?” Her voice was starting to get that telltale irritation in it, so he looked at her. His right eye narrowed in challenge. *Same ole, same ole.*

“I can’t cook; that’s one of the two reasons I keep you around.” He wrinkled his nose when she looked daggers at him. “You need to shower first, though. Jesus, you smell like you spent your day up a pig’s ass.”

“Just because I have a vagina, it doesn’t automatically qualify me as a better cook. Anyone can throw a chop in a pan and cook it! How about you get off your idle ass and make *my* damn supper for once!” She kicked off her muddy boots with a snarl. Chunks of hay and crusty mud crumbled off them, onto the floor.

“*Fuck*, Cheri, I don’t know how many times I’ve told you to leave them out in the hall.” He took another pull on his bottle. He wasn’t even making the argument a challenge for her.

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Cherish huffed in disgust and stopped the memory reel playing in her head as yet another car sped by. Screw Scott and every other man she’d ever dated. Who needed men, anyway! She kicked a golf-ball-sized stone and choked on the dry dust that flew into the air around her. The crickets chirping and the occasional rumble of a motor in the distance were her only company, and normally that would calm her, but this night she was edgy. The rest of that confrontation with Scott had awakened something in her.

She wasn’t the marrying kind? She jammed her hands into the sweaty pockets of her filthy overalls. What about him? His ex-girlfriend, recently-turned-fiancée must be dumber than a box of hair to want to marry a dick like Scott, she thought, stumbling over a hole in the dirt.

“Screw you, Scott! Screw you!” she yelled into the air. She rolled her neck. *Son of a bitch*, she thought, it was too damn hot in the prairies!

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Cherish woke to the sound of voices downstairs. At first, she thought it was the television but when footsteps accompanied the murmurs, she bolted upright. It was pitch black in the room with the shades drawn, so it took a few seconds for her senses to adjust. Her eyes darted about for an alarm clock but found none. For a moment, she couldn't even remember where she was. Maybe she had been dreaming? She chewed her thumbnail and looked down at her childhood teddy bear clutched in her arm. She was in her old home, and the reason why came back quickly. Scott's rejection had sent her to seek comfort she could only find when surrounded by memories.

A sound through the floor made her focus. The A/C hummed on and she felt her skin prickle. She hadn't bothered to turn it on last night. It had been hot and sticky and the house had felt more like an oven than anything else, but she hadn't wanted to alert anyone that she was back. She squeezed her bear tightly and listened. She swore under her breath and closed her eyes, straining to hear over the humming and her pounding heart. A door closed and two distinctly different voices droned in conversation. Someone was breaking into her childhood home – more than one someone!

Cherish considered diving back under her covers and praying not to be found, but slid off of her mattress instead. She stiffened her shoulders. She had never backed down from a fight before. She squatted, reaching blindly beneath the bed, and grabbed the hockey stick she kept there. She stood and tested the weight of it in her hand. It had been a while since she had played – not since university. With a tight frown, she tossed the bear over her shoulder. She gripped the stick with both hands and readied herself to attack. Keeping her stance wide and sturdy, she took a few practice swings. Her heart almost broke out of her chest when she missed the bedroom lamp by a scant few centimeters.

She rolled her shoulders and calmed herself. *Relax*. Stepping on the balls of her feet to avoid the well-worn paths in the hardwood, she headed for the doorway. She knew those spots well, that whined when they were stepped on. She'd avoided them every time she had snuck out as a teenager. She felt herself getting angry over the intrusion of strangers in her home. She encouraged the hot, explosive feeling. *When you're angry enough, there's no room for other emotions*. That was the number one rule in her *Rules to Survive By*, although the rule worked universally, too. Get pissed off enough and fear becomes nonexistent. How dare they invade her sanctuary!

She had almost made it to the hall when mid-step; her father's track pants slid down her legs and hit the floor. She mouthed a curse and yanked them back up with one hand. Damn that bastard, Scott, for kicking her out with nothing more than her filthy work overalls and holey sweat-stained tee shirt. Sure, he'd UPS the rest of her stuff as soon as he could. Bullshit! She pulled her lips back and bared her teeth, catching a glimpse of herself in the mirror. Even in the low light, she could see that she looked more like a rabid baby bunny than a lethal weapon. Scott had made the mistake of thinking her blonde curls and big blue eyes made her who she was, too, and had called her Baby Doll when he'd first walked up to her at a bar. The only doll she actually resembled personality-wise was perhaps *Chucky*. Thoughts of Scott made her snarl deepen. He was a damn liar and she wished she'd had her sturdy stick with her the night he'd tossed her on her butt. Stupid asshat!

She could do just about anything when it came to work, but this side of Manitoba, farm help was about all she could find. She shouldn't have started a fight with Scott until she had showered and changed into a pair of Levis and a fresh tee. Pig manure was a nasty smell that didn't seem to come out fully in the wash, or maybe the smell was just stuck in her head, but either way she wasn't sleeping in her work clothes no matter how many times she washed them. She had managed to find an old sports bra that she'd had when she was fourteen, and sadly, it still fit, but she hadn't been able to find anything else from the box of her old clothes that did. Puberty had rounded her backside and had given her womanly hips, but had left her upper body frozen in the same place it had been sixteen years earlier. Mostly that was fine by her. Breasts just got in the way – at least, that was what women that actually had them said. Her dad was a burly man close to six feet tall, but she must have gotten her height from somewhere else in the family gene pool because if she stood on tiptoe, she might reach five-foot-two. She practically drowned in his pants and the extra length puddled around her ankles, but given the alternative, she liked them just fine. Only problem was, they were worthless for fending off burglars.

Cherish's mouth was set in a concentrated scowl as she set the hockey stick down carefully and yanked her hair out of its braid. She wadded up a handful of the pants material at her waist and wrapped the elastic around it tightly. It left a very ugly lump bulging out of her side but at least the pants wouldn't fall down while she was bashing the living daylights out of the bad guys downstairs. Her yellow hair hung like crinkle-cut French fries down her back as she quietly navigated through the stairwell that led from the upper floor to the downstairs clinic. Her

father had been gone for two years and she had yet to touch anything in the medical centre. It would be exactly as it had been her whole life and she could navigate it with her eyes closed if she had to. She had the advantage there at least. Those buggers were probably looking for drugs. They'd be plenty disappointed when all they found was baby butt paste and birth control samples. The thought made her smirk. *Dumbasses!* There wasn't much need for anything narcotic in the tiny community of Barren, Saskatchewan. Anything that required narcotic pain relievers was a case for the hospital thirty kilometers south or the pharmacy/post office/catalogue shopping centre down the road.

Each stair that squeaked sent Cherish's body into an explosion of frayed nerve endings. Those were harder to navigate in the pitch black with a hockey stick as wide as the corridor. She vowed after this nightmare was over she was going to get her toolbox and screw down every damn floorboard in the old house so tight, it wouldn't squawk in the middle of a tornado.

At the bottom of the staircase, she held her breath fingering the black hockey tape that was starting to peel. The kitchen was on the other side of the door and it was the only connection between the clinic and the house. She pressed her ear against the wood and listened. It was harder to hear in the stairwell where there weren't any vents. After listening and chewing her lip practically raw, she opened the door slowly and hopped, as quiet as a gymnast, out in her father's wool socks. Blinded by light, she quickly blocked the sun with her elbow and flickered her eyes until they adjusted. The blackout shades upstairs had deceived her. It wasn't the middle of the night. The room was stark white, as it had always been, and the stainless steel counters reflected the morning sun like a mirror. Cherish blinked at the large silver clock on the wall: 7:09. She rubbed her eyes with the heel of her hand. Who breaks into a clinic at seven in the morning? And who opened all the blinds in the house? That was almost as irritating as being woken up by the thieves. What dumb ass robbers would do that? In Barren, you only got privacy if you kept your curtains drawn tight; otherwise, people decided you were asking them to look in and comment on whatever they saw. What kind of a thief opened blinds? Her eyes fell on a paper coffee cup steaming on the counter. The roasted bean aroma made her mouth water.

"Oh!" There was a yip of surprise behind Cherish. She spun on her socks, instinctively swinging the hockey stick in the direction of the voice. A crash of stainless steel canisters clattered and a tray of mugs were smashed, sending shards of white ceramic skittering across the linoleum. She swung again and hit a distinctly human target.

“Ow! Bloody hell!” A male voice yelled and hollered in a distinctly non-Canadian accent.

“Come on, you son of a bitch! I may be small but I’m tough and I know how to use this!” She swung again but this time the stick connected with a palm and was yanked out of her grasp. Cherish didn’t think – she just ran at him. No one was taking her down without a fight! This was *her* damn house!

“You had better calm down and explain yourself or I’m callin’ the police!” the man shouted. Cherish froze mid-leap and skidded across the floor. She landed in an unflattering pose at the robber’s feet.

“What do you mean, *you’re* calling the police? *I’m* calling the police!” She glared up at the stranger that stood before her. His square jaw was clean-shaven and his wavy, sun-streaked brown hair was messy but fashionably so. He didn’t look at all as a burglar should. He had no hooked nose or jagged scar; he wore no dark clothes or toque. He wasn’t even a punk kid with too many piercings and pants that sat under his butt. She eyed his khaki slacks, striped blue rugby shirt, and Lacoste shoes quizzically before looking back at his face. From this angle, his slightly downward tilted eyes were even puppy-doggish if you asked her, and even in their shocked state she noticed they were a gorgeous soft brown. “You’re the one robbing me!”

“I thought most people fended off burglars with baseball bats. What’s with the hockey stick?” His lazy drawl was unmistakably Australian. He looked entertained now with a slight pull to the corners of his mouth and deep creases fanning his eyes. She sized him up and scrambled back in a crab walk. He made no attempt to attack her. She got to her feet quickly. He was probably only five-ten but he was stocky, with wide thick shoulders and even through his shirt she could tell he had a muscled chest. She’d taken on bigger. Hell, she wrestled with that big sow the other day and Daisy was stronger than any man Cherish had ever met.

“I was practically born with that stick in my hands, buddy.” She jabbed her finger at her stick. “In Canada we play hockey, dumbass!”

“Then what of the Blue Jays?” he questioned, his mouth quirking in a more obvious grin.

What a ridiculous conversation to be having, she thought. Was it possible there was an escape from a mental hospital somewhere? No. She gave a shake of her head. He couldn’t possibly be mentally challenged – he looked too amused by the situation.

“Stop changing the subject and give me that back so I can clobber some sense into you!” She stamped her foot.

“No, thank you. I think I like it just where it is.” He looked at the stick and ran his hand along the smooth wood admiringly. She lunged for it but he lifted it out of her reach. His mouth stayed in its tight grin but his brown eyes smiled deeper in satisfaction and it annoyed her like lemon in a paper cut.

“Are you demented?” she blurted out. “Who the hell robs a place dressed for a day of golf?” She grabbed a long handled plastic broom from behind the door and whacked at him with it. It made a sharp cracking noise when it hit the floor. He had jumped back just in time. She narrowed her eyes, deciding he was fast on his feet, and swung at him again.

“Are *you* demented?” he accused her, jumping out of the way in time once again. “I’m not robbin’ anyone!” He looked down at her waist. “And at least I’m dressed!” He pointed at her legs and her eyes followed.

“Goddammit!” Her pants were ungracefully slumped at her ankles and her red and black polka dotted panties were out for all to see. She let out a string of curses but she wasn’t willing to lose the broom for her modesty. He could take the sight of her body to his grave for all she cared. His words suddenly sunk in.

“What the hell are you doing here if you’re not robbing the place?”

“Havin’ a look about.”

She was about to lambaste him when John Freeman, the town’s only real estate agent and her ex-boyfriend from high school, walked in. In a town the size of Barren, you pretty much dated everyone your age at least once in high school, but John had lasted a year.

“Sorry, Devin, I had to take that call. So what do you think?” John’s eyes widened when he saw her. “Oh! Hey, Cheri bomb,” He looked down at her underwear, his mouth sliding into an easy, wide smile. He was all white teeth and clean-cut, small town charm. “You’re looking just as nice as you did on prom, honey.”

Cherish grimaced at him and released one hand from the broom handle to yank her pants up quickly.

“When did you get back in town, darlin’?” he asked.

“You know her?”

“You know him?” They spoke simultaneously; their expressions almost mirror images in shock.

“Cherish, this is Devin Deller. Devin, this is Cherish Duncan – she currently owns the place.” Cherish curled her lip at the good-looking stranger and grabbed her hockey stick back. What the hell did he mean, *currently*?

“Oh!” The Australian smiled widely and it brought out more sun-coaxed lines around his mouth. He looked rugged and sexy and she didn’t like it one bit! He walked toward her with his easy-going gait and gorgeous eyes and she decided he might actually put John to shame in the looks department. She did a mental head-slap and shook her thoughts away.

“Nice ta meet ya,” he said, holding out his hand.

She stared at it. It was red from catching the stick mid-swing. It was also bronzed from the sun and surprisingly appealing – not too big and clumsy looking and not too small and weak. He had man’s hands. She scolded herself. What the hell was she doing, getting distracted first by his looks and then by his hands? Who the hell cared what he looked like and that he had nice hands? And why was he being so good-humoured? What kind of an idiot tried to shake hands with his attacker? Would he try to pet a grizzly after it mauled his dog, too? She shot him a dirty look and turned to John.

“And I thought Canadians were friendly. Eh?” Devin remarked, his empty hand still held out to her.

“And aren’t all Aussies descended from thieves and convicts?” she snapped obliquely at him. His brows rose in mild surprise and she turned her back on him. *Sarcasm and snark can keep anyone from befriending you before they learn you’re not really worth knowing.* It was the second rule of her *Rules to Survive By*.

“What the hell does he mean, he’s *lookin’ about*?” She slammed the broom against the wall, its end chipping the paint. “Did my house suddenly make the heritage house tour or some shit?” Her foot started tapping and she put her hand on her hip while John took his time answering. He looked nervous. He had come a long way from the rebellious teen wanting to piss off his parents by being with her. John was taller than Mr. Good-looking, so she had to crane her neck, almost painfully, to look up at him. If he didn’t answer her soon, she was going to high-stick him in the jaw. He eyed her and the stick and she almost felt sorry for him. She could be a little scary when she hadn’t had enough sleep. No one would pick up a strange hitchhiker that



smelled like pig manure so she'd had to walk most of the night to get into town. Here everyone knew Cherish Duncan was no *Baby doll*, she was a force of nature not meant to be trifled with and she hardly ever gave warning before she struck. That was how she best kept people on their toes. The smell of the coffee steaming from the cup on the counter wasn't helping her mood, either. Her brain was practically begging for caffeine.

"Cherish, we've sent you a billion letters and phoned every listing for C. Duncan in Canada for the last two years. It seems we're always one step behind you. You have never once attempted to contact us. You left your dad's place here to decompose with no concerns for what he built or your community at all."

"Yeah, so?" Guilt wiggled in her gut as if a hungry tapeworm inside her had been awakened from a long slumber.

"You haven't paid property tax on this place in years. Maude and Joe Barnaby from the historical society have been doing the upkeep in hopes you'll come to your senses and get your butt back here where you belong." He crossed his arms and gave her a half-frown.

"You didn't even come home for my wedding!" he added. "I put the announcement in five papers in hopes you'd see it and come. I guess you're too busy out there being a big shot." He rubbed the injured look from his face. The guilt worm stirred within her again. She didn't intend to hurt him. In all honesty, she didn't know he'd cared so much. The fact that the Barnabys had been keeping up the house surprised her, too. Cherish had left Barren rather abruptly after her father had died, knowing the town folk would rather it. Unfortunately, she'd stopped for a quick drink at the Clucking Duck and had somehow managed to start a bar brawl that had set the grill on fire. She had been gone before she even knew there was a fire and hadn't been back since. She'd heard it on the news when she finally got picked up by a trucker on the way out of town. The whole night was fuzzy, since she'd had too much to drink, but you'd think if she'd started a fire, she'd remember it. Of course, she was Cheri bomb Duncan and well, who'd believe her if she said she didn't do it?