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## Chapter 1

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"I -I finally did it."

While the confession was made softly and hesitantly, as if acknowledging it that way made it somehow more of a concrete fact than it already was, she ended up feeling much better once she'd said it out loud for some reason.

There was no reason to go into the embarrassing, humiliating details. It was done. That was all she needed to know about it. It wasn't as if she wouldn't be able to guess a lot of it once she laid eyes on her, anyway.

Thankfully, Bronwynne "Brownie" Marshall knew exactly what her friend was talking about—which, at its heart, was both a good and a bad thing.

"You left him." It wasn't a question, followed immediately by an emphatic, "Good." She barely managed to refrain from saying what she was thinking, which was, *about fucking time*. But it wasn't as if Jayne didn't know she'd restrained herself. That one word contained many layers and years of disgust, not to mention a large helping of pure relief.

"Yes."

BROWNIE KNEW her friend better than to think that she was agreeing with the idea that leaving the man who Brownie refused to refer to as anything other than "that bastard" was good. That was one of the reasons why it had taken her much longer than everyone she loved would have preferred for her to get to the point where she could actually walk out that door.

But it was absolutely necessary, and she'd finally seen her way to being able to accomplish it.

Brownie wasn't about to criticize her. She was too happy to hear the news, although she was trying to be respectful of her friend's feelings about the situation, which she knew were somewhat muddled.

"Are you okay? Did he hurt you?" she asked, wishing she'd thought to do so much sooner.

There was a long beat before she answered, "I'm fine." Jayne could see her friend's angry glare from across the country, even though they weren't Facetiming for exactly that reason.

"Liar. Are you, really? Did he hurt you?"

She could tell Jayne really didn't want to go into it. "I'm fine."

"Do you need medical attention, Jayne? If you do, go now. I'll cover whatever it costs."

"I don't, and no, you won't," came the staunch, stubborn, and not at all unexpected reply.

Brownie knew better than to push. "Where are you now? Are you somewhere safe?"

"I'm in Ohio."

"Ohio? Really? Why?" As far as she knew, Jayne didn't know anyone in the state. She heard her friend clear her throat nervously.

"Remember when you said that I could come stay with you anytime I needed to?"

"Of course!"

"Well," she sighed, reluctance in every word. "I think I need to, if it's still okay with you."

Before her friend could get another word out—most likely to retract her acceptance of an offer Brownie had been making since they were in college together, repeating it ad nauseum every time she spoke to Jayne, especially over the past few years—she came back with, "Give me a couple of minutes, and I'll call you back with flight numbers."

"No, you won't. We're already on the road. I had prepared—some—before I did this. I have a little money saved, the car's all packed, and it'll give me some time to process."

But Brownie wasn't one to be easily bullshitted. "You mean for the bruises to fade, right?"

Sometimes, having a friend as close as Brownie was a distinct detriment. "That's not what I said."

"Yes, but that's why you're driving rather than flying."

She honestly hadn't been thinking about that, although it was a fortunate consequence of being poor, she supposed.

"I'm driving rather than flying because that's what I can afford, and it'll be nice to have my own car while I'm there. It's bad enough that I'm dumping myself and my son on you, along with the very real possibility that Jake will appear on your doorstep, looking for me at some point, although I hope I don't impose on you long enough for that to happen."

"Have I ever made you feel that I am even somewhat concerned about that? I hope you know—deep down, despite your self-deprecating humor—that you are welcome to stay with me—with us—for as long as you want to."

There was a pause before Jayne returned, "So, he's home."

"Of course, he is. It's his house. And he's retired, so he's home all the friggin' time nowadays. But he also has various businesses to run, so he's out a lot during the day, too."

"H-he's not going to be happy for me to be there."

Brownie sighed impatiently. "You're wrong there, like you've

been wrong about him all along. I don't know why you've always felt that he doesn't like you for some reason. He'll be fine," she answered, her voice revealing her own insecurities about what she was saying.

"Uh-huh."

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"WE GO, MOMMY?" Braeden hinted from his car seat, mouth full of Apple Jacks. Usually, she only gave him the healthier flavors of Cheerios when he wanted something to nibble on, but she wanted him to think of this as somewhat of a vacation, so she relaxed the rules a bit for him. On a scale of kale to Toblerone, she didn't think that a small tab bag of the sugary, cinnamon cereal was too horribly bad.

But she was trying to teach him about courtesy and politeness, and she didn't believe that there was any age that was too young to learn about such things. "Braeden, my love, is Mumma on the phone?"

"Huh-huh." He nodded.

"What do we say when we want to speak to someone who's on the phone or talking to someone else?"

Braeden's face screwed up in the cutest way when he was thinking hard. "Say 'tuse me?'" he guessed in a questioning tone.

"Exactly! Good job!"

"He is such a doll!" Brownie gushed, having overheard the conversation. She was dying to have one of her own, but Jayne thought that a few weeks of close proximity to a two-and-a-half-year-old might well change her opinion to happy childlessness for the foreseeable future as Braeden chimed in right on time.

"'Tuse me, Mumma. We go?'"

Jayne had to grin at her precocious son. "Yes, little love." She turned the phone toward him. "Say buh-bye to Auntie Brownie."

"Buh bye, doodie head!" he said with a giggle.

Before she could correct him, his aunt compounded his naughtiness, responding while laughing uproariously, "Buh-bye, doodie head!"

"Honestly. Did you really have to teach him to say that? He did it to our thousand-year-old neighbor just last week, and I was mortified! How old are you?" Jayne chided, half-kidding, but her friend was still giggling. "Stop encouraging him! He'll probably say that to Pace!"

Bronwynne chuckled at that idea. "I guarantee you, he'll only do that to my brother once."

Jayne frowned fiercely. "I know he doesn't like kids, but I won't have him bullying my son."

"I don't know where you got that idea about him, but you're wrong, and I take back what I said." Then she wisely changed the topic. "When do you think you'll be here?"

"Depends on whether I take us on any side trips, how bad traffic is, and how well the jalopy runs."

"And Braeden, I would imagine."

"Oh, he's a trouper. He loves to ride. It's how I used to get him to sleep a lot of the time when he was a baby."

"He's still a baby."

"He's a toddler, Brown."

"Toddler, baby, infant, kid, whatever."

"Spoken like a true non-parent," Jayne teased. "All right, well, we're gonna get back on the road for a few more hours. I just didn't want to descend on you without warning."

"That would have been fine, too, you know. I'm always glad to see you."

She smirked. "Well, that makes one of you."

"Arch loves you too, though, just so you know. He's snow birding in Florida at the moment. But so does Pace, in his way."

Her "uh-huh" sounded just as skeptical as she'd intended. "See you soon."

Brownie's stern, "Drive carefully!" trickled in her ear, as if she was channeling Pace.

"Tuse me," came the small but insistent voice from the back seat.

But Jayne met his eyes in the rearview mirror and preempted what he was going to say. "We go, Braeden. We go."

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FIVE DAYS LATER, she turned her beat up, ten-year-old Outback down the long road that led to the Marshall Family Ranch, just outside of the barely-there town of Bath, Wyoming.

They drove past what seemed like—and probably was—miles and miles of fenced pasture, kicking up dust on the dirt road even though she wasn't going very quickly. The car refused to go quickly; it could barely get above fifty miles an hour. Its catalytic converter was clogged, and they—she—never had the almost thousand dollars that it would take to fix any of the myriad problems the car had.

Before Braeden ended up coughing, she rolled up his windows, thankful that at least this fifth-hand car had electric windows.

The other car she and her soon-to-be erstwhile husband owned still had the crank kind. It was a fitting metaphor for their marriage, she realized with a start.

But even that disturbing thought couldn't distract her from the nervousness that was making her heart beat faster. The fast food burrito she'd eaten for lunch was beginning to feel like a lead weight in her stomach, and she could feel her shoulders and neck tightening in anticipation.

Maybe he'd be gone—out on the range or, better yet, into town—for the day. Or the week. Or the month.

Nah, she couldn't be that lucky.

And of course, she wasn't.

Jayne had sincerely hoped that Brownie would be the first person that came through the front door when she pulled up and stopped the car. But no. That would be much too easy, and the universe didn't like her anywhere near enough to be that kind.

Instead, she saw him taking those enormous strides of his as he crossed the big veranda on the front of the family's beautiful house, casually missing every other step on the way down the stairs.

She couldn't just sit there, watching him like a woman who sees a pool of pure, cool water after years of thirst, so Jayne unbuckled herself, got out of the car, and reached into the back to do the same for Braeden, thankful that she had something to do besides gawp at him like some love-struck schoolgirl.

Braeden didn't want to be held after spending so much time in his car seat over the past few days, so she put him down next to her while she recovered some of his things from the back of the car, holding firmly on to his hand.

Or so she thought.

The next thing she knew, his little hand had slipped out of hers, and he was gone.

Jayne straightened immediately and turned to see her worst nightmare coming true. He was running, hell bent for leather, as fast as his chubby little legs would let him, toward the enormous man who was stalking boldly toward them, looking all kinds of sexy in a red plaid shirt, cowboy hat, jeans, and well-worn boots.

"Braeden, no, don't bother him," she ordered, wanting but not wanting to run and scoop him up to keep him from getting in Pace's way.

She might as well have saved her breath, and what happened next could not have been more unexpected.

The six-five man sank gracefully into a squat in front of the little boy, who slowed himself down at that development, as if he hadn't considered the idea that the man could fold himself in such a way.

Neither had she, nor had she thought that he would even bother to do so.

"Hey, little man," she heard him croon in a tone she didn't like recognizing as he used a big finger to tip his hat back. "Where're you headed in such an all-fired hurry, hmm?"

"Annie Bwownie!" the little man in question answered in no uncertain terms. She'd been telling him, off and on throughout the day, that today was the day that he would get to meet his Aunt Brownie, and he was very excited to do so, in the unabashed hope that she would have presents for him.

Her son had "met" her online and liked her a lot, but Brownie wasn't stupid. Since she was across the country and hadn't met him in person, she'd been slyly buying his affection since the day he was born. Every nice toy he owned had come from his aunt.

Jake hadn't been much in favor of spending any more money than was absolutely necessary on the kid—or anyone but himself, for that matter. And, for some unknown reason, the idiot insisted he wasn't sure Braeden was actually his. That was utterly ridiculous, of course. She didn't like sex—as he'd so frequently pointed out, using very insulting language, as usual with her—so why would she go looking for something she never cared if she ever indulged in again in her life?

"Well, partner, she's busy right now, but I'm sure she'll be out soon. Meanwhile, how about if I pick you up?" He put his arms out to do so but didn't touch the boy, watching his face intently.

At least as intently as Jayne was watching his.

Braeden hadn't spent much time around men, and his experiences with his father—almost all negative—had taught him to be wary of strangers in general.

Pace could see him biting his lip and looking heartbreakingly tentative at his question, so he revised it. "No problem, sport," he reassured in a kind, soft tone as he stood. "Why don't we go help



your mom with her things? Then we'll all head into the house together."

His eyes found hers while they were still glued to him, and she couldn't help but blush.

And fuck, she'd forgotten—as she'd known she would—to stop at a convenience store and put more makeup on!

The big man's expression was pretty open when he'd started walking toward her, Braeden pausing for a moment to look after the behemoth then deciding to try to keep up with him, which wasn't an easy thing to do at his size.

And the closer Pace got, the angrier he became.

Too late, Jayne turned back to what she had been doing before she'd stopped to watch the two of them become acquainted, and he stopped a respectful distance away from her, trying to remember not to crowd her when all he wanted to do was to grab her to him and hug her fiercely tight.

She closed the car door and slipped past him—knowing he had allowed her to do so—heading for the trunk, which was where the majority of their crap was, although "their" was being generous. It was ninety percent Braeden's, but then, that was how it went when you had a child, and she wouldn't trade him for all the clothes, jewelry, or perfumes in the world.

Jayne had been working on this little emergency jump kit for them for a while. It was easy to hide from Jake—he hated her little shit box of a car and would never think to look in the trunk. Besides, she hadn't used suitcases—not that she had any to use, anyway. In case he did decide to snoop, she'd disguised their things as trash by putting everything in big black garbage bags.

Which Pace was now seeing and realizing that she couldn't afford luggage.

As she felt her face grow almost painfully hot with embarrassment, Jayne kept herself busy pulling things out, the last of which was the incredibly elaborate—and expensive, she was sure, since it had been a gift from Brownie—pack and play. And she

had thanked her friend for it every time she could remember to. It was a lifesaver, especially now.

Even though she was sure it must seem to Pace that she'd packed enough stuff for five toddlers, the majority of his stuff was still in the crappy apartment she'd left to come here. Jayne wouldn't have been at all surprised to find that the asshole had already sold everything of value that he could on Craigslist and EBay.

But she didn't want to dwell on him and his toxicity. She wasn't with him anymore.

He couldn't hurt her, ever again. She wouldn't let him. And she certainly wouldn't let him touch their son. It had been the very real possibility that he might that had given her the impetus to leave him, finally.

When she closed the trunk, everything they owned at her feet, she heard the low vibration of his voice.

"Look at me, Jayne." Quiet and soft, but with a steel core.

He was, again, keeping a respectful distance, but she wouldn't put it past him at all to reach out and use one of his fingers to turn her head toward him. Of course, Brownie had told him that she was coming, and probably some of the why of it, hopefully not all of it, but enough apparently. He wanted to see her bruises, she knew, and she had a feeling that he wasn't going to let it go until she let him. And it wasn't as if the makeup was really camouflaging them very well, anyway.

So, Jayne said "fuck it" to herself, grabbed that part of her inner strength that she'd had to develop in order to leave that awful marriage and get herself across the country with her son in tow and not much more than the clothes on their backs, and she turned to face him full on.

The dark purplish bruise on her jaw—where Jake's fist had connected with it hard enough to snap her head back and into the wall—was just starting to fade, but the black eye was still blooming, getting worse every time she looked into the mirror,

she would swear. There was a cut on her cheek that she'd cleaned up but didn't bother to put a Band Aid on, a knot on the back of her head from the wall, and a gash at her temple where she'd hit it against the corner of the coffee table when he'd knocked her off her feet. Her ribcage hadn't fared much better than her face as she'd endured some well-placed kicks once she was down there, but he would never see those, and when she looked into his eyes, she was damned glad he wouldn't.

There was no way she could miss the shock he managed to cover quickly—she had to give that to him—before his expression became, not blank but set, a muscle ticking furiously in his jaw. That finger she'd anticipated did reach toward her slowly, but even though she'd known he might do that, Jayne couldn't prevent herself from shying away.

His face changed in a disturbing way—one she couldn't begin to put a name on—and he retracted his hand without ever having touched her, while taking a large step back. Then he cleared his throat and began to gather the stuff she'd set outside the car, shouldering almost all of the load and leaving her just a few small things. He set off toward the house, Braeden galloping behind him, trying to keep up.

Meanwhile, his mother was left to follow or not, and she wondered which would be the lesser of the two evils. Maybe she could just live in her car, rather than having to deal with him. Pace Marshall had always made her nervous for some reason. He made her jittery. Her heart beat faster around him, her hands were always clammy, and she just felt like such an idiot that she actively avoided being in his company, when she could.

This was not going to be one of those times, though. She was going to be living in his house, able to stay there only because of his good graces. Brownie and Archie lived there, too, but Pace owned the house and the ranch, which was only right since Brownie had no interest whatsoever in being a rancher.

Brownie had a fiancé who was very nice—more than a match

for Pace; in fact, he was one of Pace's football player friends who was still playing the game. Eventually, they were going to get married and had already bought a plot of land on which they would be building their dream house shortly, not too far from the ranch.

Jayne wondered baldly if she'd still be sponging off her friend when the house was finished. That was supposed to take another year and a half or so, and she'd be damned if she'd impose on them for that long.

Realistically, she'd given herself ninety days to find a job of some sort and get herself moved out of the ranch, and she considered that that was much too long, intending to accomplish it much sooner than that with any luck. She could do anything—she'd take any job in order to get *some* money flowing in. Brownie had already told her—during multiple attempts, over the years, to convince her to do what she'd just done—that rents were very reasonable—much more so than they were in the East.

So, hopefully, that would be doable. That was her goal, anyway, and she knew that she'd give herself hell if she didn't meet it. Brownie wouldn't care one whit about how long she stayed. Hell, she'd already told her she could live there indefinitely as far as she was concerned.

But Jayne couldn't see Pace signing onto an open-ended stay—especially with a precocious toddler getting into everything. Hell, she couldn't see him being particularly happy with the idea of her staying the entire ninety days, either.

Ninety minutes would probably be a stretch for him.

She knew it was going to be for her.