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## Chapter 1

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Julie stood against the wall at the party feeling miserable. The music was blaring, half the people were dancing, and the object of her affection, Adam, was across the room talking to another girl.

"Just go ask him to dance."

Julie turned to glare at her best friend Janelle. "Now who's being pushy?"

Janelle lost her smile and focused on the ground. Sighing, Julie muttered, "Sorry."

A few weeks ago, they'd had an argument about Julie pushing Janelle into things, and it had left their relationship strained. Julie had been trying to help her shy friend come out of her shell, but she'd never meant to push too hard or make Janelle do anything she didn't actually want to do.

"It's okay." Janelle easily accepted the apology but then leaned against her boyfriend, Mack. He put his arm around her shoulders and shot Julie a frown.

Julie pursed her lips and tried not to roll her eyes. She wasn't sure what Janelle saw in Mack other than the football player's obvious physical attributes. In Julie's opinion, Mack was bossy

and overbearing. He'd put a damper on their evening before they'd even arrived at the party, and he was the one who'd originally been invited. When Janelle picked Julie up an hour ago, Mack had made it very clear that neither of them were allowed to drink or take in any form of marijuana, since they were both under twenty-one. When Julie had asked what the harm was in one beer, his only answer had been a threat to tell Julie's brother about it when the party was over if he saw her drinking or taking a hit. Asshole.

She was especially irritated because Mack's threat had worked. Julie's older brother, Aaron, was eighteen years older than she was; he was a professor where they all went to college, and she was now living with him for the summer. He'd always been more like a second father than a brother, and since she'd moved in with him three weeks ago, he'd been a massive pain in her ass. He made her check in with him when she wouldn't be home for dinner, and he'd warned her at least twice not to make noise late at night so he and his girlfriend Mia could sleep.

So now it was Independence Day, and they were at an honest to God frat party, but thanks to Mack, they weren't *partying*. Julie didn't understand why anyone would want Mack at their party, but since half the football team belonged to Sigma Alpha Kappa, or 'SAK' as they called it, and Mack was the star quarterback, it probably wasn't possible to exclude him.

Trying to block Mack from her mind, Julie focused back on Adam. The man was beautiful. He was at least six foot four, he had amazing blue eyes and natural blond hair that was just shaggy enough on top to hang in his eyes when it wasn't brushed back. He was also on the football team with Mack, but Adam had just finished his sophomore year, while Mack was going to graduate at the end of the summer. Julie had only met Adam once, when she and Janelle were having lunch with Mack on campus last month, and he hadn't said more than hello, but she'd been unable to get him out of her head ever since. Julie thought

they'd make a pretty pair since she also had blonde hair, blue eyes, and an athletic build from being on the swim team.

In high school, Julie had dated several different guys, but none of them had been particularly serious. During her freshman year of college, she'd dated a guy named Craig who'd been on the swim team with her. They'd been serious, and she'd lost her virginity to him. Then in the middle of the year, he'd failed a drug test for steroid use and been kicked off the team. She'd broken things off on principle, and then she'd had a string of one-night stands while she got over him. She hadn't had another serious boyfriend since. But now that her sophomore year was done, she was ready to try again, and Adam seemed like a good starting point.

Just as she was talking herself into saying hi, Adam and the scantily clad brunette he'd been talking to went up the stairs together, presumably to one of the bedrooms.

Janelle put her arm around Julie's shoulders. "Sorry."

"It's okay." Julie shrugged. "I think I'm going to take an Uber home."

"No, I'll drive you." Janelle looked at her boyfriend and said, "You wouldn't mind leaving early, would you?"

Mack chuckled. "You're the one who wanted to come, baby, not me. We can leave anytime."

Janelle grabbed Julie's hand and said, "Come on. We can all go have ice cream and go watch the fireworks at the waterfront downtown."

Julie let Janelle pull her out of the noisy party, but as soon as they were on the porch, she said, "I'm sorry, but I don't think I'll be very good company tonight. You guys go ahead. I'll hang out here on the doorstep and get an Uber."

"Don't be silly." Janelle continued to pull her down the stairs to the sidewalk. "Your brother's place is like ten blocks away from here. We'll drop you off on our way."

"Okay, thanks."

As they turned to walk down the sidewalk, they heard some shouting coming from the side of the big frat house.

Scowling, Mack said, "You two go wait in the car."

"But..." Julie tried to follow him around the side of the house, but Janelle kept a tight grip on her.

"Are you crazy?" Janelle whispered as more shouting erupted. "You don't need to go see a bunch of drunk frat boys having a fight. Mack can handle it."

Julie glared at the back of Janelle's head as she led them to her car. Once they were inside, Julie said, "I don't get your blind faith in Mack. He's not a God. If he tries to break up a fight, he could get hurt, too."

Janelle bit her lip and looked towards the big house with worry.

Less than five minutes later, Mack came striding back and got in the car with them.

"What was it?" Julie asked.

"Someone spray-painted the word 'Jan' on the back of the building."

"Jan?" Julie asked.

Mack nodded. "A couple of the fraternity brothers chased him, but they'd been drinking, so it wasn't much of a chase. The guy easily got away."

"Of course, you would assume it was a guy," Julie accused while narrowing her eyes. "Even though the person spray-painted a female name on the side of a building, you can't even entertain the notion that a woman could have done it."

Mack sighed and shook his head. He turned in his seat to look her in the eye and spoke calmly. "You act like every comment I make is an affront to women everywhere, but you're so quick to jump down my throat that you don't even get all the facts first. They were all referring to the person as a guy because they *saw* him before he ran away. Would you like to continue calling me a misogynist now that I've stated the facts?"

Julie felt her cheeks heat up and glared out the back window before muttering, "Sorry."

"Mack," Janelle said softly.

He huffed and stopped glaring at Julie. "It's fine. I get it. You were having a bad night already. Anyway, Adam has the situation handled for now. He came running out half-naked and pissed."

Julie frowned, wishing she could have seen that, while Janelle started the car and pulled onto the road.

Mack turned to look back at Julie again. "Look, I know you like Adam. He's on the football team and the president of the frat house, but he's...well he *is* a nice guy, but he's not a one-woman kind of guy. He's chatting up a different girl at every party he goes to. But if that's what you're looking for, I'd be happy to bring you back over here with me tomorrow, and we could offer to help cover up the spray paint. It's a multicolored mess back there. It's going to take some work to either cover it up or wash it off.

Surprised by the offer and feeling worse about her sudden outburst, Julie pouted. "I wish I could, but I've got a long shift at the groomer tomorrow. But thank you for offering."

"Sure."

A few minutes later, Julie was home. She waved at her friends as they drove away and looked up at the house. All the windows were dark except her brother's bedroom window on the second floor.

Julie pulled out her phone to check the time as she strolled up the walkway. "Eleven o'clock?" Julie shook her head. "Ridiculous."

It was like living with her parents. Feeling a little homesick, she carefully opened the door, trying to keep the noise to a minimum, ostensibly so that her brother and Mia could sleep, but really so that Aaron wouldn't lecture her about it again. Letting them sleep seemed like a futile endeavor when there would be

fireworks going off in about an hour, but at least then she wouldn't be to blame.

She slipped off her shoes next to the front door and went to the kitchen, where she turned on the lights. She pulled out a tub of chocolate ice cream and leaned against the counter to eat it with a spoon. Ice cream was the biggest reason Julie was a vegetarian instead of a vegan; she couldn't give it up. She took a bite and let the sweetness melt on her tongue as she contemplated her life.

She wasn't sure if she'd made the right decision or not. Originally, she was supposed to go home to Billings, Montana to spend the summer with her parents, except she'd been enjoying her job as a groomer at a local pet store. Her brother had readily agreed to let her stay with him, even though his new girlfriend, Mia, had only been living there for a month. But so far, the summer hadn't been very good. Without school to keep her busy thinking about her future career as a veterinarian, her job didn't seem nearly as fulfilling, and living in the dorms had felt more like freedom than living with Aaron.

Her brother wasn't teaching a class this summer; instead, he was writing a book on sociology, which kept him home all day, every day. But that also meant Aaron's son, Travis, got to be there every day instead of going to daycare for the summer while his mother worked. Julie loved her nine-year-old nephew, and when she wasn't working, she'd spent countless hours playing with Travis. But Legos could only hold her attention for so long.

Julie took another bite and almost dropped her spoon when her brother's grey tabby cat, Marvin, suddenly jumped up on the counter to see what she was eating.

"You're not supposed to be up here," she whispered.

Marvin meowed at her and butted his head against her shoulder before trying to stick his entire head in the tub of ice cream.

"No, you don't." Julie pulled the tub away and stepped back a

few feet. "If your dad were here, you wouldn't even think of getting up on the counter."

Marvin sat, swished his tail, and cleaned his shoulder.

Julie raised an eyebrow at the cat, took one more bite, and then put the ice cream back in the freezer.

She picked Marvin up, flipped on the living room lights, and carried him over to the couch with her. She settled with him in her lap then got her phone out to check the flight schedule again, even though she knew she was leaving for Montana on Wednesday. Two weeks back home in Billings would be wonderful. She could spend time with her high school friends, her parents, her sister, Amanda, and Amanda's two little girls, Lizzy and Leila. Then on Saturday, it was her father's sixtieth birthday party at the country club they'd belonged to for the past twenty years. Aaron, Mia, and Travis were even flying out for the weekend to go to that. Then Julie would have a relaxing week to just hang out before coming back to Oregon. Or maybe she'd stay home for the rest of the summer. She could probably get a grooming job in Billings if she tried.

As she was flipping through her messages, she heard a muffled *thwap* from upstairs.

Scowling, she looked up the stairs, wondering if her brother had dropped something.

Then she heard it again, and again, and again.

"What the hell?" she muttered. She looked down at Marvin, but he seemed unfazed. His ears weren't even back. The sounds kept going and became rhythmic. Julie turned bright red at the thought of her *brother* having sex.

"Gross." She shook her head and cringed in disgust. But to be fair, she was supposed to be at the party until well after midnight, so she had no one to blame but herself. Maybe she should have made more noise when she came in. The rhythmic sound stopped. Julie raised an eyebrow. She didn't want to think about

her brother having sex *at all*, but that had only been two minutes at most.

*Crack!*

Julie gasped, and Marvin's ears went back. "What was *that*?" she asked the cat. Another crack could be heard, and Julie stilled as her eyes opened wide. *That* wasn't sex, that was...something else.

Was her brother hitting Mia? Or was Mia hitting Aaron? Righteous anger bubbled up in her chest and she pushed Marvin off her lap. She rushed up the stairs to put a stop to whatever violence was going on.

Once she was on the second floor, she could hear Mia cry out softly after the crack.

Julie's hand was reaching for the master bedroom door when she heard Aaron's muffled voice. "How was that for you?"

"Mm...so good," Mia's muffled voice replied.

Julie froze.

"What do you want next? The cane or the flogger?"

"Let's save the cane for last," Mia answered.

Julie slowly backed away from the door, her stomach rolling with shock.

"You've already got a couple of darker spots, and you know the cane will bruise. I think only ten with the flogger."

"Yes, Sir, that sounds perfect."

"Deep breath now."

*Slap!*

Julie's eyes popped open. She turned and ran down the stairs as quietly as possible and gingerly let herself out the front door. Feeling shaky, she sat down on the porch steps and stared blankly down the street at the dim spot of light that the streetlamp made in front of their neighbor's house.

Aaron and Mia were into heavy BDSM? Julie shook her head, not quite trusting what she'd just overheard. She *never*



would have guessed, and she *never* wanted to know anything else about it.

She put her head in her hands and muttered, "I should have gotten ice cream with Janelle."

There was no way to un-hear what she'd just heard, but *God* did she wish she could. Just the idea of her brother *kissing* Mia made her cringe; now she'd be thinking about him flogging and caning her.

Julie winced and shook her head. "No, no, no. Think about something else. Anything else. Think about Adam."

But thinking about Adam didn't help, because Julie had some kinky leanings of her own. Nothing as extreme as she'd just heard, but a few playful slaps on the ass were always fun in bed.

"Jesus, is it heredity?" she asked herself.

Very suddenly, she realized that Aaron and Mia would be just as appalled as she was if they found out that she'd overheard them. Using as much stealth as she possessed, she went back in, turned the lights all off, got her shoes on, and grabbed her purse. She heard the swish and crack of a cane before she went back outside to order an Uber down the block. She wasn't sure where she was going, but she definitely wasn't going to be home again before one o'clock in the morning.

After viewing fireworks downtown with thousands of other people, she came home to a blissfully silent house. She went up to her room, got ready for bed, and then pulled out her laptop to find out what it would cost to change her flight.

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THE FOLLOWING MORNING, Julie jotted a short note about going to work early and got an Uber to avoid Aaron and Mia. How was she supposed to look either of them in the eyes after what she'd overheard? Last night when she'd looked it up, she found out that the flight she wanted was booked anyway. She'd

have to take the red eye if she wanted to leave on Monday. Traveling at night wouldn't be a problem, but Monday was her day off, so she'd have to either come up with an excuse or be around her brother and Travis all day before her flight.

Mid-morning, one of her elderly repeat customers, Mrs. Paulson, came in with her Shih Tzu, Molly.

Janelle smiled. "Hi, Mrs. Paulson. Just the regular bath today?"

"Yes, please."

As she was checking her in on the computer, Julie said, "I won't be here for the next two Sundays."

"Oh, that's a shame. Molly does so much better with you than anyone else we've tried. Are you going to be on vacation?"

"Yes. I'm visiting my parents in Montana for a couple of weeks."

"Well, I suppose that's a good reason to be off. Molly can deal with someone new for a couple of weeks. Are you flying?"

"Yes. I leave on Wednesday. I wanted to leave a little earlier, but the flight I wanted was booked.

"Why don't you take the bus?"

"The bus?"

"I know it probably seems a little old fashioned, but it's more of an adventure than air travel, because you get to make several stops along the way."

Julie slowly nodded. "I never would have thought of that, but I'll definitely check it out. A bus ride could be just the thing. Thanks, Mrs. Paulson."

The older woman waved a hand as if to shoo away the thanks. "Thank *you* for always taking such good care of my Molly."

Later that day, during her lunch break, Julie looked up the Greyhound bus schedule and found a bus leaving from Portland tomorrow morning at ten and showing up in Billings the following morning at five. It did sound adventurous, because

there were four thirty-minute stops in different towns along the way. She could walk around for a few minutes at each locale. Then she could say she'd been to Pasco, Washington, and Coeur d' Alene, Idaho.

Nodding her head decisively, she bought the bus ticket with the emergency credit card her parents had given her. Then she canceled her flight for a full refund. Feeling good about her decision, she ate the rest of her lunch and finished her shift with a smile.

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THAT EVENING when Julie got home, she found both Mia and Aaron in the kitchen making spaghetti for dinner. Taking a deep breath, Julie plastered a smile on her face and called out to them, "I'm home."

"Hey, there she is," Aaron said. "Where'd you go this morning?"

"I had a craving for Starbucks," she lied.

"Are you excited to be on vacation?" Mia asked.

"I am, and speaking of my vacation, I've changed my plans."

"Oh?" Aaron asked, focusing on her instead of his sauce.

"Yeah. I've decided to take the bus home instead of an airplane."

Julie saw Aaron's eyebrows furrow with confusion, and then he shared a glance with Mia before turning back to her. "Why?"

Walking to the refrigerator, Julie pulled out a soda to have something to do with her hands. "Someone at work mentioned it today and said taking the bus was more like an adventure. It stops in a bunch of little towns along the way, and it stays in four of them for half an hour."

"That doesn't sound very safe for a single woman traveling alone," Aaron said. "Have you talked to Mom and Dad about it?"

Bristling at his sexist opinion, Julie turned on him, "Oh, I see, but I'd be totally safe if I were a man traveling alone? Is that what you're saying?"

"Yes, that's exactly what I'm saying." Aaron's voice went up. "Statistics don't lie, Julie. A single woman traveling alone is ninety-five percent more likely to get attacked or abducted than a single man traveling alone."

"And realistically, what percentage of people traveling get attacked? One percent? So, I'm ninety-five percent more likely to be in that one percent? So what!"

Mia put a hand on Aaron's shoulder and rubbed it. "Aaron," she said softly, "it's a bus from Portland to Billings. There will be lots of people around. Nothing bad is going to happen, and Julie is an adult. She can make that decision for herself."

Scowling at Mia, Aaron said, "I know she can. I just don't like it."

"I know," Mia agreed, still rubbing his shoulder.

Sighing, Aaron turned back to Julie. "Sorry, I just...I don't like the idea of you out there alone."

"I won't be alone; I'll be on a bus full of people, and half of them will probably be college students like me."

Aaron nodded and stirred his sauce. "I guess. And you'll have your phone with you."

It sounded to Julie like Aaron was reassuring himself rather than talking to her, so she didn't comment.

"So, we'll be dropping you off at the bus station instead of the airport on Wednesday?" Mia asked with a smile, now that Aaron was on board with the plan.

Julie reluctantly shook her head. "Actually, I leave tomorrow morning at ten."

Aaron's head snapped back up. "Tomorrow?"

Julie nodded and sipped her soda.

"Did something happen at that party you went to?" he asked with concern.

She shook her head. "No. I just...I've been feeling a little homesick."

"But you're still coming back in two weeks, right?" Aaron asked. "I know it's been...a transition for all of us, but Mia and I both want you here, and Travis would be crushed if he found out he couldn't see you for the rest of the summer."

Julie could see the honesty in her brother's eyes, and suddenly it didn't matter to her if he was into kinky shit that she'd rather not know about, because he clearly loved her.

"Of course, I'm coming back. Don't be an idiot."

Smiling with obvious relief, Aaron said, "Idiot? I'm not the one riding a bus home. How many hours is that ride?"

"Uh...nineteen?"

"Oh, Julie," Mia said with sympathy.

"Yeah, I'm the idiot. For sure," Aaron muttered as he poured some spaghetti noodles into boiling water. "Dinner will be ready in about ten minutes. Could you set the table?"

Huffing, Julie got out some plates and did his bidding.

Soon they were all sitting at the table, eating dinner, and talking about their workdays.