

---

## Chapter 1

---

**N**o question about it! They *were* being chased! Jessie glanced in her rearview mirror and saw the battered green pickup in pursuit of her Malibu. With each passing second, the headlights were getting larger and larger, reminding her of an animal hunting in the dark. It was a good analogy. The occupants of the pickup were monsters, hunting them down, and with each glance, she saw the pickup was getting closer and closer.

Her friend, Gilly Roberts, tucked in the back seat, laid it on the line. "Pedal to the metal, Jessie girl. He's gaining on us."

"What if I get a ticket for speeding?" Jessie joked.

"That would be the best thing possible. The cop could give us an escort to the hospital and arrest those creeps in the truck.

Gilly, in her no nonsense, cut to the quick manner, was right.

Jessie pressed down hard on the accelerator of her blue Malibu and the car surged ahead down the bumpy road leading out of Ridge Valley, skidding from one lane into the other. Thank God the tiny farming community in Central Ohio rolled up the sidewalks at dusk. There was little traffic at ten-thirty at night.

Jessie risked taking her eyes off the road for a second to

glance at the front passenger seat. Next to her, slumped into a ball of misery, was her best friend. In no way did Nora, sexy, full-figured Nora, resemble her normal self. Her ex-husband, Dale Glower, the creep driving the pursuing truck, had beaten the sexy right out of her.

Nora slumped in the passenger seat, one hand covering her eyes. The blows to her face were already turning her cheeks and eye lids purple and bruised. Nora was whimpering, but Jessie wasn't sure if Nora's fear was because of Jessie's wild driving, her injured dog cradled in her lap, or her own serious injuries. Probably all three, Jessie guessed.

"How's Muffin doing?" Jessie asked Nora, trying to keep her conscious. Nora adored Muffin, the poodle she had rescued from her job at the veterinary hospital. The dog alternated between panting and then gurgling for breath.

"Not good," Nora managed to get out between swollen lips.

It broke Jessie's heart to see the poor little dog so badly hurt. She knew how it felt to love an animal. Her cat, Elmo, was the light of her life. She had adopted Elmo just around the time Nora tried to leave her violent husband.

Dale Glower didn't take rejection well. He had promised to kill Nora. He'd tried four times to carry out his threat. A restraining order had done nothing to stop him. Sober, he was cautious, but drunk, his usual state, made him disregard the restraining order totally.

Tonight, he tried again to do just that, first with his fists and then with a gun. But before he could shoot Nora, Jessie, Gilly, and Rose, Nora's three best friends, had gotten her terrified text saying, *Goodbye, love you all, but he's going to kill me.*

Jessie, Gilly, and Rose had been at the local pizza shop waiting for Nora. They were only three minutes away by car, and Dale, thankfully, had been as stupid as usual, not locking the door. When they burst in, Gilly punched him in the balls, Jessie slugged him in the nose, and Rose, a nurse, ran to Nora.

It took only a quick look to assess that Nora's injuries were very serious. "She needs to go to the hospital."

The trio had half lifted, half dragged bleeding Nora to Jessie's car. They even managed to bring along Muffin. They pushed Nora into the passenger seat and Gilly, clutching Muffin, and Rose jumped into the back. Jessie leaped into the driver's side and turned on the ignition.

They were pulling out of the drive when they saw a stunned Dale stagger out the door and head to his pickup. In the fading summer dusk, Jessie could see what a wreck the truck was. She didn't think it would be a match for her Malibu, but one never knew.

"Does nothing stop that monster?" Gilly asked, half in awe that Dale could still walk.

"Nothing," Nora managed to whisper. Only Jessie heard her.

"We escaped!" Gilly shouted, but Nora shook her head.

"Nothing will stop him," she whispered, spitting out bloody phlegm.

"Forget Dale! Where to?" Jessie asked the group.

"You are the smart one of our quartet. You tell us."

That was from Gilly, who always put herself down in the brains department. Jessie had gone to junior community college and gotten a degree in accounting. She had parleyed that into a job with the local bank and was recently promoted to head teller.

But, for once, Rose had piped up.

"Eastwood." Rose was emphatic. Rose was the quiet, shy one, but when it came to health care, she would speak up. "Their hospital has an MRI."

"Eastwood it is," Jessie agreed, taking a right turn out of Nora's driveway. To her dismay, she saw the lights of the pickup come on.

Eastwood was a larger town, almost ten miles from Ridge Valley. Jessie calculated it would take her ten to fifteen minutes if she laid on the gas.

"Take Route 29. That's the route ambulances take when they transport cases out of our little emergency room. Route 29 is a straight line through farm country."

"Gotcha!" Jessie said. Too late, she remembered that Route 29 went right by Sinful Sam's, the bar that employed both Dale and her own ex-boyfriend, Jimmy Brady. In the glare of the neon lights, she could see Jimmy was outside smoking as they went by. Of course, he recognized her car immediately, and he was obviously waiting for Dale. He shook his fist at Jessie. Best bet was that Dale was going to do a quick stop and pick up his best pal.

"He's going to kill us!" Nora cried. Her hands were covering two black eyes, a split lip, and a multitude of bruises. Nora knew with certainty what her vicious husband was capable of doing when he was drunk and crazy.

In the back seat, Jessie's other best friends, Gilly and Rose, were urging Jessie on. Gilly, copper curls flying around her thin face, had turned backward to see better. Gilly, at least, was urging her on. Rose, as usual, was silent, eyes closed and focused.

"Rose is praying!" Gilly laughed.

"No, I'm not," Rose sputtered. "I'm thinking, which is something we should all do right now."

Gilly squeezed Rose's arm with real affection. "Sorry, but I think we do need a prayer and you are the best of us to do that. I don't want to scare you guys, but I think I see someone in the passenger seat.

Jessie's heart sank. She had been right about Dale stopping to pick up Jimmy, and now they had double trouble. Dale and Jimmy were two peas in a pod, except Jimmy Brady was a more polished version who hid his true, nasty, violent self pretty well under wraps.

When she had first met him, a nephew of her stepfather, he had seemed a nice guy, if a little flashy. But it didn't take long for him to show his true colors. Jessie had broken up with him when he had kicked her down a flight of stairs. That was six months

ago, and the slime bag had been trying to get her back since then, alternating between sweet words and vile threats.

She knew Jimmy Brady, and she knew he was relishing this moment. If he got his hands on her, she would be as bloody a mess as Nora. No way was that going to happen if she could help it!

Jessie forced herself to keep her eyes on the road and concentrate. She swerved around a large pothole.

Nora roused herself from the front seat and gripped Jessie's arm with surprising strength.

"I'm the one they want. Toss me out. Save yourselves!" she pleaded. That was Nora, always sacrificing herself for everyone.

Jessie didn't have to think. She grabbed Nora's hand and squeezed tight.

"Like hell. We're the Crazy Quartet! Have been since kindergarten, still are!"

But real crazy was Dale Glower on a bender.

Jessie recalled what Nora's apartment had looked like when she called for help. It had looked like a tornado had hit it—Nora, crouching on the floor, bleeding from Dale's blows and kicks, and Muffin, the poodle, hiding under the table. Dale was a mad man when he was drinking.

"That was smart to hit him with the shovel, Jessie!" Gilly laughed from the back seat. "Your well-placed kick to his crotch wasn't bad either, Gilly!"

"It slowed him down," Gilly crowed. "He bellowed like an angry bull."

In the back seat, Gilly, the wild one, and Rose, the little mouse, joined her in their fight song. "When I wish upon a star..."

But the truck was gaining on them.

Jessie tried to plump up her courage. Together, they had fought him off. They would do it again.

"When I wish upon a star, get me to a safe spot." she sang

out, joining Rose and Gilly. Gilly had started it one night in seventh grade when they ran down the ravine behind her house to escape from a bunch of older boys who were following them too closely.

Not the case tonight.

Dale, and if it was Jimmy, were in their middle twenties and worked out like lunatics so they could take on the bar crowd. Both were bouncers at the local watering hole. Sober, they were tough punks. Drunk, they were mean bastards.

"When I wish upon a star... safe spot!" Gilly kept on singing.

But now it was sheer bravado to sing in the face of danger.

"Hyenas hunt in packs," Jessie said out loud and was sorry when Nora began to cry.

"They're coming up fast," Gilly yelled out. "Definitely!"

Suddenly, there was an enormous bang and they all screamed.

"What was that?" Jessie cried out.

Gilly twisted herself around to see better.

"That guy in the passenger seat is shooting at us! He's hanging out the window. I hate to tell you this, Jessie, but I'm pretty sure the shooter is Jimmy Brady."

"Why am I not surprised?" Jessie tried to sound brave, but it was an act.

She felt a hollow pit open in her stomach. Alfie Brady, Jimmy's uncle, had been recently bragging about the new rifle his nephew had purchased. A week ago, Jessie had heard a gunshot late at night and the next day, she found a neighbor's cat dead in the street right in front of her own house. It was a warning, pure and simple. She had marched right down to the bar where Jimmy worked and confronted him and, of course, he denied any involvement, but his smirk when he walked away told a different tale.

Bastard! Rotten Bastard! What kind of man would hurt a defenseless little cat!

"You'd better use your brains, Jessie," Gilly shot out.

Those were their roles. Jessie was the smart one, the bookworm, the one who won the math prize junior year in high school *and* the senior year spelling bee.

Gilly was the wild one. The one who did somersaults and cartwheels with effortless precision. The one who looked for excitement and danger and almost always found it.

Nora was the earth mother, nurturing and caring. She had always wanted a large family to expend her love. Instead, she had ended up with Dale, the biggest baby of them all.

And Rose was the saint, shy, patient, and kind, always looking for the best in everything. It was no surprise she ended up a nurse at the local hospital.

Jessie was surprised when Rose piped up and agreed with Gilly. "She's right, Jessie. We have to think of something to outwit them."

"I agree. We do have to outsmart them," Jessie shouted over her shoulder. "How about detouring through Creepy Woods? Both roads will get us to Eastwood, but Dale's truck should have a harder time with the bad road in the woods."

"Go for it!" That was from Gilly, always the gambler.

Rose was silent, and Jessie knew what she was thinking. Creepy Woods hadn't gotten that name for nothing. Stories about strange goings on in the three-mile-long copse of oak trees went back to the time when Indians had owned this land. Supposedly, there had been a massacre in the woods. Settlers who came to Ohio to farm had met their deaths under the old oak trees. The bodies were never found, and Jessie thought it was just a legend.

Jessie was surprised when Rose suddenly shouted out, "Creepy Woods it is!"

A surge of energy coursed through Jessie and she pressed on the accelerator. Up ahead, was a fork in the road. The right side was the highway going through farm country to Eastwood. The left went through Creepy Woods.

"Watch out for that guy on the side of the road," Gilly cried.

"What guy?"

"That weirdo on the right."

Jessie spotted him. Gilly was right. The guy was peculiar, dressed all in white. He almost seemed illuminated. She slowed down a fraction and drove past him carefully, but this was no time to wonder about weirdos on the road. She glanced in the rearview mirror. The truck was gaining.

"I don't want to think what will happen to us if Jimmy and Dale get their hands on us."

Gilly was twisted into a pretzel trying to see the truck gaining on them.

Jessie didn't answer, but inside she shuddered at the thought of Jimmy Brady ever touching her again. She twisted the wheel and the car went off the main highway and onto the gravel road and entered the woods. Hopefully, Dale would think she had taken the easier route.

At first, it seemed she was right. The woods were bright tonight, even though it wasn't a full moon.

Rose was thinking along the same lines. "My aunt says these woods have been the site of a lot of weird things. A girl in her Bible class disappeared here when my aunt was a teenager. They never found her."

"Well, let's hope Jimmy and Dale don't find us. I think we may have lost them." Gilly was still twisted like a pretzel in her attempt to play lookout. "How is Nora? She's too quiet."

"I think she's half conscious, but she's breathing. I'm not too sure about Muffin."

Jessie took a deep breath. Maybe they could get to the hospital without an escort from the two devils in the pickup truck.

She was wrong. The bad road slowed the truck down, but it slowed the Malibu, too. Suddenly, they could see the headlights in the distance. Dale and Jimmy were still on her tail.



Beside her, Nora groaned. Jessie glanced at her and realized her friend was in worse shape than she had thought. She needed to be in a hospital, and any more beatings would kill her.

"Hang in there, kiddo!" Jessie cried. Her own lips and mouth were dry with fear, but she wasn't going to let her friend see how scared she was. Nora was hanging on by a thread.

Rose reached out and patted Nora's shoulder. "We're almost there!"

Two more miles to go before they were out of Creepy Woods, and the pickup was slowly gaining. Jessie was surprised it was so light in the woods. Almost an iridescence. If her life hadn't been in danger, she would have stopped the car and looked around.

"Is there a full moon tonight?" she asked her friends.

Rose said, "No. The full moon was actually two weeks ago."

Curiosity about the light stopped immediately when they heard another loud bang.

Jimmy had tried to shoot out her tires again.

Maniac! He was absolutely crazy!

Another loud bang and the car lurched to the left. It took all her strength to get back in her lane.

Suddenly, there was another loud bang, and she seemed to lose control of the car.

Gilly was wild. "He shot out one of the back tires!"

Another bang as the rear window exploded into thousands of pieces. The bullet came through the back and right through her front windshield.

"Jimmy's completely crazy!"

"They both are!" Gilly cried out.

Jessie struggled to control the car, but it was too hard on the bumpy road and with the flat tire. To her horror, the Malibu failed to negotiate the next turn, skidded for a hundred feet, then careened into a ditch, coming to rest with a bang against a small tree. When Jessie tried to go in reverse, her wheels spun in the mud.

"Lock the doors!" she screamed as the pickup squealed to a stop behind them.

A lot of good that did them. Dale and Jimmy jumped out of the pickup, each armed with a crow bar, flashlights, and a gun. They raced to Jessie's car and began to attack. Each crazed man pounded and beat the metal doors. By their expressions, it was clear their blood lust was up and they were in for the kill. Jimmy held the rifle in firing position and came over to her door.

"Get out, you worthless bitch!" he shouted at Jessie.

"Never!" Jessie was terrified, but still defiant.

There was a loud smashing sound of glass as Dale began to punch out the passenger side window with his crowbar, screaming obscenities at Nora as he bashed in the door. Glass was flying all over Nora! In a flash, he had poked his big head inside the car like an angry grizzly bear hungry for prey. His beefy hands encircled Nora's neck. Jessie reached over and scratched him as hard as she could, but he was oblivious. He only wanted to kill Nora!

Jessie looked back at Jimmy. He was pointing the gun at the back seat.

"Don't do this, Jimmy. Nora's badly hurt," she begged.

It was like pleading with the devil. In both Jimmy and Dale, there was pure evil. The fear of the injured women only inflamed them and made them nastier.

"She's Dale's business." He smiled at her and she was surprised to see how much he resembled a rat. How had she not noticed that before? "Dale and I have no quarrel with Gilly and Rose. You come out with Nora and we'll let them go."

Jessie pleaded with him, "Nora's almost unconscious! She has to get to a hospital!"

Dale stopped his smashing for a moment and guffawed. "Ha. Saves me the time of killing her."

But Jimmy was smarter and meaner. And he knew Jessie and how loyal she was to her friends. He cocked the gun. It was easy

to see the cruel sneer on his face because the woods were so filled with light. Part of her mind was registering the glow, but the accident kept her from asking what was going on. Maybe she was imagining it.

Jimmy tapped the glass with the butt of his rifle. "Get out, Jessie, or I shoot Rose. Right through the glass."

Jessie knew he wasn't kidding.

"You'll burn in hell for this," Gilly screamed.

"Don't go, Jessie!" Rose's voice was scared but calm. "

Jessie gulped. She couldn't let her friends die because she had been a fool to date Jimmy Brady for six months. That was her fault. She unlocked the door and stepped out.

Jimmy towered over her. Six three with blond hair and blue eyes, he looked like God's gift to women until she discovered he was a sneaky, lying, con man, just like his uncle. Dale was stupid and he lived for violence. Jimmy was smarter. He knew how to trap people into believing in him until it was too late.

Now he stretched, raising his muscled arm back behind his head. "Like my new haircut?" His thin lips curled back in a grin.

Jessie was suspicious. What was he up to? "It's okay."

"You thought I was going to hurt you, didn't you?" He kind of laughed. "But I was just joking around."

Before she could stop him, he reached out and yanked her blouse, pulling the material apart. Buttons went flying and he pulled tight, leaving her half exposed in her bra. It was mortifying to be half undressed with this lout in front of her.

"I'm hot for you, Jessie." He unzipped his jeans and exposed himself to her. She had never seen him so hard and big, but it wasn't a turn on. The leer on his face was sickening as he stroked himself.

"I don't believe it!" She stepped back, bracing herself against the car.

"Oh, believe it, girl. I'm going to kill you. But before that, I'm

going to take you right here in the mud. Right in front of all your precious friends. That's how us Bradys do pay back."

"You animal!" she screamed. "You pushed me down the stairs! I should have called the cops on you then."

"Smart girl. Guess I taught you something, huh!" He swung his raised arm, fist clenched, and bashed right into her chin, sending her flying into the mud. Jessie's vision exploded into a thousand flashes of light. She landed in the mud, face down, and struggled to turn. The pain was horrible. Perhaps her jaw was broken?

Jimmy gave a vicious kick to her ribs. "No one breaks up with me!" he shouted.

Jessie couldn't even fight back or answer. It was hard to breath. The mud was in her nostrils and mouth. The pain from her ribs felt like a knife in her lungs when she tried to inhale. And she could hear screaming. Probably Gilly and Rose because Nora was too far gone to scream. So much for promises they were safe.

She tried to open her eyes. More screaming. It was crazy. The pain, the screams, the bright light... Light? She must have a terrible concussion. Her headlights had been smashed. And it was above her and around her.

The light was just too intense. It was just lighting up the woods; it seemed to be a force in its own right. Had she died from Jimmy's blows and this was the light everyone talked about?

But in her chest, her heart was thumping wildly. She had to still be alive. She braced herself for another blow, but time seemed suspended.

Where was Jimmy? She pushed up on her elbows and tried to wipe the mud from her eyes. She could feel the ooze of mud on her chest and between her breasts. The soil smelled bad, like dead leaves and rot. She could also taste her own blood from the blow to her face. It was hard to see.

She could hear Jimmy hollering. Minutes ago, he had been

screaming in rage. Now his cries were different. She couldn't make out what he was saying but he sounded scared.

Jessie tried to get up but only managed to lift her head. Jimmy's boots were suspended in front of her. He wasn't standing on the ground. His legs were flailing around, kicking back and forth. She tried to see. Three feet, six feet, nine feet, twelve feet. Upright and rigid, with arms outspread, he was surrounded by light. Nearby, she spotted Dale. Dale was also rising up in a beam of light except his body was upside down. Both men were waving their arms in childlike circles. As if propelled by unseen forklifts, the two men were placed high in the trees. There, they perched like Christmas ornaments against branches.

What was going on? Nothing made sense. She must have suffered a brain injury from the force of the blow. Jessie struggled to push herself up to a seated position and rubbed the mud out of her mouth. She looked around. There were beams of light, each individually coming from above the trees, reminding her of spotlights but narrower and more focused.

Then she felt a force encircling her, gently tugging her out of the mud. Released from the gravity of the earth, Jessie was suddenly within one of the beams of light. Strong, unseen arms lifted her up and held her in an invisible embrace. Some force propelled her past the two men in the trees.

Jimmy stared at her, slack jawed with fear, but only for an instant, because whatever had her in its grasp was moving upward quickly. Now it lifted her higher and out of the trees. The evening sky was full of stars and the rising moon, but there was something else, something brighter, and she was heading right toward it. She watched the other beams of light, three now, moving away and into the night.

"You're safe now," a low masculine voice murmured. "We're almost there."

She looked down at the Ohio farmland below getting farther and farther away.

"I'm flying," she whispered as the ground moved away. "Did I die? Did he kill me?"

That was the only explanation she could think of that made sense.

"No. You are very much alive, and actually, I'm flying. You are with me now, enveloped in my power."

"Who are you?"

"You can call me the voice, for that is all of me you will ever know, or you can call me Master, as my Robotella 712 refers to me."

Jessie couldn't make any sense of this, so she stayed quiet. At least she was alive and safe, away from Jimmy Brady.

"You got awfully quiet." The voice sounded concerned.

"I'm trying to make the best of a crazy situation."

The invisible force which enfolded her rocked with something like laughter and a warm hand cupped her breast, making her tingle from head to toe. Yet, she could see nothing. All she could do was relax and fall into a warm and safe place that was taking her higher and higher above the ground.

"Is this a hallucination? Because if you are a hallucination, you smell really good. Powerful. I can't say I've ever smelled that scent before. Warm and... I think I've gone crazy."

The low, husky voice assured her. "You are completely sane."

Jessie struggled to understand what was happening to her. Her body was resting on what appeared to be an invisible lap. And in spite of the traumatic situation she found herself in, there was definitely something under her fanny, big, throbbing, and giving off a heat that made her almost forget she was slowly rising up through the night sky.

Jessie gasped.

"Do you like that feeling? Is my penis affecting you so?"

"No! No! I..." she lied, flush with embarrassment.

"I think you are not telling the truth, my dear. You are

squirming with the uncontrollable urge to place it between your legs."

Jessie fought for safer ground. "Where are my friends? Nora was badly hurt."

"She will be taken care of. Do not fear. And your other two friends, too. I am not sure about the dog. It died in the car, but we might be able to do something."

"How did you know to come and save us?"

"Did you see a man on the road dressed in white?"

"Yes! Yes!"

"He guided us to you."

Jessie began to feel lightheaded. This was all too much.

"I have to shend... shim a tank you note," Jessie said, slurring her words. She wanted to fall asleep, and she wanted something else that she couldn't identify, something created by the throbbing heat between her legs.

"No need."

Then to Jessie's shock, she felt an invisible force move under her skirt and tug at her panties. In one moment, she was free of them, and she saw the little black lace flutter catch on an air current and start to fall.

"I'm spinning in space above the ground," she cried. "Are you an angel.?"

"Far from an angel, dear girl. As you will soon see. But for now, it is time to shut down the lights."

"I feel strange. Like my body is being pulled downward but another force, stronger, is taking me upward?" Jessie forced her eyes open. She didn't add that the hot, throbbing member was now between her legs and making her dizzy with a wild desire to hold her own breasts and squeeze.

"It the earth's gravitational pull, trying to pull you down, but my force is more powerful. It is thrusting us up toward my space capsule."

The voice didn't add that *something else* was thrusting upward.

The very tip was at the edge of her labia. The sensation was out of this world.

"Now I know I'm unconscious," Jessie muttered, but it was harder and harder to stay awake. The invisible arms pulled her close and they propelled upward and away from the land below. She slipped into blackness and the world as she knew it disappeared from view.