

CHAPTER ONE

Going into the pawnshop was a mistake. I knew it the same way I'd known two months before that Stacey was going to leave me, some nagging sense of unease deep in the pit of my stomach. On the day she'd left, I'd stopped on my way home and bought dinner because a little voice in the front of my brain chattering away like a chipmunk refused to believe that sense of impending doom. It insisted that chow mein and sweet and sour pork would make Stacey smile and everything would be all right.

Of course, the chipmunk had been stilled to silence by the empty house and the note on the bedroom door.

The chipmunk, however, never learned. Today my inner rodent had prattled on, reminding me Stacey's birthday was in two days. I couldn't not get her a present, it reasoned, not after all the time we'd had together. Worse, how could I pass up a chance to win her back?

Of course, I was looking to buy said present at a pawnshop. This was a new level of desperation, even for the chipmunk.

I opened the door of the pawnshop but stopped dead when I got a good look inside. The neon lights outside flashing "BUY - SELL - PAWN" should have tipped me off as to what kind of atmosphere I'd find, but I'd never actually been in a pawnshop before, and it was far worse than I'd anticipated. It was dirty and cluttered and sad. Discarded items—mostly TVs, stereos, and Blu-ray players—lay dead on the shelves. An entire wall held musical instruments, silent in the absence of their owners. The smell of cigarette smoke and something else lingered in the air, something I couldn't identify. Something that reeked of failure. I was overwhelmed by the same sense of helplessness I felt at the animal shelter, all the animals behind bars, wondering why nobody loved them anymore.

I almost turned and walked back out, but the man sitting behind the counter was watching me, his booted feet on the glass display with a half-smoked cigarette drooping between his lips.

"Can I help you?" he asked, and I marveled at the way the cigarette stayed stuck in the side of his mouth.

I shoved my hands into my pants pockets. "I'm looking for jewelry."

He took the butt out of his mouth and smiled at me as he stood. "You've come to the right place, my friend."

I doubted that, but I chose not to contradict him. The "right place" would have been the jewelry store down the street, its windows full of gold and diamonds, but I sure as hell couldn't afford that. One of the downtown art galleries had beautiful glass pendants, but the chipmunk had protested. They were colorful, but twisted glass wouldn't win Stacey back.

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The owner led me around the shop through a faint haze of cigarette smoke, past glass cases full of iPods and cameras, GPS navigators and laptops, to one along the back wall that held jewelry. The selection was crazily eclectic. Giant turquoise bracelets and dainty gold chains, wedding bands and strings of pearls.

“You looking for anything in particular?” he asked.

That was a good question. What should I buy? Not a ring. I’d already given her one of those. Never mind that it was currently sitting in a bowl on my bedside table. Not a bracelet. She didn’t like them because they got in her way when she worked.

“A necklace?” I asked.

“Don’t sound so sure of yourself.” He stuck what was left of the cigarette into the side of his mouth, squinting against the ribbon of smoke that rose past his eyes as he unlocked the cabinet and began to pull out the displays of necklaces. The smoke curled around the coarse twists of his hair.

“Are you allowed to smoke in here?” I asked.

He glanced up at me, almost smiling. His black hair was shaved short on the sides and in the back, but the top was longer, spiked straight up in a way that hinted more at laziness than style. He was one of those casually cool guys, I realized, who were naturally put-together and suave, who found everybody else slightly amusing. And slightly stupid. “My store.”

“Yeah, but aren’t there city ordinances or something?”

He took the butt out of his mouth and leaned both hands on the edge of the glass counter to look at me. He was taller than me. Thin, though. Not bulky at all, but he still managed to make me feel small. “Pretty sure I’m the only honest pawnbroker in town. As long as I’m not fencing, cops don’t exactly care about my personal vices.”

“I see.” I tried to hide my embarrassment by looking down at the necklaces.

“Is this for your mom or a girlfriend?”

“Girlfriend,” I said, deciding he didn’t need to know about the “ex” part of the equation.

“In that case, I’d say stay away from pearls and Black Hills gold.” He shrugged and rubbed his hand over the hair at the nape of his neck. “They’re sort of old school. Opals, too.”

“She likes sapphires.”

“Show me a woman who doesn’t.” He knocked the cherry off his cigarette onto the concrete floor, rubbed it out with his foot, and tossed the butt in the trash can before pointing to a necklace in the center. It had a stone so dark blue it was almost black. “This is the only

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sapphire I have right now, but if you want my opinion, it sort of screams 1995. Now this,” he pointed to one near the end, “this one is new. Platinum’s all the rage, you know.”

“Platinum?” I touched the necklace. It looked like silver to me, but I wasn’t exactly an expert on jewelry. The stone appeared to be a large rectangular diamond, surrounded by a bunch of smaller round ones. “It looks expensive.”

“Looks being the operative word.” He smiled and crossed his arms over his chest. “The platinum is real, but the diamonds aren’t.”

“They’re fake?”

“Cubic zirconium. Just as pretty, but way more affordable than the real thing.”

I wasn’t sure about giving Stacey imitation stones, but it was definitely the nicest necklace he had. Even used, it was more than I could really afford, but that chipmunk in my brain was enamored with it, positive it was the only thing Stacey would want.

“I can pay you half in cash and half on my card. Is that okay?”

“No personal checks, but cash and credit both work.”

“Do you have some kind of nice box or something it can go in?”

He laughed, revealing perfect teeth that seemed extra white against his bronze skin. “No, I’m gonna give it to you in a Ziploc baggie.” I wasn’t really sure what to say to that, but he laughed again. “I’m kidding. Yeah, I got a box around here somewhere. You think I’m running some kind of second-rate establishment?”

The way he said it, it wasn’t a challenge. He seemed to be mocking himself more than anything, admitting that of course this was a second-rate store. That was, after all, the entire idea of a pawnshop. Second owner. Second hand.

I hoped very much that in my case, it would mean a second chance.

CHAPTERTWO

El watched the necklace-buyer leave, trying not to laugh at the absurdity of it all. The whole thing had “long-term disaster” stamped all over it. Sometimes his customers were desperate. Sometimes stupid. This one? Mostly he’d seemed perpetually confused.

When his cell phone rang, El was still smiling, thinking about Clueless Joe as he answered. “Tucker Pawn.”

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“Aren’t we all bright and cheery this evening?” Denver Rogers’s voice was rough, full of drawl that didn’t quite come from the South. “If my ears don’t deceive me, you might actually be smiling. You take someone home and get snuggly last night?”

“I don’t snuggle.”

“Well, something’s got you sounding like Suzie Sunshine.”

El smiled at the image of the necklace-buyer as Suzie Sunshine. Oddly, he kind of was. “Just a customer.”

“Oh?” There was a world of innuendo in that single syllable.

“Just a customer.” Brownish-red hair, pale skin, little freckles across his nose. El couldn’t help but imagine the soft, white skin in the places that didn’t see the sun. “He was damn cute, though.”

Denver whistled through his teeth. “Well, goddamn. Somebody call the Tucker Gazette. Emanuel Mariano Rozal is showing signs of humanity. Next thing you know, he might settle down and start collecting cats.”

“Whatever.”

“So we on tonight, or what?”

“Looks like or what.”

Denver’s huff belied his irritation, and El could picture him scowling. The two of them had a weekly “date” at the Tucker Laund-O-Rama, which wasn’t nearly as kinky as it sounded. It had nothing in the world to do with sex, and everything to do with having somebody over the age of twenty-two to talk to while their socks ran the spin cycle.

“What is it this time?” Denver asked.

“I told Rosa I’d watch the kids.”

“Come on, man. Your entire fucking family, and she picks you?”

“Miguel’s on call for the fire department, and his wife can barely deal with their own kids. Rosa’s fighting with Lorenzo’s wife—”

“About what?”

“I’m doing my best not to know.” If there was one thing El had learned, it was not to get involved in family drama. Especially when it came to the women. Especially when it came to

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his little sister Rosa, who made the stereotype of the fiery Latina woman look like Tinkerbell. “She’s been leaving them with her neighbor, but she got busted for possession—”

“Nice.”

“That leaves Abuela, and she’s too old to have to deal with those little shits on her own.”

“What about your mom?”

Leave it to Denver to notice the person El had left off his list. “Look man, it’s me. I said I’d do it.”

Denver sighed. “Someday, you’re going to wake up and wish you’d gotten out from behind that counter a bit more.”

“And you’re going to wish you hadn’t bulked up on ’roids.” El was pretty sure Denver didn’t actually use steroids, but when a man was built like a fucking barn, he could take a bit of ribbing.

“Why can’t you bring the kids along?”

“You serious?”

“Why not? They might liven things up a bit.”

El thought about Rosa’s three kids running around the laundromat. They’d scare away any little frat boys in a heartbeat, no doubt about it. “You’re on. Eight o’clock?”

“Sounds good.”

“Hey, Denver?”

“Yeah?”

“I don’t snuggle.”

He laughed. “Fine. But I take back that ‘signs of humanity’ remark. You’re as much of an asshole as ever.”

#

El had thought he was watching the kids because Rosa had to work, but when he showed up at her house at 6:30, he found her wearing tight black jeans and high-heeled boots and displaying a whole lot of cleavage. Not exactly the sort of thing she’d wear to wait tables, not even at Giuseppe’s.

“Christ, Rosa. Put on a sweater or something.”

She hooked her hands under her breasts and lifted them a bit. “Fuck off, bro.”

“You didn’t tell me it was a date.”

“You didn’t ask.”

True enough. The fact was, the less El thought about what his sister got up to, the better. He was sure the feeling was mutual. “Who is he this time?”

She turned away to study her hair in the mirror. “Somebody I met.”

“No shit, Captain Obvious. Where at?”

“Out.”

He sighed and sat down on her couch. “You got three kids by three different dads, and not one of those sperm donors is worth a damn. When you gonna learn?”

“Just because you don’t date doesn’t mean I can’t.” She pinched her cheeks and reached for a tube of lipstick. “I ain’t cut out to be a nun.”

Which meant El was a monk. Which wasn’t entirely off the mark, which annoyed the hell out of him. “Do you ever stop to think about where you’re going and what you’re doing? Do you ever think of the future? Your kids’ future, maybe with a stable male role model in the picture?”

She bared her teeth at him in the mirror. “Oh, but sweetheart, if they need a male stick-in-the-mud, they can look to Uncle Emanuel.” She yelled down the hallway, “Let’s go, kids. I got places to be.”

“And men to do,” El said under his breath.

The only acknowledgement El received was a middle finger flipped his way.

#

“What do you care that she’s on a date?” Denver asked El two hours later as they loaded clothes into side-by-side washing machines.

El glanced around to make sure Rosa’s kids weren’t listening. They weren’t. They were running around the laundromat, playing hide-and-seek among the tables and chairs. The only other person around was a young woman wearing skin-tight sweatpants with Greek letters across her ass. She had on headphones and was handily ignoring the world.

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“It’s not that it’s a date,” El told Denver. “It’s that she’s being an idiot.”

Denver slammed the door to his washer and glanced sideways at El as he thumbed quarters into the machine. “You’re the most judgmental person I know.”

“It’s not my fault people are stupid.”

“Am I included in that assessment, Mr. Genius?”

El sighed and slammed his own washer shut. “Look. When she’s hurt and crying because another loser has left, she comes clean and tells me what she really wants. She says she wants a nice guy who’ll settle down with her. Take care of her and take care of the kids. Come to family dinners and help Abuela when she needs it. Somebody who’ll be part of the family.”

“Makes sense.” Denver shrugged and glanced down at the floor, his voice gruff as he added, “Nothing wrong with wanting that.”

“I’m not saying it’s wrong. But look at it this way: you work at Lights Out. Biggest, gayest club in town, right?”

“Yeah.”

“And you’re standing here saying you wouldn’t mind finding somebody to settle down with, right?”

Denver’s jaw tensed and he took a step back. “I never said—”

“My point is, you have a couple hundred gay boys to pick from every night. But you don’t.”

Denver relaxed a bit, probably because he knew El wasn’t about to hound him on the settling down thing. “Club’s nothing but college boys looking to get laid.”

“Exactly.” El turned away to put his money into the slots. “Men in the straight clubs are no different. She meets these guys at the bar, takes them home within a week, then wonders why they turn out to be losers.”

“Where’s she supposed to meet them?”

“I don’t know. PTA meetings. Church. The grocery store.” El waved his hands to indicate the walls around them. “The fucking laundromat.”

Denver snorted. “I take it she don’t go to those places?”

“She does, actually, and guys ask her out, but you know what she says? She says they’re old or they’re fat. Or maybe they’re going bald. So she keeps choosing these drunken asshats at the bar, then wondering why they don’t turn out to be Mr. Right.”

“You think Mr. Right’s hanging out at Tucker Laund-O-Rama?”

Of course, when he said it that way, it sounded pretty stupid. “Maybe. Yeah.”

Denver raised his eyebrows. “Do me a favor, El. Let me know when he walks in the door.”

CHAPTER THREE

When I got home after work, I saw someone had stuck a bright pink flier into the rickety screen on my front door. I left it on the kitchen counter while I dialed Stacey’s number.

No answer.

I stared at the flier as the phone rang. Curb Appeal Contest, it read. Although houses in similar neighborhoods in Tucker Springs were in high demand, my little corner, an older section between the edge of the Light District and the railroad tracks, was slowly falling into disrepair. The self-appointed homeowner’s association was always trying to come up with ways to increase property value. Block parties. New playgrounds. It seemed this time it was a drive to improve the look of the lawns and houses in the neighborhood. I was about to toss it aside when the bottom line caught my eye. \$500 cash prize.

I could use \$500. No doubt about that.

I dialed Stacey’s number again. Still no answer.

I put on some music and stuck a frozen dinner in the microwave, wondering how much it would take to win the contest.

Our secret judges will be patrolling the neighborhood, looking for yards that are well kept, colorful, and inviting.

That didn’t sound too hard. And for a cash prize—

There was a dull pop, and the kitchen went dim and silent.

“Goddammit.” I shoved away from the counter and glared at the faded wallpaper as if I could bore through to the wires beneath. “Should have known.”

I’d long suspected the wiring in the house had never been up to code and that whatever work had been done on it hadn’t exactly been on the level. The annoyances of living in a place where half of the wiring consisted of duct tape and extension cords were part of my daily life. No running the microwave and the window-unit air conditioner at the same time. No using the computer while watching TV. Every time Stacey had used her blow dryer in

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the tiny master bathroom, the bedroom lights flickered and my alarm clock blinked until I reset it.

With a weary sigh, I went into the garage and flipped the breaker. Back in the kitchen, I turned off the AC and restarted the microwave, then went back to the flier.

The contest would run for a month. They even had a website where weekly scores would be displayed. It was worth a shot, right?

I called Stacey again. This time, she picked up.

“Hello?”

She sounded annoyed. My heart sank. “Hey, Stacey. Happy birthday.”

“Paul, you shouldn’t be calling. I’ve told you that. If Larry finds out—”

“Well, I certainly wouldn’t want to upset your new boyfriend,” I said, unable to keep the bitterness out of my voice.

She sighed. “What do you want?”

This definitely wasn’t going the way I had hoped. The microwave beeped, signaling that my dinner was ready. Why hadn’t I waited until afterward to call?

I took a deep breath. “I wondered if you’re free tomorrow night? I wanted to take you out to dinner for your birthday. We could—”

“No.”

“It’s only dinner.”

“I really can’t. Larry wouldn’t like it.”

“Come on, Stacey. After seven years together, I’m not even allowed to wish you happy birthday?”

“You just did. And I appreciate it. But dinner isn’t a good idea.”

I opened the microwave door, waving away the steam. “How about lunch, then?”

She sighed, and I knew she was about to say no.

“Coffee?”

“I don’t know, Paul. I—”

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Whatever she said after that, I didn't hear, because my smoke detector went off. It was loud and high-pitched, as all smoke detectors seemed to be, and I jumped.

"Shit. Hang on, I'll be right back."

"Paul? Are you okay?"

Too angry to answer, I put the phone down and went through the usual routine of making the noise stop. I couldn't reach the smoke detector on the ceiling, but I took off my shirt and waved it at the thing, jumping up and down, trying to scatter whatever hint of smoke it thought it smelled. The damn thing went off nearly every time I cooked, whether I managed to burn my food or not.

"Shut up," I yelled at it. I swung my shirt again, and it caught the edge of the lid and pulled it open. The incessant whine of the alarm stopped, although my ears were still ringing.

It hardly seemed fair that Stacey had picked the house and then left me to deal with it, although if I had my way, she'd be coming back.

"Fire alarm, huh?" she asked when I picked up the phone again. "Hasn't the landlord fixed that yet?"

"Of course not. Listen, Stacey, couldn't you at least meet me for a cup of coffee?"

"I don't know."

"Please?"

She sighed. She was relenting.

"Just coffee," I emphasized, taking the window she'd left open. "How about after work tomorrow?"

It took her a moment, but she finally said, "Fine. Coffee. I can be at Mocha Springs at five."

That would mean I'd have to skip out of work early, but I'd figure it out. "Great. I'll see you then."

She'd already hung up the phone.

#

I'd always wanted to be a veterinarian, but that wasn't how things had worked out. Instead, I was a glorified receptionist at a veterinary office. On the bright side, my boss, Nick Reynolds, was a great guy.

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“Hey, Doc,” I said to him. “Is it okay if I cut out a bit early today?” Normally on Thursdays, we closed the office at five, and I’d be there another half hour or so wrapping things up, but I didn’t want to be late for my date with Stacey.

I wasn’t sure if Nick had a date tonight too, but I assumed he did. Though we were nearly the same age—early thirties—Nick was successful, handsome, and built. I suspected women threw themselves at him.

“How early?” he asked.

“Maybe quarter to five or so?”

He shrugged. “Yeah, I think I can manage.” He tossed the patient file he’d been reviewing on my desk and leaned back with his elbows on the counter behind him. The motion stretched his shirt across his chest in a way that would have made many a coed swoon. “You got a hot date?”

I looked down at the file so he wouldn’t notice me checking him out. Nice chest. Tattoos up one arm. He was attractive and funny and nice, and that made him intimidating as hell.

Not that I was gay or anything. I just happened to notice he looked very nice.

“I’m meeting Stacey. It’s her birthday.”

He didn’t say anything, and when I looked back up, he was shaking his head. “You’re a glutton for punishment.”

“I just think—”

“It’s cool,” he said, turning to pick up the next file on the stack. “I don’t mind you leaving.”

“Thanks, Nick.”

He glanced over at me again. He raised his eyebrows and opened his mouth as if he were about to say something, but then the bell on the door rang and his next client came in.

“Hey, Seth,” Nick said, reaching across the counter to shake the man’s hand. He nodded at the pet carrier the man held. “How’s Stanley?”

“Fatter than ever.”

Nick laughed. “Somehow I’m not surprised.” He motioned to the door that led to the exam room. “Go on back. I’ll be with you in a minute.”

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Once he was gone, Nick turned to look at me. He had insanely blue eyes. Almost as blue as Stacey's. "Listen, kid, it's not my business, but if you want my advice on Stacey—"

"I don't."

Because I'd heard it before. I was better off without her. She was bad news. Move on.

He sighed. "Okay. Fair enough. I guess in that case, I wish you good luck."

"Thanks, Nick."

He shook his head as he turned to leave the room. "God knows you're going to need it."

#

The coffee shop Mocha Springs Eternal sat a couple of blocks over from Nick's office in the foot mall the Light District was known for. I passed the pawnshop and crossed to the cobblestone walkways that made up the center of downtown. It was a gorgeous evening, near eighty degrees but with a soft cool breeze that suited the outdoor atmosphere of the mall. A man strummed an acoustic guitar on a bench while teenagers skateboarded right past the "Dismount Zone" signs. Couples strolled hand in hand, some traditional boy-girl, but many same-sex couples as well. We hadn't realized until after we'd rented the house that we were smack in the middle of Tucker Springs's version of the Castro. Stacey had been embarrassed, as if we were intruding where we weren't wanted, but I liked it. The atmosphere in the Light District was bright and fun and friendly.

The ice cream parlor was packed. Kids sat out front, racing to finish their ice cream in the sun. Their sticky little hands clutched waffle cones. Ice cream dripped from their chins. Parents laughed at the foolishness of trying to wipe them clean. I smiled, thinking about them as I passed a series of art galleries and novelty shops, a martini bar, and a designer dress shop. Finally, I arrived at Mocha Springs Eternal.

I checked the bar by the front window, the tables along the brick wall, and the couches in back. Stacey hadn't yet arrived. I bought a cup of coffee for myself and a raspberry mocha cappuccino for her, and took one of the open tables near the front, where we could watch the people passing by. She liked to people-watch.

She came in, and I waved her over to my table. She'd cut her hair shorter than I'd ever seen it, and dyed it platinum instead of the dirty dishwater blonde it had been since I'd known her. A clunky shell necklace was visible under the collar of her blouse. "Hello," she said as she sat down with her back to the front window. "How've you been?"

"Good," I lied. "Happy birthday." I slid the foam-topped mug across the table. "I got you your usual."

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She looked down at it and wrinkled her nose. “It’s not my usual anymore. Too many calories. I drink chai now.”

“Oh.”

She sniffed and nervously touched the side of her eye, first one, then the other. She was wearing makeup—eyeliner, shadow, and thick mascara. When we’d been together, she’d only worn makeup like that for parties or evenings out. Never during the day.

I fought down the disappointment that welled up in my chest. “Seems like everything about you has changed.”

She tapped her finger on the table.

I took a drink of my lukewarm coffee and tried a new tactic. “How’s your work going?”

She relaxed marginally, leaning back in her chair. “I’m finishing up another sculpture. I’ve been showing my portfolio around, and there’s a consignment gallery in Estes Park that may be interested.”

“That’s great,” I said, although the words were like sand in my throat. We’d come to Tucker Springs specifically because it was artsy, and Stacey had thought she’d be able to sell the scrap metal monstrosities she called art. I knew I should tell her good luck, but any connections she was making in Estes were probably through Larry, the man who had replaced me. I’d moved here to make her happy, and she’d moved on without a backward glance.

“Are you still working for Dr. Reynolds?” she asked.

I nodded, unsure what to say. The box with the necklace was wedged into my front pants pocket. I could feel its bulk against my thigh. “I bought you something.” I kept my eyes down so I didn’t have to see the exasperation in her eyes. I took the box out and slid it across the table to her. “For your birthday.”

“You shouldn’t have done that.”

She was right. After buying the necklace, I’d imagined giving it to her. I’d pictured her being surprised and appreciative, smiling and pleased, but the folly of that belief was now painfully clear. She had a new life. A new hairdo. A new lover. She didn’t want diamonds, fake or real.

She didn’t want me.

Nick was right. I was a fool. A glutton for punishment. I wished desperately I’d never bought the necklace at all. I was about to reach across and take the box back, but I was too slow. She picked it up and opened it.

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“Jesus, Paul,” she said in disgust. “What were you thinking?”

“I thought you’d like it.”

“I can’t accept this.” She snapped the box shut and put it on the table between us. “Thank you for the thought, but really, you shouldn’t have bought it.” She pinched the bridge of her nose, shaking her head. “I shouldn’t have come.”

The words I’d planned to say died in my throat. I’d hoped to have a chance to talk about things. Maybe if you came home, we could work things out.

“Don’t call anymore,” she said as she stood up. “And don’t buy me any more gifts.”

#