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A NOVEL

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 Montlake

CHAPTER ONE

KENNA

There's a small wooden cross staked into the ground on the side of the road with the date of his death written on it.

Scotty would hate it. I bet his mother put it there.

"Can you pull over?"

The driver slows down and brings the cab to a stop. I get out and walk back to where the cross is. I shake it side to side until the dirt loosens around it, and then I pull it out of the ground.

Did he die in this very spot? Or did he die in the road?

I didn't pay attention to the details during the pretrial. When I heard he had crawled several yards away from the car, I started humming so I wouldn't hear anything else the prosecutor said. Then, to avoid having to sit through details if the case went to trial, I pleaded guilty.

Because technically, I was.

I may not have killed him with my actions, but I definitely killed him with my inaction.

I thought you were dead, Scotty. But dead people can't crawl.

I walk back to the cab with the cross in hand. I set it on the back seat next to me and wait for the driver to pull back onto the road, but

he doesn't. I glance at him in the rearview mirror, and he's staring at me with a raised brow.

"Stealing roadside memorials has to be some kind of bad karma. You sure you want to take that?"

I look away from him and lie. "Yes. I'm the one who put it there." I can still feel him staring at me as he pulls back onto the road.

My new apartment is only two miles from here, but it's in the opposite direction from where I used to live. I don't have a car, so I decided to find a place closer to downtown this time so I can walk to work. If I can even find a job. It'll be difficult with my history and lack of experience. And, according to the cabdriver, the bad karma I'm probably carrying around right now.

Stealing Scotty's memorial might be bad karma, but one could argue that leaving a memorial up for a guy who verbally expressed his hatred for roadside memorials could be bad karma as well. That's why I had the driver take the detour down this back road. I knew Grace probably left something at the location of the wreck, and I felt I owed it to Scotty to remove it.

"Cash or card?" the driver asks.

I look at the meter and pull cash and a tip out of my purse and hand it to him after he parks. Then I grab my suitcase and the wooden cross I just stole and make my way out of the cab and up to the building.

My new apartment isn't part of a huge complex. It's just a single-standing unit flanked by an abandoned car lot on one side and a convenience store on the other. Plywood covers a downstairs window. Beer cans in various stages of decay litter the property. I kick one aside so that it doesn't get stuck in the wheels of my suitcase.

The place looks even worse than it did online, but I expected as much. The landlord didn't even ask for my name when I called to see if they had any vacancies. She said, "We always have vacancies. Bring cash; I'm in apartment one." Then she hung up.

I knock on apartment one. There's a cat in the window staring at me. It's so motionless I start to wonder if it's a statue, but then it blinks and slinks away.

The door opens, and an older, tiny woman stares up at me with a disgruntled look about her. She has curlers in her hair and lipstick smeared to her nose. "I don't need anything you're selling."

I stare at the lipstick, noting how it's bleeding into the wrinkles hugging her mouth. "I called last week about an apartment. You said you'd have one available."

Recognition flashes on the woman's prune-like face. She makes a *hmp* sound while looking me up and down. "Didn't expect you to look like this."

I don't know what to make of her comment. I look down at my jeans and T-shirt while she walks away from the door for a few seconds. She comes back with a zipper pouch. "Five fifty a month. First and last month's rent is due today."

I count out the money and hand it to her. "There's no lease?"

She laughs, stuffing the cash into her pouch. "You're in apartment six." She points a finger up. "That's right above me, so keep it down, I go to bed early."

"What utilities are included?"

"Water and trash, but you cover electric. It's on now—you have three days to get it switched into your name. Deposit is two fifty to the light company."

Fuck. Three days to come up with \$250? I'm starting to question my decision to come back so soon, but when I was released from transitional housing, I had two choices: spend all my money trying to survive in that town, or drive the three hundred miles and spend all my money in this one.

I'd rather be in the town that holds all the people once connected to Scotty.

The woman takes a step back into her apartment. “Welcome to Paradise Apartments. I’ll bring you a kitten once you get settled.”

I immediately put my hand on her door to prevent her from closing it. “Wait. What? A kitten?”

“Yeah, a *kitten*. Like a cat, but smaller.”

I step away from her door like it’ll somehow protect me from what she just said. “No, thank you. I don’t want a kitten.”

“I have too many.”

“I don’t want a kitten,” I repeat.

“Who wouldn’t want a kitten?”

“*Me.*”

She huffs, like my response is completely unreasonable. “I’ll make you a deal,” she says. “I’ll leave the electric on for two weeks if you take a kitten.” *What in the hell kind of place is this?* “Fine,” she says, responding to my silence as if it’s a negotiation tactic. “The *month*. I’ll leave the electric on for the whole month if you just take one kitten.” She walks into her apartment but leaves the door open.

I don’t want a kitten at all, ever, but not having to spend \$250 on an electricity deposit this month would be worth several kittens.

She reappears with a small black-and-orange kitten. She places it in my hands. “There ya go. My name is Ruth if you need anything, but try not to need anything.” She goes to close her door again.

“Wait. Can you tell me where I can find a pay phone?”

She chuckles. “Yeah, back in 2005.” She closes her door completely.

The kitten meows, but it’s not a sweet meow. It sounds more like a cry for help. “You and me both,” I mutter.

I make my way toward the stairs with my suitcase and my . . . kitten. Maybe I should have held out a few more months before coming back here. I worked to save up just over \$2,000, but most of that was spent on moving here. I should have saved up more. What if I don’t find a job right away? And now I’m tasked with the responsibility of keeping a kitten alive.

My life just became ten times more difficult than it was yesterday.

I make it up to the apartment with the kitten clinging to my shirt. I insert the key in the lock and have to use both hands to pull on the door and get the key to turn. When I push open the door to my new apartment, I hold my breath, afraid of what it’s going to smell like.

I flip on the light switch and look around, releasing my breath slowly. There’s not much of a smell. That’s both good and bad.

There’s a couch in the living room, but that’s literally all there is. A small living room, an even smaller kitchen, no dining room. No bedroom. It’s an efficiency apartment with a closet and a bathroom so small the toilet touches the tub.

The place is a dump. A five-hundred-square-foot absolute shithole, but it’s a step up for me. I’ve gone from sharing a one-hundred-square-foot cell with a roommate, to living in transitional housing with six roommates, to a five-hundred-square-foot apartment I can call my own.

I’m twenty-six years old, and this is the first time I’ve ever officially lived somewhere alone. It’s both terrifying and liberating.

I don’t know if I can afford this place after the month is up, but I’m going to try. Even if that means applying to every business I walk past.

Having my own apartment can only serve to help as I plead my case to the Landrys. It’ll show I’m independent now. Even if that independence will be a struggle.

The kitten wants down, so I put her on the floor in the living room. She walks around, crying out for whoever she left downstairs. I feel a pang in my chest as I watch her searching corners for a way out. A way back home. A way back to her mother and siblings.

She looks like a bumblebee, or something out of Halloween, with her black and orange splotches.

“What are we going to name you?”

I know she’ll more than likely be nameless for a few days while I think about it. I take the responsibility of naming things very seriously. The last time I was responsible for naming someone, I took it more

seriously than I've ever taken anything. That could have been because the whole time I sat in my cell during my pregnancy, all there was to do was think about baby names.

I chose the name Diem because I knew as soon as I was released, I was going to make my way back here and do everything in my power to find her.

Here I am.

Carpe Diem.

CHAPTER TWO

LEDGER

I'm pulling my truck into the alley behind the bar when I notice the nail polish still on the fingernails of my right hand. *Shit.* I forgot I played dress-up with a four-year-old last night.

At least the purple matches my work shirt.

Roman is tossing bags of trash into the dumpster when I exit the truck. He sees the gift sack in my hand and knows it's for him, so he reaches for it. "Let me guess. Coffee mug?" He peeks inside.

It's a coffee mug. It always is.

He doesn't say thank you. He never does.

We don't acknowledge the sobriety these mugs symbolize, but I buy him one every Friday. This is the ninety-sixth mug I've bought him.

I should probably stop because his apartment is full of coffee mugs, but I'm too far in to give up now. He's almost at one hundred weeks sober, and I've been holding on to that one-hundredth-milestone mug for a while now. It's a Denver Broncos mug. His least favorite team.

Roman gestures toward the back door of the bar. "There's a couple inside harassing other customers. You might want to keep an eye on them."

That's odd. We don't normally have to deal with unruly people this early in the evening. It isn't even six o'clock yet. "Where are they sitting?"

"Next to the jukebox." His eyes fall to my hand. "Nice nails, man."

"Right?" I hold up my hand and wiggle my fingers. "She did pretty good for a four-year-old."

I open the back door of the bar and am met with the grating sound of my favorite song being slaughtered by Ugly Kid Joe through the loudspeakers.

Surely not.

I walk through the kitchen and into the bar and immediately spot them. They're hunched over the jukebox. I quietly make my way over to them and see she's punching in the same four numbers again and again. I look over their shoulders at the screen while they giggle like mischievous children. "Cat's in the Cradle" is set to play thirty-six times in a row.

I clear my throat. "You think this is funny? Forcing me to listen to the same song for the next six hours?"

My father spins around when he hears my voice. "Ledger!" He pulls me in for a hug. He smells like beer and motor oil. And limes, maybe? *Are they drunk?*

My mother backs away from the jukebox. "We were trying to fix it. We didn't do this."

"Sure, you didn't." I pull her in for a hug.

They never announce when they're going to show up. They just appear and stay a day or two or three and then head out in their RV again.

Their showing up drunk is new, though. I glance over my shoulder, and Roman is behind the bar now. I point to my parents. "Did you do this to them, or did they show up this way?"

Roman shrugs. "A little of both."

"It's our anniversary," my mother says. "We're celebrating."

"I hope you guys didn't drive here."

"We didn't," my father says. "Our car is with the RV in the shop getting routine maintenance, so we took a Lyft." He pats my cheek.

"Wanted to see you, but we've been here two hours waiting for you to show up, and now we're leaving because we're hungry."

"This is why you should warn me before you drop into town. I have a life."

"Did you remember our anniversary?" my father asks.

"Slipped my mind. Sorry."

"Told you," he says to my mother. "Pay up, Robin."

My mother reaches into her pocket and hands him a ten-dollar bill.

They bet on almost everything. My love life. Which holidays I'll remember. Every football game I've ever played. But I'm almost positive they've just been passing the same ten-dollar bill back and forth for several years.

My father holds up his empty glass and shakes it. "Get us a refill, bartender."

I take his glass. "How about an ice water?" I leave them at the jukebox and make my way behind the bar.

I'm pouring two glasses of water when a girl walks into the bar looking somewhat lost. She glances around the room like she's never been here before, and then when she notices an empty corner at the opposite end of the bar, she makes a beeline for it.

I stare at her the entire time she's walking through the bar. I stare at her so hard I accidentally overfill the glasses and water goes everywhere. I grab a towel and wipe up my mess. When I look at my mother, she's looking at the girl. Then at me. Then at the girl.

Shit. The last thing I need is for her to try to set me up with a customer. She tries to play matchmaker plenty when she's sober, so I can't imagine how bad the tendency might be after a few drinks. I need to get them out of here.

I take the waters to them and then hand my mother my credit card. "You guys should go down to Jake's Steakhouse and have dinner on me. Walk there so you can sober up on the way."

"You are so nice." She clutches at her chest dramatically and looks at my father. "Benji, we did so well with him. Let's go celebrate our parenting with his credit card."

"We did do well with him," my father says in agreement. "We should have more kids."

"Menopause, honey. Remember when I hated you for an entire year?" My mother grabs her purse, and they take the glasses of water with them as they go.

"We should get rib eye since he's paying," my father mutters as they walk away.

I release a sigh of relief and then make my way back to the bar. The girl is tucked quietly into the corner, writing in a notebook. Roman isn't behind the bar right now, so I'm assuming no one has taken her order yet.

I gladly volunteer as tribute.

"What can I get you?" I ask her.

"Water and a Diet Coke, please." She doesn't look up at me, so I back away to fulfill her order. She's still writing in her notebook when I return with her drinks. I try to get a glimpse of what she's writing, but she closes her notebook and lifts her eyes. "Thank . . ." She pauses in the middle of what I think is her attempt at saying *thank you*. She mutters the word *you* and sticks the straw in her mouth.

She seems flustered.

I want to ask her questions, like what her name is and where she's from, but I've learned over the years of owning this place that asking questions of lonely people in a bar can quickly turn into conversations I have to maul my way out of.

But most of the people who come in here don't capture my attention like she has. I gesture toward her two drinks and say, "Are you waiting for someone else?"

She pulls both drinks closer. "Nope. Just thirsty." She breaks eye contact with me and leans back in her chair, pulling her notebook with her and giving it all her attention.

I can take a hint. I walk to the other end of the bar to give her privacy.

Roman returns from the kitchen and nudges his head in her direction. "Who's she?"

"I don't know, but she isn't wearing a wedding ring, so she's not your type."

"Very funny."