

Chapter One

Emma

It was midnight by the time I left work. My shitty excuse for a car had crapped out on me yesterday and transit didn't run this late, so I had to walk home. Short enough walk, but this wasn't the safest part of town for a woman alone to traverse after dark. I knew better than to take the shortcut through the park, especially at night. The bad guys came out when the sun went down, clinging to the shadows in the park as they went about their illegal activities. Drug deals, illicit arms sales and who knew what else. Still, that route would cut the length of my walk in half, and after slinging drinks at the bar all night, the temptation was too much to resist.

My aching feet won the argument with my common sense, and I risked it.

It was dark under the towering trees. The heavy branches blocked out the majority of the moonlight, making it feel eerily like the setting of a horror movie. More than half of the lights on the concrete path had been knocked out by kids throwing rocks. I stepped up my pace.

I was halfway through the park when the sound of a gunshot rang out loud in the still night air. I jumped, automatically turning toward the sounds.

In the clearing off to my left side stood a big guy holding a gun. He had it pointed at another guy who had a splash of red spreading from a hole in his chest. The shooter took two more shots, hitting the other guy right between the eyes. The victim crumpled to the ground as blood and brains splattered from the back of his head. His mouth opened, but no sound came out. A thin trickle of blood trailed from the corner of his lips and splashed the ground. In the light of the full moon, I could see the life fading from his eyes as he stared at the man holding the smoking gun.

I slapped my hand over my mouth, desperately trying to stifle a scream. I wasn't successful. I stood rooted to the spot, my mind trying to process the horror of what I'd just witnessed.

The murderer swiveled and looked straight at me. He was a huge monster of a man, with tattoos covering every available inch of skin on his heavily muscled arms. His chest was wide, and no doubt just as muscled beneath a skintight shirt.

His eyes were cold and hard as he brought the gun around and pointed the deadly weapon straight at me.

Survival instinct kicked in. I turned and ran.

Shots rang out behind me. *One. Two.* The bullets went wide, the shooter's aim hindered by the moving target.

Me.

I was the moving target. He was trying to kill me. The third shot scorched a fiery path across my side. When I brought my hand down to my ribs, I could feel sticky dampness oozing from a ragged hole in my jacket. A coppery smell filled the air. Blood.

No time to stop and assess the damage. That wasn't a warning shot -- it was meant to kill. Hopefully, that was a regulation gun, with a six-shot magazine like you see in the movies. Three shots to commit murder, and three fired at me. The asshole was going to have to reload before he could finish me off.

Enough time for me to escape? I had to hope so. One hand pressed to the throbbing wound on my side, I plunged into the heavy shrubs lining the pathways. I'd be an easier target if I stayed on the paths. Better to get a few scratches. At least it was too dark away from the path for the shooter to follow the trail of blood I was undoubtedly leaving behind.

The murderer didn't waste any time coming after me. His progress was marked by heavy thumps of his boots as he charged down the path. Hopefully he hadn't seen me dart into the bushes. "You can't escape, you little bitch," he snarled. "You're pissing me off, and that's going to make it worse when I catch up. Give up now and I'll take it easy on you."

I doubted that. Considering I'd just watched him kill someone in cold blood, he wasn't likely to pat me on the head and send me on my way. I paused and crouched down beside a flowering shrub. My heart beat so loud it was a miracle he couldn't hear

it. Looking around, I tried to figure out the shortest way out of the park.

"Did you see which way she went?"

"No, but she didn't pass us, so she must be heading for the road."

Shit! There were two of them. I hadn't seen a second man, but then again, I hadn't stuck around long enough to take in details.

"Makes sense. We need to stop her." The sound of branches snapping filled the air.

"These damn bushes are thick." Even muttering to himself, the murderer sounded closer. And cold-blooded. As if he were discussing an annoying insect, not a human being. "You recognize the bitch?"

There was a long pause. "She did look familiar. Maybe works one of the bars in the brewery district? I think she might be a bartender. That shock of red hair should make her easy to find."

"Pity we didn't get a pic."

That remark was met with a derisive snort. "If we had time to get a picture, we would have had time to end her and solve the problem."

"Do you think she can ID us?"

"I doubt it. It's dark enough out, even with the damn moon shining and she only saw us for a few seconds. I'm not even sure she saw both of us."

"Doesn't matter. The boss ain't going to be happy with a witness running loose. We need to find her and wrap up the loose ends."

I had no illusions about how they intended to wrap up the loose ends, meaning me. I needed to get out of here and call the cops.

I took a deep breath and forced myself to move. I veered to my left, away from the two thugs. Weaving my way as quietly as I could between the ornamental shrubbery, I stayed low to the ground. I didn't dare stand up and make myself an easy target. That damn full moon was not helping me now. The thought of being outlined against the sky terrified me, and the bullet wound on my side hurt like hell.

The distance between me and the assassination squad widened. They were

following the path, but headed in the other direction, presumably directly out of the park. Which meant I needed to circle around and exit by a different route.

Thug number two raised his voice. "Come on out and discuss this, girl. It's not what you think. We can explain."

That would be interesting. How did he think he could explain shooting someone at point blank range? And the fact that he'd taken a few potshots at me didn't inspire much trust on my part. Not to mention their talk of ending the problem, with me being said problem.

I worked my way in the opposite direction, lengthening the distance between me and them. It felt like forever before I reached the edge of the park, not too far from where I'd originally entered. Seemed I'd been walking in a circle.

I took a careful look around to make sure it was safe to emerge before scurrying across the road and into the sheltering darkness of an alley. I reached into my pocket for my cell phone to call for help. Not that I had a whole pile of friends who could come to my rescue, but the cops needed to know there was a dead body in the park. Maybe, if they were quick enough, they could catch the murderous twosome before they escaped the area.

Crap! The phone wasn't in my pocket. I knew I'd tucked it in there when I left work, which meant it had fallen out somewhere in the park.

An icy river of fear trickled its way down my spine. If the murderers found it, they'd know who I was. Sure, there was a password, but I wasn't naïve enough to think it couldn't be hacked, and guys who committed murder wouldn't balk at illegally hacking a phone. Even if they didn't manage to bypass the password, my home screen picture showed me grinning like an idiot while standing in front of the bar where I worked, the name of the bar clearly visible above my head. I thought it was cute when I tagged it as the home screen picture. It might as well say, *come and get me!*

Dumb. Dumb and Dumber.

Now what? I couldn't very well go home and wait for the bad guys to figure out where to find me, and I definitely couldn't go back to the bar.

The rustling of bushes in the distance made me jump. Sitting here stewing wasn't helping any. Sooner or later, those guys would double back to find me.

Where to go presented an issue. It wasn't like I had a loving family waiting to protect me. I only knew one person who might be able to help me. Then again, I'd dated his little brother in high school. I might have burnt that bridge behind me.

Justin Maclean and I had been close once upon a time. Friends close, not lovers close, although we had dated. It kept the other guys away. It was a tough neighborhood, and we'd had each other's backs. I'd had a crush on his older brother James though. Tall, dark and brooding. Just what every teenaged girl longs for.

Turned out the younger Maclean and I had very different dreams. I wanted to make something of myself. I enrolled in college and was on track to get a degree. I was determined to forge a life I could be proud of.

Justin hadn't been as optimistic. He'd gotten in trouble with the law and opted to join the Army instead of going to prison. As far as I knew, he was still there.

His older brother, James, joined the Navy right out of high school and became a SEAL. That just made him hotter. Nothing like a man in uniform to give a teenage girl wet dreams! I'd kept tabs on him. Just for fun, or so I told myself. I knew he mustered out after several tours. When he got back home, he patched into the Riptide Motorcycle Club. That was about as far from respectable as you could get. Still, I knew where he lived, where the Riptide's clubhouse was, and he had recently become president of the club.

Just the thought of his hands on me, touching me, stroking me could still make me melt, but I no longer fantasized about being his lover. I couldn't reconcile my dreams of respectability with the choices he'd made. The Navy SEAL thing -- sure. That was kind of hot, although waiting to see if he came home from missions in one piece would be nerve-racking.

A tattooed, leather clad member of a motorcycle club, however? Not a chance.

Now, though, his bad choices just might be my salvation.

* * *

Ace

Someone pounding at my door after midnight was never a good thing.

Flinging the blankets off, I grabbed a pair of sweatpants and a tee shirt and pulled them on. Swiping my phone off the night table beside the bed, I opened the security app and checked the surveillance camera.

Yeah, I had cameras covering every inch of my property. Came with the territory when you were the Prez of a motorcycle club.

Staring at my front door, panic written all over her face, was my kid brother's high school sweetheart, Emma. Odd to see her here, since they hadn't been an item for at least half a dozen years now.

She looked terrified. What the fuck?

Disengaging the locks, I threw the front door open and grabbed Emma's arm to pull her inside and behind me. I visually searched the area for whatever had put that look on her face, but the quick glance around revealed nothing. The darkness could conceal a multitude of sins, though, as I knew well from experience.

I slammed the door shut and made sure the deadbolts were in place before I pivoted to face her. Want and lust slammed into my gut as I stared into her terrified eyes.

Somewhere between high school and banging on my door, she'd turned from a scrawny kid into a woman with lushly captivating curves.

I'd found her amusing as a kid and admired her feisty attitude. I'd never allowed my feelings to go any further than that. Her home life had been shitty, but she didn't let that stop her. I'd questioned her choice of my brother. I loved the little brat, but he'd been bad news back then. Running wild, drinking, stealing cars. If it was on the wrong side of the law, he'd do it.

He and Emma had parted ways when a judge had given him the choice of jail or enlisting, and he'd done the smart thing for once and chosen the Army. Not as good as the Navy, mind you, but definitely better than jail.

As far as I knew, he and Emma had parted on friendly terms, and hadn't had much contact since. Still, my body's reaction to her was inappropriate at best.

Before I managed to get past the shock of her showing up on my doorstep in the middle of the night looking like all the hounds of hell were chasing her, she threw herself into my arms. Just the feel of her soft body crushed against mine jerked me back into the here and now.

"He's going to kill me!" She spit the words out in a terrified whisper, peering up at me. "I know he is."

"Who's going to kill you?" I frowned, automatically wrapping my arms around her. "And why?"

She hissed out a long breath with her teeth clenched and her hand went to her side. Blood seeped from the mangled material of her jacket.

Taking a step back, I lifted her arm so I could see where it was coming from. An ugly gash plowed across the side of her rib cage, and the material of her shirt stuck to the oozing blood.

Bullet wound. She'd been shot.

That made no sense. The Emma I remembered always kept her nose clean and followed the rules. I'd kept casual tabs on her over the years and as far as I knew, Emma led one of the most boring lives around. School, work, more school, and then back to work.

"What happened?" I kept my voice calm. Scaring her even more wasn't going to help.

"This guy was shooting at me, and I think one of the bullets grazed me. I was scared, so I ran here."

"Why come to me?" While it made me feel good to know she came to me when she needed help, this still made no sense.

"I heard you joined a motorcycle club when you left the service. I thought you could scare him off. Or protect me. Or something."

Still didn't make sense. "Why was someone shooting at you? Who was it?"

"I don't know who it was. I was walking home, and I saw this guy shoot someone and he knows I saw him." Her voice rose to a hysterical pitch. "I think I might have screamed, and he turned and looked right at me. Then he pointed the gun at me, so I ran."

The blood was still oozing out of the wound. Damnit, not a good sign. Getting her some help was more important right now than trying to make sense of her story.

"I'm going make a quick call and get the club medic over here to fix you up." As gently as I could, I took her jacket off and pulled the shredded remains of her shirt away from the wound. Without touching it, I tried to assess the damage. It looked superficial, but I wasn't about to take any chances. "Okay with me taking a pic and sending it to Joker so he knows what to bring with him?"

"Joker?" she whimpered, her eyes going wide, and I remembered she wasn't part of my world. Normal people went to the hospital if they needed a doctor. Then again, normal people didn't usually have bullet wounds, and bullet wounds were reported to the police.

I still had no idea what we were dealing with. "The club medic. Do you want me to take you to the emergency room instead?"

She shook her head violently. "No. He might look for me there. Take the picture."

I picked up my phone. Snapping a picture, I sent it to Joker, followed with a quick text: *Need your help. My place. ASAP. Bullet wound.*

A second later, Joker responded: *Gimme five minutes.*

Joker wasn't a doctor; however, he'd been a medic in the SEALs, and seen more action than most of the high-level jerks that had sent us into those deadly situations. Bullet wounds were almost routine to him. He'd be able to fix her up, even put in a few stitches if she needed them.

My attention snapped back to Emma. "You didn't recognize the shooter or the victim at all? Maybe seen them around somewhere. Maybe at the bar where you work?"

She shook her head. "Don't know who they were."

Motherfucker. The terrified look on her face made a lot of sense now.

She swiped her hand across her face, smearing her mascara. "There were three guys, but I only saw two, and then one was dead, and I heard the other one talking to someone so there had to be three. Before one got killed."

She was starting to sound panic-stricken, and I needed her calm if I wanted more information. After being deployed multiple times, I considered myself good at getting information out of civilians.

Emma took a deep breath, and I could see how much effort it took to pull herself together. She ducked out from under my arm and crossed the room to stand by the ridiculous fake plant one of the brothers had given me as a gag gift last year.

Her hand went to the bloody mess at her ribs, and she winced. "Damn, that hurts. Never been shot before."

"Most people haven't. I'd say it's just a flesh wound, but that doesn't make it hurt any less. Just means it'll be easier to clean and bandage. No digging around to find the bullet."

A wry smile crossed her lips. "I suppose I should be happy about that."

I shrugged. "Not really, but it's something."

I watched the emotions chase each other across her face as she took a moment to digest that. "Yeah. I guess it is. Sorry for freaking out on you. I'm a little more rattled than I thought."

She carefully placed her arm across her chest so as not to put any pressure on the bullet wound. "Not every day I witness a murder. I got off work late, and I took a shortcut through Merryman Park. I know it's not a great place to be after dark, but I was tired and my feet hurt. I didn't see anyone at first and I wasn't really looking, because, you know, it's dark in there in some places and I didn't want to trip and fall so I was looking at the ground more than anything. The streetlights don't all work, vandalism and whatever. Even with a full moon it can be tricky."

She looked so vulnerable; I had to resist the urge to pull her back into the circle of my arms. "Yeah. It can be dark in there." She wasn't trembling as much now, which

was good. "So, what happened next?"

"I didn't see anyone before I heard the first shot. They were off to the side of the path, where it opens by that old band shell. Like I said, I was mostly looking down. When I did look up, this big guy was holding the gun still pointed at the other guy. I could see the outline of the revolver. The metal kind that shines in the moonlight, you know?"

She paused as if waiting for me to comment. I grunted my agreement. Some do, some don't, but I wasn't about to start a discussion on the finer points of identifying weapons. She said she saw a revolver; she saw a revolver. It didn't matter. The guy had a gun, and he took a shot or two at Emma. He'd pay for that.

"He shot the other guy two more times, right in the forehead. I guess he wanted to make sure he was dead. The back of the other guy's head just kind of disintegrated and blood and stuff went flying everywhere. He didn't make a sound, just crumpled to the ground in a pool of blood." She worried her bottom lip with her teeth. "His eyes were still open, and he looked surprised. Like he didn't think it was going to happen."

This was not good. The park was in Riptide territory, and we didn't take kindly to outsiders committing crimes on our home turf. The cops inevitably thought we were involved. By we, I mean the Riptide MC. We were a close-knit bunch, most of us closer to our club brothers than the families we came from. We protected each other and what was ours. I had no idea who these guys were, or what the hell they were doing, but they were doing it on our territory. Big mistake.

I strode across the room and placed my hands on Emma's shoulders, being careful not to hurt her. She looked up at me, her eyes wide. They were as beautiful as I remembered, deep green with flecks of gold. A man could drown in those eyes. It took a major effort to drag my attention back to the task at hand.

I knew she had an independent streak a mile wide, and she would detest being treated like a helpless wimp, so I didn't bother to sugarcoat. She'd grown up in the same neighborhood as me. She knew the world wasn't all unicorns and princesses.

"I need you to tell me exactly what happened after you saw the guy get shot.

Don't leave anything out."

She took a deep breath. Her eyes lost focus as she related the whole damn thing from the time the shooter realized there was a witness until she stumbled onto my porch and pounded on the door. That included the fact that the shooter had fired at least three shots at her as she ran. The explanation definitely shed light on the terror-stricken expression she had when she arrived. I was impressed she'd managed to hold it together that long.

She slumped against me when she finished. "I didn't know where else to go. I remember someone saying you were in a motorcycle club, and one of the girls I work with, Katya, she pointed out your house one time when we were walking to the bar." She paused, peeking up at me from under her lashes. "She's kind of a bad guy junkie, and she was hoping to catch a glimpse of you. Except she called you Ace, instead of James."

Bad guy junkie? I'd seen my fill of those. Club whores that hung around the clubhouse, hoping one of the brothers would ask them to stay. Didn't matter which brother.

"Ace is my road name. No one's called me James in years."

"Ace?" Her forehead wrinkled in a frown. "You're into gambling?"

"No." My mouth curved up in a wry grin. "Ace because just when some asshole thinks he has me down, I always manage to pull an ace out of my sleeve."

She still looked confused.

"A solution. I always find a solution."

The blank look on her face gave way as she let out a delighted laugh, quickly followed by a yelp of pain. She pressed a hand against her injured side. "Damn, that hurts!"

I scooped her up in my arms and carried her to the sofa, careful not to touch her wounded side. She buried her head against my chest, and I felt a protective urge sweep through me. I just wanted to make everything all better for her. No matter how tough and independent she tried to be, everyone has a breaking point, and I suspected she

was damn close to hers.

Sinking into the well-worn cushions, I kept my arms wrapped around her and pretended I couldn't feel her shaking as she sobbed quietly into my shirt. I kept a tight rein on my temper. There were so many things wrong with this mess.

I was not okay with someone committing murder on territory under Riptide's protection.

I was totally not okay with some idiot taking potshots at my Emma.

Yeah, my Emma.

From the moment I'd opened the door and stared into her panic-stricken eyes, all those feelings I'd squashed down when she was dating my little brother had come roaring back.

I didn't know who the shooter was yet, but he'd just signed his own death warrant.