

Chapter 1

The upright bass strings resonated, the notes deep and husky. In the background, the finger-snapping began. Peggy Lee’s voice threaded over the top of the rhythm. It was playful, hot, and full of delicious promise. She was doing her best to convince me that I couldn’t possibly know the depths of her love, could never understand how much she cared.

Johnny noted my delighted expression when I placed the lyrics, and he smiled. He was standing over me, backlit by a crackling fire, naked from the waist up. His Levis hung low on his lean hips, and the shadows from the fire played off his soft blonde curls, the marble cut of his biceps, and the strength in his hands hanging loosely at his sides.

The chorus of the song scorched out of the speakers.

Fever.

Believe me, I felt the heat.

Johnny had removed my blindfold moments earlier. I’d been wearing it since he’d surprised me at the Battle Lake Public Library thirty minutes ago. Of course I’d protested—I’m not a woman whose boyfriend shows up at her work on a random February afternoon with a bouquet of tangerine-colored tulips, a blindfold, and a whispered promise that makes her blush in her most private parts. Heck, I’m not the gal who usually even *has* a boyfriend, and when I do, he’s more likely the type to regard dental floss and socks as “fancy-shmancy” (yes, Bad Brad, I’m talking about you) than to surprise me with an every-minute-planned evening.

Johnny was different.

Johnny was love and rockets and romance and sweetness. We'd officially been a couple since December, not even two months, but we'd casually dated before that. That's how I was gonna tell the story, anyhow. Another person might interpret my "casual dating" as more like "neurotic dating," with me constantly worrying what a great guy like Johnny was doing with someone like me, and subsequently doing everything I could to sabotage our budding relationship.

You see, I'm a little messed up.

I'm an only child, the daughter of an alcoholic who died driving drunk the summer before my junior year of high school. He'd killed someone else in the accident, and I became a pariah in my hometown of Paynesville, Minnesota. Come the end of my senior year, I was only too happy to skedaddle that wide spot on a map.

Ink not even dry on my high school diploma, I took off for the Cities. I did all right for a while. Earned my English degree from the University of Minnesota, waited tables at a Vietnamese restaurant on the West Bank, hit the bars but only on weekends. Once I graduated, however, I quickly discovered that an English bachelor's and \$4 will buy you a medium latte and license to critique the punctuation on the Caribou Coffee specials board, and not much else. (I can see why the English department left that out of their advertising materials.)

After taking a couple years off from college to find myself (i.e., pay off some loans and check out what life is like when you're *not* going to school), I enrolled in a Master's program in English and began hitting the clubs in earnest. Eventually, I found myself attending more bars than classes, dating Bad Brad, and wondering if this was what my alcoholic dad's life had looked like in his 20s. I didn't like the direction—or lack thereof—in which I was headed.

A year ago last March, I received a shittily-wrapped gift when I caught Brad cheating on me, and, a few hours later, was flashed by a homeless man while crossing the Washington Avenue bridge. Nothing like stumbling across two unexpected penises in one day to crowbar you out of a rut, you know what I mean?

When my friend Sunny called soon after the doubleheader and asked me to take care of her dog and cute little prefab house on the most gorgeous 100 acres in all of Minnesota, I didn't so much leap at the offer as trust-fall into it. The gig was only supposed to last March through August while Sunny explored Alaska with Dean, her unbrowed lover, but late last summer, the couple landed a year-round job on one of the fishing boats, and here I was, an unofficial Battle Lake resident for coming up on a year.

The Battle Lake Public Library head librarian had hired me as his assistant within a week of my moving to the tiny northwestern Minnesota town, and by April, I'd scored a supplemental job as a freelance reporter for the *Battle Lake Recall*. The newspaper editor, Ron Sims, had been so impressed with my work (read: no one else would do it) that I'd been assigned to write a recipe column which I'd named *Battle Lake Bites*.

Admittedly, the title had been intended passive aggressively. You see, it took me a bit to re-acclimate to living in a small town, a community so tight-knit that if your car slid into the ditch, somebody'd be there to pull you out within five minutes. Within ten minutes, the rest of the population would know you'd gone off the road, and it'd be twelve more minutes before they began speculating on whether or not you'd been drinking, if the interior of your car was messy, and if you'd ever find love or were biologically doomed to a life of tea-drinking and spirited cat-collecting.

I imagine I'd have fallen into the small town rhythm sooner—I'd been born and raised in a little burg, after all—if it weren't for the dead bodies popping up. As in regularly. One corpse a month, every month since May, matter of fact.

A guy I had a crush on here, a statue thief there, and pretty soon, it added up to me stumbling over nine murders in as many months. I didn't like to speculate on that record because when I did, I was inevitably brought to two conclusions: 1) I was jinxed with the mother of all cooties: dead-body magnetism, and 2) it had been twenty-three days since I'd skated over a frozen corpse on West Battle. I could almost hear the clock ticking down on February. When and where would I find the next murder victim?

Because of this propensity, I'd decided to become proactive back in October and began pursuing my private eye license. (When life hands you corpses, you make lemonade, is what I always say.) Still and all, I didn't like the countdown to the next dead body. The waiting game was making me jittery.

On good days, I told myself my run of bad luck *had* to be over and I was crazy for jumping at shadows. On bad days, I'd returned to sleeping under my bed, empty cans stacked on this side of my bedroom door so I'd wake up if anyone tried to sneak in. It made dating a healthy, open guy like Johnny...interesting. He'd borne it like a champ, but I found myself watching him closely, waiting for the day when he said, understandably, "Hey, I was thinking I might like to try dating a woman who doesn't trip over dead bodies like other people find pennies. Your thoughts?"

Many times, I'd caught myself trying to pull the trigger first. You know, dump him before he inevitably ran out on me. I'd fabricate a fight, or decide he hadn't called in two days because he was cheating on me and then, when he did call the third day, I wouldn't pick up.

Sigh. I was a lot of work. Johnny had been true-blue through all of it, though, and my walls were crumbling, brick by precious brick. It was terrifying to be slowly revealed and made vulnerable. Terrifying, but also exhilarating.

These were the thoughts I juggled on an average day.

But today was no run-of-the-mill day. Today, I'd been blindfolded and brought to Johnny's living room, where a fire crackled and I was alone with the cutest boy on earth. Besides, as Johnny eased closer to me, Peggy Lee melting the speakers with her velvety tones and my blindfold dangling from his jeans pocket, my thoughts were disintegrating. There simply wasn't enough blood in my northern hemisphere to maintain a facial expression, let alone a coherent thought.

When he stood only inches away, towering over me, his body heat melted into my flesh like a lovely wave. I reached for his abdomen, longing to touch one of my favorite spots: the point where his hipbones carved a line into his sculpted ab muscles. He grabbed my hand just short of his tempting skin, and in a masterful move, wrapped one end of the silk blindfold around my wrist.

I glanced up at him, caught off guard. I was still sitting which was a delicious angle. My head was level with his belly button, and everything from that point up was sleek, strong, and staring intently at me. The blue of his eyes was as dark as stormclouds.

I knew that look, and it gave me the most exquisite shivers.

I offered him the other wrist, but he shook his head, his lips quirking at the corner. I began to ask him what the plan was, but he stopped my words by leaning over, taking my face in his free hand and kissing me, deep and long.

Peggy Lee was right: this was indeed a lovely way to burn.

I reached for him again, but he still had my right hand wrapped in the silk blindfold. He pulled back from the kiss and tugged my Henley over my head. He had to string it along the blindfold until it was free. As he tossed my shirt behind the couch, my smile of anticipation melted to horror when I realized I was wearing my Plan B bra, i.e. the one so puckered and ratty that it served as back-up birth control. I'd never have worn it if I'd known this was where I'd end up tonight.

Curse words!

He noticed the direction of my glance and put his finger under my chin, forcing me to look into his eyes. I immediately forgot what I'd been worrying about. He was stunning, open, honest, and in love with me.

The soundtrack he must have burned for the evening switched over to Bill Withers' "Use Me." It was brighter than Peggy Lee, but no less seductive. Johnny reached over and behind me. A cork popped and flew dramatically across the room. Next came the golden glug of champagne being poured into a flute. When he handed me the glass, the firelight reflected off of the sparkling honeyed bubbles.

I was technically free to move around, as he had dropped the other end of the blindfold to remove my shirt, but I remained still, hypnotized. He put the glass to my lips and I drank, spilling only a little. He set down the flute and kissed the wet spot on my chin, and quick as a blink, maneuvered me so I was lying on my back on the couch. He grabbed both wrists, pulled them over my head, and used the blindfold to tie them to the table next to the sofa. This pure hotness took all of three seconds.

I tugged at the binding, not wanting to escape but curious if I could. The knots were pleasantly tight. I smiled. I'd never been tied up before, but it had always been a fantasy. I

figured it was a command to be lazy. Who doesn't like someone else doing all the work during sex? Bring on the Nut Goodie ice cream, and you'd have three of my favorite things. Johnny had also tucked a pillow under me when he'd leaned me back, which meant my head was higher than my waist and my A cups hadn't completely disappeared. Double good!

Johnny looked me over from tip to toe as I lay on the couch wearing only a bra and jeans, my hands tied over my head. He let his eyes travel up and down me like hot fingers, and it took every ounce of self-control for me not to beg him to kiss me. When he placed his hand on his flat, muscled stomach—a move he did unconsciously but that I loved—I almost squealed. He continued to study me as if deciding whether or not to remove my pants.

He hadn't spoken a single word since we'd entered his house.

For my part, it was all I could do not to make every stupid joke that crossed my mind, which is what I do when I'm excited and/or nervous. (Let me be a cautionary tale: turns out "pull my finger" jokes are *not* an aphrodisiac.)

Apparently deciding to leave my jeans on for the time being, he ambled over to the fireplace and removed a candle from the mantle. Watching him move made me squirm, in a good way. His broad shoulders served as a stunning counterpoint to his narrow waist, and I still had the smell of him on me from —clean and spicy, like cinnamon. He and held the candle above my stomach, his eyebrow raised. I responded by shrugging, at least as much as I could with my arms tied over my head.

He dropped a single dot of hot wax onto my stomach. It was an intense, momentary sting, followed by warmth. I closed my eyes and smiled. He leaned down and kissed the spot just above my belly button where the wax had hardened. He made three more dots, leading up from the original spot and toward my neck. He kissed each after they cooled.

My shady spots tingled with delight.

When he reached my neck, he set the candle on the table and began kissing me in earnest in the sweet spot where my throat met my collar bone. His hand was on my inner thigh, kneading. Chris Isaak took over for Bill Withers, telling me about a bad, bad thing. I was ready to commit a crime myself, if it meant Johnny would lay on me. I bucked my hips, but he pushed them down, moving his hot mouth to mine.

He was the best kisser I'd ever had, full, strong lips, never too wet, tongue just right, but tonight, he was outdoing himself. I moaned. He finally eased on top of me, his knee between my legs, his weight hovering just above my body. I thrust again, but he wouldn't put his weight on me.

He moved his mouth toward my ear, his tongue lacing the ridges, his breath hot. I shivered. I loved it when he talked dirty, and I could tell I was about to get an earful. His voice, when it came, was deep and growly with desire:

“I have to go to Portland.”

Hunh?

I relaxed into the couch and blinked once. Twice. With my bachelor's in English and a handful of Master's classes in same, I felt fairly confident with most of the Mother language, including innuendo. But this “going to Portland” euphemism was new on me. Oh well, I could roll with it. I got back into character.

“Portland would be happy to host you for as long as you can *come*,” I whispered back, grinding underneath him.

He tensed slightly.

Shoot. I must have read this one wrong.

I pitched my voice into what I hoped was a sympathetic tone, any hint of disappointment erased. “That’s okay, honey. Sometimes we all have to go to Portland.”

He pulled back completely, sitting on the side of the couch, his warm hand still on my hip. I could see laughter warring with something else on his face.

“No, Mira, I feel fine. I meant the city of Portland. In Oregon? I’ve been offered an environmental science internship at Portland State. I found out this morning, after I’d planned out this whole evening. I was going to wait to tell you until”—he made a gesture to indicate me, who, for the record, was beginning to feel pretty dang foolish with her arms tied over her head and her white bra glowing like the eyes of a nervous cave creature in the firelight—“after we made love, but I can’t go through with it. It seems dishonest. Sorry to spring it on you like this.”

Ah, that was more like my luck. As sucky as this was, at least I felt on familiar ground. When had things ever worked out for me? “For how long?”

He ran his hands through his hair. “Through the end of the semester. I’d be done in May.”

My stomach dropped, but I fought to keep my face neutral. “When do you leave?”

“Wednesday morning, if I accept.” He leaned over to untie me, and I sat next to him, rubbing my wrists. Our hips were barely touching.

“They gave you not even two days to decide?” Shoot, that sounded like whining.

“Someone else dropped out from the program, opening up a spot. It’s a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.”

I took a deep breath. “Why Portland?”

He kneaded one hand with the other. “It was one of the Master’s programs I applied to.” His voice grew quieter. “Before we started dating.”

My heart constricted. I knew Johnny had big life plans. He'd earned an undergraduate degree in horticulture, which was another thing I loved about him. It meant he was green, and cared about something bigger than himself. He'd planned to go straight on to grad school, but when his mom had developed cancer late last summer, he'd taken a year off to look after her, which I loved even more. It had felt so good and natural to build a life with him in Battle Lake that I'd kind of forgotten it was temporary.

“What if you like it, and they like you?”

He glanced back at me, cupping my cheek with his warm, strong hand. The storm was gone from his eyes, replaced by a blue so pure that I could almost see waves. “Then we have some talking to do.”