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-JB

Hooked: A Bad Boy Romance

By Natasha Tanner & JB Duvane

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Chapter 1

Zack

"Hold him up! Jesus Christ, you're not even going to fight back, you goddamned pussy? How the hell you ever got such a bad-ass rep is beyond me. Man up and fight, for fuck's sake!" the bastard in front of me said as he spat in my face.

Both of my arms were pulled back behind me, and before I could even blink a rain of punches came down on my stomach like a freight train. How these assholes justified beating the shit out of a dude that wasn't fighting back was amazing to me, but it was the same thing every fucking time.

Whenever a batch of new meat showed up I knew I was in for it. What was up with all these guys that claimed they were all MMA and shit now, anyway? It's like the goddamned sport exploded the second I was put away and now every other fucking jackass thought he was the next Anderson Silva or something.

I couldn't even count the times a busload of new inmates was brought in and one of them chin-checked me in the yard to see if I would take him on. But there was no way in hell I was going to let these losers keep me in this hell hole. I was supposed to be out in a fucking week and there was no way I was going to risk that by playing their stupid fucking games.

I didn't need to kick anyones ass in here to prove myself. I knew who I was. I was the fucking Hook once, before I got to this place, and nothing was going to stop me from getting the hell out of here. I wanted to believe that I could just pick up where I left off when I got out, but I wasn't so sure I was the same guy anymore. I didn't know if I still had fighting in me.

After the gut punches usually came the predictable series of right and left uppercuts, then a roundhouse kick or two to show off how bad-ass they were to all the other inmates who, by now, were standing around enjoying the show. It amazed me how tough these guys thought they were while they stood there and heckled a man who had his arms pinned.

I could just hear them: *Look at old Zack Turner ... some champion he turned out to be ... he's gone soft and won't even fight anymore ... what a loser.* I'd like to see some of these guys take five seconds of a beating like this. Assholes.

Then I would always get a couple of back hook kicks to the abdomen and usually an elbow or two to the fucking eye. God these guys were all so predictable. They must all train with YouTube videos or something.

This guy was slightly more original though. He had a few different kicks up his sleeve, but it was all for show, as usual. After the kicks and a few more hard jabs to

the face was when I would usually start to feel like I was underwater and after that everything would be a blur until I eventually came to in the infirmary.

"You're finally awake. How you feeling, Hook?"

"Don't fucking call me that. That's not my name. Not in here, anyway," I said, squinting at the man in blue scrubs standing next to my bed. "What are you, my nurse?"

"Yeah, sure. You could call me that," he said with a chuckle. So why don't you wanna be called Hook no more? You're the best, man. I went to all your fights back in the day. I saw that awesome Ramirez fight when you took him down in the second round ..."

"Hey, I don't want to talk about any of that. So what's the deal, is there anything wrong with me? Can I get out of here?"

"Yeah, sorry. I'm just an orderly so I can't discharge you or anything. And I'm pretty much all you've got for most of the day. An RN will be coming in for about an hour this afternoon. She'll give you a look over now that you're awake and let you know if you're good to go back to your cell. Although I don't know why you'd be so hot to go back there. What the hell did you do that pissed those guys off so much?" the guy asked as he pulled the plastic bag filled with paper towels out of a garbage can and threw it into a rolling can with a bunch of spray bottles hanging off the edge.

"I didn't do a goddamn thing. Fucking new meat. All he wanted was to fight the MMA champ, as usual. And then like all the others, when he found out I wouldn't fight he unloaded all his shit on me."

"Why the hell do you let them do that to you?"

It sure as hell wasn't easy keeping my hands still whenever an ambush would go down. I knew out in the real world it would take seconds for me to wipe out a whole group of these posers. I'd always heard that my right-left-hook combo — the one I was famous for — was so fast it felt like being hit on both sides of the head with a sledgehammer at the same time. And my fists were *always* itching to deliver in this place.

"Dude, I just want to get the hell out of here. I don't need any of their bullshit keeping me from making parole. I've got one more week left in this hellhole and I'm not gonna let those douchebags fuck it up for me."

"From what I hear you've never gotten into a fight once since you've been in here."

"I'm not interested in fighting these jokers. What the hell is it gonna prove?"

"Not even when they're about to kill you? Some of these guys aren't messing around."

"Honestly, I don't give a damn about that either."

Just then the door to the infirmary opened and the warden walked in. He held the door open and looked at the orderly, who took the hint and wheeled the rolling can out the door.

"Hey, Warden. What are you doing in here? Don't tell me you came to visit me."

"Well, it is my job to make sure my prisoners stay safe. Actually, I came to find out if you were still alive. I saw the video footage and it looked pretty harsh."

"Yeah, I'm fine. That guy was a joke. I hope that whole scene didn't fuck up my parole. It's not gonna be held against me, is it?"

"No, Hook, everything was on camera. You didn't even lift a finger. You know, there's never been a single prisoner in the history of this place that's been involved in as many incidents as you have in the one year you've been incarcerated. And you didn't participate in a single one, other than getting the shit kicked out of you. I seriously don't understand why you don't fight back, Hook. You could flatten pretty much anybody in the place with one punch."

"What the hell kinda question is that coming from you? You *want* me to beat the shit out of the other inmates?"

"No, but, man, I've seen what you can do. You were the best. It kills me to see these guys disrespect you the way they do."

"I don't give a shit about any of that. I just want to get the hell out of here. I was stupid and I let myself get talked into some bullshit job a year ago and then my entire fucking career went straight in the toilet. I honestly don't even know if I'm gonna get back into fighting when I get out. I don't know what I'm gonna do."

"But there's no way in hell I'm gonna let these meatheads fuck up my chances of getting out. They can stay in here and pound the shit out of each other for the rest of their lives if they want to. I've got better things to do."

"Well, don't worry about any of it. As far as I'm concerned you're out in a week. But you gotta do me a favor."

"What's that?"

"Don't give up on your fighting career. You're too good."

"Okay, okay," I said with a smile.

I had never imagined I'd be on friendly terms with the warden of a prison. Hell, I had never imagined I'd *be* in a prison for that matter. But here I was shaking hands with the guy who ran the place and held my future in his hands. And I was damn happy that he was on my side. When you find out you've got fans in a place like this you take all help you can get.

I watched as a beat-up midnight blue Camaro pulled up into the prison pickup area and my friend Dennis got out of the car. He opened his trunk and I walked over and threw my bag in, then gave him a hug.

"It's good to see you," I said as I gave him a hug and shut the trunk door. "And I'm seriously glad to see you've still got the old Camaro. I can't believe you've been able to keep this thing running, even after all the shit we put it through in high school."

"Yeah, it's really taken a beating. I put a new engine in about a year ago after you were ... anyway, it should last another twenty years if the axles don't rust through. So where are we going?"

"They set me up at this place on the east side near the docks," I said as I handed him a piece of paper with the address of the halfway house on it. From what I heard it's not as bad as some of them, but still I'm not too thrilled to be living in a place like that.

"Did they find you a job too?"

"I need to go in to talk to my PO about that. I might be able to find something on the docks. That way I wouldn't need a car. I sure as hell won't have money for something like that for a while. Have you talked to Lexi?" I asked as I got in the passenger seat and shut the car door.

"Aww, man, I knew that was coming. You don't want to get mixed up with her again."

"What do you mean?"

"Dude, she was the one that got you into that whole mess in the first place. What do you want to get back with her again for?" Dennis asked as he pulled out onto the highway.

It had never felt so good to see the cars and trees whizzing by and I closed my eyes for a second and let the feeling of complete freedom sink in. But then my mind snapped back to reality and I thought about Lexi again — and everything that had happened between us before I went away — my stomach tightened right back up into a knot again.

"I don't know, maybe I'm a masochist. And besides, I don't know if she really is to blame..."

"Dude, she freaking turned you in. You can't tell me that she's not to blame. I wouldn't be surprised at all if it was her that set you up in the first place. Maybe she was the one that called the cops."

"Hey, come on, that's not cool. There's no way she set me up."

"Are you sure about that, Zack? Do you know how long it was before she had her hands wrapped around another dude's ass?"

"How long?" I asked as I looked out the passenger-side window, but I didn't really want to hear the answer.

"She was making out in a booth at Frankie's Place the day after you got arrested."

"How come you never told me that? It's been a whole year."

"I don't know. I didn't want to kick you while you were down."

"So you let me think everything was good between me and her for the last year?"

"I figured you would have known she'd moved on. I mean you guys weren't married or anything. You had to have guessed she was seeing other guys while you were in there. I mean, did she even visit you?"

"Yeah, a little."

"How little?"

"A few times," I said as I looked at my hands.

"I don't want to bum you out on your first day out, but she's not an option anymore. You gotta move on."

"Yeah. Can you just take me to the damn hotel?"

"Sure. Look, I'm sorry if I'm being harsh, and I'm sorry I didn't tell you about Lexi. But you gotta know I only have your best interest in mind. You have to move on and get back to fighting. Forget about her for a while and do your thing. You're better off without her, you know that don't you?"

"Yeah, I know. Thanks, man."

"Hey, you wanna go get a drink after we get you set up at the hotel?"

"Yeah, that sounds good, but I gotta be in by ten."

"No prob."

We continued on down the highway into town and didn't talk much other than him telling me about some of the fighters he'd trained in the last year. I'd actually heard of a few of them inside the joint. Mostly from guys telling me about what I'd missed out on, that I didn't have a chance anymore with all these new guys, apparently really good fighters popping up like weeds everywhere.

But I was glad Dennis was yapping his head off about who he'd been training. I didn't feel like talking about my damn career or any of that crap. I was fucking pissed and bummed about Lexi. It felt like where women were concerned I couldn't win.

From my mom leaving my dad I when I was a kid to every single other fucking woman I'd ever been with. They were all manipulative bitches that were out for one thing — as much money as they could get out of you. I'd had it with all that bullshit. I was done with women.

Chapter 2

Mia

"Hey, Mia!"

I felt a hand on my arm and looked in the direction of the voice that had yelled my name over the din of the music and voices in the bar.

"We're gonna head home," my best friend Jenna said as she gave me puppy dog eyes and wrapped her hands around her boyfriend's bulging bicep.

"Oh, come on. It's Friday night, Jenna! I've been waiting for this all week!" I said as I glared at her and folded my arms. "No one else even showed up tonight. I thought we were all going to go dancing. I thought we were going to stay out all night. At least that's what I read in all the texts I got this week. What the hell happened? You guys can't leave; you're all I have left," I said as I grabbed her arm, practically whining into her ear.

But the thing was I was really frustrated. Each of my girlfriends had recently hooked up with a guy they really liked and I was, once again, left out in the cold. I didn't understand how it happened.

One minute I had weekly nights out and sleepovers and phone calls and then suddenly I had virtually nothing. It seemed like I went from partying with my girls to party for one on the couch in sixty seconds flat.

I had just moved back to my hometown after four years away at college and it seemed like too much work to get settled and start dating at the same time.

Plus, a big part of me wasn't too thrilled with the idea of getting back into another relationship after finding out that Bruce, my ex-boyfriend of two months to the day practically, had slept with just about every girl in my dorm. I wouldn't have even known about it if it hadn't been for some girl in the common room passing her phone around to show everyone the huge cock she'd been texted.

I took one look at it and knew instantly who it was but, when I confronted Bruce about it he lied, of course, until I asked to look at the text history on his phone. He couldn't come up with a good enough reason to not let me see it, so I left. Good riddance.

But it all seemed like too much trouble now, trying to find a good guy. One that wasn't going to make a career out of lying or cheating on me. That's one thing I could never figure out. Why lie? Why cheat? Why not just stay single and fuck as many girls you want? Why ruin someone else's life in the process? It was baffling to me.

And all I wanted to do that night was be out with my girls. A night where I could feel like I was part of something, that I was with people who loved me, but

instead they all bailed on me. I could feel Jenna slipping away from me right in front of my eyes as she stared at her guy.

It was written all over her face that all she wanted to do was get back to a quiet place with her boyfriend and have him wrap those huge arms around her while he banged the hell out of her. And I couldn't blame her. If I had a guy with me that I trusted and maybe even loved I would want him to bang the hell out of me tonight too.

"I promise, we'll do it next Friday night, okay?" she said with a squeal as she squirmed away from two hands that had apparently been exploring under her clothing.

"Sure, whatever. You guys go have fun," I said with a smile as I gave her arm a little push.

"Hey, we'll totally give you a ride home, Mia. I don't want you to have to get yourself home all by yourself."

"No, really, I'm fine. I don't really feel like going home yet. I'll just sit here for a little while longer, maybe have one more drink."

"Okay, but you have to promise that you'll take a cab. This isn't the best neighborhood, you know."

"I'll be fine, you guys. Don't worry. Go home and have fun," I said as I gave Jenna a hug and watched her walk off with her boyfriend's hand curling up under her ass and in between her legs.

I ordered another Absolut Vanilla with pineapple juice and stared at myself in the mirror behind the bar. I was only twenty-two but I was already starting to feel invisible to guys, even guys my own age. I decided to make some changes and had started getting in shape ever since my dad made me one of the managers at his gym. I felt like it was a little bit of a pity move on his part, hiring his daughter who had no real professional skills to warrant a management position in a gym. It wasn't my dream job by a long shot, but I really didn't know what I wanted to do with my life and it paid the bills.

I had gotten my certificate as a yoga instructor while I was in high school and my dad let me teach a few weekend classes at one of his gyms back then. But now I had to be trained in other areas so I could fill in for anyone who was out sick.

So I was in the process of getting a weightlifting certification and I had attended a few CrossFit classes, but I wasn't ready to go there yet. And I had decided that I was leaving MMA training up to the other manager entirely. I was nowhere near their league and there wasn't any way someone could fake their way through that stuff.

It was actually a pretty good job to have until I figured out what I really wanted to do with my life. I felt like I was pretty lucky in that respect, with a dad who was cool enough to let me train on the job. Plus I had an awesome place to live with

two roommates. Although they both had boyfriends I usually had someone around, even if the only way I knew was by the sound of a bed squeaking through the wall.

"Mia," a deep voice said into my ear. I looked up and to the left at the mirror behind the bar and saw a really cute guy standing next to me.

"It's Mia, right?" he said again.

I turned and looked at him and furrowed my brow a little.

"Yeah, it's Mia. Do I know you? You look kind of familiar," I said as I looked into his big brown eyes.

"It's Randy, from the gym? Remember, you told me I looked like James Franco's distant cousin when I signed up a couple weeks ago? I know, you probably get a lot of James Franco lookalikes through there every day, so I don't blame you if you don't remember me," he said with a very James Franco smile.

"No, of course! I remember you now, Randy. You're the one that has hogged the elliptical almost every afternoon this week," I said with a laugh as I touched his arm. I didn't usually get that friendly with a guy I had just met at a bar, but I did remember him and I'd had a few drinks so my inhibitions had kind of gone out the window.

"That's me! And this is my friend Craig," he said as he pivoted to the side and an equally cute guy stepped forward and held out his hand to me.

"Craig, this is Mia. Mia, this is Craig."

"It's nice to meet you Craig. Are you a member of the gym too?"

"Nah, I'm no meathead like Randy. What I've got here is all natural," he said as he beat his chest with his fist in mock manliness. He was cute *and* kinda funny — they both were, actually.

"Hey, man! This is totally natural. Just because I lift weights to get this way doesn't mean it's not really me."

"Okay, cool down, Captain America," Randy's friend said with a smile.

I was starting to think that the night was actually going to turn out okay after all. They sat down on either side of me at the bar and we all had a few more drinks. Then they said they wanted to go dancing. Actually, it was me that said that I wanted to go dancing and they both agreed to take me anywhere I wanted to go. So they bought me one more shot and we all headed out.

"My car is down here," Randy said as he turned down an alley about a block away from the bar.

"Down there? Can you even drive a car down that narrow alley?" I said as I tripped and almost fell onto the uneven sidewalk. At least that was my reasoning. I didn't think that I could possibly be drunk enough to trip on nothing in the middle

of a perfectly smooth sidewalk. Craig was on my left side and caught me before I fell and I giggled as I touched his chest.

"This sidewalk is sideways," I said as I laughed at my own joke. I looked at Craig's arms and chest and then looked back up at his face. "You really do seem like you work out," I said as I slapped both of his shoulders with the palms of my hands. They were like two boulders. "You know, if you do decide that you want a membership at the gym I can get you a friend discount through Randy's account," I said as I leaned up against his rock-hard chest.

"Nah, I'm good," he said as he steered me to the right and down the alley toward Randy, who was walking backward ahead of us.

"I know what you mean. I'm not always in the mood to work out, myself. But I'm in a lot better shape than I was a few months ago, and I'm pretty psyched about that," I said as I felt Craig gripping me around the waist. That last shot I took was really starting to hit me and I was having a hard time keeping my train of thought and walking in a straight line. "I think I need to sit down. Where are you guys parked, in Siberia or something?"

"It's just a little farther," Craig said as his hand moved up underneath my arm and over one of my breasts. I was kind of shocked. I mean, I knew I was kind of flirting with both of these guys but I wasn't really expecting anything to happen, not tonight anyway. I kind of thought that Randy was into me and I was suddenly worried that he would be pissed if he saw me with his friend's hand on my boob.

"Hey, Craig, I hope I didn't give you the wrong idea," I said as I moved his hand off my breast and started to walk away from him a little, but he immediately pulled me up against his body again.

"I don't think I have the wrong idea at all," he said as he put his hand right back on my breast.

Even though my head was swimming and my thought process was going pretty slow I was starting to get a little freaked out. I had never had a guy put his hands on me after I told him not to before and I didn't really know what to do.

I had heard women say that they suddenly felt paralyzed when they realized that they were in a dangerous situation with a guy they thought they trusted. That something like a switch went off inside them and they felt powerless to do or say anything to stop what was about to happen.

I could see a light at the end of the alley, so I knew if I had to escape there would be a way out, but I wasn't sure how fast I could run in these heels with my head swimming like it was.

Calm down, Mia. This is crazy. Why would I have to run from this guy? And where the hell did Randy go? I thought as I looked around the dark alley ahead of us.

"Where's Randy?" I said as I stopped walking and tried to pull away from Craig again.

"I'm right here," I heard a voice say from behind me.

"What's going on you guys? Where's your car?"

"Don't worry about the car," Randy said in my ear as he wrapped his arms around me from behind. "We'll be fine without it."

"What do you mean? What are you doing?" I said as I twisted around, trying to wiggle my way out of Randy's arms. But Craig moved around in front of me and I was trapped in between the two of them. They were both a good head taller than me and I felt like I was sandwiched between two walls. I started to shake as I pushed at Craig's chest, but he didn't move an inch.

"You guys, come on. I'm not into this. I want to go home now," I said, my voice shaking. Everything suddenly became sharp and clear to me as I quickly sobered up and I realized that there was no one else around. We were in the middle of the alley, at least two hundred feet in both directions from either of the cross streets and that seemed like miles to me now.

"Come on, you were all over both of us in the bar. Don't act like you don't want this," Craig said.

He pulled my skirt up in front, then grabbed my ass and pressed himself against me.

"It wasn't! I wasn't all over either one of you! Please, let me go! I want to go home now!" I screamed. But as I started to raise my voice I felt a hand clamp down over my mouth. I couldn't believe this was happening. I couldn't believe a guy from my gym, someone I kind of knew, was about to rape me in an alley.

I tried to kick out at anything as I felt myself being pulled backward into the darkness, but with my heels on I couldn't get any leverage. The two of them picked me up and set me down on a concrete loading dock in between two dumpsters where no streetlights or moonlight fell.

Then I was pulled down so that I was lying on my back with my arms over my head, and two knees with the weight of a grown man on them ground into my hands while my mouth stayed covered. I tried to scream but nothing but a muffled whine came out of me. Between the lack of air and the panic I was experiencing I felt like I was about to lose consciousness.

Chapter 3

Zack

"Hey, Zack, I gotta get going. My wife is gonna be wondering what I'm up to," Dennis said as he downed the last of his beer. "But we should get together again next week, maybe come over and have dinner?"

"Yeah, that sounds good. All right, I'll talk to you later," I said.

I set down my empty glass and pushed myself away from the bar.

"You want to ride back to your place?"

"Nah, I'll walk. I've got another hour before I have to be back and that place depresses the hell out of me. I plan on spending as little time there as possible."

"Yeah, I don't blame you. All right, I'll talk to you later, Zack," he said as he slapped me on the back. "And try to keep your mind off Lexi. You didn't do anything wrong. She's the one that has major problems."

"Sure. See ya."

I watched Dennis turn and walk out the door. I wished I could keep my mind off of her, but everywhere I went in this town reminded me of her. We had grown up together, gone to the same grade school and middle school, and finally started dating in high school.

She knew everything about me — that my mom had cheated on my dad and left us when I was six. That my dad wasn't a whole lot of fun to be around after my mom left. And that I had been in love with her ever since the summer in between fourth and fifth grade because she would always let me come over and swim in her pool after school instead of going home to my drunk dad.

My freshman year of high school she would kid me about following her around like a puppy and I didn't care because ... well, because I didn't know what else to do. I was a fucking teenage boy and I could barely control what was going on with my body. And she was like some kind of homing device; no matter what time of day it was I was either trying to find her or I was standing there staring at her. It was pathetic.

So finally she gave in and we hooked up. We were together for the senior year of high school and then lived in a shitty apartment together for three years after that, until we didn't live together anymore because I was living in a fucking concrete cell.

I decided to hit up one more dive on the way home. There was one I had been to before that was just a few blocks away. Actually, it was one that Lexi and I used to hang out at a long time ago. It was the kind of place that never carded anyone and we would go there whenever we had some extra money before we turned twenty-

one. And for some reason I had convinced myself that it was a good idea to go looking for her there.

I made my way down the empty streets of the mostly industrial neighborhood, trying to remember what street the bar was on. There was a corner store or some kind of business on just about every block but other than that there wasn't a whole lot going on and pretty much everything was closed.

I walked through triangles of faint light and black shadow as the moonlight filtered through the sharp edges of the buildings with the only sound coming from my own footsteps and the occasional car off in the distance. It was so dark that I couldn't see much at all, but I could make out enough to avoid tripping over bags of garbage and empty boxes.

I stopped walking for a second when I heard a muffled sound coming from a loading dock to my left. I took a couple steps closer to where the sound came from, and as my eyes adjusted to the dark I realized what I was looking at. Two big guys had a girl bent in half on her back, and it didn't sound like she was enjoying it very much.

I grabbed the one who was standing in front of the dock and turned him around to give him a right hook to the side of the head like I hadn't doled out in over a year. That punch had been building up inside me for so long that I yelled as I nailed him. It felt like some kind of massive flood of adrenaline uncorked inside me the second my fist made contact with his head.

The guy was pretty built and he didn't go down with one swing like I thought he would, so I hit him with another right, and then gave him my immediate left hook. The next thing I knew he was flat on the ground behind the dumpster.

The other dude jumped down off the loading dock and started to run but I grabbed him by the shoulders and slammed him into another dumpster. As he turned around I gave him an elbow to the face. It didn't take much to get that guy to the ground and it didn't look like he'd be getting up anytime soon either.

As I stared down at the guy in front of me, part of me I wished that I had taken the opportunity to pummel the shit out of him instead of knocking him out so fast.

All the fighting impulses that I'd pushed down inside me for the last year were coming up to the surface and suddenly I wanted to punch something to a goddamned pulp. But I snapped out of my street-fighting daydream when from the corner of my eye I saw the girl jump down off the loading dock.

"Are you okay?" I asked the figure in the dark that appeared to be pulling her skirt down. She looked like she was trying to button up her shirt but she gave up and held it closed with her hand.

"They tore them right off!" she said in between sobs.

"What?" I asked. I couldn't see her very well and I wanted to make sure she was okay, but I didn't want to touch her and scare her any more than she already was.

"The buttons on my shirt. They tore them all off. I can't button my shirt back up."

She was crying and trying to cover herself up and I wanted to help her get out of that alley, but I didn't know how to get her to start walking without putting my hand on her arm.

"Are you hurt? Do you want me to take you to the hospital?"

"No ... no, I'm okay, I think. He didn't ... he was just about to, but ..." she said, her voice shaking and fading to a whisper.

"Do you want me to help you get home?" I asked.

She looked up at me, and even in the darkness I could see the terror in her eyes.

"I'm not going to hurt you. I pulled those assholes off of you. I can help you get home or wherever you want to go."

"Th-thank you. I would really appreciate that. I don't know where my purse is."

She looked down at her body like it should have been there, then she scanned the ground around her. When she found it right next to the loading dock where she was standing, she picked it up then looked back at me like she didn't know what to do next.

"I'm so sorry, I just ... I don't know what I'm doing. I feel really confused right now. I don't know how I let that happen," she said as she started sobbing again.

She walked up to me and put her head against my chest like a scared little girl. I was still worried about scaring her, but she seemed okay with me being this close to her so I put my arm around her and rubbed her back.

"It's okay. It's not your fault," I said quietly. "You didn't let anything happen."

I had never been in a situation like this and I was startled by how quickly she seemed to trust me. How she suddenly seemed so comfortable with me. I was glad though. I wanted her to know that I wouldn't do anything to her like those two pigs had done. I would never touch a woman like that. I hated guys who took advantage of their strength to get what they thought they deserved from women. It was the lowest form of lowlife in my book.

"Where do you live?"

"Not too far from here. About ten minutes by cab."

"Okay, I'll call a cab and take you home," I said as I walked her toward the bar. "I don't have a phone, so lets go back to the bar and have them call us one."

"No, I don't want to go back into the bar looking like this," she said as she stopped walking and looked up at me. She looked so scared and sad and I wanted to put my arms around her and take all her pain away. There was something about her that made me want to take care of her and protect her.

"It's okay. I'll be with you, or I can go in by myself if that would be easier," I said as I tried to figure out what she wanted. I didn't quite understand why she didn't want to go back into the bar, but I didn't want to press her.

"No, I don't want to stay out here all alone," she said as she covered her face with her hands. "Oh God, I'm so embarrassed. I shouldn't have trusted them. I don't know what I was thinking. But they seemed like totally nice guys."

"Did you meet them at the bar?"

"Yes. Well, no. One of them I knew from where I work, and he seemed like a really nice guy. They both did. I don't understand. Maybe I don't have very good judgment."

"It wasn't bad judgment. They probably would have said anything to get you to think they were a couple of good guys. Those kind of creeps make me sick," I said as we walked out into the street light.

"I'll just look up a cab company," she said as she looked down at her phone.

"No, wait. I should call the police," she said in between sniffles as she looked up at me with wide eyes. "I can't believe I didn't think of that. I need to make sure those guys get arrested!"

"Okay, well, if you're going to call the police I really should get going. Look, why don't you go inside the bar and sit down in there and wait for the police to show up? It's dark, and really, no one will even notice how you look. And if they do they won't care."

"Okay," she said with that lost look again. I didn't want to leave her there, but I really didn't want to stick around if the police were going to be showing up. I hadn't even been out for twenty-four hours yet.

"But they'll want to talk to you. You can't wait with me until they get here?"

"I really ... I don't think it's a good idea. Look, I'm really glad you're okay. Just go into the bar. You'll be safe in there until the cops get here."

"But wait. How am I going to convince them of what happened if you don't tell them what you saw ... and what you did? Some people don't believe women when they say they were raped. Especially if they've been drinking. What if the police don't believe me?"

"Look, I ... I *just* got out of prison today, okay? I'm on parole. I can't get involved in anything like this right now. I'm really sorry, I can't."

I felt like a total asshole, but I needed to look out for myself. I didn't want to get involved in any police bullshit on my first day out. And there was no way I wanted to tell them what I did back there in the alley.

I mean, I didn't do anything illegal exactly, other than a possible assault charge. But if it came down to it, who would the cops believe? The guy who got out of prison a few hours ago was probably not going to be the one. There was no way in hell I was going to stick around and talk to any police.

I really wished I hadn't had to tell her though. She was the first person I'd met after I got out and within the first five minutes the only thing she knew about me was I'd been in prison. Awesome.

"Well, okay then, if I don't call the police will you stay with me?"

"Why would you not want to call the police?"

"I don't know. I don't want to be alone right now and you're the only one here that I feel like I can trust," she said as she burst into tears again. "I'm so embarrassed about what happened and I don't want to go back into that bar and have them see what happened to me after I left with those guys. And then have to sit there and wait all by myself for some cops to show up. Everyone will see them and ask what happened, and I don't want to go through all that."

"Okay, okay, just calm down," I said as I put my hands on her shoulders. She grabbed my shirt with her hands and balled them up into fists. I was surprised by how small they looked. Everything about her seemed so small to me, and I wished I could carry her away and make her feel better. I really hated those guys for what they did. Part of me wanted to walk back down that alley and keep beating the shit out of them until they stayed down for good.

I let her cry against my chest for a little while longer, but I swear everyone that walked by was looking at me like I was some kind of asshole that was breaking up with her.

"Look, call a cab and I'll get you out of here. Okay? You can call the cops from your home if you want."

Chapter 4

Mia

"So how did you know those guys?"

"I didn't really know them. One of them started up a membership at my dad's club a few weeks ago and he was the one that approached me. The other one was his friend," I said as we headed up fifth avenue in the cab.

"What kind of club?"

"A fitness club. My dad owns Zinzer's Gymnasium and Fitness Club over in the International District and I've been one of the managers there since I moved back from school a couple months ago."

"Oh. Do you live with your parents? Is anyone going to be home when you get there?"

"No, I have an apartment on State Street. I have two roommates, but I don't know if either one is home."

"Well, I'll make sure you get inside okay, but after that I've really gotta get going. I have to be back to my place by ten."

"Okay," I said as I looked over at him. I wondered what he had done to get sent to prison, but I didn't want to pry.

"Breaking and entering."

"What?"

"That's what I went to prison for. One year. I just didn't want you thinking I killed anyone."

"Oh. I wasn't wondering about it or anything," I said as I looked out the window.

"Okay."

"What was it like?" I asked after a long pause.

I couldn't really imagine him being in prison, or at least in the prisons I'd seen on TV. I didn't have any other frame of reference for what prison guys looked like. He was definitely big and looked pretty tough, but he also had a really kind face and when he smiled, even a little bit, his eyes lit up in a way that made me want to trust him.

"What was what like?"

"Never mind, it's none of my business."

He sat there without saying anything for about a minute, but then I heard him say softly, "Believe me, it's no place you'd ever want to go. Even to visit."

"Yeah, I can imagine," I said as I looked down at his huge hand that was sitting in between us on the seat of the cab. I could see swirls peeking out from underneath his jacket sleeve and I wondered how much of his body was tattooed.

"You can drop me off at the corner up here," I said to the cab driver as I pulled out my wallet.

"Let me get this."

He gave the cab driver a twenty then took the change and got out of the cab.

"Thank you, but you didn't have to do that," I said as I stood in front of him on the sidewalk and looked up into his eyes. He seemed bigger and taller to me suddenly, but that didn't scare me at all. I was so grateful to have him with me, and it was slowly sinking in how lucky I was that he had come along down that dark alley when he did.

I felt like I couldn't have been any safer even if I had called the cops and was surrounded by ten of them right now. In fact, I knew that I wouldn't have felt any better at all. I would be reliving the whole thing again right now, probably having to tell the story over and over, and I'd be there all by myself. Or at least that's the way it would feel.

"No problem. So, is this where you live?" he asked as he gestured to the building behind him.

"Yeah, let me get my keys," I said, rifling through my purse then walking up to the building entrance.

"Thank you so much for helping me ... Wait, what's your name? I don't even know your name," I said with a sheepish smile.

"Zack," he said as he held out his hand.

"I'm Mia. Thank you so much, Zack."

"No problem. I'm really glad you're okay," he said with an incredibly sweet smile. The more I calmed down and looked at him the more surprised I was by the juxtaposition of his rugged exterior and that incredibly bright smile that would suddenly pop onto his face.

"Who's this?" my roommate, Carly, asked as she walked into the living room.

"Oh, Carly, this is Zack."

"Hey Zack, nice to meet you. It's nice to finally see Mia bringing a guy back here."

I knew she was joking around, but I got the feeling that the comment made Zack uncomfortable.

"It's nice to meet you, Carly, and Mia, I'm glad I could help. I have to get going though. Goodbye," Zack said as he opened the front door and left.

"Wow, that guy was hot!"

Carly flopped down on the couch and picked up the remote. "What did he help you with?"

I sat down on the couch next to Carly and looked at her. I didn't even know how to begin to talk about what happened, and I felt so alone now that Zack was gone. I didn't understand what I was feeling, and why I wanted him to stay with me. But it was true; I just wished that he would come back. I wished that he was the one sitting on the couch with me instead of my roommate.

"Some guys attacked me," I said.

"What? What do you mean? What happened?"

Carly put the remote back down without turning on the TV and turned to face me on the couch.

"After Jenna and her boyfriend left the bar some guys started talking to me. One of them I totally recognized from my dad's gym."

"So what, he came up to you?"

"Yeah, and I remembered him, so I guess I let my guard down and drank way too much. I mean, it didn't even cross my mind that I would go home with one of them, let alone that either of them would ... Anyway, they were buying me drinks and then when I said I had planned on going dancing with my girlfriends tonight they both said that sounded fun and that they would take me wherever I wanted to go. So we left the bar and went out to find their car and they told me they were parked down this dark alley."

"Oh, Mia, no."

"Yeah, it seemed weird to me at first but they had bought me a shot right before we left and it really started to hit me. Plus, I wasn't even thinking that they would ... nothing that happened was even within the realm of possibility to me. I wasn't even thinking that I should be careful, because why would I? God, I was so stupid."

"No, Mia, you weren't stupid. Most guys wouldn't do that. God, that's so horrible. I'm so sorry," she said as she put her arm around me. "You don't have to tell me anything else if it's too hard for you."

"No, I'm okay. It was horrible, Carly," I said as I started to cry. "They held me down on this platform and I couldn't get away. I told them to stop and to take me home, but one of them covered my mouth and kneeled down on my hands," I said as I looked at the backs of my hands. I just noticed they were raw and had bits of rock embedded in them.

"Oh my God, Mia," she said as she looked at my hands. "Jesus! That looks horrible! Let me go get something to put on them. Wait, didn't you call the police or go to the hospital?"

"No."

"Why?"

"Well, I thought about it, but ..."

"But what? Were you scared?"

"No. Before anything else happened Zack showed up. I mean, I didn't see him. I felt both guys being pulled off me, and when I finally sat up they were both lying on the ground and Zack was standing there."

"Holy shit! But why didn't you call the cops afterward? He could have told them what happened."

"He didn't want me to."

"What the fuck? Why the hell would he not want you to call the police?"

"Well, he said that if I was going to call them that he would leave. He said he thought I should call them but he didn't want to be there when they got there."

"Wow, that's weird. Why didn't he want to be there?"

I really wasn't looking forward to telling this part of the story. In my mind Zack was a total hero; he had saved me from something so horrible and unfathomable that deep inside me I knew he was a good guy. I could feel it.

But I knew that as soon as anyone else heard he had just gotten out of prison they wouldn't see him that way at all. I knew it shouldn't matter, but it upset me to think there was probably no way I could paint a good enough picture of him so that the prison part wasn't what stuck out.

"He said he'd just gotten out of prison and he didn't want to get mixed up with anything involving the police while he was on parole."

"What?! Holy shit, Mia, what freaking bar were you at?"

"It was a hole in the wall downtown."

"Where downtown?"

"Near Old Town, not too far from the docks."

"Well, no wonder! That's all abandoned buildings and dive bars down there. So, Jesus, Mia, this guy was in prison? What for? Did you ask him?"

"Yeah, he said breaking and entering."

"Oh, I guess that's not so bad. At least it wasn't something involving death or dismemberment. Did he say how long he was in there?"

"A year."

"Wow. He really didn't seem like the type. Are you going to call the police now? You said you even knew who one of the guys was."

"I don't know, Carly. I mean, I was drunk and I was flirting with them both."

"That doesn't matter! Holy shit, Mia, if you told them to stop they should have stopped. They shouldn't have taken you down a dark alley where no one could see what they were doing!"

"I know. I ... I don't feel like I can do it now. I just wanted to get home after it happened and now that I'm home I don't want to think about it anymore. I know that probably sounds lame to you, but I don't think I can go through it all again. It's one thing with you but, God, I don't want to have to tell some total strangers what I

did tonight and feel like I have to defend myself. I don't think I can do it," I said as I started to cry again.

"Okay, you don't have to," she said as she hugged me close to her.

We sat there on the couch for a while until I stopped crying. I really didn't want to be alone, and I asked her if she would stay out on the couch with me for a while.

"Of course I'll stay out here with you. Why don't you get in your pajamas and we'll put on a movie."

"Is James here?"

"Yeah, but he passed out in my bed for the night already. He's been studying really hard this week and I think it finally got to him. Do you think you're going to talk to that guy again?"

"Zack? I doubt it. I don't even have his number or anything."

"Well, aside from the prison part, he seemed nice. And he's hot, Mia. That shaggy brown hair and those dark eyes. *I'd* like to see him again."

"Carly!"

"Sorry, I calls 'em as I sees 'em."

"I do wish I could see him again. I'd like to thank him properly. I really can't believe how lucky I was having him walk down that dark alley right then."

"Yeah, you definitely had a guardian angel watching over you tonight."

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