

Chapter One

Brody Tanner eyed the legal documents spread over his desk. His client's abusive husband had rejected every reasonable settlement offer and refused to accept mediation. He insisted on taking everything in the divorce. Something Brody would fight against. In the meantime, his client was safe and the scumbag wouldn't find her.

A small knock interrupted his thoughts.

"Come in." Brody looked up. *Shit. Shit. Shit.*

Sarah, his ex-fiancée, strolled into his office.

Sarah was sweet. Sarah was perfection. Sarah was his life.

But now, Sarah despised him.

The closer the blue-eyed blonde got, the more the scent of jasmine intruded on his personal space. The same intoxicating perfume he'd bought her in college. Despite the August heat, she looked cool and confident in jeans, blouse, and sandals. Bright red polish on her toes drew Brody's gaze.

He should never have listened to her father and lied to her all those years ago. He shoved aside his memories and desires to watch her put a small brown package on his desk.

"Is that mine?"

"It's addressed to you." Her sweet, sweet voice dredged up unwanted thoughts of dark sexy nights. *Don't go there.*

He glanced at the shoebox-sized parcel. "I'm not expecting anything."

Sarah rested her hip against the desk and gave him an exaggerated pout. “Poor baby. No one loves you?”

Sarah didn’t love him. Not anymore.

Her words and attitude irritated him. She knew exactly which buttons to push and how far.

“Don’t you have work to do?”

She tilted her head and gave a thoughtful look, ignoring his hint. “Hmmm. Now that I think about it, there are lots of interesting items that come in no return-address boxes. Aren’t you a member of the blow-up-doll of the month club?”

A punch to the gut. *Excuse me?*

Sarah stood and leaned over the desk, her shirt gaping to give him an amazing view. “I know you’ve been lonely these past eight years without me, but Brody...grow up and get a life.” She straightened, and with a bounce to her ponytail, she headed for the door.

Daily ego attack. Check.

“Enjoy. I hear those blow-up-dolls can provide hours of fun.”

Just fucking great. When he was with Sarah, why couldn’t he ever think of a decent comeback?

His gaze landed on the package. He picked it up and turned it end over end. Sarah was right. No return address. He pulled out his pocketknife and sliced through the tape.

Inside lay a plain white jewelry box surrounded by packing peanuts.

Weird.

He picked up the box. Opened it.

A finger.

What the fuck?

His heart slammed into his chest. He flicked the box away, but it landed on top of his desk. The finger bounced out and rolled across the divorce papers.

Small. Dainty. Withered.

Pale pink polish on the fingernail.

Fake. It has to be fake.

His heart tumbled. A lump settled in his throat. He leaned closer.

The smell. Rotten flesh.

What. The. Fuck?

It was real.

The lump surged out of his throat. Brody gagged. Once. Twice.

His brain played tug-of-war, trying to convince himself it wasn't real.

The severed end of the finger curled in ever so slightly. Dried blood, brown and crusted, dotted the inside of the case.

Dear Lord. It was real.

Adrenaline surged. Bolting to his feet, he shoved his chair back only to stumble and knock into the bookcase behind him, dislodging several books and manuals. A thick law book smacked onto the floor. His body jerked. His heart leaped.

The gruesome sight sent chills up his spine. His stomach heaved. Bile filled his throat. He gagged and coughed, trying to keep his breakfast down. He took long, shallow breaths to ease his terror, but it didn't work.

He had to notify the sheriff. McKinley would come. Except that would alert Sarah. Brody refused to let her know about the finger. She would ask questions. She would get involved. No, he had to get the evidence to the sheriff without adding fingerprints or causing any damage.

Glancing around his office, he spotted a half-full box of computer paper. He dumped the reams on the floor. With a full-body shudder of disgust and trembling hands, he used a pencil to push the finger back into the white case which he promptly dropped into the shoe box, then into the larger carton. With a final burst of determination, he slapped on the lid. He stepped back and wiped his forehead with his shirt sleeve.

Using a meditation technique, he closed his eyes, took several deep breaths, and concentrated on slowing his run-away heart. Nope. Not happening. Hands still trembling, he lifted the box and stepped into the shared lobby area. Sarah stood by the coffee machine pouring creamer into a fresh cup. She ignored him. Typical.

With a deceptive casualness, Brody moseyed out of the building. The instant he was out of Sarah's sight, he turned and rushed down the street to the sheriff's office, cringing as the small package bounced around inside the larger box.

Sarah Collins narrowed her eyes when Brody disappeared through the front door. Curiosity won over her usual fake indifference. What had been inside the small package? She had teased him about sex toys but deep down she knew he wouldn't be so callous to have them shipped to their office.

Something had upset him and sent him hurrying down the street. What had started as another day of him avoiding her and treating her like a casual acquaintance was beginning to look interesting.

Stirring the creamer into her coffee, she made her way into his office. She wandered toward his desk, looking for anything out of the ordinary. Several reams of paper sprawled on the floor next to a heavy legal tome. She frowned. Brody cherished his books. It was unlike him to leave one of his precious treasures lying on the floor.

When Sarah had moved back to the small Montana town to be close to her dying father, her options for work and housing became extremely limited. Brody's father offered her a job doing accounting and managing the business side of the Tanner family ranch. The work was a godsend but she ended up having to share office space with Brody.

She didn't enjoy the work arrangement but it couldn't be helped. Most days, one or the other succeeded in being out of the office for a good portion of the day. But when they were both there, sparks flew. His scent permeated the room. She moaned. Why did he have to smell so good? God help her, she still loved him.

Eight years ago, he dumped her. Two years ago, Sarah decided she needed to be near her sick father and the wide-open range and towering mountains. Returning home here to Bear Valley had been one of the hardest things she had ever done. Not telling Brody of her feelings was another.

Her soul might belong to Montana but her heart belonged to Brody.

"Brody Tanner." The sheriff's voice boomed through the small law enforcement building. "What brings you to my office?" Brody shook the outstretched hand. Joe McKinley was his father's best and oldest friend. He could rely on the sheriff for discretion.

"I need to show you something. Do you have time?"

“I hope it’s some of Maria’s cookies or pies.” Joe patted his belly and grinned. “She makes the most amazing double chocolate chip cookies.”

Brody winced. What he had to tell Joe might end up ruining the older man’s appetite. “Sorry. Not this time.” He motioned down the hallway. “Can we talk privately?”

Concern clouded Joe’s expression. “Of course.”

Once ensconced in the sheriff’s office and the door closed, Brody set the box on top of the oversized desk and removed the lid.

“I received a package in the mail today.”

Curious, Joe stepped closer and bent to stare at the items inside. Not missing a beat, he opened a side drawer and removed blue medical gloves to protect the evidence. A moment later, he lifted the finger out, rotating it back and forth for inspection.

Brody gagged and turned away. He gave Joe credit.

The older man didn’t blink or cringe. He was stone cold professional. “Do you have any idea who this belongs to?”

“No. I’m hoping you can do your sheriff-ing magic and figure it out.”

Joe grunted and cocked an eyebrow. “Looks like someone is trying to send you a message.”

Brody scrubbed his hands over his face. It was the same conclusion he’d reached and yet he had no idea what that message was or why someone had sent it.

Setting the finger back inside the box, Joe faced Brody. “You know I trust you and I have your back. I’ve known you since you were born. I’ve known your father since we were in kindergarten. But I have to ask if you’ve been messing with someone’s wife or girlfriend and they got pissed?”

“Seriously?” Realizing the sheriff was not joking, Brody grumbled, “Thanks for the vote of confidence, but no. I swear. I’m not seeing anyone.”

Sheriff McKinley focused on him. The seconds ticked by. Brody had an urge to shift and squirm under the older man’s scrutiny. How many times had he and his brothers been under the same penetrating stare as teenagers? The seven brothers had caused their fair share of mischief through the county. Now, he was the one who met the sheriff’s direct inspection.

McKinley finally spoke, “You’re hiding something. I can tell when one of you boys are lying. Talk.”

Not disclosing everything wasn’t lying. “Being an attorney is no picnic, but I can’t think of anyone with a grudge. Can you help me or do I need to take this to Billings?”

His friend’s furrowed brow concerned Brody. “I’ll take care of everything,” McKinley said. “I might be able to get a print from the finger. It’ll be tough. The question is whether she’s in the system or not.”

“Thanks, Joe.” Brody halted at the door. Not telling everything didn’t settle well with his conscious. “Also, you should know... I help out at a women’s shelter in Billings. The Safe House. You’ve heard of it?”

“Yes. Good place. I’ve sent a couple of women there for protection and a new start. You think this woman is from there?”

“Possibly. I haven’t heard of anyone hurt or missing. Could be someone who has moved on.”

“Good point. I’ll check with them.”

“Do me a favor. My family doesn’t know about The Safe House.”

“Why not? It’s a worthy cause.”

Brody shrugged. “I like to keep my involvement private. And the finger. Don’t mention it. I don’t want them to worry.”

“You’re making a mistake, keeping this to yourself.”

“There’s just a lot going on right now. Mom and Dad are still on their second honeymoon. Plus, Aiden and Beth are getting married next week.”

Joe’s face lit up. “I didn’t realize they’d set a date.”

“They decided on Vegas. It’ll be a fast trip.”

“They aren’t waiting for your parents to get home?”

“No. Aiden has a plan. He’s convinced Beth that sooner is better.” He avoided more details. The deal his brother made with Beth was no one else’s business.

“Give my best to your brother. It’s about time one of you got married.”

“Better him than me.” Brody strode out of the sheriff’s office.

Unless Sarah forgave him, he’d remain a bachelor for life.