

CHAPTER ONE

Shane tossed his bag into the back of the extended cab and shut the door. All that was left to do was double check the straps holding his bike in place and he'd be gone.

Gone couldn't come soon enough.

At three in the morning, the paparazzi had mostly left. A few dogged ones were still hanging around down the street. But by now, most of them had realized he wasn't pulling all-nighters anymore, so they disappeared around midnight and filtered back around dawn.

Max, the manager of Shane's band, Thieves, tugged on the tarp covering the Honda, securing it to the straps. "You sure about this, man?"

He shrugged. "No. Can't think of a better option, though, so might as well go for it." Boosting himself up into the truck bed, he and Max went over the hooks, jerking on them. The straps held, and the bike didn't move. This was as good as he was going to get. "You ready?"

Max's lip curled in his familiar smirk, and he vaulted over the side of the truck, landing lightly on his feet. "Let's do this shit."

Shane shook his head and got out of the bed, digging for his car keys. The Thieves' manager liked causing trouble. *Any* kind

of trouble, but creating distractions was his favorite. He'd never outgrown the adolescent love of pranks, and he was on a one-man mission to top himself, every time. What the hell did he have planned for this round of Thieves versus the paps?

On second thought, Shane didn't want to know. It involved his pride and joy, the Caddy he'd restored with his brother Eric. If there was going to be carnage, he'd be better off not knowing.

The heavy-duty pickup was new, purchased by Max several weeks ago and snuck in when Shane was out distracting the photographers. He'd hated every necessary minute of it. The weeks between the arrival of the truck and his imminent departure snuck under his skin and dragged sharp, tiny nails over his nerves. He couldn't write, couldn't play, couldn't do jack shit and spent long hours on his bike and even longer hours running along the beach, doing his best to ignore the world. Being cooped up in his house, trapped by the fucking flashbulbs and shouted questions, was driving him out of his mind.

If Krista turned him away, he didn't know what the fuck he'd do. Find some cabin near the coast and turn hermit, probably.

"I'll text you once I'm there." The keys jingled in his hand, twitching with eagerness to get on the road.

Max sobered. "You think she'll say yes? Need me to find you a place?"

Shane shook his head. "She'll say yes." She would, at least for one night. Krista had an inherent sweetness to her that wouldn't allow her to say no. It was a dick move on his part, but he was going to take full advantage of it.

Her generosity was part of what drew him to her.

The stifling late August air closed in around him, and he sucked in a breath, blew it out, repeating the ritual he used to shed the antsy shudders before he performed. He pulled a second key chain from his pocket and tossed the keys to Max, who snatched them out of the air with a grin. "Come on."

Max strolled over to the vintage Cadillac convertible and lovingly stroked his hand over the glossy, dark red finish. "Baby, you and I are going to have a fucking fantastic ride together," he crooned.

“Cut it out,” Shane said, irritated.

“Hey, just letting her get to know me a little. We’re going to be spending a lot of quality time together, you know?” Shane growled, and Max laughed, opening the door. “Relax. She’ll sit in the garage while you’re gone. Poor thing.”

Shane watched his friend and manager climb behind the wheel of his baby. It was one of the few reminders he had left of what Eric had been like before the drugs became his one and only hobby. Hours spent in the garage, swapping out parts, welding the chassis, sweating and bleeding and grunting their way through the restoration. They’d written some of their best songs during that period, too.

He shook his head clear of the memories and got in the truck, waiting for the familiar rumble of his Caddy starting up. He felt like a nervous father, watching Max ease the car into gear and down the long, winding driveway to the street. Max was right, though. His car was recognizable. With the top up, the few dickwads still hanging around would follow the car, wanting to know where he was going at three fuckin’ o’clock in the morning. It’d give him the chance to slip out the other side of the neighborhood and backtrack to the freeway.

He lowered the window and held his breath, listening. Out here, near Silver Lake, it was as quiet as it got for Los Angeles. No sounds out of place. No whistles or screeches of metal. Thank Christ. He relaxed a bit, certain that whatever Max had planned, it wasn’t going to damage the car.

He craned his neck and stared up at the sky. No stars. None. Too smoggy. Maybe he’d be able to see them in Portland. From the map he’d studied earlier, her house was in an outer suburb, farther away from the light pollution of the city.

A band squeezed his chest at the thought of her, all blue eyes and blond hair, long legs and soft skin. He wondered if she still had purple streaks in her hair, or if she’d changed the color. Or if the shadows in her eyes had finally cleared.

His phone buzzed, pulling him away from thoughts of Krista, and he thumbed off the lock. “Still in one piece?”

“You worry too much about the damn car, Shane. I counted five cars as I drove past, and I’ve got four of them behind me. Not sure where the fifth went.” A horn blasted into his ear, and he winced, pulling the phone away. “Get your ass on the road. Your window’s closing.”

Shane hung up without saying goodbye, started the engine, and rolled down the driveway, turning right where Max had gone left.

He glanced in the rearview as he drove down the street. The lone, battered car stayed where it was, not unusual in the eclectic neighborhood. Still, he took random turns, dragging out the drive to the freeway by another half hour before he merged into the early morning traffic.

Fifteen hours before he saw her again.

She clenched her hands in her lap, staring across the room. He could see it coming, and he fumbled for the words that would tell her everything he’d been trying to say for the past few months. How he wanted her. Needed her. Needed her, for so much more than what they had. If he could get it out, he could change the future. Their future.

Then she turned those gorgeous eyes on him and uttered the words he’d been dreading. “I can’t do this anymore.”

He clenched his hands on the steering wheel and forced himself to concentrate. If he thought too much about Krista, he’d talk himself out of it, and he needed the solace she brought.

The crazy, intense, sweaty fucking had started as a way to deal with the pain of losing his friend Adrian. He couldn’t pin down the turning point, but somewhere along the line it became more. All those times they’d sat on her couch watching TV, that she’d made him a late dinner after a failed studio session, or wrapped around him as he navigated the winding roads up Topanga Canyon on the back of the motorcycle, those meant as much to him as having her naked and spread out before him like some kind of hedonistic feast.

She’d become his bright light on the horizon. And because he couldn’t open up and tell her what she’d become to him, she’d told him to go.

He made good time on the way up to the Bay Area, then lost it as construction slowed progress to a crawl. When he reached the California-Oregon border, no amount of caffeine could keep him awake, and he had to pull off the freeway. He paid cash for a cheap motel room that stank of cigarettes and mold and fell face first on the bed, sleeping for a solid five hours before jolting awake.

He bypassed the shower after giving the towels a dubious sniff, then grabbed a burger at the run-down diner attached to the motel before hitting the road again. The sun sank lower and lower in the sky off to his left, bathing the scenery in muted gold, then cloaking it in shadow as darkness crept in.

Nerves tightened his hands on the wheel the closer he got to Krista's. She'd kicked him out for a reason, and he'd understood it. He'd have given her whatever she'd asked for. But he was tired of holding it together for everyone else, tired of being the strong one, and she was the only one he knew who'd hold him up.

No sex. Not this time. He'd respect her wishes, though he was prepared to beg to be allowed to stay on her couch for a while. Hell, he'd take a few days.

The porch light was off, the street deserted as he eased into her driveway. A light was on in one of the windows, glowing faintly behind the curtains. Was she still awake? One of the reasons they'd worked was because her night owl tendencies matched his own. The ache in his chest became a burning, combining with the queasy mass of fear in his belly.

He shut off the engine and sat there, hoping like hell she wouldn't cut him off at the knees before he had a chance to say anything.

* * *

She waited.

The unfamiliar growl of an engine had shut off moments ago, and curiosity was starting to get the better of her. Whoever it was had stopped in her driveway. There was only one person

who'd come by this late, and she hadn't seen or heard from him in months. He didn't even know how to find her.

I can't do this anymore.

And Shane being Shane, he'd left, exactly like she'd asked him to, without protest or platitudes. Just a final kiss before he'd walked out the front door. It'd been for the best—she was ready for more, and he'd shot her down every time. It wasn't what they were about. She was his distraction, and for a while, it'd worked for her.

Pushing back from her desk, she stood and padded down the short hall to the front entry, peering through the long, narrow window next to the door. A monster of a truck sat in her driveway, a tarp covering something in the bed. She couldn't make out any of the driver's features.

A shiver of fear skated down her spine. Her best friend Sara and her fiancé had been attacked several months ago, the act brutal enough it'd landed Taylor in the hospital with a gunshot wound. The guy'd been caught, and so far no one else connected to Taylor's old gang life had made the trek across the country to disrupt their lives. Taylor was worried, though, and that worry extended to her. She could be used to get to Sara, and it was well known Taylor would do *anything* for Sara. Krista thought it was a little ridiculous, but still...

Better safe than sorry.

She stepped back after making sure the deadbolt was in place and went in search of her phone. When she'd rented the house two months ago, the amount of space, both inside the house and around it, had appealed to her after living so long squished in between people.

For the first time, she thought all that space wasn't such a good thing.

A knock on the door had her straightening her shoulders. This was stupid. The neighborhood was safe as houses. She snagged her phone off the kitchen table and walked to the door, squinting through the peephole.

The breath caught in her lungs, a surge of pure joy chased away by trepidation. Even in the dark, she recognized Shane's

face. She flipped the locks and opened the door. "You drove an awfully long way for a booty call that isn't going to happen."

His mouth twisted in a half-smile. "Would you believe me if I told you that's not why I'm here?"

A breeze drifted through the open door and brought goosebumps to life. August in Portland was not the same thing as August in Los Angeles. The heat of the day usually broke at night, and standing in the open doorway in a thin tank and sleep shorts didn't exactly make for warmth. She stepped aside. "Come in."

She led the way to the kitchen and hit the overhead light switch, pulling open the freezer for the vodka. She held up the bottle. "Drink?"

"Sure." He dragged out a chair and slumped into it, and she snuck a glance. Still as stupidly handsome as ever. She liked the scruff. The dark hair shadowing his golden brown skin would be rough under her fingertips. Her fingers twitched, and she curled them into fists.

Swallowing hard, she busied herself with glasses. So easy, like the past six months hadn't happened. She wasn't going to get sucked into his vortex again. Once was enough.

Vodka burned her throat as she took a healthy swallow before setting his glass in front of him. She retreated to the counter, letting the edge of it bite into her back rather than join him at the table. "I'm sorry about Eric." The guy couldn't catch a break this year. First Adrian, one of his closest friends, died in a freak stage dive accident, then his brother overdosed. What was next? God would smite him with a lightning strike?

Shane spun the glass around, the liquid slopping against the sides. "Thanks. I guess. I never know what to say to that sort of shit." His green eyes were dull with grief. "He made his choice. We all have to live with the consequences." He lifted the glass and drank down the contents in one long gulp.

She fought off a yawn. "What's the rest of the band doing?"

He shrugged. "Split out. Rem's home in Louisiana with his girl. Not sure where Thad took off to, but Max managed to get

a hold of him, and apparently he's fine. Shit!" He shifted in his seat and fished his phone out of his pocket. "Max has my car."

She smirked. "You let someone else drive your car?" She'd seen plenty of pictures of the car, but never had the pleasure of riding in it. She'd been relegated to the back of the bike.

Shane didn't answer, holding the phone to his ear and frowning while he waited for Max to pick up. "Max. I'm here. No tail to the freeway, so whatever you did worked." A pause, while he listened to his friend on the other end. "You fuckin' kidding me?" He groaned and hung up without saying goodbye, tossing the phone on the table. It rattled across the surface, and she swiped it before he could protest. She thumbed open the text message and stared at the attached photo.

It was her turn to frown. "Is that a hooker?"

Shane nodded. "His grand plan for a distraction. Take my car, make the paps think I was picking up a hooker. Guy could give two shits if his name and face get splashed all over for a stunt like that."

She pursed her lips. "Sounds like the distraction worked."

"It did," he admitted. He nudged the glass away and braced his elbows on the table, dropping his head into his hands. "You're probably wondering why I'm here."

Her heart skipped. "The thought had crossed my mind." And how he'd found her. She certainly hadn't shared the news she was moving with him.

"I need a place to stay for a while."

Her brows shot up. "Oh? Something wrong with your house?"

"Other than it's surrounded?" He lifted his head and met her gaze. "I didn't know where else to go."

There were about a thousand and one other places he could have gone. "Okay?"

He muttered something under his breath. "I'm not trying to get in your pants this time. I need to get away from all the bullshit in L.A. Seems like everyone I know is in the industry, and I need a friend who's not."

Unease snuck in. “We had sex. A lot of it. That’s all it was.” Her voice shook. They were not friends. They’d never been friends. She was a fool who’d let him come and go as he wanted because she wasn’t stupid enough to try and tie him down and ask for more.

“Bullshit.” A single word, laced with a vehemence that stunned her. “You were never just a fuck to me, Krista. You said you were done, I respect that. I’m not here to change your mind. I’m here because I was going out of my mind down there. I’m here because I’m a dick and I’m taking advantage of your kindness. I thought of you as a friend. You had my back when I needed you, and I’m asking again.”

He got up from the table and stepped up to the counter, his body inches from hers. “Please,” he said quietly. “Let me stay with you for a while. A few days. Longer, if you’ll let me, but a few days will help. I’ll stay out of your way. Just...Christ, I don’t know what else to do.” He lifted a hand, moved to cup her jaw, and dropped it, clenching it into a fist. “Please,” he repeated.

If he stayed, she’d have to tell him. She’d have to kick him when he was already down, and she couldn’t do that to him. It’d be better if he left. She started to shake her head, and the pain in his eyes stopped her short. This was worse than it had been with Adrian. Her hands started to tremble as she struggled to keep them to herself, the urge to touch him almost overwhelming.

She was so very, very screwed.