

## Chapter One

“I’ve made up my mind, Jerry. You knew this was coming. I told you I needed some R & R. Some time to clear my head.” Mitch Burk—aka superstar Simon Grey—stood in the middle of his high-priced agent’s office, his arms crossed over his chest.

“Okay. I get it. You need a break,” Jerry said as he stretched back in his massive leather chair and stroked his chin. “I’ll make arrangements for you to stay at this exclusive retreat I’ve been hearing so much about. It’s very discreet. You’ll be able to relax in complete privacy while you sort out whatever it is that’s bothering you. The place even has counselors. You know, if you need a little extra help.”

Mitch shook his head. “I don’t need help. I need time. Time away from here to think. Time to myself.” He grabbed the envelope from Jerry’s desk. “Thanks for getting this for me,” Mitch said as he thumbed through the large stack of bills.

“You didn’t give me much choice,” Jerry grumbled. “Besides, it’s your money. It’s not as if you couldn’t have withdrawn it yourself. It’s obvious you don’t need me anymore.”

Mitch felt a twinge of guilt. He and Jerry had been through a lot together. They’d weathered the good and the bad before Mitch had become Simon Grey—overnight heartthrob.

But Jerry didn’t get it.

He didn’t understand that success and fame weren’t all they had

cracked up to be. At least not for Mitch.

Being a success, being recognized wherever he went—having his personal life scrutinized and put on public display—was more than Mitch had bargained for. He was feeling claustrophobic. He thought he'd prepared himself for stardom, but Mitch had only masked his introverted demeanor to fit the persona Jerry had created for him. Now he needed some time to figure out what he wanted to do with the rest of his life, reevaluate where he was headed, and make a decision about his future.

Mitch extended his hand across Jerry's desk but instead of shaking it, Jerry stood, pushing his hands into his pockets. "This is a mistake, Mitch. You walk away now, and you can kiss your career goodbye. Studios aren't going to stand by waiting for you to *find yourself*. They'll get themselves another 'Sexiest Man Alive' to throw their money behind. You'll have the solitude you want. That's for sure. In six months, no one will remember who Simon Grey is or even care for that matter."

Jerry's words were cold and callous, but it wasn't anything Mitch didn't already know. Together they had created Simon Grey: movie star, sex symbol, globetrotting playboy. Mitch thought it was the life he wanted—and had enjoyed it for a while—but now he needed to figure out who Mitch Burk was before he drank himself to death. Something definitely needed to change.

Before it was too late.

The next morning, Mitch studied his reflection in the mirror while he towel-dried his hair. His signature blond locks were now dyed a dusty brown—his natural color—and a shade similar to the scruffy beard he'd been growing for the last few days. Going back to his original color, as well as his real name, would help him blend in, that, and his low-budget wardrobe. No more Saint Laurent jeans or Bruno Magli shoes. Wranglers and Roper boots were now his labels of

choice.

Mitch grabbed his duffle bag and phone—then thought better of it. Studying the piece of plastic that had been a natural extension of his hand for so long, he realized he no longer needed or wanted it. Tossing his phone on the entry table, he jogged down the front steps and out to his latest purchase. The old 1986 Suburban he'd picked up at a used-car lot looked like a pile of junk. Its fenders were rusted out, and the paint was peeling, but it ran like a top. That was all that mattered.

Mitch stood back and looked at the three-story ultra-modern home he'd acquired four years ago. He could still remember how he'd felt the day he bought it. It was the same day Simon Grey had been named the highest paid box-office actor. Worldwide.

He had made it to the top.

He was number one.

However, when Mitch studied the house that stood as a symbol of his success, it looked like a facade from a movie set. It was as fake and phony as the name Simon Grey.

Mitch didn't care if he ever saw it again.

Pulling from the driveway, Mitch once again felt guilt nudging his conscience. Even though he'd told Jerry not to worry—assuring him he would be back in three or four weeks—he had no intention of returning. He'd straight-up lied. It was the only way he could get out from under Jerry's thumb. If his agent knew his top-grossing client, along with the hefty paycheck he represented, was walking out the door, Jerry would fight him every step of the way. Mitch didn't want to fight. He just wanted to live his own life. Make his own decisions. Mitch would be forever grateful for the persona Simon Grey. It was because of his alter ego that Mitch had the finances to do what he wanted with his life. To find a small, quiet town somewhere in Middle America where he could just blend in.

Live a quiet life.

TAMARA TILLEY

Be Mitch Burk again.

## Chapter Two

“I dare you!” Curtis goaded Shane as he took a swig of beer and swiped the back of his hand across his lips.

Shane Justin looked at Curtis and glared. He grabbed the pistol Lucas was holding and turned it over in his hand.

“What’s wrong, Shane? Haven’t you ever held a gun before?” Curtis taunted.

“Of course, I have!” Shane snapped.

“Yeah, well, we’re talking about the kind that shoots real bullets, not airsoft BBs or buckshot,” Lucas added as he gave Shane a shove.

“Knock it off, Lucas. I said I would do it, and I meant it.”

Shane tried to talk a good talk for a sixteen-year-old, but wasn’t sure he could follow through with the dare. His heart beat furiously in his chest, making it hard to breathe. Shane looked at the pistol in his hand and told himself he had nothing to lose, but when the sound of an approaching vehicle grew louder, he felt like he was going to throw-up.

“It’s now or never,” Lucas said as he pushed Shane from behind.

“Knock it off!” Shane shoved him back, wanting to punch him in the face. He could take Lucas. He was bigger than his friend and definitely more muscular, but that wasn’t the point. Shane wanted to fit in and prove to them he was as just as tough as they were.

Shane turned around and peered over the long, dried grass growing on the side of the road. He watched as an old Suburban headed their way, pulling an Airstream trailer, going slower than

slow.

“He’s driving too slow. What if it’s someone old? I can’t shoot at someone old. They could have a heart attack or a stroke or something.”

“I knew you couldn’t do it! You’re nothing but a coward and a momma’s boy!” Curtis yelled.

“Oh yeah? I’ll show you who’s a momma’s boy.”

At the last moment—before the Suburban had passed—Shane bolted out of the ditch, crouched along the side of the road, aimed the gun at the windshield, and pulled the trigger.

Lucas and Curtis took off the minute the report of the gun echoed, but Shane couldn’t move. With his eyes glued to the Suburban, he watched as it swerved back and forth across the road, completely out of control. When Shane realized it was headed straight for him, he squeezed his eyes shut, knowing he was about to be hit.

Tires screeched and the acrid smell of burning rubber stung his nose. He opened his eyes just in time to see the Suburban and trailer jet across the two-lane road and land in the ditch across from where he was standing.

When the truck’s door swung open and the driver staggered out, Shane realized he needed to get out of there. Fast. He dropped the gun and took off across the open field behind him. He could hear the guy running behind him—panting and cursing—as his pounding footsteps closed the distance between them. The man tackled him to the ground with a thud, and lay spread eagle on top of him. Shane struggled to get away but couldn’t. The guy was pure muscle.

Yelling obscenities and grabbing Shane by the collar, the man spun him around and shoved him into the brittle grass. His brown-green eyes sparked with anger and blood dripped from a gash on his head.

“You stupid little punk! What were you thinking? I could’ve been killed!” The man clung to Shane’s collar, shaking him violently with

every questioning accusation.

Shane couldn't disguise the fear he felt or hide the tears clouding his eyes. The guy was going to kill him. He just knew it.

Finally, the man stopped his assault on Shane and rolled over on to the rocky soil. He lay on the ground, his chest heaving as he grabbed for his head.

Shane scrambled to his feet, ready to run, but he couldn't. The stranger lay on the ground, blood oozing from his forehead, eyes closed, his chest rising quickly with every breath.

"Dude, are you going to be okay?" Shane asked, but got no response. He bent down alongside the guy and shook his shoulder. "Don't die on me."

"I'm not dying!" the man yelled, shoving Shane's hand away. "Now stop shaking me before I puke all over you."

Shane sat back on his heels, not sure what to do next. He could run, knowing the guy wouldn't have the strength to catch him. But if he left and the stranger died, it would be his fault.

*I guess I am a coward.*

Swearing under his breath, Shane pulled his flannel shirt off and yanked his grungy t-shirt over his head. With the pocketknife he got for Christmas, Shane cut his worn undershirt in to strips, then wadded up the tattered material and pushed it against the man's forehead.

The man flexed in pain, obscenities flying, his hand latching on to Shane's wrist.

"I'm just trying to help!" Shane shouted. "I need to stop the bleeding."

The guy held Shane in his stare for a moment before he released the hold on his wrist. Shane pressed the bloody material against the man's forehead and wrapped the second piece around his head.

"So, do you think you can walk back to your truck?" Shane asked, still not knowing what he was going to do with the guy. The stranger looked at him, hatred in his eyes.

“Yeah, I think so.” He sat up, swaying slightly.

Shane extended his hand to the guy. Hesitantly, the stranger looked up at him before allowing Shane to pull him to his feet. The man was tall, nearly collapsing on top of Shane when he took his first step. Taking a minute to steady the stranger, Shane looped the man’s arm around his shoulders. Slowly, they made their way across the field. When they got back to the road, the man picked up the gun where it lay on the edge of the pavement. Shane swallowed hard, wondering what the man was going to do with it.

“Consider this my insurance policy,” the man warned as he gripped the gun. “No more trouble, okay?”

“Okay,” Shane answered, knowing his trouble had just begun.

It was slow moving, getting the guy back to his vehicle. He stumbled over the uneven ground and nearly took a header when he ran into the fender. Looking at the damage of his Suburban, he cursed and hollered up a storm. When he slammed his hand down on the hood, he moaned and grabbed his head.

Shane waited until the guy was done throwing his fit, then helped him navigate the ditch as they circled the passenger side of the old jalopy. Swinging the door open, Shane brushed the shattered glass from the front seat, then lowered the man to the torn interior. Slowly, the stranger swiveled his long legs around until they settled on the floorboard. Shane slammed the door shut and took a step back, staring at the man through the broken window.

“So, is that it?” the man asked. “You’re just going to leave me here as I bleed to death?” The guy moaned, then rested his head back against the worn seat cushion and closed his eyes.

“No!” Shane snapped, even though that was exactly what he wanted to do.

He took a few steps back and looked at the Airstream that now rested precariously in the ditch. “Great!” There was no way he was going to be able to pull it out. The Suburban didn’t have enough

power.

After jumping up and down on the hitch, and wrestling with the winch, Shane was finally able to unhook the trailer from the truck. He walked to the driver's side and yanked the door open. Wiping the rest of the glass from the seat to the floor, he climbed in and slammed the door.

"Do you think you could slam it any harder?" the man hollered.

"Sorry," Shane mumbled as he turned the key in the ignition. The engine whined and squealed, but didn't turn over. He tried a second and third time with no luck.

"You're going to flood it," the man said, with his eyes closed, his head leaning against the doorframe. "Pump the accelerator three or four times, then turn the key halfway. When you feel the engine grab, floor the peddle."

Shane turned to fire off on the guy. He didn't need him explaining how to start a stupid truck. He opened his mouth to tell the man what he could do with his advice but decided against it. He was the reason the man was hurt, and his vehicle was in a heap. Getting the engine to turn over was the least of his worries.

He pumped the accelerator four times, turned the key halfway, and listened as the vehicle roared to life. When he dropped it into gear, the man opened his eyes. "Do you know what you're doing?"

"Yeah. I think I can drive your piece of junk." He turned forward—looking through the shattered windshield—and gunned the engine.

It took him three attempts, but finally, the Suburban lurched and groaned, and with a burst of power, Shane was able to get the beat-up vehicle out of the ditch and back onto the road. Shoving the gearshift into park, Shane got out of the Suburban.

"Where are you going?" the man asked.

Shane ignored him as he walked around to look at all four tires. He then pressed his belly to the asphalt to inspect the undercarriage.

He didn't see anything wrong, so he got back in, shifted into drive, and started down the road.

"Where are you taking me?" the man asked, looking dazed and ready to puke.

"Home."

"No way!" The man protested, trying to sit up straighter. "I'm not going home with you. Take me to a hospital or something."

"The hospital is fifty miles away, and I'm not sure this piece of junk of yours will make it that far."

"Then take me to the sheriff's office or the town vet. Anywhere would be better than your house. Your family is likely to make me disappear so I can't press charges."

"You're not the one who needs to be worried." Shane glanced at the stranger and then back to the road. "By the time my mother gets done with me, I'll be the one needing police protection."

"Then she should've thought about that before she decided to raise a juvenile delinquent."

"Hey, my mom's not like that!" Shane hollered.

"Yeah, right. Excuse me if I don't believe you." The guy turned toward the passenger window, but silence lasted only a moment. "Where did you get the gun, and why were you out on the highway shooting at people?"

"Passing time."

"Passing time?" he repeated with a sarcastic chuckle. "Geez, I hate to see what you do for real entertainment." Again, there was only a moment of silence before the stranger asked, "Who were those other boys with you?"

"What other boys?" Shane answered coolly, keeping his eyes on the road.

"I saw them take off on four-wheelers. Who were they?"

"You must've been hallucinating. I was the only one out there."

Shane slowly turned down the long gravel driveway, his stomach

churning, his heart racing. He shifted the vehicle into park just short of his front porch. He watched as the stranger leaned forward to get a better view of the house.

“For what it’s worth, I’m sorry,” Shane said.

“Why’d you do it then?”

He looked at the man and shrugged. “What does it matter?”

Shane got out of the vehicle and slammed the door. Walking around to the passenger side of the truck, he saw his mother approaching from the barn. Leaning on the frame of the window, he crouched down and stared directly at the stranger. “I know you think I’m some punk kid, and that’s fine. Just don’t take it out on my mom. This is my fault, not hers.”



Mitch studied the kid’s face. Try as he might, the teen wasn’t the delinquent he pretended to be. Mitch recognized something in the kid from his own childhood; he was struggling.

After one more look at the quaint clapboard house, Mitch turned to say something to the kid, but the woman walking toward him completely upended his thoughts.

She couldn’t have been more than five-foot-three, maybe five-five if you counted the heel on her dusty cowboy boots and the beat-up straw cowboy hat perched on her head. Mitch watched as her hips swayed in worn jeans that hugged her slight frame like a glove. *No way is that the kid’s mother.* She was too young to have a teenage son; not to mention she was drop-dead gorgeous. Mitch had expected to find a toothless, overweight woman with a cockeyed snarl and a shotgun perched on her hip. Not a bombshell in boots.

Glancing at his lap where the gun lay, Mitch figured wielding a weapon would not be in his best interest—at least not until he knew her frame of mind. The woman didn’t know him from Adam, and if she saw the gun, she might jump to the wrong conclusion. Mitch

quickly shoved it deep within the upholstery of the bench seat. He could always pull it out later if things went south.

The woman approached, her blonde ponytail bobbing from shoulder to shoulder. Mitch watched her pleasant smile turn into a frown when she took in her son's appearance.

“Shane, why is your shirt unbuttoned and where's your t-shirt?”

Before the kid could answer, she crossed her arms over her chest and turned her attention to Mitch. “What's going on here?”