

CHAPTER 1



Charles ‘Chas’ Mackenzie was mad as hell when the tiny little rust bucket T-boned his brand new Ram 2500. Shaking his head, he got out of his vehicle to inspect the damage and make sure the other driver was all right.

“What the hell were you thinking?” he demanded when she cranked down her window.

“Me? You came out of nowhere,” the woman snapped back, fighting to get her crumpled door open.

Sighing he went to the door and grabbed hold, not surprised when the entire thing came away in his hand.

“How did you ever manage to get this piece of crap inspected?” he asked, frowning as he dropped the door on the ground and reached for her hand to help her out. She ignored it and scrambled out on her own. Then she did the strangest thing. She took a swing at him.

Her fist connected with his abdomen and she squealed, shaking her hand violently and nearly hopping up and down.

Chas couldn’t help it, he laughed, making her even madder. Suddenly, both of her fists were flying and he planted his huge

hand on her head, easily stopping her from connecting again. He was 6'5 and she was 5' nothing. It was not difficult.

"Hey, hey, hey, take it easy, crash."

"You think this is funny?" she screamed, swinging again and again until she tuckered herself out and stood gasping for air, her shoulders heaving.

"Of course I don't think it's funny. You just dented my new truck," he replied, amused despite himself.

"Yes, you do," she accused. "I can see the smile in your eyes, you big jerk. Well, not everyone can afford to drive a monster like that," she insisted, pointing at his huge red vehicle. "Some of us drive what we have to."

"What was that, before it became fodder for the junk yard?" he asked, removing his hand now that she'd seemed to settle down and pointing at the pile of scrap she called a car.

"I'll have you know that vehicle was a classic," she snapped, shivering in the biting winter wind.

"Not everything older than dirt is a classic," he retorted. For the first time he took in her appearance, really took it in. She was small, wearing a pair of those ratty jeans that were all the rage with young girls, but for some reason he didn't think that particular pair came from some designer store and she wasn't a teenager. Her sneakers were beat up, with a hole at the toe of her left shoe and her jacket didn't look warm in the least.

"Why don't you get in my truck and warm up," he suggested. "I imagine it will take quite a while for law enforcement to get here on these roads. No sense in freezing our asses off."

"Do we have to call the police?" she asked nervously.

"Yes, we do," he insisted, taking her arm and leading her toward his truck. "For one thing it's against the law to leave the scene of an accident and for another I'm going to turn this into my insurance company."

"Oh," she said, looking up at the seat when he opened his door. Twice she tried to get her foot on the icy running board and twice

she slipped off. She squealed when he picked her up and sat her inside the truck's cab.

"Watch your hands," he ordered before shutting the door with a solid thud.

Chas stood in the bitter wind and called 9-1-1 on his cell, reporting the accident before climbing into the driver's seat and cranking up the heat. Thankful for his heavy Carhart jacket he noted the thin windbreaker she was wearing. Taking his thermos, he poured a cup of coffee and handed it to her, watching as she wrapped her hands around it gratefully.

"Is there a reason you didn't want me to report it?" he asked, watching her face flush.

"Yeah, I don't exactly have insurance," she admitted quietly. "At least I don't think so. They sent me a cancellation notice a while ago and I couldn't pay the premium, but sometimes there's a grace period," she added hopefully. "Maybe they'll cover the damage."

"Why am I not surprised?" he sighed somewhat disgustedly.

"Well you don't have to get nasty about it," she snapped, glaring at him. Handing him the cup she moved to open the door. "It's not like I'm some vagrant, deadbeat," she hissed. "I do pay my bills when I have the money."

"And do you have any money?" he asked.

"Not at the moment. I mean I have about twenty bucks, but that's it. But I will have money as soon as I find a new job and a place to stay," she continued with her chin up. "I believe I'll wait outside. It's pretty chilly in here, Mr...?"

"Mackenzie, Chas Mackenzie and I wouldn't advise that," he stated calmly.

"And why not?" she demanded, narrowing her violet eyes at him.

"Because the roads are slippery as goose shit and in case you haven't noticed our vehicles are blocking a good part of this one. Another vehicle could come around that curve and plow straight into us. You're safer in here."

She appeared to sniff in derision as she reached for the door handle.

“What’s your name?” he demanded.

“Roberta, but my friends call me Babe,” she replied reluctantly.

“Hmm, it fits you,” he noted. “Let me put it another way, Babe. Do you see this console?” he asked patting the piece separating them with his huge hand.

“Yes,” she replied, sounding confused.

“Well it flips up, giving me plenty of room to pull your obstinate self over my lap and spank you good. I’m sure your backside is pretty cold. Believe me, it will sting like hell. Is that really what you want?”

“Are you threatening me?” she gasped.

“Nope, just stating a fact. I’m not particularly fond of young women who are a little too big for their britches and while this accident was entirely your fault, I won’t sit by and watch you get frostbite or become road kill. Now, sit still and wait for the law to arrive.”

Chas placed the coffee back in her hands and said no more.



BABE LOOKED at him sideways as she sipped from the mug. He was a behemoth, and in hindsight she couldn’t believe she’d had the nerve to swing at him. His full dark beard was neatly trimmed and he was warmly dressed in jeans, a flannel shirt and brown lace-up work boots. Thick leather gloves lay on the dash, no doubt the best money could buy. His jacket looked exceedingly warm and she made a note that in the future, if she was going to trapes around this neck of the woods she would need something like that. Although, what she was going to trapes around in she had no idea. Her car was trash. She’d be lucky to get a dime from a junkyard and the twenty in her pocket wouldn’t go far.

He surprised her when he spoke.

“Do you have family in the area?” he asked, staring out the windshield obviously watching for red lights.

“No.”

“So what are you doing here?”

“It’s a long story,” she sighed.

“I’m pretty sure we have time,” he replied, watching the snow pile up and speeding up his wipers.

“I met this guy on the internet,” she began.

Chas snorted and removed his hat, running his hand through a head of wavy dark hair.

“There’s no need to be so judgmental,” she said, glaring into his blue eyes. “Many relationships start online and they end up getting married.”

“Yeah, and many end up with the woman raped, murdered and stuffed in some garbage can,” he retorted. “What were you thinking?” he demanded angrily. “Where are you from anyway?”

“I drove up from Florida,” she answered defensively.

“In that thing?” he asked in outrage. “It’s a wonder you made it to Georgia.”

“For your information, Bessie, has been a very good car,” she snapped back, “and besides it’s not her fault the guy turned out to be a big fat liar and a jerk.”

“Is he from around here? What’s his name?” Chas demanded.

“Roger Thomson,” she quietly confessed.

“That guy’s a dirtbag,” Chas said with a touch of fury in his voice. “You’re lucky you got out of there with your virtue intact. It is intact?” he questioned, pinning her in place with his frosty stare.

“I’m not stupid, you know,” she hissed, feeling her face heat up. “I realized almost as soon as I got there he’d been less than honest with me about his circumstances. He was far older than his profile picture indicated and he has no job. His place was in shambles and he seemed to think I should clean it up. In fact, he wanted me to marry him and...”

“Look after his lazy, good-for-nothing ass for the rest of your life, right?”

“Something like that,” she sighed in embarrassment.

“Did he hurt you, Babe?” he asked softly.

“No, just my pride. I can’t believe I was so stupid. I took him at face value; well it wasn’t actually his face he sent me. I don’t know whose face it was.”

“How old are you?”

“Twenty-two, old enough to know better,” she admitted. “I was just so lonely, and the bastard lied through his rotten teeth.”

“Don’t you have a family, a daddy, a brother, anyone to look out for you?”

“I’m a grown woman,” she insisted, staring up at him.

“Almost,” Chas replied with a laugh as he reached over and tugged at her very long dark braid playfully.

Babe slapped his hand away and he laughed harder. Then the police arrived.



IT TOOK QUITE a while after two New York State Troopers got to the scene. Licenses and insurance information was exchanged and a tow truck was called to remove Babe’s vehicle. It was so old and damaged even the cops had trouble figuring out the make and year until she produced the registration after they pried the glove compartment open.

Chas knew both of them and stood out in the storm asking after their families and making small talk, while Babe took her handful of tickets and retrieved her backpack. She started down the road. He caught sight of her just before she disappeared in a swirl of snow.

“Gotta go, guys,” he said, getting into his slightly damaged truck. “She’s trouble with a capital T but I can’t just leave her out here like this.”

“Need any help?”

“No, I’ve got this. I’ll take her home with me until I get her straightened out. Thanks,” he called as he got in his truck and headed in the direction she’d walked off. When he found her she was a little way up the road, knees deep in a snow bank. He opened the passenger window and called to her.

“Come on, I’ll take you anywhere you want to go,” he yelled above the wind.

“I can’t,” she called back.

“Why not?” he demanded getting more peeved by the second.

“I’m stuck, and I think I hurt my ankle jumping down from your truck,” she screamed. He could see she’d been crying and she wiped her nose on her sleeve.

Chas pulled over as far as the snowbanks allowed and turned his emergency flashers on. Getting out of the truck he stomped to her, took hold of her arm and pulled her from the snow, tossing her over his shoulder.

“You could have waited, you know,” he scolded.

“What for, you don’t owe me anything,” she replied.

“Funny, I feel like I owe you a good old fashioned whooping for being so foolish,” he growled softly as he plopped her onto the seat of his truck.

“Funny, I don’t believe I want to go with you,” she sassed back.

“What are your options?” he asked, facing her in the open doorway and blocking her exit.

“None,” she admitted, looking at her lap and blowing on her frozen hands.

“Then be a good girl and shut up,” he advised, closing her door after clicking the lock.

“How do I know you’re not one of those guys you talked about? The ones who would rape and murder me and toss me in a garbage can?” she demanded when he climbed in and put the truck in gear.

“You don’t,” he replied with a grin. “However, I promise to feed you first, and get you into some warm clothes.”

“Gee thanks,” she sneered.

“You’re welcome. Would you rather go to a shelter? It won’t be nearly as nice as my place but you’ll be safe. Also, in case you haven’t noticed, I’m a relatively attractive man with all of my teeth intact. As a rule I don’t have to resort to rape to get a woman into my bed,” he teased.

“And so modest too,” she shot back. “I guess the devil I know is better than the one I don’t.”

“Do you feel you know me?” he asked surprised.

“A little, at least you didn’t abandon me, which is more than I can say about some men. And I am sorry about your truck. It was entirely my fault. I saw you, but I couldn’t stop on these roads.”

“My, she can tell the truth too. A point in your favor. Maybe it won’t have to be a full-fledged whooping. Maybe it can just be a few good swats to your butt to teach you not to put yourself at risk.”

“You are kidding, right?” Babe asked, biting her lip.

Chas grinned and turned the truck around.