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## Chapter 1

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**I**t was one of those old convenience stores that has its own smell that's not at all unpleasant but kind of loamy, all the same. The type of small, local store where there was a literal barrel of pickles—that people used to sit on—and an equally disturbing, enormous jar of pickled eggs on the counter, near the register, the utterly unappetizing sight of which was almost enough to convince you to put whatever food you'd chosen back. The floors were wooden—dirty and creaky—and there was dust on more of the items offered on the shelves than not.

Still, it was well stocked with those things its patrons preferred that barely lasted a day before being snapped up—the cheapest of beers, of course, and every imaginable type of snack food, crunchy-salty as well as sweet. Its only redeeming quality seemed to be a good-sized bakery case with what looked like homemade cinnamon rolls that were the size of a dinner plate, apple cider doughnuts, and bear claws.

Arianne Messier sighed as she considered the cans of quote "food" unquote she was staring at in the third aisle, furthest from

the door. They were tired, they were hungry, and all she wanted to do was go home, but she knew there wouldn't be anything there to eat yet, and she'd just wanted to stop and pick up something they could have just for tonight. They'd set sail to the nearest city tomorrow morning and get *actual* supplies so that she could make healthy, home-cooked meals for them.

They'd end up eating on lawn chairs, but that was okay.

Tonight, though, she just wanted something mind-numbingly easy.

The bell tinkled on the door and she knew that someone else had come in. Her natural sense of curiosity led her to look up, an action she regretted almost immediately when she caught sight of what was standing in the doorway.

*Who* was standing in the doorway, she corrected herself ruthlessly. Just because he was shockingly scarred on the side of his face that she could see, not to mention he was the size of one of those gourmet refrigerators—tall and barrel chested and just disturbingly large—didn't mean that he wasn't human.

She felt a fissure of fear run through her that had nothing whatever to do with his looks, but that she couldn't seem to tamp down and couldn't stop herself from turning away from him, as much as she didn't want to appear rude. It was automatic, just like the urge to find somewhere to hide, which, luckily, she managed to keep herself from doing.

Barely.

Instead, she turned around to face what passed for the frozen food aisle—which was really just a few shelves in a freezer that sported more ice cream and bagged ice than any kind of actual meal—except for frozen pizza, one of which she had a horrible feeling she was going to end up buying.

But what really stopped her heart was the voice she couldn't help but recognize seconds later.

"Can—may I kith your booboo fathe?" she asked, her lisp as excruciatingly cute as she was herself.

## Her Gentle Giant

Although dusk was near, he didn't usually go out during the day. Folks around here knew him, knew what he looked like, but that didn't stop them from staring at him, so he preferred to get whatever he might need under the cover of darkness. That might have been a hangover from his military training, too, although he didn't like to think of it that way. He'd always done his best work at night.

Killing people just seemed easier to do under the cover of darkness.

But the cupboards were barer than he liked, and with his preference for being prepared for anything, that caused an annoying mental itch. So, he decided to stop to get some "essentials", and whiskey, unfortunately, had become an essential. The entire town hated paying Unka Al's understandably inflated prices, but they didn't have much choice unless they wanted to drive an hour either way to civilization.

Unka Al—who was actually long gone—had a captive audience in the small town of Moncton, TN, nestled as it was, remotely, in the foothills of the Great Smokey Mountains.

As soon as he entered, Hoyt looked around out of a long ingrained sense of self-preservation, literally counting how many people were there. Not only was he immediately calculating whether or not he could take them, if necessary, but he was also assessing how likely they were to be horrified, terrified, or—worse than either of the others—pitying of his appearance.

As luck would have it, there was only one other person in the store besides himself and Al's grandniece, Shelly, who was behind the counter, running the place—reluctantly, of course. Mostly, her head was buried in her phone, and he imagined she considered customers to be an unwanted interruption of her online social pursuits.

The other customer was a small woman standing by the frozen food, who, upon seeing him, turned away. He liked to

think that he was used to such reactions by now, but he felt a small twinge of pain at her action anyway.

Suddenly, he felt a tug on the leg of his BDUs, just by his ruined knee, and he flinched, reflexes having been heightened to treat any such incursion on his person with deadly force, an impulse that he was glad he'd learned to curb when he saw who it was.

Hoyt was utterly amazed to see a tiny wisp of a little girl standing there, since—what he had thought were—his still finely honed nerves hadn't alerted him that she was even approaching. He hadn't even considered her existence, even though he'd seen the woman who was probably her mom at the back of the store. That was another glaring example of the fact that he had lost a lot of his edge.

He should have been happy at that, although, in truth, he found it distinctly humiliating to realize that a toddler was able to sneak up on him.

"Can—may I kith your booboo fathe?" she asked, her lisp undeniably darling, as was she, as she stood there looking innocently up at him, face wide open and gently expectant.

She could not have been more adorable if she tried. She had long, golden blonde hair that was held back in a pink bow. Her tiara was cocked at just the right jaunty angle atop her head, and she was wearing a pink leotard that was set off by the rainbow tutu around her waist. Her tights matched the leotard, but instead of the ballet slippers he might have expected, she was wearing pink, sparkly cowboy boots.

A pretty pink butterfly wand, with streaming ribbons in various shades of pink, completed her obviously carefully constructed ensemble.

He couldn't help himself. He was enchanted against his will and felt a smile start to spread across the parts of his face that would still cooperate with what—granted—had become such an unusual impulse.

## Her Gentle Giant

Hoyt was just about to scunch himself down to her level when the woman he'd spotted before—who was also tiny, especially to him—came running at them. She grabbed the little girl, never once meeting his eyes, and scurried away with her, murmuring an apologetic chant under her breath, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry," as she did so.

She didn't give him the chance to say anything to her, but he could see that she was literally shaking—and still avoiding his gaze—even after they were safely across the store from him.

Well, she obviously didn't think that distance didn't make them safe from him, which made Hoyt sigh.

Despite his anti-social tendencies, he might have followed the kid, anyway, and let her do what she'd wanted to do. It wasn't often that someone actually acknowledged his glaring physical flaws, and he found it refreshing when someone did.

But he didn't want to scare her mother—for no real reason—any more than she already was, so he didn't. He knew he was an ugly, hulking, monstrous bastard, and he could hardly blame her for being scared of him. There was a time when he might have approached her, hoping for a date. But those scars were really only the beginning of the horror show, so that thought was squelched before it really made it to his consciousness.

Even when he wasn't horribly, visibly ruined, it would have only been a fifty-fifty possibility of her saying yes, but he would have been more than willing to chance the rejection. Now, he would never have even considered asking her out, even if she hadn't practically run screaming from his hideous visage.

While this was all going on, the little girl's eyes never left him, and he couldn't resist the urge to give her a big wink and crossing his eyes, enjoying the sound of her tinkling laughter.

But, having not seen what he did, her mama took the little girl's reason for laughing entirely the wrong way, making Hoyt scowl, because he certainly hadn't meant to get her in trouble. And he couldn't see a way of explaining what had happened

without approaching them, which he didn't think the mother would appreciate.

"Teensie! We do not laugh at other people under any circumstances!" her mother scolded sternly, and he saw—as he glanced covertly in their direction—that she held the little girl's chin in her hand so that she knew she had the child's full attention. "And we most definitely do not approach people we do not know! What have I been telling you since before you were born about stranger danger, Emily Jane Messier?"

Oh, dear, all three names! Hoyt felt sorry for the little girl, especially when her motives had been nothing but altruistic.

But he did applaud the mother for correcting her child at all. Some parents—in his experience lately—seemed to have abandoned the idea of disciplining their children in any way at all. And she was doing so the perfect way, not yelling, but using a calm—if distinctly chiding—tone.

She also used the French pronunciation of her last name. Big points for that, as far as he was concerned.

"But, Mumma, I wanned to halp kith it all bedder!"

The little one was on the verge of tears, and he had the unusual impulse of wanting to hold and comfort her, even though he understood completely how her mother felt and thought she was handling it beautifully, except for the misunderstanding about the girl's motive for laughing.

As he heard her continue to speak to her daughter, he knew she was battling against herself—wanting to make an impression on her daughter about how dangerous what she had done was, but, at the same time, wanting to grab her and hold her, because she was all right and incredibly precious.

"Emmy. You know that you are never to leave my side, even if I'm not holding your hand. And you're also never to approach a strange *man* under any circumstances."

"Yeth, Mumma," the little girl responded softly.

"If you and I should be separated, what do you do?"

## Her Gentle Giant

"Fine a lady wiff kidth an' athk her to halp me."

"Exactly. But what are you never, ever to do, young lady?" He could hear the ferocious frown she was wearing in her tone.

"Walk away from you. I'm thorry, Mumma!" She burst into tears, and his heart ached as he watched her mother gather her close, hugging and rocking her and brushing her hand over the little girl's hair as she whispered soft, soothing things to her.

Before he'd become the freak show that he was now, he'd been dominant in nearly every relationship he'd ever had with a woman, and he'd had a few moments like that—when he'd been torn between hugging the breath out of the person he cared for and spanking them till they were begging him to stop. Which was when the real punishment began, as far as he was concerned.

More touched than he wanted to be by the exchange he'd surreptitiously witnessed, he sighed again, more heavily than before, got what he wanted—avoiding going near them while he did so—then brought his stuff up to the counter.

"Evening, Hoyt."

"Shelly." His tone did not encourage conversation, but then he suddenly changed his mind about that and he said a few things to her that had her looking surprised and amazed before he left.

Having noticed that Man Mountain Dean was gone, Ari brought the frozen cheese pizza, a two-liter bottle of off brand diet orange soda, a half gallon of milk, a small brick of obscenely expensive cheddar cheese, bag of ice, and a box of off brand Cheerios to the counter. Pizza for dinner tonight on paper plates she'd bought while they were on the road, cereal for breakfast—and lunch, if necessarily—and some kind of version of macaroni and cheese for dinner the next night, if they couldn't get into a town to buy actual groceries.

The place she'd rented was supposed to be furnished, and she heartily hoped that that included a microwave oven.

"That's forty-eight seventy-three."

She actually groaned out loud at the total. She wouldn't be frequenting this establishment much, she could see, or she'd been in the poor house in a week!

Since she hadn't been paying as close attention to their finances as she usually did while they were traveling, Ari prayed that her debit card wouldn't come back as "Denied" and said a silent prayer when it didn't.

The girl was bagging her stuff—very slowly—and then she said, "I don't know if you noticed him, but the guy who was in here before you gave me a message for you."

Her head shot up, and she wasn't sure she wanted to hear the message.

"Is it obscene?" she asked automatically.

The girl looked downright insulted. "What? No. That's disgusting! Just because he's not good looking, doesn't automatically make him a perv, you know."

"I know, but I've never been here before and I don't know him. What could he possibly want to say to me?"

"Actually, he wanted me to apologize to your daughter because he got her into trouble with you. He wanted me to tell you that she wasn't laughing at him to be mean. He'd made a funny face, trying to get her to laugh."

"Oh. Well, she was going to get a stern talking to anyway because she left my side and went over to him, a perfect stranger, and began to talk to him."

"Yeah. But, just so you know," the girl said, pushing the bags toward Ari as she spoke. "He's one of the good ones. He'd never hurt your daughter."

Ari froze for a split second, then she forced herself to gather the bags in one hand and Teensie's hand in the other. "Thanks, but all men are dangerous, especially those who are the size of a bear."

"Not him." Her staunch defense of the man was a compliment to her—and him—but it would never change Ari's mind.



## Her Gentle Giant

She gave the girl a vacant smile, saying, "Thank you," and herded her daughter out the door, effectively ending that discussion, such as it was.

The small, two-bedroom bungalow style house wasn't too far from the store. The online directions to it were very detailed and made it easy to find. It was relatively well-hidden, and she noted that she didn't see many neighbors on the dead-end street that it was off of.

It did have a nice front porch, and there were even a couple of those country rockers on either side of the front door, as well as a swing on one end and a cozy outdoor furniture arrangement that was well worn but also clean and well cared for, on the other side.

She gathered as much as she could from the car for the first trip, nearly stepping on something that was sitting on the welcome mat in a grocery bag.

Arianne put down her load and looked into it.

It contained a Pyrex nine-by-thirteen pan, and when she lifted one edge of the aluminum foil that was covering it, she saw that it was full of baked ziti. And that wasn't all the meal-fairy had left. It was complete with great homemade rolls for sopping up the sauce, a spatula for serving, as well as paper bowls and plastic silverware.

That was very nice of someone to do for them! She suspected it was the lady who had rented her the place whom she'd been emailing back and forth with and even spoken to on the phone several times.

This would feed them for three or four days, at least, and it was real food!

The key was right under the mat, where the woman she'd been dealing with had said it would be. She guessed in a place like this you didn't have to worry much about a crime. This was the kind of place where you could leave your door open and come home to an untouched house.

Mayberry. She'd moved to Mayberry and was only too glad to be there—to be *anywhere* else.

Ari only had to make one other trip back to the car—thanks to her pack mule tendencies—and then she was able to close the door behind them, feeling, for the first time in days—hell, years—somewhat safe.

She was pretty sure he wouldn't have any idea where they were. She hadn't even brought her wallet and wouldn't have used her credit cards, anyway, knowing that they could be traced. Before they'd left—while he was at work—she'd raided the stash of money he kept at home, in that false drawer in his desk, to have money to travel with, paying for as much as she could in cash. The money she'd scrimped and saved for herself over this past year was in an online bank account that he didn't know existed. It wasn't much, but it was a bit of a nest egg that would let them get started here, away from him. She'd also left the beautiful new smartphone he'd gotten her and was using a burner phone she kept off most of the time, anyway, just in case.

Arianne forced herself to take a deep breath. There was no reason to think he was following her. She'd done her best to keep an eye on the traffic around her as she was driving—less so the further she got away from him, but still. She'd never seen any indication of anything suspicious.

She could relax a bit here, maybe. Although she didn't know if she'd ever really be able to do that again, but she hoped so. She hadn't trusted easily in the first place, and the way he'd treated her left her less willing to trust anyone, ever again.

As she shoved those thoughts from her mind, she forced herself to concentrate on what needed to be done. They were both hungry, so she turned on the oven to preheat, set the table with the accoutrements they had been so generously given, then she and Emmy made their beds with linens that smelled fresh and clean before they began to unpack the meager belongings they'd brought with them.

She'd set the timer to go off about five minutes before the food would be ready so she would have time to warm the rolls and fill Emmy's sparkly pink sippy cup, even pouring some soda for herself, which she didn't usually indulge in.

She lifted Emmy onto her own chair—with a booster seat.

"Piktha for dinner! Yay!" she yelled excitedly.

"No, love, we'll save the piksa—pizza—for dinner another time. We're going to have a lovely baked ziti that someone left us! I'm sure it'll be wonderful!" She did her best to sell it while her daughter's face began to cloud over.

"But I fought we were gonna have piktha tonight!" she whined, a little bit of rebellion seeping into her tone.

Emmy was not usually bratty in the least, but this trip had been hard on the both of them, and they were both exhausted.

"Well, we kind of are, actually."

That earned her a deeply suspicious look that Ari had a hard time not laughing at.

"This is macaroni pizza."

"Macaroni piktha?"

"Yes. It's sauce and cheese—you love sauce and cheese! Only it's got macaroni—ziti—instead of crust. And you don't eat your crusts, anyway. You might find you like this better!"

Emmy could be hard to convince about things like this, and she was duly skeptical.

But she ate her entire helping, regardless, Arianne was glad to see, and even asked for more. She wisely refrained from crowing about that, though, and just dished it up gratefully.

There was no butter for the rolls, so Em refused one, but she used it to sop up all of the flavorful gravy.

Even though it was early once they'd finished cleaning up—most of which Emmy did, because it was really just throwing things away—they stretched out on the bed in her room and turned on the television.

The next thing Arianne knew, someone was knocking at her

door, and when she opened her eyes at the sound, the sun was shining.