

*Fury's
Kiss*

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Published by Strange Roads Press
ISBN 978-0-9940932-0-2 (paperback)

Cover by Fionn Jameson
Edited by Nancy Cassidy, The Red Pen Coach
Interior formatting by Author E.M.S.

Published in the United States of America.

CHAPTER ONE

It was Friday night and I'd been stood up.

Which was probably what I deserved for relaxing my strict no-dating-customers policy. But it had been months since I'd had a date, and sometimes it seemed like all I did was sling plates of seafood at the Graceful Mermaid. Working at one of Hawthorne's few upscale restaurants was good training for my dream of owning my own place one day, but it was hard not to give up sometimes when my feet hurt and my back ached. When I went to bed alone and smelling of shellfish every night.

I checked my watch for the thousandth time before rising to throw my cold macchiato in the trash, and decided to head for Spyder's. Maybe there would be something happening at the local watering hole.

When I pulled into the parking lot, though, I was disappointed to see it was nearly empty. The only other vehicle in the lot was the beat-up old pickup I knew belonged to Nora Katsaros, the bartender.

Weird. Although the place wasn't exactly the crown

jewel in Hawthorne's entertainment scene, I'd never seen it completely dead before. For all its dubious charms, Spyder's was a popular place.

As I got out of my car and headed for the door, a stray plastic bag ghosted across the empty lot and I realized suddenly how alone I was in the darkness. I shivered despite the warm July air and walked faster. A young woman had been found murdered the week before, just a town over from Hawthorne, and it was too easy to imagine myself in her place.

It was stupid to let my fears run away from me, but I breathed easier when I stepped into the warm circle of light on Spyder's front porch.

"Thank God, a customer!" Nora greeted me when I walked inside and sat down at the bar. She had a smooth Southern accent with a hint of something more exotic underneath.

I looked around at the empty seats surrounding me. "Maybe people are avoiding the Cape since that girl was found last week?"

I wasn't the only one feeling jumpy. Ever since the story had broken, everyone in Cape Cod had been on edge.

"Maybe some people," Nora allowed, "but it would take a lot more than one victim to keep the tourists away."

Even if that one victim had fallen prey to the New England Slasher.

For the past six months, a serial rapist had attacked women on the East Coast with a knife, scarring them mentally and physically. There seemed to be no way to

predict where he would strike next or who would be targeted.

A silence fell as we contemplated the crimes.

“That’s enough talk of the Slasher.” Nora smacked a hand on the bar. “You came here to have fun.”

She turned to choose from the bottles lining the mirror behind her and soon had two cocktails lined up in front of us. She raised her glass to clink with mine.

“Just don’t tell Lefty,” she said with a grin, referring to the bar’s absentee, often drunk manager.

A couple drinks later, the bar was still dead and I had just made up my mind to head home when Nora looked over my shoulder and let out a shriek of delight. I jumped in my seat and turned to see a man standing in the doorway. Tall and square-jawed, he had the kind of rough, masculine features that looked better at thirty-something than they would have in his twenties.

I sat up straighter on my barstool. Suddenly, Spyder’s seemed a lot less empty.

He had scruffy brown hair, a little long in the back, like it had been a while since he’d remembered to get it cut. There was nothing special about his clothing—jeans, a T-shirt, and a beat-up, brown leather jacket—but there was something about him that grabbed and held my attention. Hot, heavy lust coiled low in my belly, and the room felt warmer. My skin tingled as I imagined nuzzling the sexy, day-old shadow at his jaw line.

My heartbeat picked up and my breath quickened as he came closer. I downed the last sip of my drink to cool off and looked at him over my glass as he passed.

There was no way he could miss the invitation I was sending his way. Maybe this guy would be the one to break my streak of unwanted celibacy.

It was a nice little fantasy, but it didn't last long.

He gave me a speculative glance as he went by, but it was clear he only had eyes for the woman behind the bar. Not the one seated in front of it.

"Jackson Byrne, you liar!" Nora had a beer uncapped for him before he'd even taken a seat. "You told me you wouldn't be here until Sunday."

"The job I was on finished early." Jackson took a deep pull of his beer. "So I hired on with that hospital construction project in town." He spoke with the same drawling, Southern cadence as Nora, though he was missing that extra, exotic lilt.

Nora seemed to have forgotten my existence, so I sidled closer and held out my hand. "I'm Tara."

"Jackson." He nodded at me, politely enough, but didn't hold his own hand out to shake.

I let my hand drop awkwardly back to my side as the heat from a blush crept up my neck. My shorts and tank top were perfectly respectable summer attire, but I felt suddenly self-conscious and exposed.

"Are you sure you want to keep working construction?" Nora asked Jackson, returning to their conversation. "With your background, you could—"

A muscle in his jaw jumped as he cut her off. "That's not my life anymore."

"I'm just saying—"

He relaxed a little, smiled apologetically. "I know. But I've been moving around long enough. It's time I

was here for you and Ruby full-time.”

My stomach dropped as I thought of the photos Nora had shown me once. Ruby was her six-year-old daughter. And now that I thought about it, the little girl looked like Jackson. My already flushed skin burned even hotter. No wonder he'd brushed me off.

I'd been giving him come-hither, bedroom eyes in front of the mother of his child.

Mortified, I muttered something about how late it was getting and grabbed my purse. The alcohol I'd consumed mixed with embarrassment to set my head swimming, and I went outside to call a cab and get some air.

Outside the bar, I savored the light breeze that wafted by, cooling my flushed, heated skin. I was about to fish out my phone and dial a taxi when another car pulled into the lot and two men got out. One was tall, dark and handsome, while the other was short, pale and average. The tall one smoked a cigarette and looked a little bit like James Dean.

He offered me one when he got within speaking distance.

I wavered for a second, but took the cigarette he held out to me. Sure, the last time I'd tried to smoke, I'd spent ten minutes hacking up a lung, but that had been years ago. I was an adult now, not an awkward eighth grader having an asthma attack in front of the coolest guy in school.

Besides, you only live once, right?

I leaned into the lighter James Dean held out for me, careful not to catch my long, blonde hair on the

flame. It had taken me four years to grow it out after my glasses and braces had finally come off in high school, and I was determined that no one would think of me as Tara Walker, four-eyed beaver, ever again.

“You out alone tonight?” Short, plain, and average leered at me.

“I was just headed home,” I answered with the cool, careful dignity of slight inebriation. There was no way I was going to tell this guy about the date who’d stood me up earlier, or how I’d made a fool of myself inside the bar.

“So what’s up with this place?” He surveyed the parking lot, unimpressed. “Shouldn’t there be, like, people here?”

Without thinking, I repeated what I’d said to Nora inside the bar. “Maybe the latest slashing is keeping people away.”

As soon as the words left my mouth, I wished I had them back. The New England Slasher could have been anyone—including either of the two men standing in front of me. A wave of nausea swept over me and I dropped the cigarette so I could grind it out under my shoe.

“I, um...” I swallowed hard. “I have to go.”

As I walked away, short, pale, and average muttered something about stuck up bitches and I glanced back over my shoulder to see him stalk into the bar in disgust. Unlike his vertically challenged buddy, though, James Dean seemed to have some manners.

“Sorry about that.” He gave me a self-deprecating smile. “Vic had a few too many before we came out

tonight, and he gets nervous around women. You know how some guys are—they'll say anything to make a pretty girl notice them."

I paused. Now that I was no longer trying to inhale cancer on a stick, I felt significantly less vomit-y. And my inner alarm had quieted since 'Vic' had gone inside.

"Come on, let's go in and I'll buy you a drink to make it up to you," my new friend said, seeing me weaken. He flashed an open, easy smile. "I promise I won't bite."

I couldn't help smiling back. He was seriously cute. "I'm Tara."

"You're gorgeous," he countered.

I rolled my eyes, but his compliment hit the mark, a bulls-eye to my bruised ego.

I tossed my hair, letting him catch a hint of my jasmine-scented conditioner and leaned against the wall of the bar to steady myself. The raspy bite of brick scraped sharply against my bare shoulders.

"I'll bet you feel good, too." James Dean's voice got lower as he took a step closer and bent down to brush his lips over mine.

I let him kiss me. Sometimes a little tall, dark and handsome can go a long way toward making a girl feel better.

The door to the bar opened and I tore my mouth away to look over his shoulder as someone stepped outside. Oh, wonderful. The object of my embarrassment himself.

Jackson didn't notice us at first, standing in the

spotlight created by the bare bulb hanging above the porch, but a cloud passed over his features when he saw the man pressing me into the shadows.

“Everything all right out here?”

When he spoke, his sexy, Southern drawl was a male counterpart to Nora’s, and I kicked myself again for not putting two and two together. They’d probably grown up together, been childhood sweethearts. I wondered for a second where he’d been for the past year or so since Nora had moved to town, but reminded myself it was none of my business.

“Everything’s fine,” my new friend said shortly, as I told myself the heat between my legs had nothing to do with Jackson and everything to do with him.

Jackson looked at me with dark eyes, waiting for me to confirm or deny what the other man said, but when I stayed silent, too embarrassed to say anything, he shrugged and went back inside.

I looked down at the stranger’s hands gripping my hips. What had seemed like an exciting, illicit rendezvous at first had taken on the seedy luster of a one-night stand. One that would leave me feeling even worse about myself in the morning.

I stepped away. “I really do have to get going. I have to work in the morning.”

I wasn’t on shift until late afternoon the next day, but I needed an excuse to get away.

“Ah, don’t be like that.” Ignoring my attempt to be polite, my suitor wrapped his fist up in my hair and pulled. Hard. I sucked in a breath through my teeth.

“Yeah, you like that, don’t you?” he said before I

could speak. It wasn't really a question.

"Let me go!" I pushed at him, but he ignored me again and bit my neck.

My pulse pounded and now I felt real fear, a dry-mouthed, gut-clenching sensation that was more than just caution or unease. My neck throbbed where he'd bitten me and I tried to push him away again. He responded by grabbing my wrists with one hand and bringing his knee up between my legs so I was riding high on his thigh.

"Stop it. I don't want this." My voice was unfamiliar in my ears, sharp with panic and adrenaline. The bones in my wrist ground together painfully as he tightened his grip.

Then he pressed his mouth to mine again, roughly. I turned my head away and made a move to the left, trying to pull away and get around him. But he pushed me back harder against the brick and my head bounced against the wall. Bright points of light danced in my field of vision. Tears ran in wet streaks down my face as my wrists ached and my skull sang.

He unzipped my shorts with his free hand and shoved them down. I thrashed against his grip on me, but it was no good. He was too strong.

I tried to yell, but nothing came out. I twisted one hand free and tried again to push him off. He slammed my head back into the wall, harder this time, and twisted the arm he still held. I cried out in pain and he sealed his mouth over mine, cutting off the sound. He unzipped his own jeans and I felt him hard against my thigh. I gagged, sure I would be sick. I tried to twist

away, but there was nowhere to go with rough, solid brick behind me.

I shut my eyes. This wasn't happening. This was just some dream I was having. I'd had a few too many, gotten a cab home, and passed out in front of the TV. I would wake up in a minute and be freaked out enough to sleep with the lights on.

The man pressing me up against the wall groaned, and I opened my eyes again. This was no dream. It hurt too much to be a dream. My head and my twisted arm both ached, and I tried again to get away. But exhaustion made my efforts feeble.

"Stop," I begged. "Please, stop."

He didn't listen, just pushed against me.

I heard a dispassionate newscaster in my head, relating the tragic attack on Tara Walker, latest victim of the New England Slasher, and shook my head in an attempt to clear it. Whether this guy really was the Slasher or not, the result would be the same if I didn't fight him off—I would still be a victim. I thought of how devastated my friends would be if he hurt me, killed me. What it would do to my mother. My father had left us when I was young, and I was all she had left.

At that thought, my pulse pounded in my ears and my field of vision narrowed so all I could see was him. Heat swept through my body and the pain in my arm and my head grew distant. There would be time to feel it later, but right now my world narrowed to this man.

"I said *stop*, asshole." I shoved as hard as I could with my uninjured right hand, and there was nothing

feeble about my efforts this time. My attacker flew across the parking lot and landed in the shadow of Nora's pickup truck, parked by itself in the corner. I wasn't sure where I'd found the strength, but it felt good.

Better than good, in fact. It felt great.

I cradled my injured left arm against my chest and clumsily pulled up my shorts before walking over to where my would-be rapist lay in the gravel. I looked down at him and he made a move like he was going to get up, but whatever he saw in my face made him stop. He froze, his eyes wide. I leaned down and grabbed him, one-handed. I felt strong, powerful.

"Who do you think you are?" I asked him. "Haven't you ever heard 'no means no'?"

He didn't answer me. Not surprising, since I'd picked him up by the throat. Acting on instinct, I pulled him closer—close enough to kiss, or maybe bite—and as the thought flitted through my head, I grinned. Maybe I would scare him into thinking I actually *would* bite him. The idea of showing him how it felt to be on the wrong end of unwanted attention was appealing in an eye-for-an-eye sort of way.

I snarled at him as he struggled. "Relax, baby. You'll like it."

He gasped, trying to draw in enough air to speak, or maybe scream for help, but nothing came out. I opened my mouth as I leaned closer and bared my teeth like I was auditioning for a role on *True Blood*. When he began to pant in fear, I pulled back, about to tell him to stop sniveling while I called the cops, but something

stopped me before I spoke. Something in my alcohol-and-pain-addled brain zeroed in on his breathing and I was seized by a sudden, wild urge to just make him *stop*.

Stop wheezing, stop trying to speak, stop acting like he was the victim.

Without giving it any thought, I lunged forward and locked my mouth onto his, smothering the rasping sounds he emitted. Startled by my own instinctive action, I stared into his eyes and sucked in a breath of surprise. He clutched at the hand I held around his throat and kicked for a few seconds before going rigid in my grasp. His skin swelled under my fingers and the moisture inside his mouth heated, nearly boiling.

Shocked, I let go of him and jumped back with an inarticulate cry. My newfound strength abandoned me and I sank to my knees in the gravel as he began to convulse.

I scrambled into a crouch next to him, chest heaving as I tried to breathe through my adrenaline and confusion. What the hell had I done?

I looked around wildly. My rage had disappeared and I tried not to panic now that I was left with the reality of an unconscious—or maybe even dead—body at my feet. Could you kill someone by sucking the air out of his lungs?

I swallowed hard as I wrapped my arms around myself and rocked back and forth. What was I supposed to do now? Go back into the bar and announce that I'd almost been raped, but no need to worry—I'd knocked the guy out? Or maybe even

killed him?

Yeah, that was so not gonna happen. Who would believe my story?

I'd been there, and even I didn't believe what had happened.

"Hey." I nudged the guy's shoulder.

No response. He was puffy, like someone had stuck a bicycle pump under his skin, and he had a definite bluish-purple tint. I couldn't tell if he was breathing or not, so I nudged him again.

Still nothing.

I got up and stood over the body for a few minutes, trying to think. I didn't feel even remotely drunk anymore, but I was exhausted and my head and arm were screaming at me. It was hard to think clearly. The situation was majorly freaky and I just wanted to go home and pretend it had never happened. But how could I?

He got what he deserved.

The voice came from inside my head, sharp and sibilant, like when I'd hissed at the guy a few minutes ago.

"Oh, God," I moaned aloud. "What's happening to me?" Clearly, I was losing my mind.

No one saw what happened, whispered the freaky-me voice again. *No witnesses.*

It was hard to focus, but the voice had a point. The longer I stuck around, the more likely it was that someone would come out of the bar, see me standing by the body, and accuse me of...something. I didn't know what had happened, but I knew it looked bad.

He got what he deserved, freaky-me said again and I propelled myself into action. My split personality—or whatever it was—was right. The unmoving body at my feet was hardly an innocent victim.

I leaned closer to study the...thing lying next to Nora's truck. It didn't really resemble a man anymore, and after a few seconds, I had to turn away. Its staring, bulging eyes looked at me accusingly.

Turning my back on it, I walked toward the more brightly lit section of the lot where my car was parked, glancing back over my shoulder every couple of seconds. I half expected the body to lurch up and follow me, but nothing happened. When I reached the car, I debated whether I was sober enough to drive, and finally reached the conclusion that whatever had come over me, it had dissolved the alcohol in my bloodstream.

I let out a desperate laugh—some silver lining. I was panicking, exhausted, and in pain, but at least I didn't feel drunk anymore.

I got in and put the car in drive, trying not to think about what I'd left behind me. My palms were sweaty on the steering wheel as I drove, fingers curled around it like claws, and I expected to hear the wail of sirens the whole way home. Finally, I pulled into the driveway. After fumbling with my keys for what felt like years, I managed to stagger inside, and made it as far as the couch before I collapsed with my shoes still on.

Before I lost consciousness, I had just enough time to hope I wouldn't wake to cops banging at the door.