**Chapter Two**

“Order up!”

Mark Haywood wiped his greasy hands on the already soggy and soiled apron as he reached up for the next ticket.

“Marci, grab the toast and plate it.”

Marci nodded at Mark and hurried to the toaster, plucking each piece of toast and slathering it with butter. She tossed both pieces on the plate and proceeded to line a couple of plates on each arm.

Mark shook his head and chuckled. He was always amused to see her line the hot plates on each arm without flaw. Every time he’d tried, they either seared through his flesh or toppled off into a shattered mess.

Winking, she headed towards her table and began serving their breakfast.

Mark scanned the last ticket quickly and realized that it was just a bowl of cold cereal and some fruit. Marci handled all of the non-hot food. He glanced around the nearly empty diner and called out to the waitresses that he was going to go smoke.

Making his way to the back room, he bumped into the skinny zit-faced kid who’d started just a week ago. He had warned his boss that this kid wasn’t good for anything but washing dishes and he turned out to be correct. They tried him on front grill for a day but he’d managed to cause a small oil fire and burned eighty percent of the meals he tried to make.

“Hey, watch it!” the teen snarled at Mark.

Mark continued to the backdoor where he pushed it open and took a deep breath. Morning was starting to come to an end and the lunch traffic was starting to pick up. He could see the base across the street from his smoke pit and watched as a jet taxied back to its hanger.

Lighting up a camel menthol, he inhaled deeply and sighed. He turned when he heard the door swing open, expecting to see zit-face.

“Menthols? I swear Mark, my balls are bigger than yours.” Marci snickered as she lit her Marlboro Red.

“You calling me a sissy?” he joked, with narrowed eyes.

Marci laughed and inhaled a deep puff of her smoke.

“You and those planes. What’s your fascination, anyways?” she asked.

Mark shrugged and continued gazing across the road and over at the base.

“I dunno. I used to want to join the Air Force but my pops always told me I was wasting my time. That they would have me thrown out before basic was done.”

Marci took another drag and shook her head.

“So why not now? You’re young. Not even thirty. You could join.” She said.

Mark flicked his ashes and turned his head toward Marci.

“Naw. That was the old dream. This? This is the new dream.” He joked, sweeping his hands in a glorious gesture to display the diner behind him.

“Oh, bull.” Marci laughed and coughed in her smokers-cough way.

Mark raised his eyebrow and watched for another ten seconds as she tried to catch her breath.

“Menthols don’t do that to me. But you enjoy those big balls.” He winked and tossed the butt onto the asphalt, grinding out the cigarette with the hell of his work boot.

“Whatever.” She rolled eyes and swatted at his arm.

Mark always found Marci to be pleasant. She was old enough to be his mother and he loved her like one. She was always bringing him toiletries and socks, like she knew or had a feeling that he was lacking in both departments.

Mark grinned at the thought and headed back inside to clock out. He was off for the morning and as he made his way to the register, he wondered what he would do with his day.

“Bill called out, can you stay for lunch too?” Diane called out.

“No can do, I got plans.” Mark told her.

“I’ll do it!” the zit faced teen called from the dish pit.

Diane turned toward Mark and pleaded with her eyes, mouthing, “Please!”

“Sorry.” He simply said and walked out of the diner.

Mark never had real plans but he figured it a good excuse. It worked for him, anyways. As he hopped into his red Ford Ranger truck, he sped away and turned up the radio.

Living in Arizona was always something that Mark wanted to do. He was fascinated with the desert, as plain as it seemed to others. The miles and miles of dusty sand sea, cactus and briars and a rocky mountain line being his only backdrop. Arizona was beautiful in that special way that only Arizona could be beautiful in. The heat was a plus. He hated growing up in New York. The winters were harsh and wet, which is something he grew to detest.

Mark was 28 years old and stood 6’1 tall. He wasn’t drop-dead handsome but he wasn’t ugly either. He had a chiseled jaw and straight Roman nose. His eyes were a deep green and his hair was dark brown in color. Working out every day gave him the appearance of one of the many Airmen littering the base.

He heard his cell phone ringing in his pocket and he frowned, pulling it out of his jean pocket while trying to also keep an eye on the road. No one ever called him. He didn’t have but a handful of friends in Arizona and rarely did his family, what was left, contact him. Being an only child to parents who were also only children, limited his Aunt/Uncle/Cousin stash. His grandparents were dead and his father was in prison.

“Hello?”

Mark made a right turn and headed towards his apartment that sat directly across from the West Gate of Luke Air Force Base.

“Mark?”

Mark switched the phone to his other ear and swung wide into the apartment parking lot. He navigated through the swarm of children getting off the bus on their half-day of school, due to teacher’s planning and made his way to his designated parking spot.

“Yeah? Speak.” He told the female voice.

“Mark Haywood?” the voice asked.

“I’m hanging up in one second.” He growled. He was starting to get annoyed.

“I’m sorry, I just didn’t think I would find you on the first try.” A sweet and gentle voice cooed over the phone line.

Mark raised his eyebrow and scanned his brain to see if the voice was recognizable. For the life of him, he couldn’t place it with a face or name. He parked the truck and opened the door, shifting so he could prop his boot up on the opened window ledge. He pulled out his pack of smokes and lit one up, waiting for Miss. Sweet Voice to keep talking.

“I-I’m sorry. My name is Bay. You don’t know me…” the voice started.

“Then why the hell are you calling me?” Mark asked.

He hadn’t meant to sound rough or mean but it was fun hearing her voice tremble. He didn’t have plans for the afternoon so this would be it, for now.

“You’re right. I shouldn’t have. I’m sorry.” The woman said quietly.

Mark blinked. All that show for a quick hang up? He didn’t think so.

“Now, I know exactly why you called.” He told her.

“You do?” the voice asked in surprise.

“Of course I do. I wouldn’t still be on the line, otherwise. But you know that already.” He grinned, having fun messing with her.

“I do?” she asked, again.

“Honey, you better start talking and making sense or I’m going to have to make it my mission to find you and beat it out of you.” He joked.

He heard her suck in her breath and he laughed out loud.

“That wasn’t funny!” she stammered.

“Now, now. I’m just having fun. How can I help you, Bay?”

“How do you know my name!?” she cried out.

“You told me.” He answered, dryly.

“Oh, that’s right. Um…” she started.

“Oh brother. Listen, Bay…”

“Look, I read the ad, I figured I would try and see if you were interested in a date with me, too, but clearly you aren’t so forget it. That’s what I get for pulling the damn tab off that paper in the bathroom.” She said hastily.

“Date? Tab? Lady, what are you talking about?” he asked, scratching his head.

“The diner I eat breakfast at every morning, the bathroom had your ad. Clever spot for it, women’s restroom and all… but if you didn’t want any more dates, why didn’t you take it down?” she asked, sounding a bit miffed.

Just then, his phone vibrated and while still on the phone with Bay, he glanced down to see a text from Marci coming in. He rolled his eyes and opened it.

\*Incoming Text- Marci: Rofl. You’re welcome. I told you that you needed to go out more. She’s a sweet one. Told me this morning she would be calling.\*

Mark threw his head back and roared with laughter. That little sneaky shit. He could hardly blame her as he had set her up with the old man who came in every morning at promptly four in the morning and drank endless cups of coffee.

“Listen, Bay. Are you busy this afternoon?”

“Really?” she asked, incredulously.

“Lady, did you or did you not call me so that we could go out on a date?” he asked, impatiently.

“I did, but…” she started.

“I’ll pick you up at the diner tomorrow evening. Be there around 7 PM.” He told her briskly before hanging up.

Glancing down at his phone, he shook his head with a hint of a smile on his lips and began texting Marci back.

\*Outgoing Text – Mark: Very nice. In fact, I’m doing a small golf clap for you right now. You old bat. You’re next.\*

Grinning wickedly, he shoved the phone into his pocket and got out of his truck. Reaching for his cowboy hat, as he never left home without it, he plopped it onto his head and made his way to the apartment buildings. He could feel the sleep deprivation kicking in as he dizzily made his way to the apartment. He would need to grab a nap after lunch if he wanted to make this date with Miss. Sweet Voice.

People were often very curious about Mark. He was a city slicker, gone cowboy in the desert. Not a familiar trend around these parts but he refused to let any city change him. If he had, New York would have destroyed him.

He reached his apartment door and shoved the key into the door knob. Stepping inside, he sighed contently at the brisk cold air pouring out of the window A/C vent. It felt refreshing, especially being that it was already 102 degrees and not even noon yet. After discarding his wallet onto his dresser and putting his keys on the hook, he made his way towards the bathroom and turned the shower on. That was one thing about Arizona that he didn’t care for. The water never got ice cold in the shower. The dry heat kept all of the plumbing lukewarm and it was impossible to enjoy an ice cold shower without ice cold water.

After undressing, Mark stepped into the shower and let the water flow over his back. He could almost feel the diner itself oozing off of his body and piddling around the drain. The diner always made him feel grimy after standing over a hot grill and playing in grease all day. As he soaped his body up, he thought about when he’d moved to Arizona. His dad had just been busted for illegal gambling ring activity and his mother was a nervous wreck with a drinking problem. He couldn’t pin his dad for his mother’s addiction, as she did this his whole life. The pair of them were just screwed in the head.

He remembered his father screaming, “Take care of your mother!” as the cops dragged him out of their apartment basement. He had tried. He took his mother to an AA meeting that evening and even thought that recent events might fly her straight, until she was kicked out for smuggling sips from her tiny flask. He left that evening.

Mark felt like a bit of a gypsy, as he was always wanting to be on the move. A year or two in one place seemed a bit ridiculous, when he’d been offered a whole huge world to go see. At least, that was his way of thinking. One thing was for sure, he wanted to end up in Texas, on a ranch that he owned. It was the main reason he kept his cowboy hat around. To hold onto that dream.

Mark finished rinsing the soap and turned the water off. Reaching up for the towel, he dried his face first, then proceeded to dry the rest of his body. A knock at the door startled him and he muttered under his breath, “Shit.”

“What is this, bother Mark day?” he muttered as he wrapped the towel around his narrow hips and sauntered to the door. He swung it open and said, “Yes?”

The apartment manager stood with a receipt book in hand, glancing down at the towel before blushing and looking back up at Mark. Mark raised one eyebrow and smirked before she finally spoke.

“Uh, sorry sir. I’m sorry. Listen, I can come back and-“she stammered.

He took this opportunity to interrupt her and opened the door up a bit wider.

“No, it’s fine. Come on in. You’re here for rent?” he asked, licking his lips and grinning.

Miss. Berndhart blushed again and stepped inside. As she did, Mark leaned past her and shut the door closed, winking at her.

“Don’t want to let out all of the air conditioning, unless you’re going to add utilities to my rent, of course.” He joked.

Miss. Berndhart let out a nervous giggle and tucked a loose strand of mahogany hair behind her ear. She glanced around briefly before turning her attention back to the receipt book. Clicking the pen briskly, she started to fill out the information and then asked him if he would be paying with a check or cash.

Mark walked towards his bedroom, grabbing his wallet from the dresser and pulling out the bills. He counted them quickly and walked back into the living room. Miss. Berndhart was standing by the front door and scribbling onto the receipt.

“Cash okay?” he asked.

She nodded and began to finish filling out the amount. Once she ripped it out of the book, she exchanged it for the cash and counted it out herself.

“It’s all there.” He said, dryly.

“Just checking. It’s policy.” She explained quickly.

Nodding, she tucked the money into the bank deposit bag and zipped it closed. She opened the door and started to step out of his apartment. He held the door and watched as she walked down the steps, turning to thank him.

“Thanks, we appreciate you and enjoy having you as a tenant.” She smiled and said. She seemed much more comfortable as the distance grew between them. Mark rolled his eyes and nodded, shutting the door behind him and walking back into his bedroom to start getting dressed.

Miss. Berndhart was an attractive woman but her skittishness and nervousness turned him off. Still, he didn’t mind watching her leave. He appreciated attractive women but he knew that deep down, it would never be a deciding factor on whatever woman he ended up with.

Grabbing a pair of fresh Wranglers from his closet and a t-shirt from his dresser, he walked over and tossed them on the bed. He had a specific ritual for after showers. He would get his clothes on the bed. Go brush his teeth, naked, because he hated accidently spitting toothpaste on his fresh outfit and he did nearly every time when he was dressed. Then slather on deodorant, get dressed and finally top it off with his favorite scent, Stetson.

Once he finished his routine, he walked over to the couch and sat down, propping his feet up on the coffee table. His rumbling stomach reminded him that it was time for lunch and he sighed with annoyance as he stood back up and made his way to the kitchen. He wobbled a bit, chalking it up to be either lack of sleep or food and opened the fridge. Grabbing the leftover, half-eaten sub, he made his way back to the couch and began to eat.

Just as he ate his last bite, the cell phone rang again and he cursed under his breath as he grabbed for it and answered.

“You have a collect call from an inmate at Otisville Correctional Institution. To accept charges, press 1 now.”

Mark quickly pressed one and waited impatiently. His father’s phone calls always stressed him out and he never knew what to talk about. In his opinion, his dad was going off the deep end and Mark just didn’t want to be bothered anymore.

“Son?”

“Dad, how’s it going?”

“Not good, son. Not good at all. Are you alone?” his father asked in a hushed voice.

Mark rolled his eyes. Here we go, he thought.

“Yeah dad, I’m alone.”

“Don’t take the damn tone with me, Mark. I’ve had about enough of your shit. You left your mother stranded in New York and took off to chase skirts in the frigging desert.”

Mark closed his eyes and pinched his pointer and thumb to the bridge of his nose. He could feel his anger building and he was trying very hard not to lose control or his temper.

“Dad, don’t start. You know damn well why I left mom there. She had the problem before and after your arrest. She doesn’t want my help or anyone else’s for that matter.” He started.

“Mark, I had them again.” His father said, cutting him off.

“What?”

“The dreams, I’m having them again. This time-“

“Stop! Just stop, damn it. I have to go.” Mark snapped back into the phone.

With that, Mark slammed the phone down on the table and slung himself back on the couch. Closing his eyes, he rubbed his temples and stewed with anger. His father was having the dreams again. It took him a moment to process this and he remembered the last time his father had “dreams.” They were in New York and he was picking his father up from an underground basement casino. Illegal, of course. His mother had been drinking profusely because she was angry that he’d gone again after promising he would stop. She sent Mark after him, as usual and Mark had obliged.

When he arrived, he found his father rummaging through his pockets and screaming at the other members. He had to calm his dad down for ten minutes before getting him to admit that he didn’t have any money left and they wouldn’t let him gamble. He had started offering inappropriate deals to be able to gamble, involving his wife and Mark was furious. He punched his father that day, for the first time in his life. His father glared angrily back at him and told him that he would be in prison soon enough.

Mark remembered laughing in his father’s face because prison was the farther place that he would ever end up. He’d never been arrested in his life and didn’t drink or do drugs. But his father insisted, telling him that he’s been seeing it in his dreams. It made Mark wonder if his father had been dabbling in drugs, himself.

“Mark my words, you little piece of shit. You will be in prison and there won’t be any getting out. Murder looks good on you, son. I seen it!” his father had screaming as spit slung from his words.

Mark had to leave him there and get out of there. He thought about how he didn’t go home that night. He was worried for his mother but also felt that he couldn’t save her either. This wasn’t the first time that his father had screamed about dreams. For a few months earlier, his father would often come to him in that same hushed voice he used on the phone and try to convince him to cover it up. Mark never knew what that meant until the recent week when his dad told him that Murder could be covered up correctly if researched right. Mark shook his head, remembering how his father had huge wide eyes and a stressed voice, while telling him that he needed to be careful not to get caught.

A few days later, Mark had gone to a Mental Health clinic to receive information about admitting a parent. This was just a few months before he took off for Arizona. He wanted to at least try and help his parents become as close to sane as they could. Unfortunately, the clinic required a prepayment before allowing someone to stay at the clinic and it was money that Mark just didn’t have. Unbeknownst to him, he wouldn’t need it, as his father was arrested shortly after for illegal gambling and drug trafficking.

Mark sat up and glanced at his bed. He decided he would go ahead and take his nap before his date with Bay tonight. Absentmindedly walking over to the bed, he tried to brush off the thoughts of his deranged father and hopeless, alcoholic mother and get some sleep.