

CHAPTER 1

The shower room was a germ breeding ground. Truckers with no shower shoes touched their toes against furry green bacteria. Rust and corrosion covered the faucets. Bo started to undress and avoided eye contact as he always did with the other men in the room.

It wasn't because he feared them. His stocky legs carried a solid frame, built up by loading and unloading his trucks, and regular workouts when he wasn't traveling. His ripped biceps and athleticism protected him. He was a handsome man with blond curly hair, aqua-green eyes, kissable lips, and a trimmed goatee.

Bo undressed slowly and with precision, looking over his shoulder. The steam from the shower created a protective cover so no one would see he'd kept his underwear on.

Men get lonely on the road, Bo knew all too well. Better safe than sorry, he always thought.

He wasn't interested in the few who made a pass; he could always politely decline. Some would get aggressive, but Bo knew how to make them back down with his 'don't-even-think-about-it' stare that made them think twice. Still, it paid to be alert, and he was always glad when he found himself alone.

The shower felt good but it was hard to feel clean in these forever dirty public showers filled with truckers—the gypsies of the highways. The road dirt swirled around Bo's feet and down the grimy drain. The water circled, flashing Bo back to one of the last moments with his sister Rose, before when...

It was a humid day. The air was weighty and the sky looked like a bruise. A dangerous storm hovered, ready to drop like a bomb.

"Stop squirting me with the hose!" Rose yelled. They were hungry and muddy.

“Mom and dad will kill me if you track in dirt.” Bo laughed and kept hosing her down.

“I said Stop! You’re not my boss!” Rose stomped away.

She disappeared two weeks later.

They blamed him, but what they didn’t say hurt the most. No one ever asked him, “How was your day?” Bo’s mother would always say to his brother something like, “I made your favorite dinner, Doug. Meatloaf, potatoes, and asparagus!” Then she would fill Bo’s plate with asparagus, knowing how much he hated the taste. Sometimes it was more subtle. But Doug was always the hero.

Bo’s parents had to have a fall guy. He was supposed to be watching her. He blamed himself. Eventually his dad ran off with his secretary while mom gambled away their savings and moved in with Aunt Doris. It was then Bo escaped to the streets at sixteen.

Now, so many years later, he rode the roads, looking for Rose. The only one that had a semi-normal life was Doug. And Doug was an asshole.

Bo tucked a fresh t-shirt in his faded jeans, ran his fingers through his blond mane and started to head back to his truck. He was hungry and he was sure Polly was too.

“Hey mister,” the boy’s voice startled Bo out of his daydream. “I can wash your wheels and wax your hood. I’m starving, haven’t eaten for two days.”

The other truck drivers had warned Bo about the homeless kids coming in and promising to do some type of service, then robbing you blind. Bo reached into his jean pocket.

“Here’s five bucks. Get some food and water. If you want to make some more, I have some work you can help me with. Come back in a half an hour.”

“Thank you, mister, thank you!”

Bo had grown up on the streets. He could tell by the young man’s eyes he was sincere. Desperate. That look stays with you. He didn’t think he’d see the kid again, though. Too bad.

“You still driving cross country with that cat?” The cashier chuckled, ringing up dinner for Polly and Bo.

“Yes, my traveling buddy. Polly likes to sit in the passenger seat and look out the window.” Bo smiled.

“Well, I’ll be damned. Anything else, cutie?” The old woman flashed a mischievous grin.

“Grab me some of those cigars, darling.” Bo pointed to the yellow and brown package on the shelf.

“Sure thing.” She tilted her head toward the window, where a girl was watching, trying to catch his eye. “Looks like you might have a friend.”

“Thanks, keep the change.” Bo gathered the food and his cigars and headed out. It was dark already and Bo was tired.

“Hey sugar, want some company?” The young girl leaned against his truck.

“How old are you?” Bo crossed his massive forearms.

“Look buddy, do you want company or not?” The young girl blew a big bubble and popped it with her teeth.

She can’t be any older than fourteen, Bo thought to himself. “Have you eaten? I’m going to eat dinner and feed my cat, Polly.”

The girl grinned, suddenly just a kid. “You have a cat?”

“Do you want to meet her? Come on in—she will love the company.” Bo climbed up the rig and unlocked the passenger side for her.

“Look mister, I can’t get into your truck without some cash.” But she couldn’t resist Polly’s long-haired beauty. “Aww! Is this Polly?” The young girl joined the cat on the front seat.

“Here, feed her a treat. I’ll split my dinner with you if you like.”

“I had a cat once; he was all white like a cotton ball.” Her face knotted.

“Hey, what’s wrong, sweetie?” Bo set down half a sandwich and chips on a napkin.

“One morning I woke up and he wasn’t there. His food bowl and toys were all gone. My mom said his owner came back and got him. But I found Snowy on the street. I had him for over a year. I know my

father took him out into the country and dumped him. That's what he said he was going to do. Whenever he was mad."

"I'm sorry. Sweetie, can I ask what your name is?"

"Pixie," She rolled her gum up in the napkin, and took a big bite of her dinner.

"What's your real name?" Bo laughed.

"Look, I can't tell you that. My pimp would blow a gasket!" Pixie finished the sandwich in two quick bites.

"Is that what happened to your eye? He hit you?" Bo clenched his teeth together. *Nothing worse than someone who hurts children.*

"He didn't mean to. It was an accident. He loves me." Pixie held Polly close to her.

Bo's knuckles turned white on the steering wheel. He wanted to beat the guy to a pulp.

Pixie's phone buzzed, almost falling off the arm rest. "I need to go. Thank you for the food."

"Here's fifty dollars—don't give any to him. I will be back through in a few days. Find me. Come see Polly."

"Are you sure you don't need anything else?" Pixie touched his hand.

Bo pulled back. "I do want a favor. Get away from him and go back home. Finish school. It's not too late." Bo pleaded with her.

"No one has ever been this nice to me. I'll think about it." She paused, then looked up. "Trisha."

"What?"

"My name is Trisha."

Before Bo could say anything, they heard a rough voice from the parking lot. "Pixie! Where the hell are you? Answer your phone! Where the fuck are you?"

"Roy, I'm over here! I'm coming! I got to go. Bye, Polly. What's your name, mister?"

"Bo. Can I walk you out?"

"No! I'll be OK."

When she was half out the door, Bo wished he'd just driven away with her in the cab. Roy kept yelling. "There you are you little bitch!

When I say fifteen minutes. I mean fifteen minutes!”

“Let go of me, Roy!” Pixie tried to fight him off as he dragged her out of the truck.

“Hey asshole!” Bo jumped out of his truck and picked Roy up with one hand and slammed him on the hard ground. Bo grabbed Roy by his throat, lifted him up and threw him on the ground and sat on him.

“Bo, no! Don’t please!” Pixie yelled.

“You sick bastard! You like to beat little girls. Come on, hit me!” Bo fists slammed into his face. The darkness swallowed him whole. He kept going until two of Roy’s cronies pulled him off and held him back so Roy could get his revenge.

“Who the fuck are you?” Roy swung at Bo, who pushed back and managed to duck so Roy missed.

“He’s a trick. Here’s the money!” Pixie handed him the crumpled-up cash.

Roy wiped the blood from his lip and picked up his dirty baseball cap. “Are you sweet on my girl?” He snatched Bo up with his collar. “I should slice your pretty face.” Roy pressed the shiny blade against his cheek.

“Roy! The pigs are coming. I see their lights!” Pixie whispering loudly.

“Lucky for you, boy.” He slid his knife inside the sheath and covered it up with his dirty t-shirt. “This isn’t over. I will be watching you.” Roy spat blood on Bo’s shoes. “Let him go,” he squealed.

They disappeared into the darkness. Bo winced with pain as he took a breath in. He headed for the rig; he didn’t need to run into the cops.

“Now Polly, where were we? Here you go, girl.” Her big mitten paws cupped the cat treat. “We need to be careful girl—bad energy everywhere.” As he got ready for the night in the truck as usual, Bo scooped her up and tucked her under the covers with him. “Goodnight, girl. I hope tomorrow is better.”

In the dream Bo and Rose are in their backyard playing tag. Rose laughs and jumps around, her corn silk hair bouncing with every jump. Two men with blurred faces appear from behind the bushes. They snatch up Rose. She tries to scream but nothing comes out. Bo's body is paralyzed. They run away, Rose pounds on one man's back while Bo watches and screams with no sound.

Rose finds her voice as she gets farther and farther away. "Bo, why won't you help me? I need you! I hate you! I hate you, Bo!"

The screeching of tires woke Bo abruptly from the familiar dream. His shirt and blond hair were damp with sweat. Polly curled in a half-moon on the floor with her tail wrapped around like a blanket.

His steel toed boots were within reach, near a fresh pair of socks.

"I should have used these on Roy's cronies," Bo muttered as he laced them tight. He slapped on some deodorant and grabbed his cigars. Today was going to be a hot one. He was heading further into Arizona to drop off his load and get a pickup.

He poured the last of his coffee from his thermos and tugged hard on his cigar. This trip was difficult. He would go through his hometown, full of old girlfriends, a few family members that he wasn't close to and the house where Rose vanished. He always drove by and sat outside for hours, reliving that day over and over. Each time he vowed never to go back again. But then, he always did.

He would try not to stop, but when he reached the Arizona state line, he'd say what he always said to himself: *Now Bo, listen to me. You have no business near the old house. So, no need to swing by.* As the words left his mouth, he would find himself out in front of his childhood home, praying to any deity to take him back to that day. He needed some kind of retribution.

He knew his curvy, too smart therapist would tell him, "Bo, you like torturing yourself. It allows a permanent place for guilt to reside." How could he tell her the truth? Guilt and shame were all he had ever known. It was hard to explain. Revisiting that day made him feel alive. The pain kept Rose tangible.

He'd stop, even though he knew everyone in the small town knew his truck. They would whisper about him, and Rose's disappearance.

It had been five years since Bo last saw his brother. Doug and his wife lived in town along with their two German shepherds and two kids, Mark, twelve years old, and Violet, nine years old. She was named after Rose, two beautiful girls with flower names.

Doug had a huge chip on his shoulder. Twenty-five years since Rose was kidnapped, but he still blamed Bo as if it happened last week. Bo had tried to write to him when he was in basic training, and many times after that, but Doug never responded.

On that fateful day Rose was taken, he'd lost his whole family. *Driving gives you too much time to think.*

The glare of the setting sun blinded him even with his sunglasses on. It was dusk and Bo was almost to the state line. His hometown wasn't too far. The more scenery he recognized the tighter the knot in his chest gripped him. He didn't have to drop the load off until tomorrow. So, he would grab some dinner and have a drink at the local tavern.

"Come on Polly. Sit in my lap." Polly gladly stretched and made her way toward Bo bumping his face and love-biting his goatee. "How about I save you some strips of my dinner tonight? A special treat." Polly meowed with approval.

Bo pulled up and parked the big rig. He sat on his bed and tidied up the sleeping space. Then he changed his clothes after pushing Polly gently off, and combed his thick blonde hair. "Love you girl. Be back soon."

It was Friday night, Men and women were dressed up for dates, and sexual energy was electrifying the air.

"Table for one?" The waitress, a powerhouse femme, looked him directly in the eye.

"Yes, thank you." Bo replied.

"Right this way, sir."

She moved through the crowded restaurant easily, customers parting like the Red Sea.

Bo sat and picked up the menu. She smiled—flirtatiously? "Can I get you anything to drink? Sir"

"A beer would hit the spot. Also, a burger and fries, then some chicken strips to go." He handed back the menu. She leaned into Bo's

face.

“You know, you look really familiar. May I ask your name?” She leaned in a little.

“Mm. Bo—I’m just passing through.” Bo’s eyes shifted from her intense gaze.

“That’s strange. Do you have a sister or brother that lives here?”

“No, I don’t.” Bo snapped. “I just want my food and beer, ok?”

“Sure, I didn’t mean to pry.”

Damn! Bo, what is wrong with you? An attractive woman is interested in you, and you chase her off! Good job!

“Here is your beer. Your food will be out shortly.”

“Ma’am, I apologize. Bad day, and I didn’t mean to take it out on you. Let me make it up to you. Would you like to join me for a drink at The Corral? Tonight, after work of course.” Bo flashed his beautiful teeth.

“I usually don’t go out with someone who is rude to me. But I might change my mind.”

She came back with the food and the bill. He finished his meal, taking in all the families and couples out for Friday night dinner. Table for one felt lonely. Flipping the check over to leave a generous tip, he grinned when he saw her name—Heather—in flowing ink. She had written *I get off work at 10:00. See you soon.*

* * *

The night air was alive with crickets and locusts singing their symphonies. Lightening or maybe firebugs flashed and whirled in midair. Bo loved the beauty and complexity of the natural world. He smiled sadly as the memory came to him.

Rose was pulling at the jar.

“Rose, be careful—you don’t want to hurt them. Leave them in the mason jar and we can watch them all light up.”

“I want to make a necklace with their green light.” Rose fetched one from the jar.

“Rose, no!” Bo hollered, rushing toward her.

The lightless bug fell to the ground and twitched. Then it stopped. "Bo! What happened? It won't fly anymore!" Rose muttered through her tears.

"Don't cry. I will take him to the garden. Don't touch the others—let them have their light." Sorry little guy: now you can be free.

Polly had her chocolate chip paws on the truck's window, her reptilian eyes zeroed in on Bo and the bag he carried.

"Good girl, Polly. Are you hungry?" He shredded up the chicken for her and changed the water. He was itching for another beer. "Maybe tomorrow after we drop off the shipment, we can go to the park so you can stretch your paws." Polly was wolfing down the chicken, bumping his beard and purring out loud for more. "Slow down! I will save a big piece for later."

Bo lit up a fresh cigar and closed his eyes, leaning back against the seat. Part of him dreaded coming back home and the other part yearned for it. Rose's memory was plastered across this ghost town. Sometimes he wanted to forget all about her. He was running while standing still.

The heat was sweltering as he walked toward the tavern. Dirt balls exploded under his heavy black boots. His hair was wavy and damp with perspiration. People were hanging outside, and the music was loud. Inside a band was playing, and the shuffling of cowboy boots on the hardwood floor kept beat with the bass. Bo found an empty bar stool where he could observe the lively crowd.

"What's your poison?" A familiar-looking middle-aged cowboy with a huge hat and striped button shirt asked.

"Bottle of Bud with a whiskey back." Bo needed a little liquid courage with Heather. This was still his hometown bar, and he was on high alert. The ice clanked against his teeth as the liquid concoction coated his throat and sent electricity through his limbs. The heat and the rhythm and the alcohol created chemistry. Bodies swayed slowly and hands roamed freely.

I miss women. Bo thought to himself. But he didn't have time to settle down. He never did. He had to find Rose. *Maybe someday...*

"Another round, fella?" The bartender spat black juice into a dirty cup.

Bo nodded, placing him in his memory. Buck had aged a lot since the last time Bo came through town. Buck still didn't recognize Bo. *I'm a man of mystery!* Bo chuckled.

"Congratulations to the happy couple! First round is on me!" A booming voice bounced off the walls along with cheering and clapping.

"Hey Buck, Doug and his wife want another round for our table." A bald man with a baseball cap and faded jeans hollered over the patrons in line.

"Ben, I told you before there are customers in front of you. I will send a waitress over when I can."

Slam! The skinny, red-faced man's hand pounded on the wet countertop. "Listen, Buck, it seems to me you have a short memory. The way I heard it your pussy brother freaked out overseas and almost killed everyone. Doug went in and saved the whole unit while your brother cried like a little bitch in the corner. So," Ben tightened his grip on Buck's shirt sending a button flying into a drink across the bar, "the way I see it he saved your yellow-bellied brother's life. Get our drinks, Buck. And it is so generous of you—on the house too."

The bully's upper lip curled and his eyebrow's narrowed down to an almost a perfect W, making him look even more smug. Buck started working on the drinks.

Ben's eyes were black olives—soulless. Bo looked straight ahead and focused his energy on the hole in the wall, right above the saguaro cactus on the paneled wall. "Asshole brother won't even recognize me." Bo was in no mood for Doug and his self-righteous friends. But he also knew, if you stay too long in one place, the truth might just show itself.

A cold shiver traveled up his backbone. *Fuck, Doug is here with the good ole boys. I don't need this shit tonight! We will end up fighting and he will blame me again for Rose and the divorce. Then he'll throw Mark and Violet in my face, reminding me I'm forbidden to see them. I'm leaving.* He turned blindly towards the door.

"Hold on there, cowboy. Where's the fire?" Heather cocked her head to one side.

"Hello, Darlin," Bo pulled his cowboy hat lower to hide his face. She smiled, and pulled up a seat next to him.

“Where were you headed?” She sat with her legs crossed, and tossed her hair back over her delicate shoulders. “The usual, Buck.”

“Put it on my tab. I was going out for a cigar.” Bo lied, trying to pull himself together.

“My grandfather smoked a pipe. I hated the smell, but after he passed, my mom and I were cleaning out his den and found the wooden box he made to hold his tobacco. Now I cherish the box. It smells like him, hickory and cherry tobacco.” Heather’s voice cracked. She tossed back a long belt of her drink. “I’m sorry,” she added, not wanting to say too much.

“No problem. I’m more than happy to listen.”

“So, Bo, where are you from? Bet you don’t have any family. Truck driving is a lonely occupation. I know the look.”

“What look is that?” Bo gulped.

“The fifty-yard stare. Longing for meaningful conversation and planting their roots somewhere. But truckers have a gypsy heart.”

“Sounds like some trucker broke your heart. Some of us are reluctant to “plant their roots.” It’s too much to ask of a woman to always wait for her husband out on the road for days at a time.”

“If I loved him and had a family it wouldn’t be hard at all.” Heather’s hazel eyes danced in her soft round face.

Bo appreciated her delicate, strong features. Her hands were strong, too, from hard work, feminine but calloused. “So, are you Irish?” Bo knew the answer.

“Why would you think that?” Heather asked with an impish grin.

“Your satin auburn hair, fair skin and hazel eyes. They’re beautiful and indicative of Irish descent.” Bo sipped his whiskey sour. He wanted to stay alert. She really was beautiful.

“I could be a vampire.” Heather chuckled. “But yes, Irish on my father’s side. Third generation. My grandfather came over and settled in Maine. He moonlighted as an amateur boxer for a while to put food on the table. He had to give it up because he broke the bones in his hands too many times. He loved carpentry too much to take the chance of becoming crippled.”

“So, Heather. Do you have any children?” The light conversation

quickly shifted. Bo could sense her becoming instantly guarded. He touched her hand. "I'm sorry. Let's just enjoy the music."

"What about you? Do you have a family?" Heather's eyes were intense.

"Well...my parents are divorced. I have a brother and well, I hope to still have a sister." Bo finished his drink avoiding her penetrating eyes.

"You hope to have a sister? OK, I get it. You don't want to talk about it either. At least tell me where you're from."

"I'm a wildcat." Bo showed his fangs and curled his fingers like a tiger's claw.

"Ha! You're from Arizona?"

"Yes, I am. I still love the southwest. You said your family is from Maine. What are you doing here?"

"How about I play some music on the old jukebox?" Heather stood up.

"Sure, here are some quarters." Bo watched her walk away. She must have been hurt as badly as he had, and he needed to handle her with care. Just like Rose's porcelain dolls at their tea parties.

Heather was strong, but she had a crack just like Rose's baby doll Betty, whose arm had a thin line where she'd hit the floor a little too hard. Except Heather's injury wasn't superficial. She picked a slow song on the jukebox. Bo kept his back on Doug and his gang and walked up to Heather, tipping his hat. "Would you like to dance with me?"

Bo made the decision for her by gently taking her hand. His dark eyes centered on hers. Then they were dancing. Heather's silky hair brushed across his cheek and he caught a whiff of her perfume. The smell filled every pore of his skin.

"Where did you learn to dance?" Heather inquired.

"The movies. Classic movie night, everything from *Saturday Night Fever* to *Grease*. I was obsessed with it. I knew every move that John Travolta made. I also loved Fred Astaire, and Ginger Rodgers. It was magic."

"Did you find your Sandy?" Heather whispered in his ear.

Her hot breath sent ripples across his stomach making him ache

to kiss her. “No, Marty was more my type—light eyes, dark hair.” Bo touched her hair.

“I think you’re leaving out one detail, well a big detail.” Heather lightly squeezed his pecs as they both chuckled.

“I was trying to be a gentleman.” Bo blushed.

“You’re not blind, are you? Another drink?”

They settled at a corner table, and Bo ordered two more whiskey sours. Buck’s face had shame written all over it. He needed this job. Bo remembered his wife’s inoperable brain tumor. The debt alone must have crushed him. Bo came through often enough, and listened from the sidelines, so he kind of kept track. Back in the day, Buck was in Vietnam, decorated. Twenty years ago, Buck would have wiped the floor with Doug and his cronies.

“Keep the change, Buck.” Bo felt a little smug, hiding under everyone’s nose. He had changed so much since the last time he’d seen his brother. He could hear him across the bar, his voice too loud and a little mean. The past was jumping up everywhere today.

Bo was watching the snowflakes fall in perfect unison, blanketing the brown grass. It had been six months since Rose disappeared. Bo had to find her. And bring her back. Maybe, just maybe, they would stop blaming him then. A muffler backfired like a shotgun outside in the driveway. Bo’s heart sank; he knew who it was.

“Where are mom and dad?” Doug barked.

“They are out putting up flyers for Rose.” Bo said over his shoulder. He didn’t want to look at the disgust on his brother’s shiny face.

“Shouldn’t you be out helping? You’re the reason she is gone!” Doug tossed his keys on the kitchen table.

“Shouldn’t you be out saving the world from our enemies?” Bo lashed back, clenching his teeth.

“Fuck you! What would you know about country, or honor? Huh? Nothing, that’s what. Mom and dad can’t wait for you to leave. Between Rose and the weird books you read, and your clothes. You’re a freak. They deserve to have some normalcy.”

Doug stomped off to his bedroom.

I hate it when he comes home on furlough! Bo hissed under his breath.

Asshole! Bo found his way to Rose's room, a shrine, really. Everything was exactly the way she left it. He touched her butterfly barrettes. Rose always had one in her blond hair.

They would chase monarchs in the garden and watch for caterpillars, keeping them in a glass jar on the dresser, feeding them leaves and watching them wiggle, until they became a chrysalis. Bo loved the transformation. It gave him hope. He found a brown spotted barrette that looked like a monarch and placed it in his pocket.

"Two whiskey sours." Bo announced to Heather, setting them on the wet table, making sure his back was turned towards Doug.

Suddenly the front door opened as two truckers hooting and hollering, already drunk, almost fell inside. They stumbled to the bar, cutting in front of people with no apology. Heather froze, her body slumping, her hands gripping her drink.

"Hey, Heather, what's wrong?" Bo leaned in closer.

"Do you see that bald man with the gray goatee?"

"Yes, he's hard to miss."

"That's my ex-husband. I need to go!" Heather got up quickly and snatched her purse.

"Woah." Bo cut her off. "You don't have to go. Finish your drink. He won't bother you."

"I'm sorry. I can't." Heather darted for the door.

"Shit." Bo bolted his drink and left to catch her, glaring at Doug on the way out. *Dumbass doesn't even know it's me.* He caught up to her in the parking lot. "Heather, wait! Roll your window down. Look you don't have to tell me what's wrong, but I want to see you again."

"I have to get home. Stop in the diner in the morning. We can have a cup of coffee." Heather rolled her window back up and sped away.

The dust kicked up from her tires covered his boots. He felt suddenly tired, glad his truck was close by.

"Polly, hey girl! Wow, you were hungry—you ate all your dinner. Come on girl, daddy is tired." Bo kicked off his boots and took his jeans off. He had a long day tomorrow. And the butterflies were twirling in his stomach. He picked up Rose's barrette and opened and closed it until he fell asleep.