

CHAPTER ONE

These are the longest three hours of my life.

I knew this would happen, and sure enough, here I was, stuck in the car with Mom giving me the evil eye. Mother and daughter trapped together in our Range Rover for 180 intolerable minutes.

In all fairness, it didn't start out that way. While Mom made her client calls on the cell phone, I created a zone of rock music around myself. Just me, the iPod, the earbuds, and the cooler-than-Aragorn lead singer taking me away, freeing my mind and spirit. I folded my knees against my body, crouching so no one driving past could see me.

Yes, at 17, already a high school junior, I still waited for the growth and boob fairies to visit me the way they had my classmates over three years ago.

Most of the time I hated being so small, but today I could shrink down into the seat and close my eyes, bobbing and rocking to the rhythm of the tunes.

Mom punctured my "zone" with what she considered the height of mother-daughter diplomacy. "What *is* that crap you're listening to?"

I braced myself for the argument, but tried to answer the question. "It's Better than Ezra, Mom."

"Who's Ezra?"

"Ezra's nobody. Better than Ezra's the name of the band."

"Well, they're louder than hell, Fiona. I can hear them right through your headphones."

I wanted to reply that I could hear her right through the earbuds, too, but I had promised myself I'd be on good behavior today.

“Where’s the Britney disc I got you for your birthday?”

Melted into a silver puddle in the trunk if I’m lucky. “It’s packed away. I just felt like a change of sound, Mommy Dearest.” *Oops, better watch it. That came close to pushing her buttons.*

Too late. I could tell I'd already gotten to her.

She took a deep breath, brushing the dark bangs from her eyes before continuing. Mom had let her normal business-friendly short haircut grow long the last few weeks in favor of attending to the more important chores associated with moving the office.

When she got angry, like now, the wrinkles around her mouth became more pronounced and her dark blue eyes flashed--a predator-like warning I'd learned to recognize over the years.

She spoke through gritted teeth. “I thought you *liked* Britney Spears.”

“Well, yeah, maybe a few *years* ago. She’s so *yesterday*.” Of course, Better than Ezra went back pre-Britney, but the difference in quality made it unfair to compare.

“When did you get into this loud crap? What happened to those nice singing bands like Boyz II Men and INXS?”

I stifled a chuckle. She didn't mean INXS. But it wasn't worth correcting her. We had enough to fight about.

But Mom didn't want to argue about music. She'd just set me up to blindside me. “This is Joey's influence, isn't it?”

Actually, over half the discs I'd ripped into my iPod had come from Joey. Melissa Etheridge, U2, Tori Amos, Concrete Blonde, Suixie and the Banshees, The Doors ... a whole world of music I'd never experienced six months ago. “It's not just Joey. This is what everyone listens to in Broad Ripple.” True enough. In Broad Ripple, everyone hung out at the coffeehouses, and most were college students. What did she *think* was gonna happen to my impressionable young mind?

Mom's nostrils flared. At times like this, the stress caused from years of balancing single motherhood with her skyrocketing career would shine right through the make-up caked on her face. I could almost feel sorry for her, but then she would blow it all by saying something obvious and dumb.

No exception today. "Those people from the Café Espresso were too mature for you."

"Well, stop the presses and rewrite page one!" I rolled my eyes at the familiar complaint. Next would come a comment about my blue hair. I decided to forestall it. "You brought me to Broad Ripple, remember? You moved us to the biggest college hangout in Indy, and, surprise, I end up making friends with the college students. And now you finally stop playing super-lawyer long enough to notice? Here's a clue, when I take up bingo and shuffleboard, you can safely assume I'm hanging out with an even older crowd."

I reached into my pocket where normally I kept my trusty cell, intent on escaping into my own conversation or at least say hi to Joey. My fist clasped on hollow cloth pocket and I couldn't hide the disappointment from my face.

Mom didn't miss any of it. She saw the look read my hurt, and attacked. "Oh, no, no cell phone calls. Your cell stays with me until I get every penny back from the overcharges last month. Four hundred dollars! Spent on a boy who lived just down the road! Don't you have any pride? Any sense of responsibility?"

I folded my arms, feeling my face burn, and tried to shrink down into the seat. "Well, since I just quit my job, you might have to keep that phone for awhile."

"I'm sure they have fast food restaurants in Perionne. You'll figure something out."

We sped along I-69, stewing in an uncomfortable silence. I averted my eyes and looked out the window, watching the endless flat farmland whisk by. The moving van followed.

Mom started again, her forced, even tone revealing the hot temper percolating beneath the surface. "That's not really fair, Fiona. Those hours I put in paid off. As the senior partner of *Shaefer and Gerrold*, I helped build the firm, and I've kept us living pretty damn good while I did it."

Now the whining started. I'd heard it all before, and I could easily tune it out. She rambled on anyway. "The property opportunities are so much greater in Perionne than in Broad Ripple. Very powerful clients have requested my firm specifically." She nodded once, convinced she'd made her point.

My mother, the lawyer. Sounds like a bad TV sitcom. She handled acquisitions, bankruptcies, and property distribution. If her example indicated anything, she worked in a fast-moving, constantly changing environment.

"Opportunities like this keep a nice roof over your head. They also keep you in the best schools in town." She stopped defending herself and attacked. Sharpness entered her tone. "Even when you can't keep up the grades."

So much for being on my best behavior. She wants the "Mom of the Year" award? I'll pop this little bubble right now. "Mom, what time did I come home last night?"

Her face flared red beneath her make-up, and the car swerved. The silence that followed spoke volumes. She knew as well as I she couldn't answer. Not last night, not from six months ago.

I reached for my iPod, thinking we'd finished the conversation. But Mom collected her composure and started in again. "I understand they have an amusement park in Perionne."

Apparently, the question about my comings and goings was too hot for her. She continued on like the previous five minutes had never happened. "You'll probably have an easy time finding kids your own age there. I'll admit I didn't know that much about your 'friend' Joey, but I could see enough. Look at how much you've changed, just in the last month."

"That had nothing to do with Joey." Now it was my turn to flush. Every time she said the word "Joey," heat would creep into my face.

Mom didn't approve of the denim jacket, the earrings, the bracelets, the half-tees, or anything else I chose for myself. She had hit the roof when she saw the dye job. I didn't explain the blue hair. Everyone in the Café Espresso wore some form of colored hair, especially the poets

and writers I hung out with. They were comfortable expressing their individuality, and that's how I wanted to be.

Instead, I'm sitting here, trapped and squirming. That'll teach me.

I ruffled the pages of my paperback, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, wondering if I would have a chance to read any more of it. The novel sure had me pumped up for small town hospitality, yessirree.

We continued north to Highway 20. Perionne lay 10 miles east of La Grange. Once we took the exit, the road deteriorated into large chuckholes, sudden dips, and narrow shoulders, which made the car rock maddeningly for those of us trying to read in the passenger seat. The signs insisted you could still travel 55 miles an hour. Through the trees I could see a billboard advertisement of Perionne Park. The aerial photo looked like a traveling carnival with rickety spin-and-barf fair rides.

"This will be good for you," Mom said. "Maybe you'll realize how ridiculous you look, and you'll dye your hair a more respectable color."

I knew she'd get around to the hair. "Thanks for the support, Mother."

"Oh, you think I'm being mean?" The lawyer façade dropped, and she scowled at me. "I should have made you cut it off. That's what I should have done. Made you shave it off and go to school bald."

"That's child abuse, Mother."

"Are you telling me about the law, young lady?"

Whoops. Wrong approach. "My friends liked me this way."

"You mean Joey liked it. Were you going to get a nose ring like his, too? That would look really attractive. Jesus, Fiona, I thought you had more brains than that."

I slipped lower into my seat, wishing I could somehow float up through the roof and out of the car.

"You're better off never seeing him again. One thing I've learned in life is that you have to make your own mistakes. So go to school looking however you want."

I shrugged. Soon, Mom would settle into her new office, and I'd be left alone. I just had to endure another few days. But she'd brought up Joey, the one person I'd been trying desperately to forget. Those thoughts only dredged up the hurt, and I didn't want to face the pain right now. It was too fresh. We'd only said goodbye last night.

Sweet, crazy Joey. I'd let him pick the color of my hair. He had loved to run his fingers through the strands. We'd had a rocky relationship, but my heart hurt when I thought about breaking up with him. Every time I'd tried, I would feel a cold hollowness in my chest. Then I'd put it off another day and the pain left.

Over time, I realized Joey was no good. The drinking, the smoking, the fits of self-abuse. He said nice things to me, he truly had a talent for poetry, and he was great in bed. Oh, yes. The first man I'd been devoted to. My head spun from the previous six months of passion. I wanted to be with him forever. It killed me when I found out I couldn't control the monster side of him.

Especially after the incident last month.

Then Mom laid the news about the move on me, and the point was moot. In her own way, Mom had done me a favor. Not that she needed to know. Any of it.

The pain returned. And this time nothing I did would make it go away.

I grabbed at my abandoned earbuds. My silver bracelets rattled. Between my earrings, the chains, and the buttons strewn across my denim jacket, I served as a walking advertisement for Claire's. I liked the look. Still did. But if I really wanted to, I could've ditched the buttons. Heck, I could've dyed my hair brown and been done with the whole thing. Let Mom think she'd won.

No way.

I'd keep the hair. And if I was going to glow in the dark, I might as well jingle. Better to be damned for who I am. Either that, or shave my head and go dike.

I looked out across the expanse of highway and over the tops of the trees to a cluster of rust-colored track supported by a wooden framework. The roller coaster of Perionne Park appeared as a series of arcs dropping off and disappearing through a gathering of high-rising branches.

Having nothing better to do, I stared at the towering structure, then had an uneasy feeling the coaster stared back, the arched structure bearing a closer resemblance to a lumpy sea creature than wood and steel. We approached, the highway leading us past the park, and a cold, chilling jolt of fear coursed down my spine.

Panic overcame me, along with an urge to throw open the door, jump for it, and run like hell. My body tensed from the anxiety. Something wasn't right about that place. What, I couldn't tell.

Even though I didn't want to do anything that might get her attention, I risked a quick glance at my mother. She projected her usual stylish confidence, showing no symptoms of the uneasiness overwhelming me.

Uneasiness? More like sheer terror. I swiped a hand across my forehead and stared, dumbfounded, at the cold wetness reflected on it. I craned my neck in the direction we'd come. I could still see the coaster, slipping away over the horizon. I took a deep breath.

With a clear head, the ride looked neither impressive nor scary. Instead, I saw a dilapidated old relic--outdated, rickety, and pathetic. A few hundred yards from the coaster, the top half of a Ferris wheel rotated above the trees, seats sun-bleached in pasty yellow and pink. That was the only other object visible from the highway, completing the depressing picture. Cheap, small fun for cheap, small minds.

Abandon hope all ye who enter here.

Perionne, Indiana, a sign read, Population: 6500. Soon, 6502. Up ahead, I saw a small cluster of suburbia surrounding a town hall and school building. *Must be a ninety-minute drive to anything remotely resembling decent shopping.* Even Wal Mart had passed through without stopping. I swallowed back cold fear, telling myself it could all turn out okay if I stayed on my best behavior.

For all the good it'd done me so far.

CHAPTER TWO

My first day at Perionne High School was a disaster.

The beginning of the end started in American Folklore, taught by a Mr. Haplin. Well, my schedule listed him as “Haplin,” but everyone called him “Hap.” Fine with me, I’m sure he imagined it endeared him to us and made him cool. He couldn’t have been further from the truth.

I wanted to grab a seat in the last row, but a fat guy with dark hair and greasy corkscrew curls already occupied the back. Like Jabba the Hut surrounded by three toadies, he lorded over his domain. The guy wore a sweat-spotted redneck T-shirt and a black denim jacket. He could barely squeeze his oppressive bulk into the chair attached to the desk. His beady dark eyes bugged out of his piggy-face when he saw me. He scratched five-day stubble on his reddened cheek, daring me to invade their space.

Hap entered the classroom, shutting the door behind him. Tall and lean, he towered over us. A huge bald spot circled his head as if he’d been freshly scalped. Perching on the edge of his desk, he looked and acted young--for a teacher, I mean--perhaps in his early thirties, and he spoke with a quiet hesitation, as though still new to the whole public-speaking thing.

“Hi, kids,” he announced, sounding like Mr. Rogers. “Today we’re going to continue our discussion on Perionne folklore.” He glanced at a single sheet of paper before placing it behind him on his desk. “But first, I want to introduce a new student joining us from Indianapolis. You’ve probably already noticed this colorful girl sitting toward the front. I’m sure you’ll want to introduce yourself.” He grabbed a loose sheet of paper and searched for my name.

I started talking before he could announce me. My nickname bore little resemblance to my real name, so there wasn't much point in saying it. "My name's ... my last name's Shaefer, but my friends back home called me Fi-Fi." I folded my arms and stared defiantly at the other students. I could see a couple of guys open their mouths to say something, but I glared at them, and they drifted into silence. I created my own aura of intimidation. I shook everyone up--almost.

The large guy sitting in the back row cackled. "Now I know why she looks like a dog." The entire room laughed, pretty much ruining the forceful first impression I'd hoped for.

"Clinty!" The teacher snapped. "Are you looking for another suspension? You know I'll do it."

Clinty shut up, and the rest of the class clamped down on their own laughter.

Mr. Haplin turned to me. "Sorry. Tell us about your look. It's quite different. Is blue hair the thing in Indianapolis?"

"Not quite. Just in Broad Ripple. A lot of people dress like this, though you'll see more vampire children than anything else."

Mr. Haplin nodded and smiled, but kept any conclusions to himself.

"Well, class, take the time to welcome ... Fi ... Ms. Shaefer ... on your own time. I'm sure you'll have a lot to learn from each other."

Hap grabbed a large spiral-bound booklet from his desk and held it out to me. "This is our material for Perionne Folklore. We're reaching the end of it, but I suggest you study it on your own, as the material will be on the first test at the end of September. So, you only have a week. I've also attached a schedule. After that, we'll begin on the textbook."

I took the offered papers.

He turned, approached his desk, and sat on the edge of it.

"Now ... Fi-Fi ... this provides the rest of us with a unique opportunity. Turn to page twenty and tell me what you know about Gunther Stalt.

I flipped through the handout as I replied, "Gunther who?"

"Oh, come on," a student whispered.

I opened the handout to a newspaper clipping. A head-and-shoulders photograph of a middle-aged man stared back at me, his gaze glaring off the page. His hair, which hung down to his broad shoulders, appeared to be graying, though it was hard to tell from the Xerox. The headline to the article read “Perionne Local Robs Bank.” A second clipping screamed the headline, “Stalt Still at Large.”

“You just handed it to me. How am I supposed to answer the question?”

“Puh-lease.” This time I could tell the comment came from Clinty.

“I see,” Mr. Haplin said. “So, living in Indianapolis, you’ve never heard of Gunther Stalt?”

“No. Not a word. But I guess he robbed a bank.”

Disbelieving laughter filled the room. Hap turned toward the group. “Class! Now, Fi-Fi, what would you say if I told you Gunther Stalt is as famous here in Perionne as, oh, say, Madonna or Donald Trump are around the world?”

“I guess I’d have to take your word for it.” On the next page, another headline caught my eye. Dated November of 1992, it read, “Ghost of Gunther Sighted by Former Girlfriend.” A sketch of a scarecrow-like apparition accompanied the article. The sketch depicted a hooked hand attached to the left arm, foreshortened and out-of-proportion, as if the character were reaching off the page toward the reader. I couldn’t help but smile at the melodrama.

“This proves an important point.” Hap strode to the dry-wipe board and started scribbling with a bright green marker. “A lot of folklore is regional.” He underlined the word regional. “In fact, most folklore is known only in a specific area. The Robin Hoods and Johnny Appleseeds are few and far between.” He turned toward the class and smiled at me.

I couldn’t help squirming. *Oh, shit, I’m starting to become the teacher’s pet. This isn’t happening.*

“Now. Who can tell Fi-Fi about Gunther?” He looked at the front row. “Steve?”

A clean-cut, average guy in a gray Nike polo shirt answered. He looked at his desk as he spoke. I had a better view of his swoosh on the left pocket than I did of his face. “Gunther robbed

the Perionne National Bank in 1978. He disappeared that night, taking the money with him, and has never been seen again.” He lowered his voice. “Unless you count the ghost.”

The class tittered.

Hap chose to ignore the comment. “Right. Now, does anyone know why this was such a big deal?”

I certainly didn’t. Judging from the silence that followed, no one else did, either.

“Ah,” the teacher declared, his tone chastising the class as a whole. “You all thought you could fake your way through the discussion without reading the material, didn’t you? Thought you knew everything about Gunther, didn’t you? Chuck, why is he such a big deal?”

Chuck shrugged, but offered up, “I guess because people started seeing his ghost afterwards.”

“Well, that’s true. The Ghost of Gunther.”

A quiet murmur buzzed around the room.

Hap waited for the class to settle down. “In general, folklore has a habit of tying back to the supernatural or fantastic, and Perionne folklore is no exception. The facts behind the folklore relate to someone who died under mysterious circumstances. In this case, Gunther Stalt.” He waved a hand in the air to dismiss the topic. “We’ll get to that in a minute. Why did people start seeing Gunther, though? What created the excitement?”

Nobody answered.

“Think, kids. How many bank robberies have occurred in Perionne?”

Not too damn many, I would guess, but nobody raised their hand.

A hint of frustration leaked into Hap’s easygoing façade. “You kids remember Hank Simone last year? They picked him up the next day in Michigan. And remember Fred Lionel? What happened to him?”

One student called out, “His girlfriend found the money crammed in his mattress.”

A few people chuckled.

“Correct. What happened to Gunther?”

Steve raised his hand. “Nothing. He never got caught.”

“That’s right, Steve. An unprecedented situation. It had never happened before, and in fact, hasn’t happened since. Now, here’s what you would have found out, had you read your articles.”

I had scanned the article while Hap talked and found the answer a few seconds before he asked, but thought it might compound my popularity problem to volunteer a correct answer.

“Gunther’s bank heist is the only unsolved robbery in Perionne.” Hap paused a moment to let the fact sink in. “Think about where you live, people. We’re a fairly closed community. Everybody knows everybody. What do we know about each other? Clinty smokes marijuana in his dad’s tool shed. Michelle McKinley and George Lewis got caught fornicating behind the large pine tree near Baptism Lake last month.”

I cringed, wondering if Michelle and George were in the room, and whether they appreciated being used as scandalous examples. *American Folklore Lesson Number One: Better be careful, or I could wind up as an example in next year’s class.*

“Gunther robbed the bank wearing a white mask. There was no clearly identifiable picture taken of him by the security camera, but all the eyewitnesses positively identified him. Why? Because they knew him. They recognized his jacket. They knew he had his hand in his pocket to hide the prosthetic arm and hooked hand. They knew his walk. They knew his voice.”

Silence settled into the room. At last, Hap had everyone’s attention.

As if he sensed enlightenment dawning upon his class, Hap’s voice grew more animated.

“Here’s the thing. In theory, it’s nearly impossible for a local citizen to commit a felony in Perionne. Quite simply, you’re going to get found out. It’s one of the great attractions of living in a small town. I’m not saying that to scare you, it’s just a fact. And yet ... the article tells us Gunther escaped authorities. It was many hours before the police found the body of Jeff Crimley, Gunther’s accomplice, dead in the hospital parking lot.”

Hap scrawled a second word on the board: mystery.

“Okay, class. What mystery are we talking about?”

Hands shot up around the room. I listened while scanning an article about a middle-aged lady who had seen Gunther's Ghost staring at her on numerous occasions. The article featured an accompanying photo of Gunther Stalt and a young woman, petite with dark hair and a wide smile. The year under the photo read 1966; the article's dateline read 1990. The article identified the woman as Mary Steeber, Gunther's high school sweetheart, and further claimed Gunther's Ghost stalked her almost every night. Apparently, the ghost got its kicks torturing the exes.

The smiling image of Gunther held me for several seconds before I turned the page. Even in the old photograph, his aggressive, mesmerizing personality shone through.

"They never found the money," one student said. "My dad says Gunther still has the money, and it's cursed."

"There was no body," a second, feminine voice called out. "Gunther is still alive and pretending to haunt people. He's living in another town and coming through Perionne every now and again to scare people. That's what I think."

Hap paused. "Ah ... right. You're all correct in one way or another. There's no money, no body, and not one policeman found any clues, except the getaway car. Gunther eluded authorities until the trail ran cold. Which brings us to our next topic. What happened? Jen has touched upon one of the more colorful ideas going around. Although I admit, it's more plausible than the ghost sightings we're always hearing about."

"Hey," Clinty called out. "My pa told me he saw Gunther. My pa was driving north on Summit street, and he looked out the window and saw this guy hitch-hiking, only the guy was holding out a hooked hand. Pa got so freaked, he skidded his car onto the shoulder of the road and went right through the body."

"Yes, Clinty. Fantastic stories like your father's keep everyone talking about--"

"Are you calling my pa a liar?" Clinty's beefy fist pounded the tabletop.

I cringed, fully expecting foam to spew from Clinty's mouth. A sharp laugh, purely involuntary, escaped my lips. The rest of the class had stayed to a quiet murmur, so my outburst proved loud and cutting--unfortunate for me.

Clinty turned in my direction. His look said it all: *You're dead meat.*

Great. Just what I needed. Clinty as an enemy.

Hap, oblivious to the drama playing out in the form of exchanged glares, pressed his argument. "I'm not calling your father a liar, Clinty. But the situation has created the proper conditions for people to think they're seeing a ghost because that's what they want to see. Like the Loch Ness monster that is really a floating log."

"Pa didn't drive through a floating log, Hap," Clinty said. "You can't drive through anything but ghosts. Gunther is dead, all right, but he has a score to settle. We just don't know what it is yet. That's what my pa told me." A hint of intelligence lit the blustering bully's eyes. But only for a moment, and then it flickered out.

No one spoke. Nobody else wanted to contradict the volatile redneck. They didn't care to be next on Clinty's shit list--right beneath me.

"Well," Hap said, "this has certainly stimulated passionate conversation. Let me ask you kids, how many of you believe in the Ghost of Gunther?"

Clinty's hand shot up, along with the rest of the back two rows. Certainly not an accurate poll, but five others, over half of the rest of the class, raised their hands as well.

I listened without comment, even as the opening notes to "The Twilight Zone" theme played in my head.

* * *

I opened my locker and stashed the Xeroxed handout on the shelf. When I reached for my English book, two pairs of hands grabbed me from behind and pinned my wrists against either side of the locker frame.

The old locker ambush. Clinty couldn't wait until lunch or after school. He wanted to get into it right here. Stupid me had expected something clever--or at least subtle--from him. I wouldn't make that mistake again.

Between the two of them, Clinty's eager helpers subdued me with ease, whipping me around to confront him face-to-face. One would think that the pair of large brutes could easily manhandle my 105-pound frame even if I *did* struggle.

Which I didn't. Panicking wouldn't help me, so why bother? Besides, the anger flaring in Clinty's eyes at my decided *lack* of cowering made it all worthwhile.

The two thugs made quite a show of jerking me from my locker while keeping my arms pinned to my sides, pulling me into the middle of the hall for everyone to see. I cursed my own stupidity and Clinty's lack of forethought at this attack. But I knew my moment would come. I had to wait him out.

They didn't realize where I'd come from, or what I could do. On my old turf, I had to fend off the drunks and the drug addicts looking for an easy mug-and-grab, looking to steal something they could trade for another fix. Then there were the college linebackers. After a couple drinks, they all thought they were God's gift. All I needed was a little persuading.

These pricks would be simple in comparison.

The two laughing buffoons, mistaking my submission for defeat, had already loosened their grips on my arms. The thug on my right even released one hand to scratch his scalp. I restrained a reaction, even when Clinty circled behind me. I could feel his eyes checking me out. I wasn't at all surprised when a large hand prodded against my shirt and groped one of my tits.

Still, I yelped, and my face flushed.

Clinty sauntered in front of me. "Laugh at me, will ya? Think you're so smart, do ya?"

A crowd gathered to see if they could get their sensibilities assaulted.

The two henchmen pinned my arms around my back, then shoved me toward a grinning, drooling Clinty. "Three against one. Pretty brave, assholes."

Clinty reached out and gripped a handful of hair, pulling 'til my eyes watered. "Wha's this? It's a blue-haired bitch in heat!" He snorted a whistling laugh. "Hey," he said, thrusting his chubby face so close to mine I could smell rancid chewing tobacco on his breath. "Is this all the blue hair you got? I'm curious."

One thing I'd learned in Broad Ripple--when a stranger underestimates you, play the game. Then, when they think they have you, strike like lightning. You're bound to get the advantage because they won't be expecting any aggression. But make it count, because surprise only works once

I made it count.

I kicked out. The toe of my combat boot connected with his shin. It cut through his jeans, and he yelped in pain. His grip slackened on my hair.

Throwing out my elbows, I dropped toward the floor and slid through the hold his cronies had on me.

I thrust my hand into my jacket pocket, where I kept a studded leather strap for situations like this. The looped leather eased over my knuckles. I pulled my fist out of my pocket, drew back, and smacked Clinty in the face with everything I had.

All three hundred pounds of redneck staggered, his head whipping sideways from the impact.

My other assailants turned and bolted.

Clinty shifted his head back into place. A look of stunned stupidity slipped across his features. Blood poured from his nose. It seemed to dawn on him that his friends had disappeared. His panicked gaze darted around the growing crowd, realizing that whatever the outcome, this fight had become public.

People started yelling. Whether they cheered against him or for me made no difference at this point.

He screamed and charged, but I had already moved away from the lockers, punching at his chest while I backpedaled down the hall. I waited a few beats, sidestepped his attack and set my legs. I drew both arms back, hands wrapped around the studded leather. I waited until he charged me, then, slammed my fists into his ribcage.

The blow made a popping sound that brought a hush to the crowd. Clinty teetered and veered toward the wall, losing control of his knees. He went down with a crashing thud right into the row of closed lockers, more closely resembling a falling oak tree than a human being.

Something snapped inside me, and I lost control. "Small town shit! I'll kill you!"

The crowd burst into an enormous cheer--not that I paid much attention.

All the frustrations from the last few days gathered in my dinky, lightweight body, and then erupted. I pounded Clinty's face, chest and stomach. I kicked and punched and clawed and screamed until two teachers and a group of students managed to pull me away.

The vice principal wasn't amused. Neither was Mom. She pulled up right behind the ambulance.

Both Clinty and I got suspended. The VP told me to go home. Clinty would be taken to the hospital. The paramedic said Clinty had a broken nose, needed stitches, and probably had several cracked or broken ribs.

I walked the gauntlet to Mom's SUV, overhearing the awed whispers of my classmates.

I stood near a small group in various branded shorts, T-shirts, and running shoes. Apparently gym class had stopped so that everyone could gather to watch the paramedics wheel a moaning Clinty toward his ride.

His gaze found me, and his body jerked like a wild animal. "I'll get you for this, you bitch!" I grinned back at him and waved, knowing I'd infuriate him even more. Lying on the gurney, beaten and bruised, his threats fell flat.

The crowd turned as one, taking a step back to give me room or make sure they weren't next. I thought I saw stares of respect--or fear. Word would get around that I was someone who should not be fucked with.

* * *

Mom did not take the news of my suspension well. She hadn't said a word the entire trip home.

With a distant feeling of dread, I sat in the living room, sinking into the darkened leather couch. No sense trying to avoid the inevitable. Part of my mind admired how the matching leather chair and glass tables fit so much better in this new house than the old one. After years of wondering about my mother's taste for big, expensive furniture, I realized she'd finally found the big, expensive house to match.

Today before she left for the new office, Mom had absorbed herself into her Cool Professional character--that's Miz Leona Shaefer to you. I knew she planned overseeing the reloading of the Shaefer and Gerrold client database at the new offices. Now she'd had to leave her "important" work early and come to the school, then home to reason with the problem child.

Mom's face was red from the heat of anger. She didn't bother to ask me if I'd been hurt. She went straight for the lecture. "What the hell is this, Fiona? You think I don't have enough troubles? Do you know what it's like to completely remodel an office? Do you have any concept of what I've been going through today?"

The irony triggered my own anger, and the sarcastic reply spit from my mouth before I could contain it. "No, Mom. Do you have any idea what it's like to have a group of boys try to gang-bang you in the hallway? During school hours, I mean."

Her hand jerked to hit me, but she held back. I wish she had, though. Sometimes after she looses it she'll hold me a moment and tell me how much she loves me.

The anger my jibe caused disappeared in a flash, and her face transformed from red-hot anger to a barely contained patience. "Fiona, honey, I know this transition is rough, but try to give it a few weeks. You have to learn to like it." She sighed in resignation. "But you might try wearing a hat for a while until your natural hair color grows back in. Or how about we go ahead and dye it to something less outrageous? I'll spring for the bottle."

"Jesus, Mom! I get jumped in the halls so it must be my fault. That's your idea of supportive? I happen to be in the right here, just in case you were wondering."

"Fiona, they confiscated a weapon from you."

"And a good thing I had it, too, or else we'd be having this conversation in the hospital."

“Then you’d better adapt to the situation! You don’t have a choice. Besides, what were you thinking, getting into a fight? This is all because of that Joey ...”

Great. Only two days after the move, and she was already repeating herself. I sighed and waited out the tirade. I knew from past experience she had nothing more important to say.