

SLEEP ^{OF} REASON

by
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2006

CHAPTER ONE

At ten in the evening on a freezing Saturday in Cortez, Colorado, Tonya Perkins was chugging a beer and planning to fuck a total stranger when her night on the town was interrupted by a phone call from her boyfriend, Wade Miller.

Wade had bad news. Tonya's two-year-old son Corban had burned his hand on the stove, and Wade had to take him to the hospital.

"Shit," said Tonya. She never went out drinking with her friends anymore. She couldn't pay for a sitter. Now, finally, she had a boyfriend who said he'd mind Corban, and this happened. "Okay. I'll come home."

"Nah. You don't have to. Just thought you should know what happened."

Tonya heaved a sigh of relief. If Corban was okay then she could stay at the bar. She gave her sister Amberlee a thumbs up and checked out a hot guy across the room. "You sure you don't need me there?" she asked as someone shoved another pitcher of beer in front of her.

"Yeah. Don't worry. He's got himself a sore hand, that's all."

"I don't get it. I just hit him yesterday for reaching up on the stove."

Wade mumbled something that sounded like, "This time he learned."

A tightness in his voice registered with Tonya. Guessing at the reason, she took a swig of beer and asked, "What'd you have to pay them at the hospital?"

"It's fine. I got some extra work."

Didn't sound like the Wade Miller Tonya knew. Since he'd started saving up for his new car, he was even stingier than usual. That's why he didn't care about missing Amberlee's party. He acted like he was a

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hero for babysitting Corban, but Tonya knew he just wanted to avoid buying a round.

“You sure?” She gave him a last chance.

“No sweat. You’re my old lady.”

“I love you, ding dong.” Tonya let her eyes return to the man-meat across the room. She tried to remember his name. Something foreign. Andre. No, Vincente. The guy had his own car repair shop. He looked like Ricky Martin. She decided if she couldn’t get him, she would check out one of the salesmen in town for the agricultural show. They were always married, so no one would make annoying phone calls the next day and start calling himself a boyfriend like Cortez males were in the habit of doing.

“You gonna be much longer?” Wade asked.

“We’re going back to Amberlee’s after this.”

“Right. I forgot. Want me to pick you up later? Like in a few hours or something?”

The stud was looking her way. Tonya sucked in her stomach. “Yeah, okay,” she remembered to answer. She was already fucked up, and she’d only been drinking since eight. Laughing, she said, “I can’t drive. No way. I’d take a wrong turn and end up in the reservoir.”



Sitting at a table a few yards away, Matthew Roache had a pitiful look on his face, and his eyes were glued to Tonya. His sister, Heather, felt sorry for him, but this had gone on long enough. He’d been living at her place since he broke up with that slut, and Heather had had it. She was fed up with him and his loser buddies camped on her sofa and eating her food with the TV blaring day and night. And she was fed up with that dirty goat tied up in her yard, causing a problem with the neighbors.

When the heavy snows came a few days back, Matthew brought the disgusting animal into the house, and he was keeping it in the guest bathroom now. He never cleaned up after it. Heather had to scrape droppings off the soles of her best boots on her way out the door tonight.

“What do you think you’re doing?” she asked. “She dumped you

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and she's with someone else. Forget her. Just walk away and forget her. She's not worth it."

"I love her."

"Well, she doesn't love you."

Heather had decided recently that you had to be cruel to be kind. Matthew was her little brother and she loved him, but he was letting Tonya Perkins ruin his life. He'd even lost his job. His boss got fed up with him calling in so-called sick. Heather knew exactly where he was on those supposed sick days—parked outside of that bitch's house.

Unable to help herself, she stared past a sea of bodies to the peroxide blonde perched on a bar stool and thought, *I hate that woman. I hope she dies.* Normally she would feel ashamed of herself for thinking such a thing, but as Tonya dropped her cell phone into her purse and leaned back against the bar trying to look sexy, Heather could only marvel at the stupidity of males. How could they be sucked in by such a whore?

Tonya wore fuck-me pumps and a denim miniskirt no one a size XXL should wear. Black fishnet stockings strained over her fat thighs. They couldn't hide the cellulite, and she must have spent hours with the curling iron, getting her big hairdo coiled into long ringlets. Someone should tell her strawberry blond wasn't her color.

As if anyone could possibly miss her double Ds, Cortez's number-one home wrecker tugged her pink crop top down so her staunch, pale breasts bobbed over. This drew attention to the tidemark at the base of her throat where her tan foundation began. She wore candy pink lipstick, baby blue eye shadow, and eyeliner flicked up slightly in the corner of each eye.

Heather almost laughed. How yesterday was *that* look? Turning away before Tonya caught her staring, she could barely stop herself from slapping Matthew upside the head. He was slouched over his beer, sniffing noisily.

"We were supposed to be getting married today," he choked out.

"As if I could forget. I was supposed to be in Cancun, remember? Has she given you back that ring yet?"

"I don't care about the ring," he blubbered.

"Well *I* do. You owe me four hundred dollars." By rights that engagement ring belonged to her. Matthew had been paying her back the seven hundred she lent him to buy it, but after he lost his job the

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payments dried up. “I worked hard for that money,” she reminded him.

“I know. “ Matthew snatched her hand and flattened it over his pounding heart. “I’ll pay, I swear. God’s honest truth.”

“Even if you just got the ring back, I could live with that,” she said generously. “I could sell it on eBay.”

“How am I supposed to do that?”

“Try asking. If she says no, then stop by her place when she’s not expecting you and get it off the dresser in her bedroom. She keeps it in that music box I gave her for the engagement.”

“How do you know?”

Heather rolled her eyes. “Duh. I only organized her bachelorette party. I’ve been in her room.”

Matthew seemed to be thinking. He gave a small harsh laugh. “While I’m there, I’m gonna take back that stuffed panda I gave her, too.”

“Oh, that’s smart. You walk out with your hood over your face and carrying a big, huge stuffed animal. Just in case no one noticed you burglarizing the house.”

“I never thought of that.” He snuck another look at Tonya and rifled his fingers frantically through his hair as if that might dislodge the trashy slut from his brain.

“Lovely,” Heather said. “Now you’ve got dandruff in your beer.” Why she bothered trying to make him think with his brain instead of his dick was a mystery. He was never going to ask Tonya for the ring, and if he tried to steal it he would probably get caught. At this rate, she would be spending her next vacation in Kansas, not Cancun.

Predictably her brother acted like everything was settled, promising, “I’ll get a job and pay you back. Twice as much. You’ll be able to go to Mexico just like you planned.”

Heather had heard it all before. The fact was, that woman had cast a spell on Matthew, and until he snapped out of it, he would be unemployed and eating everything in her fridge. “That’s all well and good, but I’ll tell you something you can do for me now. Okay?”

Her brother dragged his arm across his face. “Okay.”

“I want that goat gone by tomorrow. I refuse to have it polluting my home for one more day.”

“He doesn’t hurt anyone. And we don’t have to mow the yard with him chewing on the grass. You’ll be glad when it’s summer.”

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“Oh, really? You think I enjoy listening to the neighbors complaining about their kids putting goat poop in their mouths because they think it’s raisins? The joke’s over. It’s you or him.”

“A week,” Matthew begged. “Jason’ll be in town next weekend. He’ll take him.”

“No.”

Their older brother, Jason, hadn’t shown up for months. He had some land in Jackson County, and he was always promising to drive down and visit, but he never got around to it. Heather seriously doubted he’d want the goat anyway. Matthew was kidding himself. He thought he was so funny when he got the animal after 9/11, telling everyone how he was naming it after *My Pet Goat*, the children’s book the President was reading when he was told about the terrorist attack. He just made himself look stupid calling it Bush’s Homeland Security adviser and asking it what color the terror alert should be.

Heather didn’t see the big joke, and she didn’t appreciate her brother disrespecting the President. She’d voted Bush/Cheney both times because she didn’t believe in abortion. She’d tried to talk to Matthew about the unborn and about how the gay lifestyle was being taught in schools as close as Boulder. But even with the sanctity of marriage in direct peril, he’d been too busy running around after Tonya to get to a polling place. That woman had lowered his IQ, which—let’s face it—wasn’t right up there to begin with.

Leaning closer to him, she said, “Listen to me. I’m trying to help you, but you have to start doing stuff for yourself. Get rid of that goat. Get a haircut. I’ll buy you some new pants and a shirt, and you can start applying for jobs. That’s the best revenge you’ll ever get. Show her you don’t care and you’re a success. My boss is looking for guys to help out with a big roofing contract in the spring. That’s good money.”

“Roofing? Oh, man. It’ll be all Mexicans and me. I don’t speak Mexican.”

“It’s better than laying around all day watching the soaps. And think about it, you’d be one of the only white guys so you’d be boss of your own gang pretty quick. Mr. McAllister needs men who can communicate with the client.”

Matthew whined, “Do we have to talk about it now?”

“Yes, we do!” Heather seized his chin and forced his head in Tonya’s direction. “Look at her pawing Vinnie Russo when she’s

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supposed to be with Wade Miller now. She's a slut, Matthew. She stole her sister's husband, and then *he* left her—guess why?"

Matthew looked guilty. "It was love at first sight. We couldn't help it."

"Oh, that explains why she seduced Wade off of Brittany Kemple while you two were engaged. If you *had* gotten married, trust me, she'd be cheating on you right now."

Her brother stiffened. His light brown eyes glittered with fury, and his chest rose and fell like he was palpitating. "I'll fix her." He stood up and shoved his chair back.

Heather grabbed his arm. "You can't fight Vinnie Russo! He'll kill you."

"I'm not going to fight Vinnie." Matthew looked her dead in the eye. He was pale and his mouth shook. "I'm going to do what you said. I'll show her. I'll take that job and get a decent car and my own place, and she'll wish she'd never dumped me for that asshole Wade fucking Miller. And when you get home later, no goat. Okay?"

Before Heather could say thank you, he stalked out of the bar.

CHAPTER TWO

Sheriff's Detective Jude Devine untangled herself from her sheets, groped for the phone, and peered at her digital clock. 4:30 a.m. Normally, she got up at 5:30 so she could work out for an hour before she drove to work. A phone call this early meant she wouldn't be bench-pressing anything bigger than a coffee mug.

"Get in here, Devine," her boss demanded as Jude licked her furry teeth and tried to formulate a greeting.

Dragging herself upright, she located the bottle of water she kept on her nightstand. After two years away from Washington, D.C., she was used to dealing with the Colorado altitude. Anyone who didn't drink plenty of water could expect a permanent headache.

"What's up, sir?" she asked after a few protracted gulps.

"We have a situation." Sheriff Pratt's grim delivery made it clear she would not be staying in her nice warm bed much longer.

"How bad?"

Pratt coughed wetly into the phone. "Bad enough for me to be freezing my balls off down here instead of doing what the doctor ordered and staying in my goddamned bed for another week."

"Bummer."

Jude slid her feet into the chill air and groaned. She turned the heating down when she went to bed, so her room wasn't even fifty degrees. Shivering, she stumbled across her cold floorboards to the window and twitched the curtain aside. It was still dark, but her yard glowed winter white with the first serious snowfall of the season.

No one could believe they'd had to wait until March to see the usual high country snowpack. Even the most earnest devotees of denial, of which the Four Corners had more than its fair share, were suddenly wondering aloud if global warming was not just a liberal fiction

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invented to destroy the American way of life. Hurricane Katrina and the cost of gas had unleashed a rare storm of doubt about the wisdom and pronouncements of the demigods on Capitol Hill.

“Snow’s coming down pretty heavy out here,” she told Pratt, gloomily resigning herself to shoveling her driveway in darkness so she could get her Dodge Dakota out.

“Weather report says we’re expecting another nine inches,” he said unsympathetically. “The sooner you leave, the less you’ll have to shovel.”

Jude hit the lights and squinted until she could relax her eyes. “I hear you. So, what have we got?”

“Hard to say exactly. Just do me a favor and haul ass, Detective.”

Surprised by this masterful directive, Jude juggled the phone as she located underwear and warm clothes. The sheriff seldom took that kind of tone with her. Although he had never wanted her on his staff and was antsy around her at the best of times, he usually managed to conceal his feelings behind a mask of professional respect. Whatever was going on had to be big for him to drag her in right off the bat.

Intrigued, Jude asked, “Sir, any special equipment requirements?”

No answer. She surmised Pratt had his hand over the phone while he was coughing. He’d caught a bad case of the flu a week earlier and was so feverish at work he collapsed on a bed in one of the detention cells. The staff panicked, imagining a terrorist attack, maybe anthrax in the mail. Homeland Security closed the office for a day and sent in a team in hazard suits while doctors ascertained the cause of Pratt’s symptoms. He’d been at home in bed ever since.

Jude could hear nose-blowing in the background. Finally her boss croaked, “We’ll be needing the K-9 unit. There’s a kid missing.”

“A kid. Now? In this weather?”

“Looks like it. And we have a felony animal-cruelty incident tied in, so you might want to prepare yourself before you get to the scene.”

What he really meant was for her to prepare Tulley. Her deputy at the Paradox Valley substation was stoic in the face of crimes against persons and property, but anything involving a four-legged friend derailed him.

Jude buttoned her shirt. “I take it we’re talking about a search-and-rescue op.”