

Chapter 1

It's four-thirty. I am pacing and waiting for my best friend. Normally, I'd be substituting or working in the school library of the elementary school, but I took this week off so I could be here with Kenny.

There was a knock at the door. I opened it and melted into Kenny's arms. He stepped into the condo, shut the door, and held me.

My tight chest and knotted stomach, the result of anxiety built up during the days of the last six months, slipped from my body like water rushing down a hill. I sighed as my heart rate slowed and a sense of "rightness" swept over me. It felt wonderful to be in Kenny's arms. When he chuckled, it echoed through my entire body and lightened my heart.

Kenny pulled his head back, a huge smile on his beautiful face that touched his lovely green eyes that matched mine. "How are you, Stretch?"

"I'm great, now that you're here." I hugged him harder, burrowing my head on his chest.

Zoie and Shelby came running through the hallway, slid across the floor, and I stepped out of Kenny's arms so Zoie could take my place. She jumped into his arms, lifted her snout, and smothered his face with licks, her tail moving so fast it looked like the blades of a fan set too high.

"I guess she's glad to see you, too." I sighed as I patted my dog's head. Her tail was going, too.

Kenny laughed, trying to hold the squirming dog, then frowned at me. "Let's go sit and talk."

I had decorated the small beach cottage with a brown leather couch and recliner because it was impossible to keep Zoie off the furniture. Even when I left laundry baskets on the furniture, Shelby used her nose to push them off, so Zoie could jump back on them. Even though I bought two enormous round dog beds at Costco, Zoie, who didn't enjoy lying on the floor, still got on my furniture. As the seasons changed, I added seasonal pillows to the couches to add color, but always removed them because Shelby had taken to eating them. I had come home once to a house full of white stuffing, looking as if it had snowed inside my house. And with two dogs, I had installed oak wooden flooring everywhere in the house, except for the bedrooms.

Kenny brought Zoie over to the couch, kissed her on the head, and set her on the floor. He sat next to me on the couch and pushed the beagle back to the floor every time she tried to climb into his lap.

"Outside," Kenny shouted. The dogs ran toward the hallway.

I sighed.

Kenny frowned at me. "Really, Stretch, how are you feeling?"

"I'm okay," I shrugged.

Kenny tilted his head, then placed his hands on either side of my face. “Are you sure?”

I nodded. “And now that you’re home, I’ll be even better. I missed you, Kenny.”

Kenny dropped his hands to his lap. “Not as much as I missed seeing you, Stretch.”

“I could have come and visited you.”

“I know, but I didn’t want to see you with plastic between us.” Kenny held out his hand and I took it, wrapping our fingers together.

“Well, you’re here now.”

Kenny frowned, glancing back at our hands.

“What?”

“Where’s your wedding ring?”

I glared at him.

“You *still* haven’t patched things up with him, Stretch?”

The tightness in my chest returned. I pulled my hands from Kenny’s and I growled. “I *hate* him, so *why* go back to him?”

Kenny grimaced. “Does he know you’re living here in Belle City?”

I pointed a finger at him. “I will give you the same ultimatum I gave my family. Whoever tells that ass where I live is on the ‘do not talk to’ list.

Kenny lifted both his hands in a show of surrender. “Okay, Stretch. If that’s the way you want it.”

“Good. Now, are you hungry?”

Kenny grinned. “I’m always hungry.”

“Me, too. Does Chinese food sound good for dinner?”

“That’s great. I need a shower and I want to change out of these clothes I’ve been wearing for twelve hours. Where did you put my stuff when you cleaned out the house I rented next to yours in San Ramon and before you moved to the beach?”

“It’s hanging up in the spare room.” I beamed as Kenny walked towards the hall to the spare room.

I called Ian at the local Chinese restaurant. The food arrived as Kenny strode down the hall, dressed in jeans and a black shirt with an American flag embossed on the front. He looked thinner but had gained arm muscles in prison.

Kenny shrugged and raised his arms. “Nothing to do in prison except pump iron. They never let me near a computer.”

Since Kenny had found the victims and their abusers on the internet, it made sense that they limited his access.

We set the food out on my kitchen table, loaded up our plates.

Kenny sighed with the first bite.

“Prison food not good?” I asked.

“It was okay, just plain – meat, vegetables and potatoes.”

I put my hand on his arm. “You never discussed prison in our letters.”

Kenny shrugged. “There wasn’t much to say, Stretch. It was the same routine *every* day.

“You didn’t have any problems, right?”

“No.” Kenny took another bite, closing his eyes to savor the taste.

“So, it’s not like they show in the movies?”

Kenny’s eyes popped open. “No, it’s worse. The hierarchy in a prison is simple, but very terrifying.”

“But they didn’t bother you?”

“Nope.”

“Why not?” I frowned. Kenny was a tall, lean, good-looking man. His mom used to call him Angel Face because of his high cheek bones, delicate features, and crystal green eyes.

“Remember, I didn’t rat out the three gangs that I had turned over the abuse information to, so they kept me safe.”

“I think little of gangs, but I appreciate what they did for you.”

“Me, too,” Kenny shivered, then added, “Prison inmates are frightening people.”

I smiled, glad that Kenny had remained safe since I was not sure how I’d cope if something had happened to him.

“I know you love takeout, Stretch. But this town is only five blocks wide. Why didn’t we walk to the Chinese restaurant?”

“I wanted you to myself. Tomorrow we’ll eat out and I’ll introduce you to people.”

“We’ll see,” Kenny said as he took another bite of his food.

That evening we watched my collection of Golden Girls. They were less funny to me, although Kenny rolled with laughter. Had I outgrown the Golden Girls? I hoped not.

Around nine, I yawned and stretched. “I need to go to bed.”

Kenny nodded. “There’s no late-night television in prison. I’m staying awake to enjoy the luxury of choosing when I go to sleep.”

When I got up, Kenny stood. I wrapped my arms around him and gave him a big hug. “I’m so glad you are home.”

Kenny kissed me on top of my head. “Me, too, Stretch.”

He let me go, and I walked to my bedroom.

I always go to bed early since bathroom breaks and other things interrupt my sleep. Twenty minutes later, I got into bed and was asleep in minutes.

I slipped into a dream where a young five-year-old girl and I were walking along a path surrounded by pine trees. She was petite with red hair, like mine, in pigtails and green eyes, like mine and Kenny’s. We were swinging our arms and laughing. Then we were swimming in a pond. She was floating away from me and screaming. I tried to reach her, but she kept moving further and further away.

I screamed and sat up in bed, gasping for breaths and shaking as a panic attack wave crash over me. My stomach rolled and my chest tightened until my breaths were coming out in quick puffs.

Then Kenny was there holding my hands and saying, “Stretch? Are you alright?”

I gasped, sucking in more breath, rubbing my chest, which hurt.

“Head,” Kenny said.

I put my head out and our foreheads touched.

“Hands,” he said.

I reached out as we entwined our fingertips, I counted and when I skipped a number, Kenny made me start again. Within minutes, my chest relaxed and I could take a deep breath.

“What was that?” Kenny asked when I looked up and smiled at him.

“A dreadful dream, I guess,” I told him, shrugging and playing it off as nonchalant as I could. I had been having nightmares since New Orleans.

“You’re lying, Stretch. What’s happening? Your chest never hurt with the attacks. When did they start? And how bad are they?” Kenny frowned at me. He always knew when I was skirting the truth.

“They started after New Orleans. In the beginning, I was afraid in the dream but stayed asleep. Then it changed, and I’d wake up sweating and shaking.”

“Your fear drove you awake?”

“I guess so.”

“And now?”

“The fear intensifies, and I slide into a panic attack.”

“And because no one is here to help you, you pass out.” Kenny glared.

I shrugged. “And I wake up and I’m fine.”

I glanced over to Kenny and said, “When did you start wearing boxer shorts to bed?”

“Can’t sleep naked in prison, Stretch, and stop trying to change the subject,” Kenny scowled.

When I had another nightmare two hours later, this one with a young boy lost in an abandoned mine, Kenny was again by my side and walked me through the panic attack. The dreams with children echoed my earlier dangerous circumstances, like when I had almost drowned in the hermetically sealed building in Ridgedale and the time I’d fallen into a mine shaft in Clainsworth.

After the panic attack subsided, Kenny said, “I want to try something.”

“What?”

Kenny climbed in bed behind me and pulled me up against his chest.

“This is nice,” I told him, chuckling.

“It’s an experiment,” he said.

When the next nightmare came, Kenny could calm me by rubbing my shoulders and talking in my ear. My sleep was more restful because Kenny intercepted the panic attacks and, when I woke up, I was more rested than I’d been in months.

The next day, I showed Kenny around the town and introduced him to people.

When I walked toward O’Malley’s pub, Kenny said, “You and a bar, Stretch? Do you drink now?”

“No, but they make the best Shepherd’s Pie and Corn Beef and Cabbage you’ll ever eat.”

Kenny laughed. “Okay, I get it. It’s a food place.”

Kenny opened the door, and I pushed aside the heavy curtains that covered the entrance to keep the rain out since the door opened inward.

As I walked through the curtains, Grady, the owner, yelled. “Angel, how are you?”

My stomach growled and I sighed. “Wonderful and hungry.”

Grady chuckled, came around and enveloped me in a big hug. Grady was a solidly built man, just under six feet tall with large muscular biceps, not from any gym, but from lifting cases of beer and liquor. His family had owned O’Malley’s for over a hundred years. He started working in the back when he was sixteen and took over the business ten years ago, when his parents

decided they wanted a change from the overcast humid nature of living at the beach. They bought a condo in Arizona and love the dry heat.

Kenny walked in behind me and his eyebrows shot up into his hair line.

Then Grady noticed Kenny, kissed me on the cheek and asked, “Who’s the guy?”

I introduced the men and Grady stuck out his hand and shook Kenny’s. “Any friend of Angel’s is a friend of mine.”

“Angel?” Kenny asked.

“Another nickname,” I sighed. “I don’t understand why people can’t use my actual name. Everyone is always giving me a nickname.”

“So why Angel, *Stretch*?” Kenny asked, emphasizing his own nickname for me.

Grady smiled. “Angel, because she’s lovely inside and out.”

I rolled my eyes, but Kenny nodded and returned his smile.

“Why Stretch?” Grady asked, and Kenny told the story of that nickname.

O’Malley’s Pub is a true Irish bar with pictures from Ireland on the walls and soccer on the four big screen televisions. It is not a large place, just twelve feet wide and twenty feet long. The entire right side is a huge wooden bar with pewter beer mugs hanging and liquor bottles of different shapes and sizes covering the entire right wall. On the left were six tables. We took a table in the back to leave the front tables for the tourists.

Grady laughed at Kenny’s story, then said to me, “I’ll get you your usual.” He handed a menu to Kenny. “What do you want to drink?”

“I’ll have a Coke,” Kenny said.

“Okay, check the menu and I’ll take your order when I get back.”

Kenny set the menu back in the basket and said, “Whatever Stretch is having, I’ll have.”

Some locals came in and sat with us during lunch, and I introduced Kenny to them. Since O’Malley’s was the first place I had gone when I first arrived in Belle City, Angel had stuck and everyone in the town used it. Several of the woman took Kenny’s new cell phone number and promised to call and show him around town. The food was excellent, as usual. Even Kenny agreed. “Any food covered in mashed potatoes is tops in my book.”

Toward the end of dinner, Grady sat with us, handing me the dessert menu. “We’ve got a good dessert collection today.”

“Yeah,” I said, grabbing the menu from him.

“Stretch loves desserts,” Kenny chuckled.

Grady chuckled with Kenny, then said, “How long are you staying, Kenny?”

“I have no plans,” Kenny shrugged, then nodded toward me. “Just until she tires of me.”

I looked over the menu. “Great, then. You’ll be here until I’m old and gray.”

Kenny shrugged. “We’ll see.”

Grady leaned toward Kenny and said, “Can you help me?”

“Sure, what do you need?”

I glared over the menu at Grady.

Kenny glanced at me, then back to Grady. “Oh, I see. You want her to commit and she’s dragging her feet.”

Grady nodded and whispered, “I’ve found her a good divorce lawyer, although that didn’t turn out the way I’d planned.”

I set the dessert menu on the table. “I don’t think I want dessert today.”

“What?” Grady and Kenny said together.

When I stood, Grady said, “I’m not pressuring you, Angel. It will happen at the right time. Sit, and I’ll bring you a nice slice of chocolate cheesecake.”

As I sat, Grady stood, kissed me on top of my head, and walked toward the kitchen.

And as fate always has ruinous plans for me, Brandon walked into the pub. The locals yelled his name, except Grady, who shook his head, frowned, and turned around to pour Brandon his beer.

Brandon came to our table and used his index finger to direct my chin up to him. Then he leaned over and kissed me. It was a pleasant kiss.

“How’s my girl?” Brandon said as he took the seat that Grady had vacated.

“I’m great. Brandon.” When I looked over to introduce him to Kenny, he was frowning. “What?” I asked.

“Nothing,” Kenny nodded toward Brandon.

I introduced the two men. “You and Brandon have something in common. You’re both lawyers.”

The men shook hands, and Brandon chuckled. “Yeah, poor Grady came to me for divorce advice and when he introduce me to Angel, I snuck my name into the pool for her affections.”

Grady set my cheesecake and Brandon’s beer in front of us. “I forgot to ask you, Kenny, do you want any dessert?”

“No, I’m good.”

Brandon stayed to finish his beer and he and Kenny talked lawyer stuff. Kenny promised to stop by to see his office.

In the next week we took walks, talked for hours, played board games, watch our favorite DVDs, and enjoyed each other's company. We had lunch or dinner with Grady or Brandon each day. I was hoping Kenny chose one for me, as I could not decide between them.

At the end of the week, we ordered Chinese food for lunch, again. A strange man brought it.

"My name is Steffen. Ian's on vacation, so I brought your food."

Kenny and I shrugged. Kenny took the bags. I paid Steffen since I was still using Emily's money, although Kenny had money. The prosecutor could not prove that Kenny had benefited financially from any of the crimes they accused him of perpetrating, so Kenny still had his checking and saving accounts from being a partner lawyer at the biggest law firm in the country, plus he was the only heir to his grandparent's estate, which included hotels, restaurants and a big-ass castle in Scotland, according to Kenny.

When we finished eating, Kenny laughed and pulled out four fortune cookies. "Guess Steffen doesn't know we don't get these. You want to pick your fortune, Stretch?"

"Sure," I told him and moved my hands over the cookies, picked one and opened it. It said, 'Your future is bright with happiness.' And it was now that Kenny was here.

Kenny took the fortune and stared at me.

"What?" I asked.

Kenny frowned.

"What?" I asked again.

"Nothing. I have calls to make, and I want a place of my own."

"You can stay here, Kenny."

Kenny chuckled. "No, I'm not bringing a date here and have you scrutinize my choice of companion."

I yawned.

"You had five nightmares last night, Stretch."

"Did I? That's why I'm tired, so I'm going to lie down for a few minutes."

"Do you need me to come and lie with you?" Kenny asked.

"No, I'm fine during the day. I won't fall asleep."

"Yeah, I've never known you to be a napper unless you're sick."

“I’m not sick, just tired.” In the bedroom, I slept but did not dream. When I woke up the clock on my nightstand said 5:00. My stomach growled and yelled, “I am thinking pizza for dinner, do you agree?”

Someone knocked on the front door.

“If you ordered pizza, Kenny, I forgot to tell you red sauces give me terrible indigestion these days. I prefer white or pesto on pizza.”

“No, I didn’t order takeout pizza, Stretch.”

As I came into the living room, I asked, “What did you order?”

Kenny sighed, then smiled. “Takeout husband.”

“What?”

Kenny opened the door. Tom stood in the doorway dressed in his Chief of Police uniform.

Kenny looked at his watch. “Wow, it took you only four hours to get here from Gainesville. You must have used your lights and sirens the entire way.”

“Fuck a duck,” I growled, glaring at Kenny.