

CHAPTER 1

Shattering pain stabbed through Kendall Kilmer's foot, just beneath her left toes—burning pain that only two days ago, before the accident, she could never have imagined. She shifted from side to side in the hospital bed, moaning between rapid, shallow breaths. She wasn't a particularly religious person, but the image of Christ being nailed to the cross kept flashing through her mind. She pictured the nails boring through her own flesh, flesh no longer there, and she cried out again. The outburst caused Tim to jump up from his chair and take her hand, which clutched the side rail. "Kendall, please use the morphine."

"No! I don't need that stuff."

With his arm in a sling, and bruises on his face, he choked back the tears. "I can't stand seeing you like this."

He had never displayed this kind of emotion in front of her before, and she was touched by his vulnerability.

"Just take a little more. You probably won't even need it tomorrow. Come on, Kenny" he coaxed. "If you won't do it for yourself, will you do it for me?"

She hesitated, and then another jab in her foot lifted her off the bed.

"OK, give me that thing."

Tim reached for the tubing hanging from the bed and handed it to her. She pressed the button that controlled the morphine drip and braced herself for the hit, thinking she could control its effect. But within minutes, her body went limp, her eyes closed, and her breathing eased.

The absence of pain gave way to other thoughts ... the car coming from behind Tim's motorcycle, pushing toward them, and then slamming into them before speeding off.

"Tim?"

“Yes?” He leaned his face into hers, and stroked her hair.

Her words slurred, and her voice cracked, but she spoke with conviction. “We’ve got to find out who did this to us.”

**

Kendall waited while her father pulled the wheelchair out of his trunk, unfolded it in front of the open passenger door, and locked the wheels into place. It had been three weeks since her release from the hospital, and the doctor had ordered physical therapy. She hadn’t been outside her father’s and stepmother’s home in all that time, and the noise and activity of cars coming and going in the parking lot caused her to flinch.

“Come on, Kendall.” Her father took her elbow. “Easy does it.”

She wished he’d stop saying that. She knew he thought it to be an endearing phrase, but it annoyed her. Did he think she intended to sprint from the car to the chair?

She pulled herself to the edge of the passenger seat, stood up on her one leg, pivoted, and lowered herself into the seat of the wheelchair. Then she propped her stump, bandaged below the knee, on the makeshift platform that protruded out from under her left thigh, and settled in. She had this down now.

As they approached the door, an elderly man jumped up from his seat inside and flung the door open. Her father pushed her into the crowded waiting room and left her at the side of the reception desk, while he gave the young woman behind it Kendall’s name.

Trying not to meet the eyes of anyone, Kendall kept her head down and gazed around the floor of the room. All she could see were pairs of feet. She raised her head a bit to look at the mix of people attached to them, and for the first time since her accident, she realized she was no longer like everyone else. Her heart sank. How could she be an amputee?

A little boy approached to get a better look at her leg and stood transfixed at the unfamiliar sight. So Kendall reached for the blanket under her and covered the seven-inch stump.

“Joshua.” The boy’s mother signaled for him to come back to his seat.

Tears welled in Kendall’s eyes, and she turned her head away from the other patients to hide her embarrassment.

“Honey?” Her father rested his hand on her shoulder.

She blotted her eyes with her sleeve, and cleared her throat. “What?”

“They need your insurance card.”

**

“I’m not going back to physical therapy.” Kendall hunkered down on the couch later that day.

Tim stood holding out a glass of water to her, and pleaded, “But Kendall you need to learn how to build up your strength, so you can walk again.”

“And how am I supposed to do that on one leg?” She took the glass, and took a sip of water.

“But you’ll get an artificial one soon.”

“It won’t be the same.”

“That’s why you need help. To learn how.”

She placed the glass on the end table, and folded her arms. “I’m not going out like this anymore. I’m a freak.”

“You are not.” He grabbed the television remote from the coffee table and continued, “Look at all of those amputee soldiers back from the war. They’re not freaks. You’ll be like them.”

“I don’t want to look like them.”

“I know, but how are you going to get back to work? You have to start somewhere.”

“You and I both know I can’t do my job anymore.”

“Of course you can.”

“How do you know? You have no idea what this is like.”

“You’re right,” he said, with regret in his voice. “I don’t.”

Of course he couldn’t know. She shouldn’t take her frustration out on him.

She changed the subject. “Do you have any leads on our hit-and-run driver?”

“No. I’m sorry.” He flopped down next to her. “I apologize for not being able to do that either.”

Kendall, a popular consumer reporter for an independent TV station in the L.A. area, felt sure that there had been a connection between the news story she had been investigating and the hit and run driver.

While she was in the hospital, she had given Tim all the contact names involved in the story. She couldn’t understand why he’d come up empty. But she’d vowed to find the bastard who had made her a cripple.

Now, she’d lost the strength she had used to fight to stay alive, endure the pain, and plot her revenge. Without the security of the hospital environment and the strong, mind-numbing painkillers, a sense of helplessness had taken over as she faced the reality of being a disabled

person in an able-bodied world. Those things, together with Tim's failure to locate her assailant, left her empty and wondering how she could go on.

**

Her doctor saw the change and sent a social worker out to help her deal, but after the woman's most recent visit, Kendall had told the doctor she wanted no more of it. The social worker had appeared more depressed than Kendall was. All she did for Kendall was describe her future artificial leg as a fine leather boot and show her how to use her crutches.

So, when an unfamiliar woman, about Kendall's age, peeked into the bedroom a few days later, Kendall's guard went up.

"Kendall?"

Kendall sighed and kept her eyes on her laptop screen. "Yes."

"Hi, I'm Becca. How are you doing?"

Kendall clenched her fists. "I'm fine. Listen, I don't mean to be rude, but I told Dr. Crane not to send any more social workers, and I ..."

"I'm not a social worker. And your dad asked me to come by."

"He did? Why?"

"He thought we might have something in common."

Kendall scanned Becca, standing there in jeans and a tank top. "Well, we look to be around the same age, but other than that I don't know why he thought ..."

"Kendall, I'm a below-knee-amputee, too."

"Oh." It took her a minute to digest what she had heard. "Really? Which one?"

"Right."

Kendall motioned for Becca to sit. "I couldn't tell."

Becca shrugged.

“Where did my father find you?” Kendall asked.

“He called the “Limb Loss Link.” It’s a statewide group that supports amputees, and they sent me. I’m a peer counselor.”

“When did yours happen?”

“Three years ago.”

“Was it hard to learn to walk with a ...” She pointed to Becca’s right leg. “Prosthesis?”

“Yes, it took a good amount of work. But it was worth it. You’ll see.”

“I don’t know ... I’m scared,” Kendall murmured.

“Of falling?”

“Of failing.”