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SHANNON FREEMAN

CHAPTER 1

KAELYNN

Kaelynn normally walked around barefoot. Today was different. It was an extra-hot Texas summer. She could feel the ground through her flip-flops. She was dressed for the hot weather. Polka-dot bikini top. Short cutoffs with the pockets hanging out the bottom. Her wavy brown hair hung around her face. It was freshly washed. The scent of shampoo lingered. On a day like today, it would take minutes for her hair to dry.

She was walking to Samantha's house. She knew she would have to pass a farm she loathed. The people neglected their animals. She hated passing there. You could smell the stench for blocks. The other route would take an additional ten minutes. It was too hot for that. She held her nose and tried to breathe through her mouth. As soon as she

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passed, she took a huge breath. She was blocks away from her destination.

As she approached, she could see there was a new pickup in the driveway. Samantha's place had a revolving door. She was thirty-one and liked to party. Hard. It took a toll on her looks. The men who came around were overweight and struggling. They always took care of Samantha, though. That was a requirement, or they wouldn't be around for long.

Kaelynn walked down the gravel driveway. She peeked inside the pickup to get some idea of what she was walking into. Country music CDs. A little rap. Some work equipment. And a city badge hanging from the rearview mirror. *Another fat bald guy. Ugh!* she thought.

She walked around back to the garage. Five people were talking. They had beers in hand and a blunt going around. Kaelynn knew everybody there. Everybody knew her except for one new face. She assumed he was the owner of the pickup. She had to admit, Samantha had come up. This wasn't one of her normal guys. He was gorgeous, with blue eyes, dirty blond hair, muscles, and a full sleeve of tattoos on one arm. His jeans sagged just enough to make him look young and fresh. Kaelynn could not keep her eyes off him.

When they were alone, she moved closer to the fan, which was the only breeze in the hot garage. Her wavy hair blew wild as the fan whirled.

“I’m Will,” she heard him say from behind her.

“I’m Kaelynn,” she said, turning around to look at him. She felt light-headed. She didn’t know if it was the heat, the weed, the beer, or just Will’s presence. He was like a dream come true. Her heart seemed to skip a beat when she looked into his blue eyes. He walked over toward the fan to steal some of the air she was enjoying. He reached over and moved a curl from her face.

Just then, the rest of the group returned. They had gone inside to get cool cups for everybody.

“What is this?” Will asked curiously.

“You’ve never had a cool cup before?” Kaelynn asked. “You are definitely not from around here.”

“You’re right,” he said, tasting the frozen drink. “That’s good. Really good.”

She laughed. “They are. I grew up on these things. My grandmother used to sell them. All you have to do is make some Kool-Aid. But it has to be really sweet. Pour it into the cup and freeze it. Couple of hours later, cool cups.”

“Cool.”

Samantha seemed to notice something brewing between Kaelynn and Will. She had invited Will over, wanting to get to know him better. Kaelynn was intruding. Darn her high school body and good looks.

“Don’t you have homework or something?” Samantha

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asked, interrupting their conversation. “I know you didn’t pass all ’dem classes this year.”

“Summer school is over, Sam. Thanks for your concern.”

“You’re still in high school?” Will asked, shocked.

“Yeah, one year left. But I’m legal,” she lied, looking over at Samantha, who rolled her eyes. She was only sixteen. She didn’t want Sam to out her. Time to leave. “Hey, Will, do you mind driving me home? It’s starting to get dark, and I hate to walk this late.”

“Girl, walking is in your blood. I just saw your mom pass by here earlier today.” Samantha knew she would hit a nerve with that. Kaelynn’s mom was the neighborhood drug addict. All she did was walk around looking to score. Kaelynn lived with her grandmother. She’d lived there for as long as she could remember. Samantha knew the history. She chose this moment to use it against her.

Kaelynn looked up to Samantha. Like a big sister. But this guy was making her mean. Kaelynn shot her a look and walked toward Will’s truck.

“Hey, Sam, thanks for having me over,” Will said, following Kaelynn to the truck.

“Any time,” Samantha said, flirting shamelessly.

Will unlocked the doors. The two climbed in.

“Hey, you mind if we go smoke a cigarette before I go home? Sam has my nerves bad,” Kaelynn said.

“No, it’s cool, but I don’t smoke. I dip snuff.”

“It’s okay. I have my own smokes.” She began beating the back of the cigarette pack as she explained where to find a remote location. She led him to an abandoned baseball field. It hadn’t been used for years. There was talk of getting it cleaned up, but nothing had been done so far.

Kaelynn jumped out of the truck and walked toward the bleachers. Will joined her. She took a drag of her cigarette. Then exhaled as she thought about Samantha’s words. “In your blood.” She hated what Sam had implied. Everybody in the whole damn town thought she would turn out like her mother. Yes, she liked weed. She liked beer. Her mom was a whole different bird. She liked drugs. All kinds. The hard stuff too. She would do anything: coke, meth, crack. It didn’t matter as long as she got high.

“You okay?” Will asked.

She had almost forgotten he was there. “Yeah, I’m fine,” she said, smiling. She blew smoke out of her mouth. Then she leaned over and kissed him. When she was done, she lingered close to his face. “I’ve been wanting to do that since I saw you,” she whispered.

“Me too,” he said, grabbing her and pulling her close.

They kissed for what seemed like forever. Then they got back into his truck. She didn’t know if it was the weed or the alcohol, but she couldn’t control herself. Her brain didn’t say stop. And her body responded instinctively.

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He had never asked her how old she was. She hadn't asked him either. Their mutual attraction had been enough. It was as if they didn't want to know. They both figured it was better that way.

CHAPTER 2

YESSENIA

Yessenia sat on the toilet in disbelief. She stared at the pregnancy test in her hand. If she stared at it long enough, maybe it would show a different result. It was the second one she'd taken. She thought the first test was wrong. This stick had just confirmed her greatest fear. She was pregnant. *Pregnant!* The last thing she'd ever wanted to be. Everyone in her family had a ton of kids. She wanted no part of it. Now here she was.

She was on the pill. How could this have happened?

There was a loud knock on the bathroom door. She knew it was Dante.

“Yessie! What the hell? They’re outside!” Dante screamed.

She rolled her eyes. At that moment she hated the sound of his voice. He turned her stomach. This was all his fault.

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She told him they shouldn't have sex. That they were too young. But he said he had needs. Well, look where his "needs" had gotten her.

She wiped the tears from her face. And she washed her hands before joining him and his friends in the car. They already had two blunts going when she got there. All the windows were up. They were "hotboxing," as they liked to call it. Normally, she was down, but all that smoke was making her feel ill.

She'd mixed some tequila with Sprite before leaving the house. She took a gulp. She had to make it through this night. She was not about to do it sober. Then she took a huge drag on a blunt. She made her signature smoke rings. Her stomach began to calm down. She knew she'd been feeling a little under the weather. And so tired. But she never thought she was pregnant.

"Yo, can we roll down the windows?" she yelled, trying to talk over the music. She could feel herself getting light-headed. They had a thirty-minute drive ahead of them. She wasn't going to make it at this rate. She leaned over to Dante. "Hey, I'm not feeling so good."

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"I don't know," she lied. "Can we pull over for a second?"

Dante quickly got his boy to pull the car over. Yessenia jumped out. She began retching. Then she vomited. Dante

came to her, but there was nothing he could do. Her friend Sofia was right by her side, holding her hair back.

“Dante, I have her. Are you okay, Yessie?” Sofia asked.

“It must have been something I ate. I’ll be fine.”

“Are you sure? We can’t have you getting sick on the way back. There’s too much at stake here,” Dante said.

“I’ll be fine. I’m always fine, right?”

They joined their friends back in the car and took off again. They smoked another blunt before pulling up at the store.

“You sure they got bank like that in here?” Dante asked Sergio.

“Man, my cousin’s working the register. They got it. He told me. We just drove thirty miles. You want to chicken out now? Man—”

“Nah,” Dante said. “As long as you know we’re about to come up, I’m good. I’m not trying to risk everything for two dollars.”

“Look, they are taking in five grand a night at this liquor store. You know they’re right next to a dry county. This store is jumping.”

“It don’t look like it’s jumping right now,” Yessenia said. She was skeptical.

“That’s ’cause my cousin told me when to fall through. I ain’t no dummy.”

“All right. Well, let’s go,” Dante said.

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They pulled on ski masks and took out their guns. Yessenia jumped into the driver's seat. Sofia got in the passenger's seat. Yessenia turned the car toward the interstate. Sofia kept an eye on the store. Yessenia focused on the road ahead. It wasn't their first rodeo. She had been the getaway driver many times. Sofia always had her back. They were both good at it. The guys knew they could count on them. Yessenia was old-school and played her role. She was a ride-or-die type chick.

"They're coming," Sofia warned her. "And it looks like they've got company."

Yessenia clenched the steering wheel until her knuckles were white. She heard the store's alarm and knew it was time.

The guys jumped into the car. Both were yelling, "Go! Go! Go!"

She saw a man pointing a gun directly at the car's tires. She heard the gunshot. A bullet hit the dirt as she cut a hard right. She looked in the rearview mirror. The store got smaller and smaller. The guys took off their masks and put away their guns, but she was focused on getting to a safe location. Adrenaline was pumping. She felt alive. On fire.

"I hope y'all got enough money," she said, looking at them in the mirror. She didn't play about her cut, and they knew it.

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*“Yeah, right. I’m not giving up my Dr. Pepper for anybody.
Not even my little bundle of joy.”*

Three girls could not be more different. Kaelynn is pure country. Yessenia lives on the wild side. And Lyric is the good girl. They meet at a program for pregnant teens. The town’s one high school is not an option. Who wants to be there, shunned and with growing bellies? Here, they can still take classes. And hopefully graduate on time. The girls soon lean in, relying on each other to see them through the drama.



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