

# RACHEL CAINE

NY TIMES BEST SELLING AUTHOR

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## BITTER FALLS

### CHAPTER 1

#### GWEN

When my personal phone rings, I check the caller ID. Force of habit. There are only six people in the world I take calls from on this number. Sure enough, it's Sam Cade. A little bubble of warmth explodes inside me as I hit the button and lift the phone to my ear.

"Hey, stranger," I say. I hear the purr in the back of my throat.

"Hey yourself," he replies. I hear the husky tone in his voice too. Oh, subtext. So sexy. "What's going on?"

"Right now? Exactly nothing," I say, and yawn. It's three thirty in the morning, and I've been sitting in this chilly rental car for three hours, not counting a quick dash into the convenience store down the road for a pee and a giant coffee I'm going to regret. "I'm waiting for my guy to make a move."

"A move to do what?"

"Good question."

"You're not going to tell me?" He sounds amused.

"Well, you know. Not until I'm sure. Anyway, you're up late. Or early. Which is it?"

"Early. Just getting some paperwork ready for the day," he says. "Kids are still fast asleep, by the way. I checked." My kids are my life, and he knows that. Sam's also well aware that he's one of a very select group of people I trust with my children. My daughter, Lanny, is at a difficult sixteen-feels-like-twenty. My son, Connor, is too adult for his age at thirteen and too young for it at the same time. Not easy people to handle, my kids.

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There's no reason they should be. They've spent half their lives now with the horrifying knowledge that their father was a serial killer, and with the equally heavy burden of having people unfairly hate them by association. I want to protect them from the world. I can't, of course. But I still want to try.

"You going to be home before six?" he asks me, and I sigh. "Okay, fair enough. You want me to wake up Lanny when I leave?"

"Yeah, better plan on that. I can't trust her to hear the alarm and get Connor up too. I'll text and let you know when I'm on my way." I want to let my kids sleep. They have to be up at seven, but an extra hour of sleep to a teenager is like ten to me.

Neither of them will want to get up, and still less head to school, but they're used to facing unpleasant situations. I flatly refuse to homeschool them. Their lives are going to be incredibly difficult given our family history. I want them to learn how to handle it now, not hit eighteen as protected little china dolls.

There lie monsters.

Counseling has done all of us some good. I started the kids in individual therapy for a few months, then together, while Sam and I met with another counselor as a couple. Now we do it as a family once every other week, and I dare to think things are . . . better.

If not for the fact that town itself has closed ranks against us.

I'm not really sure what tipped Norton residents over to utter dislike; maybe it was Sam's unintentional but ongoing feud with a bunch of drug-dealing but influential hill folk. And some of it I brought on myself by agreeing to do a TV interview. The situation had turned utterly toxic. That had triggered even more media attention to rush into the calm backwaters of Stillhouse Lake. I'd thought I was doing a good thing, but it had been like unloading a dump truck of ten-day-old garbage on my head.

The internet trolls are back, relentless and ghoulishly gleeful as ever. I'm never sure

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what they get out of trying to destroy my life, but I'll give them this much: they're dedicated. I recently found a post on a message board that said their goal was to drive my kids to commit suicide live on camera. The level of sociopathy that takes goes to eleven, but no mistake, it's out there. And, disturbingly, it's not that rare.

That's who we deal with on a daily basis. I don't like to call them monsters; they're just bored, angry, empathy-free humans without a cause who see me as a target for their rage. After all, I was married to Melvin Royal, the infamous serial killer. He slaughtered women for fun, so I must have been somehow responsible for that too. No, the swarm of ever-present trolls are not the monsters. I've known monsters. I've faced them down, including Melvin.

I kill monsters. You'd think they'd keep that in mind.

I talk to Sam for about half an hour, lulled into comfort and warmth and a deeply coiled need to feel him with me, but we both know that's not going to happen right now. Thanks to the closed-minded town of Norton mostly shunning us, his construction work has dried up, and he has to go farther out to find jobs. That means longer drives, shorter times at home.

I'm working for an out-of-town detective agency that tosses me a wide variety of cases within my specified driving distance; I can turn down what I can't handle or what I just don't feel like doing.

But the pay's good, and I'm decent at this kind of job.

A very wealthy CEO named Greg Kingston is getting my full attention right now. The assignment came to us from his company's board of directors, who were concerned by what they considered strange behavior and some worrying financial results. I've already uncovered embezzlement out of his Florida PR firm, and his digital fingerprints are all over that. Easy enough—that goes back to his board to decide what to do about it. Kingston's days are probably numbered.

But in the process of following Mr. Kingston, I've found something that disturbs me

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a whole lot more. I'm not sure what it is yet, which is why I didn't say anything to Sam. Right now it's just clues, instinct, and one important question.

Why in the world would a man with Greg Kingston's hefty bank balance and social standing be staying in a no-stars motel in a shady part of Knoxville when he also has a room booked in the very upscale Tennessean Hotel?

There are a few reasons a man like Kingston stays in a place like this: hiring prostitutes, buying drugs, or something darker than either of those. I'm actually hoping he just has a taste for sex workers on the rougher side of town. That would be the best possible outcome here.

But it isn't what I get.

I watch as an anonymous dark car pulls up. A dumpy-looking white man gets out. He's wearing jeans and a plain jacket, and he has a ball cap pulled low over his face. No bag, so if he's a drug dealer, he's not bringing more than what's in his pockets. I don't think someone of Kingston's monstrous ego would be just in for a dime bag.

As the man opens the back door of the car, I realize that is not what he's bringing.

The girl can't be more than twelve at best, and my mouth goes dry. My heart starts hammering harder. I force myself to be calm and take as many pictures as I can. The license plate. The car's details. The best shots I can of the girl. She's in a blue dress that belongs on a younger child, and she has a vacant, defeated expression on her face that makes me want to scream.

I get an absolutely clear picture of Greg Kingston's grin as he opens up the motel room door and shakes the dumpy man's hand. He ushers the girl and the man inside the room and shuts the door.

My hands are shaking when I drop the camera and dial 911. I give the report as calmly as I can, and I tell them there's a child in serious danger, possibly being abused right now. If I'm wrong, if somehow Greg Kingston came to this shady motel to meet his

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cousin and his niece, then I'm screwed.

But I know I'm right. I'm watching a child being sold, and it takes every ounce of control I have to sit and wait for the police instead of beating two men senseless and taking that child someplace safe.

It doesn't take long. Less than five minutes, but it feels like an eternity. The slow, silent glide of the police cruiser into the parking lot is a relief. I get out of my car and talk to the two uniformed officers. They take me seriously, especially after they look at the photos on my camera. I'm shivering and tense as I lean against the car and they pound on the motel door.

It's over fast. Whatever they find in that room, it's enough to put Kingston and his dumpy friend in handcuffs, and when the girl comes out, she's wrapped in a blanket. Her frozen, blank look has been replaced by something that looks like real emotion.

Like the beginnings of hope.

An ambulance arrives, lights flashing, and a detective car noses in. Around the small L-shaped motel complex, the evening's occupants are making quiet getaways. Nobody wants to be caught up in this mess.

Kingston looks murderously angry. I think he ought to be looking a whole lot more scared, so I dial the city desk of the local paper and a couple of news stations. They'll love this story, especially if they can get a shot of the mighty Greg Kingston sitting in his boxer briefs with his black dress socks still on. He looks pallid and thin and exposed. Perfect front-page material.

The two detectives eventually make their way to me. I give them my business card and explain what I'm doing here. My camera's internet-enabled, so I send the photos to them directly. I add in from my phone the vague message board posts that led me to this motel. They're all in code, but it was enough to make me curious. And I can see the detectives see it too from the looks they exchange.

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I give them a statement. Promise to come in for more questions if they need me. One of them clearly hasn't recognized my name; I'm always on guard for that, but he just writes it down along with my contact details and moves on.

The other detective lingers, looking at me. I can see by her expression that she's caught on. I guard myself instinctively and wait for the sneer, the distrust, the cut.

But she says, "Glad you made it through all you've had to deal with, Ms. Proctor. Can't have been easy. You taking care of yourself?"

I'm surprised. So surprised I don't really know what to say to that, so I just . . . nod. My throat feels unexpectedly tight. I don't try to thank her. Maybe she sees it anyway, because she smiles and walks away.

I feel oddly exposed now too. I'm always prepared for a fight. Not for that.

I get back in the car and tell Sam I'm headed home. It's a solid hour and a half drive home without traffic, but we'll have some overlap to enjoy being together. Quiet time.

I'm almost never that lucky, and today's no different. I come in the front door and reset the alarm. Connor's already up and sitting at the breakfast table nibbling on a piece of toast. At thirteen he's put on a growth spurt that caught me by surprise. He's filled out in the shoulders and chest. He's got some height going too.

But Connor doesn't look great today. Slumped shoulders. Dull, dark shadows in his eyes. Sam's cooking eggs at the stove. He flashes me a warm, quick smile and a shrug, messages received and acknowledged. Sam's in his late thirties, just a bit older than I am. Medium height, medium weight, blondish hair. A nicely symmetrical face that somehow can look older or younger, depending on his mood and the light.

And I love him completely. That still surprises the hell out of me; what right do I have to love a man this solid, this good? And how does he love me? It's a mystery I don't think I'll ever solve.

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“Hey, baby,” I say. I kiss my son on the top of the head. He barely reacts. “What’s wrong?”

Connor doesn’t answer. He looks pretty zombified, which is partly the hour and partly something else. Sam replies for him. “He says he woke up sick.”

“Sick,” I repeat. I sink down in the chair next to Connor. “Stomach again?”

He nods and gnaws a tiny bit of toast. There are dark circles under his eyes, and he needs a haircut. I keep intending to take him in for one, and it hits me that he looks halfway neglected right now. He’s got on a favorite threadbare sweater I told him to throw away, paired with distressed blue jeans. Add the ragged hair to that, the exhausted eyes . . . If you sat him on a corner with a WILL WORK FOR FOOD sign, he’d absolutely get donations.

“You don’t want to go to school?” I ask him, and get another nonverbal agreement. “How about going to the doctor?” This time it’s a negative. I press the back of my hand to his forehead. He isn’t running a fever. “Baby, I’m sorry, but you know you either need to go to the doctor or go to school. I can’t let you just stay home. You’ve missed enough days already.”

He gives me a miserable look, but still doesn’t say a word. He just drops the toast and heads back to his room. I look at Sam, and he holds up his hand in an I-don’t-know gesture. “If I had to guess, I’d say bullies,” he tells me.

“Connor’s been dealing with those for years.”

“Connor’s also been moving around town to town. He could look forward to leaving bullies in the rearview, but he’s settled now. He has to face them with no end in sight. I could be wrong, but—”

“But you’re probably not,” I sigh. “Okay. Save me some eggs?”

“Cheese and crumbled bacon. Got it.”

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I knock on Connor's door and ease it open. He's sitting on the edge of his bed staring at the floor with socks he hasn't yet put on in his hands. I step in and he doesn't get mad, so I shut the door behind me. "Sam thinks it's bullies," I say. "Is he right?"

A slow nod.

"Can you talk to me about it?"

I'm not sure he will, but he finally does, in a voice so rusty it's painful. "I just . . . it's hard."

He's right. I get abuse and threats daily in my email. On social media. Even sometimes mailed right to our address. But at least those people are at a distance.

Connor's face-to-face with his bullies every day. And he can't escape.

I feel an overwhelming surge of fury, frustration, anguish that makes my pulse beat hard in my temples. Although I want to protect him from the pain, there's not much I can do. Stick to your decision. He needs to learn how to cope with this as he grows up. Wrapping him in my arms and protecting him from the world can't give him the armor he needs.

Teaching him how to guard himself . . . That will ensure he's safe when I'm not there.

"Sweetie, I know. I'm sorry. I can talk to the principal, make sure he knows that they need to back off . . ."

He's already shaking his head. "Mom. No. If you do anything it'll be worse."

I take a deep breath. "So what do you want me to do?"

"Nothing," he says. "Just like—" He doesn't finish that. His voice trails off, but I know what he meant to say. Just like always. It must seem that way. Even though he



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knows how much of my life I devote to protecting them. It hurts, but I endure that. “I’ll be okay.”

“I can make you an extra appointment at the counselor if you—”

He puts his socks on, then his shoes. Calm, methodical motions, like it’s important he gets it right. “Sure.” His voice is bland now. Disturbingly empty. “Whatever.”

The dreaded whatever. It’s a steel door slamming in my face. I’m used to getting it from my daughter, not Connor. But he’s growing up, becoming his own person. I’m no longer his shelter.

Now I’m in his way. That hurts.

I have to take a breath against the cold that stabs through me. “Who is it?” I ask him.

He doesn’t pause in tying his shoelaces. “Why? What are you going to do, beat them up?”

“Maybe,” I say. “Because it kills me to see you hurting, baby. It really does.” I hear the very real tremble in my voice at the end.

So does he. He looks up quickly. I can’t read what’s on his face and he turns his head again so fast it’s a blur.

“It was easier when we moved,” he says. “When we didn’t have to just take it.”

“I know. Do you want to move? I thought you liked being in one place.”

“I did. I mean, I like the idea. It’s just—” He sits back with a sigh but doesn’t look at me. “I’m going over to Reggie’s house after school, remember?” He says it as if we’ve already agreed on that. We haven’t. But I just nod and let it go. My son needs to feel like he’s got something to look forward to.

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“Call me when you get there?” I make it a question, not an order. He looks relieved.

“Sure, Mom.” He stands up. “I guess I should eat something.”

“Good call.”

I want to hold him but I can see he doesn’t want that. My heart aches for him. I’m so afraid that the whole world is coming to hurt him, but I can’t stop the whole world. I know I can’t.

Maybe that’s the worst part.

By the time Connor’s at the breakfast table, my daughter shuffles in, dark hair lank around her face. She’s dressed in a fuzzy red bathrobe with cartoon Draculas all over it. She yawns so widely I can check her tonsils. “Crap,” she says. “School again?”

“Again,” I agree. “Eggs?”

“Sure,” she says. “Coffee?”

“Elixir of life with plenty of cream and sugar, coming up.”

We eat like a family. It’s precious to me even if it isn’t to the half-asleep kids; I have to hustle Lanny off when she wants to dawdle. If I’m not riding herd, both of them will miss the bus, and Sam’s got to be on his way.

I share a sweet kiss with Sam at the door. I read the regret in his eyes. We missed our short window of privacy today.

Tonight, I hope. If nothing comes up.

“Sam?” I call after him. He turns back on the way to his truck. “Be careful.”

“So many rules,” he says, and flashes me a grin. Dawn’s breaking behind the trees and

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it bathes everything in a benevolent, soft light. It glints off the glass of our car and truck windows, and for a second I think I'm imagining things, because the bright red spot on Sam's chest seems so out of place.

I feel my heart start to hammer before I work out what it is. By then the laser dot is moving.

"Sam!" The alarm in my voice is clear, but I can tell he doesn't know what I'm warning him about. I'm about to yell get down when the side window of his truck goes milky white as the safety glass crazes. There's a hole in the center the size of a quarter.

The boom of a shot echoes out over the hills behind the house.

Adrenaline hits me hard, and I start out the door before I check myself. Sam's not hurt, but he's an open target. He's ducked, but he's clearly looking for the origin of the shot. I yell, "Get in here!"

He dashes for the door. The shot has come from behind the house, and above. Someone's in the tree line up there. Someone wanted me to see that he had a bead on Sam, and could have put a round through Sam's chest as easily as through that window.

"Jesus Christ," Sam says. He sounds remarkably calm, though his face has gone pale. "I didn't see him."

I drag him back from the doorway. Slam the door shut. Throw the locks. Engage the alarm with lightning-fast stabs of my trembling fingers. The kids have bolted out of their bedrooms and stand frozen, faces stark with worry. "Back from the windows," I tell them, and point to the kitchen. "Get in the safe room and stay down!"

"Mom, was that a shot?" Lanny asks.

"Get Connor in the safe room now!" She grabs her brother and drags him that

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direction. I frantically look Sam up and down for any wounds. It hits people that way sometimes, that in the rush of adrenaline they don't feel the shot. But he's not bleeding.

The sniper had him marked dead to rights, then deliberately missed him. A warning.

"Are you okay?" I ask him.

He looks at me with that same odd calm. "Apart from wishing I'd taken out more car insurance? Sure. He missed."

"He didn't miss. He had a laser sight on your chest."

"And you know laser sights at that distance are bullshit," Sam says. "Bullets curve." He puts his hands on my shoulders, then moves them to cup my face. "Gwen. Breathe. It's okay, it's just a window."

"No," I say. "It was a threat."

I turn away, grab my cell phone, and speed-dial the Norton police.

*Continued in Bitter Falls*

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