

Liberating Lana

Chapter 1

Tuesday early morning

I know where you are. Lana's chest tightened as she read the threatening email. Her heart raced as she glanced at the time on her phone: 2:04 a.m. In the silent darkness of her home in Helena, Montana, fear surged through her veins like a jolt of electricity. She always felt uneasy when he sent messages, but this time was different. This time, in addition to the message, she could swear someone had been following her, skulking in the shadows as she rode around town. It had gone on for several days now. Had he really found her this time? Her stomach churned. He had tracked her down like an animal before, but she had simply moved on. This was the first place she'd felt safe enough to make friends and start anew. But if they were already coming for her, it meant one thing: it was only a matter of time until she had to run again. For nearly a year, this had been her safe haven. No, it was more than that. Helena, and her life here, was a place she could finally call home.

Lana leaned against the wall in Clarice's trailer, where she had been sleeping on the sofa since shortly after she arrived in Helena. She sipped her coffee, the bitterness a familiar comfort. At 29, she was a skilled hacker, though few knew her secret past.

Her laptop screen flickered again, the backlights obviously going bad. "Dang piece of crap," she mumbled as she glanced down. Her fingers tapped the keys with practiced precision, a dance she'd known for years. But her eyes darted to the side, an involuntary tic born from fear.

She didn't dare stay in one place too long, always looking over her shoulder, avoiding connections with people. She had learned to live like a dark specter in a world where everyone else seemed to bask in the light.

"Maybe I should just toss you out the window," she mused aloud. She imagined the satisfying crunch of metal and glass meeting pavement.

Lana's computer beeped, signaling she had received another email. She hesitated before opening it, her heart pounding.

Surprise, surprise. You didn't really think you could hide from me forever, did you?

Lana's hands trembled on the keyboard. Had he actually found her, or was this just another scare tactic? If he had, she knew what he was capable of, and she knew he would stop at nothing to get to her.

A knock at the door startled her. Lana froze, her breath caught in her throat. She knew she had to act fast. She quickly shut down her laptop and jammed it into her backpack, which was filled with practically everything she owned. She pulled on her combat boots, grabbed her leather jacket, and peeked out the window, relieved to see Tuper standing there with his black and white border collie. Dually traveled with him almost everywhere he went.

Tuper was an enigma wrapped in a cowboy hat and boots. He was tall and slender, and resembled Sam Elliott, but with a scar down the right side of his face from his eye to just under his chin. He had been her lifeline in this strange new existence. She opened the door.

"Hey, Agony," he said. He'd been calling her that since they first met. In return, she called him *Pops*. He hated that he was getting old and didn't like any reminder of it, but Lana believed he'd gotten used to the handle. Maybe even enjoyed it a little. They had a unique

relationship even though they were forty years apart in age. Tuper barely knew what a computer was and didn't even know how to text on his flip phone. He barely knew enough to make a phone call.

"Do you know what time it is?" Lana asked.

"Not exactly. Why? Don't any of your fandangled machines have the time?"

"What are you doing here at two in the morning?"

"I saw the light on. Besides, I knew you'd still be up. You're always on that contraption."

Tuper shivered. "Can we come in? It's cold out here."

"Sure." Lana glanced around outside to make sure no one else was there.

"Are you expecting someone?"

"Of course not. But then, I wasn't expecting you either."

Tuper stepped in and closed the door. Lana locked it. Tuper gave her an inquisitive look, then sat down at the table.

"What are you doing out at this hour?" Lana repeated as she reached down to pet Dually.

"Need your help on a case."

"Right now?"

"That machine of yours works all hours, right?"

"Ugh, fine," she said. "The teapot's on if you want something hot to drink."

"Thanks," Tuper said. He stepped into the small kitchen, separated from the dining area by only a counter. When he returned, he sat down at the table next to where Lana had reclaimed her seat.

No one here knew her last name, or anything about her past. They did know she was good at finding things online. As much as she wanted to maintain her secret identity, something about working with Tuper offered a sense of stability in her otherwise chaotic existence. But she hadn't yet trusted anyone enough to let them in. If she ever did reach that point, Tuper would be the one she would tell. In fact, she was tempted to tell him about the email. Yet, if it was real, she didn't want to put him at risk, and she knew he would want to help. Lana downed the last dregs of her coffee.

"Maybe I should just burn it all," she mused, half-jokingly. "Start fresh somewhere else."

"What are you jabbering about?"

Keep it together, Lana. She wanted to tell Tuper, who wouldn't judge her, but she just couldn't. *Nobody can know.* She wasn't alone, but still, the shadows of her past loomed ever closer, threatening to swallow her whole.

She looked up from her computer. "So, what is it you needed?"

"I know a guy who knows a guy."

Before he could finish, Lana said, "Really, Pops?"

"Just listen. The guy thinks his wife is cheating on him, and he wants me to find out."

"I thought you hated those kinds of cases."

"I do, but this is a good friend. He'd do anything for me, so I need to do the same."

"What do you need from me?"

"For starters, I need you to go with me to meet with the husband this morning at nine. We'll figure it out from there."

"You came here to tell me that?"

"No. I stopped because your light was on. I knew you'd be up, and it's cold out there. I wanted a cup of hot tea."

"Whatever, Pops," she said. "By the way, I've got some new info on our latest case."

"Really?" Tuper raised an eyebrow. He leaned forward in his chair, which creaked under his weight. The cowboy hat perched on his silver-haired head matched his well-worn boots.

"Let's hear it."

Lana's fingers danced across the keyboard as she pulled up the information she'd gathered. Despite the risks, she couldn't deny the thrill she felt each time she breached another secure server. It was a game to her, one she played with the odds always against her.

"I managed to access the phone records of our shady businessman, Mr. Thompson." She glanced over at Tuper, whose eyes were already sparkling with interest.

"Humph." Tuper leaned back in his chair and sipped his tea. "So, what did ya find?"

"Turns out he's been making frequent calls to a number associated with a known criminal organization. And not just any organization, the Rattlers."

"Those snake-lovin' swine?" Tuper spat, his face contorted with disgust. "That explains a lot about Mr. Thompson."

Lana grinned at Tuper's reaction, but her mind raced as she thought about the implications of their discovery. It was one thing to investigate a corrupt businessman; it was another to tangle with an entire criminal syndicate. She knew all too well the dangers that came with digging too deep into someone else's secrets, especially when those secrets belonged to dangerous people.

"Are you sure we want to go after these guys, Pops?" Lana asked, her voice wavering. "I mean, we're playing with fire."

"We've always played with fire," Tuper replied, his eyes serious, but with a hint of a smile. "Besides, I ain't gettin' any younger. Might as well go out with a bang, right?"

"Only if that bang doesn't take me with you," Lana muttered, her fingers resuming their position ready to type.

Tuper chuckled. "Now, now, don't you worry your pretty little head about that. I know a guy. We'll get through this just fine."

"Whatever you say." Lana rolled her eyes, hiding the smile that tugged at the corners of her mouth. Despite the ever-present shadows of her past, she couldn't help but feel a sense of belonging with Tuper. As they were about to dive deep into the dangerous world of Helena's criminal underbelly, Lana couldn't imagine facing it with anyone else by her side.

Chapter 2

Tuesday morning

It was still dark when Tuper walked out the door, and Lana closed it behind him. The rickety wooden fence that surrounded the trailer creaked in the wind. The modest home was where she'd found her sanctuary after Clarice and her sister, Mary Ann, had taken her under their wings.

Clarice passed through the dining area into the kitchen. "Was that Tuper just leaving?"

"Yeah. We've been working on a case most of the night."

"I'm surprised he didn't stay for breakfast." Clarice opened the fridge and pulled out a few things.

"He was meeting someone at Smith's."

"I figured he must be up to something. He's never one to miss a free meal." Clarice looked out the window. "They say we might get some snow today."

"Not much though. No blizzard or anything."

"But it won't be long before we can't see the ground again. We seldom get by without a white Christmas."

"I'm looking forward to that."

After a few minutes, Lana closed her laptop and made her way into the cozy kitchen, where the aroma of pancakes and sausage now filled the air.

"Where's Tuper?" Mary Ann entered the room, still in her pajamas.

"Out chasing leads." Lana leaned against the counter. "He's got enough energy for someone half his age."

"Stubborn old coot," chuckled Clarice, sliding a plate of pancakes onto the counter. "He's always up and out before the rooster crows."

Lana smiled, taking in the familiar faces of her makeshift family. She couldn't have survived this past year without them. They had given her a place to call home while she assisted Tuper with cases, never probing into her past. They didn't know where she was from or why she was running, and they didn't pry. Here, she could maintain her secret identity.

"Speaking of cases, did you two manage to track down that missing dog?" asked Mary Ann, as she sorted the stack of mail on the counter.

"Yep. We found the poor thing tied up in some creep's backyard," Lana recalled the earlier rescue. "Tuper gave the guy a piece of his mind, punched him in the face, and left with the dog."

"Good for you guys." Clarice nodded and served up the rest of breakfast.

As they sat down to eat, Lana felt a pang of guilt. She knew how much these women cared for her, yet she couldn't bring herself to share the details of her past with them. It was enough that Tuper had suspicions. She was certain of it, even though he'd never questioned her. She didn't want to put anyone else in danger, and involving them would do just that.

"Anything interesting in the mail?" Lana asked, trying to get her mind onto something else.

"Mostly bills." Mary Ann sighed as she sifted through the stack. "But there's a postcard addressed to you."

"Really?" Surprised, Lana reached for the postcard. The front displayed a picturesque beach scene from San Diego, California.

Lana turned it over. "From Ron Brown." She fought the urge to smile, remembering their brief encounter before he returned to San Diego, after a visit here with Tuper. The kiss Ron gave her before he left still lingered on her lips. He was charming and handsome, but she knew better than to let herself get too close to anyone. It could only end badly.

"Ron, huh?" Clarice's eyes twinkled with curiosity.

"Uh, he keeps in touch," Lana replied nonchalantly. "He's... nice."

"Nice? That's all you've got to say about him?" teased Mary Ann, a grin spreading across her face. "He's actually very handsome and charming as can be."

"Can we not turn this into a thing?" Lana rolled her eyes. "I'm just trying to enjoy my breakfast."

"All right, all right," conceded Clarice with a chuckle. "But if you ever want to talk about this *nice* fella, we're here for you."

"Thanks, guys," Lana smiled, feeling a warmth in her chest she hadn't experienced in years. Despite her secrets and the constant fear of being discovered, she had found something special in this unconventional family. As she ate her meal, surrounded by laughter and love, Lana couldn't help but wonder if maybe, just maybe, she could one day let her guard down and truly belong.