

Chapter 1

Reflections off an asphalt mirage

Noah Hart. The most beautiful name on Earth. But of course, I had no idea about it on that certain day, when we first met. I had no idea just how deeply those combined syllables would resonate within me, as though they were notes from some song I'd never heard before yet could tap every note as providence.

No. I wasn't clairvoyant. Instead, I was lost in the eyes of self-reflection, gripping the wheel, momentarily motionless. I laughed to myself, then I changed the song on the radio, not knowing that soon it will all begin -I would hear the melody that would stay with me forever. This is your song, Noah Hart.

Chapter 2

Ex boyfriends, new wives

While checking the rear view for some signal of the bright and sunny Friday somewhere off the 405, I still wondered if it was worth risking Hepatitis A and having my car stolen just to ease my guilty conscience. At that moment, when I found out by chance that my ex was meeting our old friends tonight, I jumped at the opportunity, but now I wasn't so sure. Let's just say that my plan was bleeding from several wounds.

First of all, the hole in the wall where the meeting was held was slightly fit for human presence. "The Gates" was the manifestation of my adolescent rebellion against my wealthy but emotionally isolated foster parents. At 17, it seemed like a great idea to come here in secret with my boyfriend -who was also going through his rebellious phase- but as an adult, with some basic hygiene knowledge, it lost son charme romantique. I wondered if those rustic tables and chairs, caked with grime, had survived the ravages of time, or have they been preserved by the dirt that has clung to them?

But the overall epidemic threat was still nothing compared to problem number two: the core clientele. The Gates was a hangout for many not-so-prosperous youths, who were on the borderline of deciding whether to continue on the right path or to respond to the hopelessness of their social status by turning to crime. At the time, of course, I had no sense of the danger that lurked in this place, probably because I was under Peter's protection. He was so cool with his charismatic smile, irresistible sense of humor and motorcycle that my presence was also accepted, but without him, I doubt that there would have been a high rate of survival for a reserved, bookworm, natural blond girl who had long lived under the delusion that private tennis lessons were a privilege for all... I never looked down on them because they were poor, in fact I was actually grateful to them for showing me another aspect of

life. I just don't think I contributed too much to their personal growth, which just made my current situation even more awkward; I had no idea how I was supposed to behave with them.

Then there was problem number three: Peter. We dated for a short time before college. Peter was the typical macho man who fancied himself a wild mustang, or at least that was the impression. Underneath, he was a frustrated little boy who couldn't cope with his father's contempt and neglect. Unfortunately, by the time I realized this, it was too late: he was deeply in love with me. I dumped him, and in return he showed me months of red-hot hatred. There was still a chance that he would choke me with a cocktail straw...

So why the hell did I go to a place I didn't want to be, to meet people I didn't connect with, and all that without even being invited? Well, I didn't know the answer to that question at the time, I just felt the pressure that I had to go there for some reason. Years later, of course, I realized, that it wasn't really for Peter, but for myself. Somehow, I felt that my life had reached a crossroads, and I knew that Peter had experienced with me exactly what I had always dreaded; letting someone get really close to you. He did it for me, he stripped off his charming daredevil persona, only for me to crush his soul. And that's why it was so important for me to be there that night: I had to know that someone would also come for me if I were in his shoes.

In the aftermath, of course, everyone is smart, but the moment I stopped the engine of my car not far from the bar, I didn't feel clever at all. I took a deep breath and got out, leaving my car's highly appreciated security central locking system behind.

As soon as I stepped through the doors of The Gates, I immediately recognized old acquaintances. The blaze of peering faces made me regret even more my decision to come here alone. It crossed my mind to ask one of my gay friends to be my boyfriend imitator, especially since I knew Peter would be coming with his wife. But in the end, I didn't. I think I owed him enough to offer him my penance on a silver platter with no loopholes.

Well, too late to regret... let's rather try to mingle. After a quick look around, I saw that Peter was not here yet. I joined the girls who still remembered me at one of the tables, or at least that was what I concluded after they said a confused hello to me. After the first few minutes of awkward silence, things started to improve, the girls were chatting cheerfully next to me, and finally Peter and his wife arrived too. They seemed to be doing well and happy. Peter hadn't noticed me, so I had no choice but to ambush them in an impromptu rendezvous. That sounds much better than a stalker ex, right?

However, as I stood up to give myself - and probably them - one of the most embarrassing evenings in my 27 years of existence, my eyes landed on Him; a Greek god standing in the corner. Tall, muscular, brazenly handsome... I slumped back in my seat as if struck by lightning. What was a man of his caliber doing here? A well dressed, sloppily elegant Adonis with big brown puppy dog eyes. There were only two possible reasons that come to mind: to generate all sorts of impure thoughts in the female sex, or else He was a compulsive knife collector and had heard of the usual Friday nights here. But whatever the reason for his presence, He was here, and the next moment He looked at me. He looked me straight in the eye.

I blushed. I may have even cast down my eyes, like I was just a shy teenager meeting love for the first time, while my heart rate was skyrocketing. The handsome stranger smiled. He looked at his watch, then back at me, but didn't move. Maybe He was waiting for company? I continued to eye Him secretly, completely forgetting about Peter. But as my attention focused more and more on Him, I found myself less and less able to engage in the conversation; the girls had to settle for a simple "uhum" for almost every question asked. That's probably why they stopped asking me anything soon. The girls soon left our table, but I didn't sit alone for long; some of my old friends sat down next to me for a few words. Maybe they had some fond memories of me after all. In any case, no one stayed too long. I was too absorbed in the mysterious stranger's gaze to pay any real attention to anyone. Then suddenly someone nudged

our table as he took a seat, and with him the smell of beer and dirty leather from his clothes also settled between us. I looked around, and instead of old acquaintances, there were three unfamiliar men sitting next to me.

One look at their faces was enough to send shivers down my spine: these guys were sketchy even by the standards of this place. I shot my sexy Prince Charming a look which He returned; concern etched on his chiseled face. I gathered my things and was about to stand up, but the bald, stocky man sitting directly beside me was not taking the hint and continued to sit as still as a statue.

“Will you let me pass, please?” I asked him.

He just smiled at me but didn’t budge.

“Why are you in such a hurry there, princess? Why not have a drink with us on this fine evening?” he said, pushing a glass in front of me.

A drink, huh? As I looked at that glass of drink, I could almost see bits of the party drug floating in it.

“Thanks, but I’ll skip that now.”

“Come on, a little liquid won’t hurt you,” said the bald man, winking shamelessly at me, clinking his glass to the other one.

“Well, speaking of the benefits of liquids, they say that stuff will put hair on your chest. Why not pour it on your head instead? It might make your hair grow out,” I replied as I weaved my way between his chair and the wall.

Obviously, the bald man did not appreciate my pub humor, because before I could step away from their table, he grabbed my hand, pulled me back and whispered in my ear so that only I could hear:

“Come on, who are you trying to fool, princess? Coming in here with your tight little dress, just begging for it.”

“Okay, first of all, let’s make it clear: the outfit I am wearing is not what you’d call a ‘tight little dress,’” I told him. If you knew how long it took me to pick out this purple, high-neck dress - pretty enough if the wife turns out to be a Victoria’s Secret model, but not revealing enough to tempt anyone to make

a move on me -you'd understand the effort, "and secondly, get your bloody hands off me."

To make sure the message made it to his mind, I grabbed the glass with my free hand and poured the contents into his face. After that, of course, everyone turned towards us, even Peter noticed me. Great. I didn't exactly want to reappear on the scene as a drama queen. I was just about to head over to say hello to him and his wife after this brilliant opening, but the bald man prudishly grabbed my hand again, now standing up from his chair.

"You're gonna pay for that, you little slut."

Now really everyone was staring at us. They were all worried, including Prince Charming, already on his feet, ready to jump in and intervene. I just shook my head, indicating that I didn't need help. Peter looked at me as well, but after a moment, as he assessed the situation, he just winked at me with his familiar mischievous grin. I smiled back at him: he was the one who took me to my first Kraw Maga class back then. So, I turned my full attention to Baldy; I grabbed his hand around my wrist, twisted it and with great momentum sunk his elbow awkwardly into his ribcage while forcing his arm down towards the floor.

I can't say it calmed him down any when he realized he was now grounded - by a woman barely 110 pounds. He glared at me, with his evil beady little eyes, hurling epithets all the while. I took a few steps back, hoping that was enough for him, but stocky started coming towards me as soon as he was on his feet. I waited for him to get close enough to me, then I torpedoed my nude double strap heel so hard into his liver he sprawled out on the ground. His friends helped him up, but before the three of them could make another move towards me, Peter's entourage stepped in; the scumbags were helped out the back door with a friendly, but tight hug by them. Well, *c'est fini*, I guess. But when I turned around to finally say hello to Peter, they were both gone.

Disappointed, I too stepped out into the street, leaving The Gates behind. I closed my eyes and took in a deep breath of freshly fallen night.

Maybe it was meant to be? I could see that he was fine, and he didn't have to open the wound with a conversation? It was as if my thoughts had just been confirmed; as soon as I opened my eyes, I saw Peter and his wife driving down the road in front of me, waving sweetly but not turning back as they were off towards those rolling hills. I was just to heave a sigh of sorrow when someone behind me spoke:

“Are you okay?”

“Of course,” I answered without even looking up at them, “everything's fine, I just would have really liked to talk to Peter a little...”

“Uhm... I was referring to the men who attacked you.”

“Ooh that,” I said exaggeratingly. “No worries, men fall head over heels for me all the time,” I laughed midturn towards the voice beside me, but as soon as I saw who was standing there, the smile froze off my face.

Of course, it was the Greek god, who else. He was a lot taller than me, had a gorgeous, muscular upper body and ripped arms. But unfortunately, I couldn't completely enjoy the view, as it was quite obvious on his face as He added A to B: ex-boyfriend, unresolved emotions, plus an endlessly conceited LA chick who thought everyone wanted her. This is how to maximize the potential of first impressions, I guess. I was unable to stifle a laugh as I thought about it, but He extended his hand to me with a smile:

“Noah Hart.”

“Donika Rosewood,” I introduced myself as I shook his hand.

His skin was so warm and soft, I felt a low electricity jolt when our hands touched. But before any love blossoms could grow out of the situation, The Gates' door opened again, and the street was flooded with my acquaintances; they have probably had enough fun with the bald guy and his companions. One of them came straight to me:

“Doni, we're getting out of here. Are you coming to party with us?” and with that he did a little dance there on the street, exclusively for us.

Although his robot moves were quite impressive, I didn't feel the tingling

in my bones for another visit to a scrappy pub. I was just about to start listing my faux excuses when Prince Charming intervened:

“Hey, guys, that was a really nice move you made evacuating those assholes back there. If you want to go to party, I know a place. I can get you in without having to wait in line.”

“Really? Which place?”

“The Deluge.”

Oh boy. The Deluge was one of the fanciest nightclubs in town, with queues for miles and drinks at horrendous prices. How was He going to arrange for my lovely but less presentable pals to mingle with the blue blood guests? But the phone call was done, instructions were given, and the boys were off to Snobland.

“How about you, do you feel like going to the club for a bit?” Noah asked with a gentle smile as one by one everybody left the place with their cars.

To my great surprise, I didn't say yes straight away to Zeus' second hidden child. This evening got off to a bumpy start, and for a moment I was unsure if I wanted to continue. But as I let myself get lost in the reflection of his eyes, I found a kind of comfort there. Though I knew nothing about Him, I gave Him my trust.

“Alright, Handsome, let's go. But I'm taking my own whip.”