

Chapter 1

The carousel had been shut down for six months.

A cool, afternoon breeze swept through the river canyon in Missoula, Montana, fluttering the broken strips of yellow plastic police tape—tattered remnants of the snowy winter morning that Mr. Porter had been found inside, a victim of his own deranged mind. The eccentric old man had been the maintenance manager of the merry-go-round, but he was better known by his self-proclaimed title of “Gatekeeper.”

Two teenager girls walked aimlessly through the neglected park, killing time during their school lunch hour. They looked at the building as they passed.

“Someone swore they saw Porter walkin’ around in there last Saturday night.”

“Bull . . .” Exhaling smoke from her cigarette, Rocky Davis didn't believe the tired, old ghost story any more than she believed her dad was going to make it big as a movie star and come back to take her out of this boring little town that she'd called home all her life.

Karen squared her small shoulders, trying unsuccessfully to make herself seem bigger than she was. “Just ‘cause you never saw him—”

“Whoever told you that crap was probably so wasted they'd swear they saw naked mermaids riding pink elephants. Five bucks says one of the guys snuck in there and put on Porter's top hat and red jacket, trying to scare their drunk girlfriends.”

“Nuh-uh,” objected Karen, adamantly shaking her head.

“Look around . . . Where do you think all these beer bottles came from?”

Rocky watched her friend glance at the neglected flowerbeds as if noticing the litter for the first time. Maybe she was, Rocky realized, feeling a slight twinge of guilt for pointing out the ugly realities of life, as usual. Karen was the saint of the two of them. Rocky was the sinner and knew first-hand about the parties down here. Riverside Park at the bottom of a hill from the business area was a great place to hang out because no homeowners were around to complain, so the police almost always looked the other way, even more so since last winter. Nobody else wanted to come back down here. Nobody else wanted to remember. But they all did. They only pretended to forget.

The nine-thirty train coming in from Butte whistled in the distance, long and mournful like a death knell.

Resisting the urge to shake off the creepy feeling slithering up her back, Rocky brought her mind back to Karen, wondering how the two of them wound up so damn different yet still the best of friends. So many nights she'd lain wide awake until three in the morning, wishing she was the one with the Pollyanna innocence, wishing she was the one with a great mom and dad who were well-liked and respected in town.

She watched Karen toy with her one and only cigarette she would smoke that day, probably that whole week. She'd never have started at all if it hadn't been for Rocky. Even now, Karen only did it when they were together. It was practically the only thing they'd had in common during the last couple years. Rocky watched her friend lightly touch the end of her cigarette, testing her sensitivity to the red-hot heat. Playing with fire was something that didn't appeal to Rocky. She'd been burned enough already, without the help of cigarette butts. Only her burns weren't self-inflicted . . . or left any scars. Not visible ones, anyway.

“It’s haunted, I tell you,” muttered Karen, her expression darkening.

“Yeah—And I’m a virgin and you’re not.”

“Shut up, Rock. I hate it when make me sound so . . .”

“So pure you could puke?”

“God, how I hate it when you’re like this.”

“Get in line—it’s a long one.” Rocky took one last drag from her cigarette and tossed the butt at a dandelion growing out of the broken cement.

“Your mom and who else this time?”

“She’s enough for the moment. When I left this morning she was saying how she was going to burn my clothes while I was gone. She just won’t let up. One of these days I’m gonna wake up and find out she’s bleached my hair while I was asleep.”

Rocky plopped down on the low stone wall at the edge of the embankment sloping down to the river. Rummaging around in the bottom of her leather backpack, she found two tubes of lipstick and a mirror with a crack down the middle. Her blue-black hair framed a pale complexion in a stark contrast that was outrageous yet so incredibly Anne Rice-looking.

She chose the blood-red lipstick instead of the black, which would have gotten her sent to the vice-principal’s office for breaking the rules about extremes in fashion. Rocky almost laughed at the absurdity of it.

“We better get back before the bell rings,” said Karen, who always worried over that sort of thing. Dressed in white jeans and a pink cotton T-shirt, she didn’t suit the role of a rebellious teenager like Rocky did. Karen wouldn’t dream of wearing the in-your-face outfits like the one Rocky wore today—a black knit top with a deep neckline, skin-tight black jeans, and black military boots her dad had sent last Christmas. He claimed to have bought them at a boutique on Melrose Avenue, but they looked suspiciously like the ones on sale at the local K-Mart.

Rocky stared at the thick blunt toes of the boots, knowing it was time to head back. Only she didn’t want to. Not today.

“You go on without me.” Her voice was dull and hollow, even to her own ears, not much different from the feeling she’d been carrying around inside all day.

“You can’t ditch any more classes. We only have a couple weeks left to graduation. You can take it that long.”

“It won’t matter one way or the other. I’ve already got enough credits to graduate. I could’ve gotten my diploma last January if it wasn’t for my lame counselor being too lazy to tell me in time.”

One thing Rocky would never admit to was her three-point-eight grade average that came way too easy. She was smart, but not where it counted.

Not about guys or the stupid, dumb-ass fools they made of girls who fell head-over-heels in love with them.

Karen gently grasped Rocky’s arm. “If you keep going like this, I’m afraid to think of where you’re headed.”

“Then don’t think about it.”

“When you and Jason broke up, I thought you’d go back to the way you used to be. But you’re only getting worse.”

Here it comes.

Rocky had expected Karen to finally turn her back on her like everyone else had. It had only been a question of when, not if. Still, it hurt just the same.

“Okay, let me have it. Tell me to go to hell. Tell me how much you hate my clothes and everything about me—”

“Stop it, Rocky!” She threw up her hands, then dropped them to her sides with fists clenched as she launched into a passionate speech about graduation being the turning point in their lives and the opportunity for a fresh start.

Rocky shook another cigarette out of the half-empty pack and lit it with her silver butane lighter. She didn't care anymore. No, that wasn't completely true. She did care about Karen. They'd been buddies since their first day of kindergarten. But Karen was the daughter of doctors who had moved from Chicago to this dinky Western Montana town so they could raise their two kids in a wholesome environment. Karen and her older brother were part of a perfect little God-fearing family who went to church together on Sundays.

While Karen came from the affluent side of town, Rocky lived on the wrong side of the tracks, literally. Her dad had taken off for Los Angeles six years ago to find his fame and fortune as an actor, leaving behind a wife and three half-grown daughters in a drafty single-wide trailer. The official divorce papers were filed three years ago, and she hadn't seen him since. She was fourteen then. His rejection hurt like hell until, a month later, she'd started sneaking off to meet with Jason, a junior on the varsity football team.

Rocky stared indifferently at Karen, who had run out of steam and stood silent, obviously frustrated that her zealous lecture had not been the least bit persuasive toward responsible adult behavior, such as returning to afternoon classes.

“You're going to be late,” Rocky said, pushing off the rock wall and heading toward the carousel. She knew her terse reminder would be all Karen needed to send her back to class. And she was right.

After a heavy sigh of defeat, Karen said softly, “See you later at the Frostie Freeze? Around four?”

Dropping her backpack at her feet, Rocky stared through the dingy glass panels in the doors, eyeing the wooden ponies and assorted wild animals that she'd once ridden in happier days. “Maybe . . . I don't know. I'll call you.”

Karen's shoulders sagged as her gaze dropped to her feet. “Yeah, right. Whatever.”

Watching the reflection in the glass of her friend turning to leave, Rocky knew how much she'd hurt Karen by shutting her out.

“My dad called last night to tell me he's getting married.” Something inside had pushed the words to the surface, as if a part of her just couldn't stand to keep it bottled up any longer, couldn't stand to have Karen walk away without knowing some small part of the pain gnawing through the lining of her stomach.

Karen turned back. “Married?” was all she could say. What else was there to say? Congratulations? Ha.

“I asked if I could go to the wedding but it's going to be the same day as graduation,” Rocky said in a strained voice, desperately fighting the hot sting of tears in the back of her eyes.

“Did you see it coming? Did he mention anybody before now?”

“No.”

“It sounds so—”

“Don’t you dare say romantic or I swear I’ll scream.”

“I was going to say impulsive.”

“Yeah, well, it runs in the family.” Like her own sudden urge to take off for parts unknown.

Maybe she would go to L.A., after all. Maybe she’d look up her father-the-wannabe-movie-star just so she could see how well his acting skills could mask his shocked expression. She knew she’d be the last person in the world he’d want dropping in unannounced, especially now that her future stepmother was expecting a baby—the long-awaited son that he’d tried so hard to mold out of Rocky.

The ugly memory of eavesdropping on the argument last night between her parents came back with the same gut-pain as Rocky had felt the night before. Her mom had been talking on the kitchen phone in an angry whisper so as not to waken Rocky in her room, forgetting how thin those trailer walls could be . . .

“You’ve got to take Rebecca off my hands, Jack. I can’t control her anymore . . . Because she’s your kid, too. And she’s made damn sure to live up to that tough nickname you gave her. Last month I was called to school after she fought with some boy . . . No, not Jason. That’s over, remember?—

He ran off to Las Vegas with a sorority girl in his dorm because she was pregnant . . . No, not Rocky—thank God! This school-thing was with a different boy. She said he’d been sexually harassing Karen for weeks . . . Did I believe her? Hell, I don’t know. Maybe the kid deserved it, maybe not.”

He had deserved it. And more! Rocky had been stunned and hurt to hear her mother hadn’t believed her. That ‘kid’ had not only cornered Karen, but also accused Rocky of attacking him out of jealousy because of her own sexual relationship with him. In the end, he should’ve been the one to get the one-day suspension instead of her.

Her mom, oblivious to Rocky’s presence, had continued to push the issue. “The point is, Rebecca needs to get out of this place if she’s ever going to get straightened out . . . For all I know, she’s slept with half the football team since Jason jilted her for that other girl. People see her as nothing but a tramp. And if you could only see her clothes and hair, you’d know exactly what I mean.”

I’m not a tramp, Mom. I don’t sleep around! Scrubbing a track of tears from her cheek with the heel of her hand, Rocky had looked down at the threadbare Seattle Mariners T-shirt she’d worn to bed, hardly the nightwear of a hardline hooker. But that’s practically what her own mother had called her.

“I don’t care if your fiancée doesn’t know about us,” her mom argued, raising her voice. “You’re not the only one who has a chance to start over. I met someone, too . . . No, the girls don’t know about him . . . Look who’s lecturing who about keeping secrets. When did you plan to tell Rocky about missing her graduation, or are you expecting me to break the news to her? I won’t do your dirty work, Jack. You can call back tomorrow night and tell her . . .”

Karen’s voice broke through Rocky’s silent recollections of the previous night. “Well, at least it was nice of your dad to let you know he’s got a valid reason for not being able to make it to graduation.”

“You’ve always got to see the good in everybody, don’t you?”

“So? There’s nothing wrong with that.”

“There is if you get burned. And I've been burned too many times by my dad. He didn't even tell me. I overheard Mom arguing with him. He could have changed the wedding date by a week one way or the other. But no, he purposely set it up so he couldn't come, because he doesn't want to be here.”

“That might not be true.”

“It is. And I know it.” Rocky inhaled on the cigarette, then exhaled a rapid rush of smoke. “Neither of my parents want me. Dad’s got a new baby coming, and Mom can’t wait to be rid of me so she can take up with some new man in her life. And right now the last thing I wanted to do was dump on you.”

“I’ll ask my parents if you can come and live with us.”

Rocky knew she wouldn't be welcome, not with her reputation. She also knew Karen would only fight harder for the underdog. Rocky didn't want to come between Karen and her parents, so it was better if she didn't say anything more.

“I’m just blowin’ off steam. You know how it is. I’ll be fine by tomorrow. I promise.” With a nod in the direction of school, Rocky gently waved Karen away. “You better get going. Tell Mrs. Pratt I went home with cramps.”

Shortly after her friend disappeared up the walk, Rocky saw an agile old man coming from the opposite direction. Dressed in dark gray pants, a white Henley shirt and a wine-colored vest, he looked like he could have been a bartender or doctor a hundred years ago. With a light bounce to his step and a set of keys jangling in his hands, he whistled an unfamiliar but light-hearted tune.

“Ah . . . there y’ be.” His blue eyes were bright and playful. “I could use a wee bit of help if y’ can spare the time.”

Rocky glanced over her shoulder, certain he must be speaking to someone else. But there wasn't a soul in the deserted park except her . . . and him.

“McNally, I am. And you?”

“Rocky.”

“Och . . . what sort of name is that for a lovely young lady such as yourself, eh?” He stopped in front of her. His gaze traveled up and down, taking a good look at her. “Sounds like a misnomer to me. What might be your god-given name, the one your parents bestowed upon y’?”

“Rebecca.”

“How lovely. Yes, lovely, indeed. Now, Rebecca . . . how about that help I was just askin’ for?”

For the life of her, Rocky had no idea why she was willingly conversing with this total stranger, other than the fact that he seemed completely harmless. And very short. Probably only five feet tall to her five-eight. Average weight, though, for his size. Not too paunchy or too skinny.

“What are you doing here?” she finally asked, with more of a cocky edge to her voice than she’d intended or he’d deserved.

“Why, I’m the new gatekeeper.”

Oh, no . . . not another one of those whackos like Porter. She chucked her cigarette butt on the ground and folded her arms over her chest. “Are you reopening the carousel?”

“That I am . . .” He retrieved the butt as if it were nothing more than an errant leaf. Snubbing it out with the pad of his forefinger and thumb, he casually remarked, “If

you play your cards right, lovely Rebecca, y' can be the very first to ride it again. What do y' say? Are y' in?"

"I, uh, need to get going. I got school—"

"Really, now? Y' didn't look to me like y' were in an all-fired hurry to be on yer way a moment or two ago." He folded the cigarette butt in half and tucked it into the pocket of his baggy, gray trousers.

"What do you need me for anyhow? All you have to do is unlock the doors and push them back into the pocket in the walls."

"Sounds as if you might know your way around this old carousel better than me."

She shrugged. "I used to come down here when I was a kid." Lifting her backpack and hooking one strap over her shoulder, she hoped he got the hint she was leaving.

"Och, yer still a kid. We all are, don't y' know?"

"You, maybe, but not me. I grew up fast." And hard.

McNally gazed up at her, his sky blue eyes twinkling with the laughter of a child, despite his aged appearance. In the breadth of a single heartbeat, she no longer saw an old man, but, instead, a young boy who wanted someone to share in his excitement and anticipation of Christmas, his birthday, and the Fourth of July all rolled into one. With a tiny gasp of surprise, she blinked and the strange optical illusion vanished.

"Come with me," he asked quietly. The corners of his small mouth tilted up in a wise smile. He held out his hand.

Rocky glanced down at his open palm. Fear rose from her toes like a column of black smoke and swirled in a dark maelstrom throughout her chest. "I—I can't."

"Ah-yes, y' can . . . And y' will, lovely Rebecca. This is where y' feel safe. This is where y' bring yer broken dreams and ride a pony into the land of make-believe. 'Tis a time machine, y' know."

"It's only a merry-go-round," Rocky said bluntly, realizing with bitterness that she'd almost been sucked into this crazy man's looney fantasy. "I'm outta here, Pops. If you want someone to join you, I'm sure you can find Peabrain-Porter in there wandering around in his ectoplasmic state. From the sound of it, you two belong together."

"Och, no, lass. Phineas Porter had not yet acquired enough experience to be appointed the sole guardian of a carousel, especially this one. He made a tragic mistake in judgment."

"Are you referring to before or after he put his neck in the noose?"

McNally shuddered. "Some of his . . . customers never should have been granted their requests without further evaluation."

"What requests?" Ignoring the warning bells going off in her head, she slowly lowered the backpack. She wanted to know. She had to know.

Everyone in town had whispered their own speculations about the real truth behind the disappearance of six people—the truth that had died with Porter. "What sort of evaluation?"

"Psychological assessment of their stability, of course." He'd answered as if it was the most logical thing in the world he could've said.

"Of course," Rocky replied with equal conviction, lying through her teeth. "What went wrong?" Aside from the fact that a certifiable nut-case named Porter had committed suicide after being questioned as a possible murder suspect, then released by the local cops.

“‘Tis quite simple, really——They never should have been chosen.”
“Chosen for what?” Impatience sharpened her tongue.
“Time travel, of course.”