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CHAPTER ONE

Mutt

Few things were certain around O'Fallon's Service and Tire. Kenny didn't really work there, but he was there enough. Be careful what you eat in the break room. The week before I'd found some leftover cake, and, sure enough, it was harder than a wedding night dick. And last, when we did the fifteen-minute oil changes for fifteen bucks, that garage would be asshole to elbow all day.

Dad had done that promotion once a year for twenty years, which happened to be every year he'd owned the place.

It was our family business. That was, if two people could make up a whole family. I guessed families were all different shapes and sizes, and since Grandpa passed away, it had only been Dad and me.

Oh, and Dean.

He wasn't *really* family, but he'd worked there since we were in high school. And, honestly, who the hell wasn't family somewhere down the line around Wynne?

Dad and Dean worked the shop and I ran the desk—unless they needed the help, but most of the time it was pretty slow and easy to manage.

Not that day.

There was a line out the door and cars parked along the road, waiting. All there to get their oil changed for fifteen bucks.

I wadded my thick, long brown hair up into a knot on the top of my head as I heard my dad exclaim from the garage.

"Twenty, Mutt! We're on a roll today, kid. Make sure they all keep pulling in."

Oh, yeah. My name's Mutt. Not my given name, but, ask anyone who Darrell O'Fallon's daughter is—ten to one—they'll say Mutt. My grandpa—God rest his bastard soul—called me that from the day I was born.

Sometimes it drove me nuts growing up. I'm used to it now; I don't think my mom

liked that very much, but she didn't stick around long enough to do anything about it either. She left when I was two months old.

No Dear John letter.

No phone calls.

Just gone.

My grandpa called me Mutt because apparently my mom was the town bike. Every town had one, and she was theirs.

Among everyone else who had a go at her, my dad ended up getting the longest ride. He loved her. To tell you the truth, I thought he still did.

This one time I asked my grandpa about my name and he told me flat-out: "Your mom was a whore, Mutt. You could be anybody's kid. You could be made up with anybody." I never forgot that, and thought about it a lot more whenever I'd consider dating someone.

First, what if we were related? *Ew*. No.

Second, who would want to bring a *Mutt* home to Sunday dinner? Not many.

So most of the time, I decided, better not.

That was the only time I saw my dad raise a fist. He knocked out three of Grandpa's teeth that morning. Then he made me scrambled eggs and told me to not pay him any attention.

Don't worry. They were false anyway, so I guess there was no real harm done.

It wasn't like Grandpa had a lot of room to talk. His last wife had run off with some guy she met at a casino. That's why he was stuck there living with us.

Most people would say I was kind of a tomboy, growing up with only a dad and an asshole grandpa to show me the ropes. I didn't really give a shit. In my experience, people said whatever the hell they wanted to anyway. My name was the perfect example of that.

Anyway, *I'm not done yet*, despite how hungry I was on fifteen-minute oil change day, I *was* having a pretty damn good Saturday.

Wynne was a small town on the river and we had a great lake nearby, too. Sure there was no mall or movie theaters, but if you wanted to catch wall-mount worthy trout or a largemouth bass, you were in the right spot.

Dad's oil change promo was going great, but what was shocking me was how many spinners and lures I'd sold.

I'd made them all myself and was about to sell my last one.

"Mutt, honey, those sumbitches bit on every cast. I'm taking the rest you've got here," said Mr. Walton to me from the other side of the counter, slapping a twenty down on the linoleum top.

I should have been charging more.

A few days back, I'd set up the little display with the fifty or so I had on hand, and at five bucks each, I sold out too easily.

I wasn't complaining. I loved making them.

But Mr. Walton was right.

Those *sumbitches* did work.

The past Thursday evening, I'd caught a two-pound bass off my dock in only about ten minutes. That's called *working* right there.

"I'm glad you liked them. Which one did you use?"

"The blue and yellow one. You got any more of those?"

"No, but I can make a few up for you."

"I'll take 'em, by God. Make me ten of 'em."

"All right, I'll call you when I have them ready. Is that all you need?" I asked. He'd just been in a few days before getting new brakes and tires put on.

"Oh I'm fine, I just thought I'd come settle up from last week. Your dad's probably just been busy, but we never got our ticket in the mail like we usually do."

That was odd. My dad was always meticulous about his billing. Although primitive, his system was foolproof.

In Wynne, everyone knew everyone. They'd drop their vehicles off, and then come pick them up whenever. Keys in the visor.

Dad always sent out invoice tickets on Mondays, and Mr. Walton had been in the past Friday.

"Sorry about that. Let me look real quick." I left him at the counter and ran into the small office. In the old wooden chair, I sat down and spun around to the cabinet where he kept all the past week's tickets and found it full. I pulled the folder out and opened it, seeing Mr. Walton's ticket about a third of the way down.

Had none of these been sent out?

I knew he was waiting for me, so I didn't want to spend too much time going through it all, but shit, there was a lot. I quickly looked at the ticket on the bottom and it was from almost a month ago.

"Hey, Mutt," Dean said from the doorway, the office was only big enough for one person. "Can you call and check on the parts order? Your dad says we should have more filters, but I can't find them. I hope he's got more coming in."

Shit.

"Yeah, I'll call, but I doubt they're open now. Do you have enough for today?"

"I don't know. We still have about ten cars out there."

Shit. Shit. Shit.

"Call down to Dub's and see if they have any to get us by."

Dub's was the other automotive repair place in town. There wasn't really any competition though, since there was enough work to go around. Always had been.

Dad and Dub even worked here together for a while, but they didn't have enough space. Dub opened his own shop about three years after Dad bought his. They'd been best friends all my life. He even came by earlier to get a free hot dog and Pepsi.

"Thanks, he probably forgot. I tell ya, the old man's mind is *not* what it used to be."

It was true. My dad would never hit the Guinness book for highest IQ, but that had been just another thing he'd slacked on.

"Mr. Walton, here's your invoice. He didn't get it out yet. Sorry for the trouble. Do you want to pay it now? It's \$745.00."

"Sure, honey, let me go get my rubber checks out of the truck," he said, winking at me. I think I'd heard that recycled joke told once a week for the past ten years.

I peeked into the garage and caught Dean hanging up the shop phone. He gave me a thumbs up, then motioned for the next car to pull in.

What would we do without Dean?

He was like the brother I never had, and Dad was like the father Dean never had. You could say Dean's story and mine were similar. Me with no mom. Him with no dad. Since his mom had passed a few years back, he had no mom either. We were pretty much his only family.

I walked over to my old man, his head grease streaked and his hands moving as fast as they ever did.

"Twenty-two, Mutt. I think we're going to beat last year's twenty-eight." Pride was shining in his aging brown eyes. He loved what he did.

Then he teased Dean, "If that slacker would pick up the pace we could damn near hit forty, I bet."

"Yeah, well, you're going to owe Dub a case of beer. You forgot to get oil filters this week. He's on his way up. This is the last one on the shelf," Dead fired back.

My dad stopped and looked at him like a coonhound with three dicks, but it wasn't Dean who was wrong. Judging by the stack of unpaid invoices, I had to start taking on a little bit more of the responsibilities around there.

"Didn't we order those?" Then he scratched his face and went on about his business.

"I'll call them on Monday and see. Maybe they left them off the truck or something? Don't worry about it," I said and kicked his work boot. "You've got a line out there. Get your old ass in gear."

He rolled his eyes at me and went back to work.

Dean and my dad beat their record. Thirty-three oil changes in less than fifteen minutes, start to finish. They drank a few beers as they cleaned up the shop for the evening and called in some tenderloins for us at Diana's, the local diner across the street. We were all hungry and one of her tenderloins could practically feed a whole family. They were plate-sized and you needed three buns.

"Hey, we're walking across the street to eat, you coming?" my dad finally asked a little later.

I looked at the clock. It was seven and I knew she'd be closing up the kitchen soon, but I needed to take a better look at those tickets. I had my work cut out for me. It was either going to take all night or all the next day, and paperwork was the last thing I

wanted to do on Sunday.

It was supposed to rain a little, but that was fine. I needed to get a jump-start on making more lures. The extra money was going to be nice, and they were selling better than I ever dreamed.

"Nah, you guys go eat while they're hot. Tell Diana I'll be over there before she takes off. I'm going to settle this register and clean up. You two go." My dad ran a hand over my back and kissed the top of my head.

"Hey, how many did you sell today?"

I smiled, knowing he'd be just as excited as I was.

"All of them."

"No shit, Mutt? Hell, you'll be setting up a tackle shop next. Just you watch. Good job, kid." It was nice having someone notice how well they were doing, but, then again, he was my dad.

"Your old man's gonna go eat, then I'm hitting the sack. These old bones are tired." He winked at me as he slapped off the lights to the shop. "Love you, Mutt."

"Love you, too, Dad. See you in the morning."

It didn't take me five minutes to get the register in order, and then I went through the pile of invoices in the folder. There was almost ten thousand dollars' worth of billing in there. I sorted them and decided I'd come back the next morning to finish up.

I was starving and didn't want Diana waiting on me so she could go home. She would, too, if she saw the light in the shop. Hell, if it weren't for her, I would have starved by age three.

I closed up the building for the night and walked across the street. Teenagers were cruising, people were filing into Sally's—one of the two bars in town—and it was a normal, small-town Saturday night.

I stepped up to the brick front of Diana's, and just as I was opening the door I heard a man say, "Shit," from the vehicle parked nearby. I guess I wasn't the only one having a long day. Minding my own business, I stepped into the diner.

"Hey there, sweetie. I've got your sandwich in the oven keeping it warm for you. Want anything else with it?" asked Diana. She wiped her hands on her apron as she dropped the rag she'd been wiping tables off with when I came in.

"No, I probably won't even be able to finish the sandwich."

"Your daddy said you had a long day. Those big hazel eyes of yours look a little tiresome." She was kindhearted, so I knew it wasn't an insult.

I nodded, which turned into stretching my neck. Diana was right. Thirteen hours is a long day for anyone, especially this twenty-six-year-old chick.

She smiled sympathetically, the ever growing laugh lines on her face appearing, then she walked in back to get my food. Her grey hair was swept up in a ponytail, and as she walked away she rubbed the back of her neck, too.

She was a hard worker. There were a few high school kids who helped her out here

and there, but other than that, it was just her and one other waitress running the place.

I took a seat in the booth closest to the door, and when the bell rang above it I reflexively looked up. There stood a tall man who I didn't know.

Wynne wasn't big and I knew everyone who lived there. It wasn't likely for a passerby to stop in, especially at quarter to eight on a Saturday night.

He looked at his watch, taking stock of how empty the place was.

"Hi," he said as he regarded me with the most striking cornflower blue eyes I'd ever seen. "Are they still open?"

I blinked a few times. His words had hit my ears, but not yet my brain. I sat there staring. Either I was delusional, or he was one of the finest men I'd ever seen.

What in the hell would bring him here?

"Excuse me," he added, looking for an answer. "Do you know if they are still open?"

I shook the stupid from my head and replied, "Hell, I'm sorry. Lost my thought there. Yeah, they're open, but I think the kitchen is already closed down for the night."

He took a frustrated breath, raising his arm and placing his palm to his forehead.

"Perfect," he huffed as he squeezed his eyes shut, looking defeated.

I instantly felt bad for him. I always had a bleeding heart for someone down on their luck. If he was the same guy who was swearing in his SUV, which I knew he was, then this just added to whatever he was already dealing with.

I could commiserate.

"If you're hungry," I started to say when he interrupted.

"Of course I'm hungry, why else would I be here?"

I didn't take offense. I was no stranger to a hungry man with a short temper, but I also wasn't one to take their shit.

"Hey! You didn't *let me finish*. All I was saying was, she has pie up there under the counter. Chill out." I didn't shout, but my tone was a clear message that assholes were never alone in a room with me. If you want to be a jerk, bring your A game.

He froze and hung his not-from-around-here head.

"Sorry. I'm just starving and tired," he apologized. Then he pointed a finger in the direction of the pie case and raised his contrite eyebrows like he was saying, "In there?"

I nodded sarcastically.

He started it.

The guy walked over to the case just as Diana walked out with my overflowing plate. She'd even added lattice fries, because she knew they were my favorite. It smelled like heaven. An embarrassment of riches in the form of meat and potatoes.

When he saw what I was getting, his eyes grew to the size of saucers. They followed her all the way across the room until she placed the plate down in front of me. If it had been a cartoon, he would have had one of those thought bubbles above his head with my plate in it.

"Hi there, honey. You want some pie? I've got the kitchen shut down, but you can

have whatever you like under there."

Diana danced around grabbing a bottle of ketchup and mustard off of the table behind where I sat and handed them to me.

"You want some tea, Mutt?"

"Yeah. Extra ice, please."

"Okay," she said, handing me a knife and fork rolled in a napkin.

"See anything in there that looks good to you?" she asked the guy.

He tapped the glass as he studied the pies. My eyes were drawn to him, trying to figure out who he might be and what he was doing in Wynne.

"All of them are good, but her apple is the best," I offered as I stared at the heaping pile of fries. Then, just before I spread out my napkin to begin hacking at the colossal sandwich, which was impossible for me to eat in one sitting, I caved.

"Do you like tenderloins?" I asked, knowing there was no way I could eat all of it anyway. It was almost humiliating having that much on one plate when this guy was clearly as hungry as a bitch wolf with nine pups.

"I do," he answered, looking at me over his shoulder.

"I've got a little over half of this that I can't eat. I'll split it with you, if you're that hungry."

Diana crooked her head to the side and opened her mouth, about to make a bigger deal out of my gesture than necessary. Then she snapped it shut just as quick. She knew better.

I rolled my eyes at her and asked, "Can we get an extra plate, please?"

"Sure, honey. And what do *you* want to drink?" she asked the guy as she set my tea down.

"I'll take a glass of milk," he answered and walked over to my table. Then with the same pointing thing he'd done a minute ago, he silently asked if he could sit on the empty side of the booth.

What was it with this guy and finger pointing questions at me?

Dramatically, I nodded again, trying to hide my smile. Even if he was grouchy, he'd be nice to look at while I ate.

Diana came back with his milk, silverware, and the extra plate with a bun on it, setting all of it in front of the guy.

"I'll be in back. Holler if you need me," she said as she winked and walked off. When she got to the kitchen door, I glanced her way and she wafted her hand in front of her face and mouthed, "He's hot."

It was almost comical how he was looking at my sandwich. With my knife and fork, not knowing his stance on strangers touching his food, I cut the tenderloin in half and forked it over to his plate. Then I lifted my plate and spilled half of the fries over to his.

"So what's your name? I don't know you," I said.

"Vaughn Renfro," he answered, but he was more concerned with his food. He smiled

up at me, but quickly went back to his full plate, popping a lattice fry in his mouth as he reached for the ketchup.

I squirted mustard on my bun and placed the pickles on it just how I liked. By the time I was applying ketchup to my fries, he was already digging in to his half. I doused my plate in ketchup, not missing a single bite.

Observing my overuse of ketchup, he looked at me questioningly with his mouth full. His face had changed from the hungry, frustrated one that walked in to a friendly, more likeable one. Now I could see what Diana was saying.

He was *seriously* hot.

Blue eyes. Short, dirty-blond hair. I watched the muscles in his jaw work as he hauled ass on the sandwich. I also took note of his forearms and big hands.

We ate in almost silence, except for the moaning and grunting coming from the other side of the booth. And I'm not proud to admit it, but the sounds he made were kind of hot, too.

"Pretty good stuff, huh?" I asked, capturing a piece of ice and giving it a loud crunch. He cringed immediately at the sound, then swallowed.

"Oh my God, I thought I was going to die."

"Yeah, I could tell. You had that hungry man thing going on."

He chuckled. "Yeah, sorry about that. It's been a hell of a day."

"I hear you."

"So how is it that *you* can get served food when the kitchen is closed? I need to learn your trick." He sat back and took a long drink of his milk. It left a little white ring on his lip before he licked it off. Under normal circumstances, it would have looked dumb. But him doing it? Well, it was hot. I'm not going to lie.

"I've known Diana my whole life. I work across the street. No trick. I just called her a while ago and had her keep it warm for me."

He looked thought the window at our building across the street. "You work at that garage over there?"

"Yep," I answered as I kept eating. I was hungry too, but, unlike this guy, I liked to enjoy my food.

"Did she call you ... Mutt?" he asked, his facial expression confessing he thought he'd heard wrong.

"Yep."

"Why would she call you that?"

I hated that question, but I gave him my stock response anyway.

"It's a family name."

Which was true. If my mom hadn't been such a *friendly* lady, I'm sure it never would have stuck. Before he could say anything more about it, I asked him a question to change the subject.

"What were you shitting about in your vehicle when I walked in?"

He leaned forward, propping his elbow on the table and ran his fingers over his head. Something he'd done a few times already. Must have been a nervous tick.

"Well, I'm the new dentist in Dr. Carver's office, and I've been moving all day."

That was all he needed to say. I hated moving. Not that I'd ever moved, but I'd helped friends move plenty of times, and it was total bullshit. He could have stopped there and I would have called that justification, but he continued.

"I had a flat on the U-Haul about two hours into the drive. Then when I got here I realized I'd packed the *new* house keys in the trailer. I had to unload some of the boxes on the driveway until I found the one they were in. I don't have any food in the house and I was starving. So I drove here, remembering there was a restaurant on this corner, and just as I pulled in, my check engine light came on."

Shit. That was a bad day.

"Damn."

"Yeah, but, honestly, it doesn't seem near as bad now." His eyes locked on mine and a flutter of something came to life in my stomach when he smiled at me again.

"Everything looks a little better on a full stomach. You know?"

He sure as hell looked better to me on a full stomach.

Just before I let those exact words slip from my mouth, Diana called from the kitchen.

"You two doing all right out there?"

"Yes, that was amazing," Vaughn answered.

"Diana, this is Vaughn. He's the new dentist, and he's moving into the old Robinson place, right?" I knew that was right because I'd seen the *for sale* sign was gone from the yard the other day and hadn't heard of anyone else buying it. It was the last house in town on the road out to our place. I loved that house, but it was going to need a lot of work.

"I guess. It's the house just south of town on this street."

Diana came over to shake his hand and clean up our plates. "Well, it's nice to meet 'cha. Welcome to Wynne. I'm Diana. I'm always open 'til eight, but I usually shut the kitchen down at seven, seven thirty. We're closed on Mondays and only open from eleven to five on Sunday. You can always call something in if you're running behind."

"I appreciate it, thank you. I'll remember that," he said, his voice calmer than it had been before. "By the way, that was incredible. I'm sure you'll see a lot of me." He was much more charming once he ate a meal and stopped to catch his breath—even after his shitty day.

Diana blushed and waved a hand at him.

"You have my ticket, Di? I'll settle up with you," I said, knowing she wanted to get the hell out of there. She had a new grandbaby at home, and since her daughter, Faith, was now living with her, she probably had a ton of things to do before she even sat down herself.

"No. Honey, your daddy got yours earlier when he and Dean were in. Dean said he

was probably gonna clean up and head down to Sally's or The Tap. You ought to go down. I think there's a band somewhere tonight."

Although that sounded fun—or as much fun as was possible on a Saturday night in a small town, population 3,400—I was ready to take my shoes off and just have a beer in the garage at my workbench.

"Not tonight, I'm licked." For those of you not from Wynne, that means tired, but in that moment I knew what I'd said and who I'd said it in front of. I quickly glanced to the man I'd only known for about thirty minutes and fire burned under my embarrassed cheeks. "I'm tired," I corrected in case he thought I'd meant something else.

He failed at hiding his amusement, but didn't laugh at me, which I appreciated.

In case you haven't figured it out yet, I was rough around the edges for a chick. I always had been. I was raised by my grandpa and dad, in a town where kids didn't go to the arcade, they went to a creek. Where we didn't go to the beach and get a tan, we bailed hay for the neighbor and got burned. I barely wore makeup, and most days my hair air-dried from my rolled down truck window on the way to the shop.

I only dated one guy in high school, and he turned out to be a real ass, which was okay because the poor dope was as bald as a knob and his wife slept around on him with the bartender at The Tap. Other than him, I'd had my share of hits and misses, but nothing major. The dating pool in Wynne was shallow, a lot like the gene pool.

I could out-fish any man in our county. Clean my catch twice as fast.

It was known that I could change a tire faster than Dean, when push came to shove.

I even killed all my own spiders, and I wasn't afraid of the dark.

Yet, there in Diana's diner, I was blushing like a Barbie doll because I said the word *licked* in front of a man whose face I couldn't quit staring at. I'd be lying if I said saying it hadn't brought up certain explicit images in my mind.

Simply put, I was a bit hard up and it had been awhile. A *long* while. I needed to get out of there before I really made an ass of myself.

In my reverie, I'd missed what Vaughn and Diana were saying. My thoughts had drowned out their words. I got up and headed for the door.

"I'll see you Tuesday, Diana. Nice to meet you, Vaughn," I said as I stepped out into the warm spring night about to cross the street to my old pickup truck.

Before I knew it Vaughn was outside, too, saying, "Hey, you said you worked over there. You think they'd be able to take a look at my Escalade next week? Like I said, the check engine light just came on. Hopefully it isn't anything major, it's not that old, but I need to get it checked."

I turned around and walked backwards, not wanting to stop in the middle of the street, but not wanting to be rude.

"Sure, bring it up on Monday. I'll see if my dad or Dean can hook it up to the diagnostic thing. Shouldn't take too long." I spun back around, jumped up on the curb

and opened my truck door. It creaked—which I thought of as an anti-theft feature, even if I never locked it—then I hopped in. I chanced a look back at Vaughn, who was still standing there by the door of the restaurant.

I cranked my grey beast to life and rolled down the window.

He shouted, “Thanks for the sandwich.”

“See you Monday. I hope tomorrow runs a little smoother for ya,” I shouted back as I pulled out and headed for home. He lifted a hand and gave me a little wave as I drove off.

I slowed a little as I rode past the old Robinson house. We lived on the same road, but we were out of town about a mile and a half and they were the first house on the edge of the city limits. I drove past it nothing short of twice each day.

I saw the boxes he’d unloaded to get his house keys on the driveway, stacked neatly against the garage door. The whole bungalow needed a new coat of paint, and maybe even a new porch. As far back as I could remember, it had always been that color and it had never been remodeled, only maintained—if you could call it that. There were dowels missing from the railing on the porch and the screen door on the side was never shut and latched all the way. Sometimes it would swing in the wind if the weather was bad. It needed a new roof, too.

I’d been in it a few times as a child, and I was sure the inside was just as dated and neglected. It was nice that someone was going to fix it up.

I smiled to myself and my boot pushed down on the gas pedal, speeding up on my way out of town.

I didn’t know Vaughn, but anyone who would move to Wynne—from anywhere—and fix up one of its oldest houses, and take over for a dentist who’d been a lifelong resident ... well, he had to be pretty ambitious. And sadly, that’s one thing our little town lacked.

Ambition.

I pulled into our shed, where I normally parked, and killed the engine. It was only a little after eight, but I knew if I started on the lures I’d be up all night. And I had to get those invoices straightened out in the morning.

So instead, I grabbed a beer from the old fridge next to my workbench, let the tailgate down on my truck, and sat there in the dark, thinking about the new guy and watching the stars.

