

Wow. Today was really one for the books. You know . . . the kind of books you douse in an entire quart of lighter fluid, hold a match to them, and watch them ignite in an explosion of angry flames? Yeah. It was one of those days.

It all started when I arrived at work. Anything and everything went wrong—malfunctioning equipment, missing memory cards, coffee spills, overdue rush orders, printer jams, seething customers. If there were ever a day that would have finally convinced me to leave Ellwood Photography behind for good, this would have been it. Why didn't I quit the stressful job I hated? The answer was simple: I was good at my job, and I had no idea where I wanted to go from here.

When I lifted my time card and pulled it through the strike stick, swiping my way to freedom at last, a great release of tension washed over my body. It was like an anesthetic, temporarily numbing the last remaining bits of work-related stress plaguing my mind—for the weekend, anyway.

I secured my purse strap over my shoulder and walked toward the employee exit, pausing only to switch off the lights and set the alarm on the building.

The brisk night air prickled my skin as I stepped out into the hazy darkness—a bit unusual for the middle of April in Mesa, Arizona, but not unwelcome. The streetlight overhead flickered erratically, giving the abandoned parking lot an eerily pulsating glow and sending an unpleasant flutter of nerves to the pit of my stomach. *Stupid streetlight*. I lengthened my stride and crossed the parking lot to my Ford Ranger as quickly as my tired feet would allow.

An owl hooted mournfully from a nearby tree. I immediately glanced over my shoulder, fumbling to find the keyhole in the dark. I don't know why, but I just had this creepy feeling, like I was being watched. "That's it! No more *Unsolved Mysteries* before bed," I muttered into the

darkness, appalled at the ball of nerves I had become.

My frustration increased as I continued to struggle with the door lock, forcing me to reach for my phone and open up the flashlight app. *Finally*. I slid my phone back in my pocket, swung open the door, plopped into the driver's seat, and set my purse down on the floor. I stuck the key into the ignition and turned. Nothing. Not even a hum or a sputter.

"No, no, no! Come on, Beasty! Don't die on me now!" I tried again. No click. Nothing. "Ugh!" The piece of trash battery was only two months old. I slammed my palm against the steering wheel. Hard. *Ow*. I shook out my hand to try to ease the throbbing.

Just perfect. I was a sitting duck. Alone. In the dark.

After locking the door, I removed my cell phone from my pants pocket, opened my contacts list, and scrolled down to Sydney Freeman. I rubbed my still stinging hand up and down my thigh as I waited for my roommate to answer the call.

"Hey, Kenz!" Sydney's melodic voice greeted me. "What's up? Are you finally on your way?"

The muffled rumble of conversation sounded through the speaker, reminding me that I was interrupting her game night. I felt terrible. My truck literally couldn't have picked a more inconvenient time to crap out on me. Well . . . maybe that wasn't exactly true. At least she wasn't on a date.

I inhaled a steadying breath. "My truck won't start. Can you please come get me?"

"You're kidding!"

"Unfortunately not," I said. "I'm so sorry, Syd. I know it's not the greatest timing."

"Don't worry," she assured me kindly. "I'll be right there."

"Thank you," I replied, ending the call and shoving the phone back into my pocket.

I tossed the keys into my purse with a sigh, then rested my head on the steering wheel and closed my eyes to block out the creepy scene surrounding me. Strobing streetlight. Abandoned parking lot. Yeah, that's totally not the perfect setting for a murder. I breathed in deeply, willing my irrational fears to calm. *Nobody is watching me. I am completely safe.*

Besides, it was only nine in the evening. Murderers didn't come out until midnight, right?

I mentally visualized how I was going to get my truck up and running before seven-thirty tomorrow morning; the dull ache of stress started to build at the back of my neck. *Autozone* was already closed for the night and wouldn't open again until seven. *Ugh!*

A little sooner than I expected, headlights flashed across my windshield. I slowly lifted my head, thinking I'd see Sydney's white Nissan Altima, but instead, I found a blue Chevy Silverado pulling up in front of me. *Who is that?*

My heart started working double-time when a tall man in a dark shirt hopped out of the driver's seat. He reached into his truck to retrieve something I couldn't see and tucked it into the brim of his jeans. *What's he doing?* I strained to focus on the stranger in the dim light, searching for something, anything familiar about him, to put my mind at ease. When he finally turned his gaze on me and started heading my way in long, determined strides, my stomach dropped to my feet. There was nothing—not one single glimmer of recognition. *What should I do?* My palms started sweating. *Remain . . . calm.*

A glint of shiny black metal captured my attention as he walked in front of the glowing headlights of his truck. My blood ran cold. That thing he tucked into his pants was a gun.

*Oh . . . I'm dead, I'm dead. I'm dead!*

My pulse raced, and my heart pounded in my head like a drum. I never should have put off taking those self-defense classes. With shaky hands, I grabbed my purse and reached for my

pocket-sized taser, feeling totally unprepared for an altercation and yet completely resigned to zap the attacker as many times as necessary for my escape. *If only my stupid battery weren't dead, I could just drive away!*

*Come on, Mackenzie! You're a problem solver. You can figure this out.*

*Headlights. Yes!* He left the engine idling for a fast getaway. A crazy idea popped into my mind. *If I could just get into his truck . . .*

The clock was ticking. He was almost at my door. My mind scrambled to make sense of the ludicrous plan. Was it even possible? I could stay in the locked cabin of my Ranger and crouch to the floorboards . . . but was that really the safest option?

*Ha!* Who was I kidding? With a gun in the equation, the only “safe choice” was compliance.

I remembered the woman on TV who mysteriously vanished and was never seen or heard from again. *This guy could make me disappear.*

I wasn't going to let that happen.

Just as the guy lifted his hand to presumably tap on the window and lure me out, I unlocked the door and slammed it hard against his body, taking him by surprise and knocking him back a step or two. With adrenaline coursing through my veins, I held tight to my purse and sprinted from my Ranger toward his Silverado.

“Wait!” the assailant demanded, halting my progress as his hand enclosed around my stupid purse strap.

I screamed and tased his arm, causing his fingers to lock around the leather strap in an unbreakable grip. He growled and reached for my taser with his other hand. I panicked and dropped the weapon to the ground, then wrenched my purse free in the commotion, and dashed

for his truck. I didn't dare look behind me, but his fast, scraping steps across the asphalt told me he wasn't far behind.

I yanked the door open and grabbed the steering wheel, pulling my body into the driver's seat and slammed the door just in time. I hit the lock a millisecond before he pulled on the handle. He banged on the window, effectively drowning out whatever profanities I imagined he was trying to yell at me through the glass. I ignored the fleeting impulse to listen to what the man had to say, and reached for the gearshift instead.

I drove like a madwoman out of the parking lot, tires squealing, laughing in disbelief that my plan had actually worked.

"I'm still alive!" I cried aloud, my pounding heart finally starting to calm as I drove farther away from the creep.

"Holy . . . I just stole a car!" The realization hit me like a ton of bricks. My stomach churned with a fresh wave of anxiety. How the heck was I supposed to explain myself to the police? Technically, my attacker hadn't laid one finger on me, because I never gave him the chance. The guy didn't even try to shoot me. Did I overreact? I rubbed at the worry lines on my forehead and groaned.

*No.* I reassured myself with a shake of my head. I acted out of fear for my life.

But would the police believe that?

They had to believe me. I was the victim. *He* was the criminal preying on innocent women, not me.

Safely a few blocks away, my mind began to clear.

*Oh no. Sydney!* She was coming to pick me up. I needed to call her ASAP and warn her to turn back. Then I would call the police.

*Come on, Syd, pick up the phone!*

On the last ring, she finally answered. “Kenz! Did Tanner help you solve your car problem?”

“Tanner? Who’s Tanner?” I could hear voices laughing in the background. Sydney was still at the house. *Why hadn’t she left yet?* I started getting this funny twisting feeling in my gut, as if I knew I was going to dread the next words out of her mouth.

“The guy who volunteered to go rescue you. He should’ve arrived by now.”

*No!* I gasped as I pieced together the ugly truth. “Does he happen to drive a blue Silverado, by chance?” *Please say no. Please say no!*

“Yeah, that’s him.”

“Oh no . . .”

“What is it?” she asked, her voice a mix of confusion and amusement.

*I hijacked my rescuer’s truck!* Mortified, I turned around at the first possible opportunity and raced back to the photography studio—while going the speed limit, of course.

“Kenz?”

I had forgotten Sydney was still on the line. “Why didn’t you tell me some guy was coming to help me?” I demanded.

“I guess I forgot to text you.” She chuckled. “Is everything okay?”

*No, I freaking tased the guy and stole his truck!* I wanted to yell into the phone, but I kept the embarrassing declaration to myself. *Ugh!* “Yeah, just peachy. I have to go now. Bye.” I ended the call without waiting for a reply and dropped my phone into my purse with a growl of frustration. “I’m such an idiot!” I needed to deliver one incredibly big apology to a complete stranger, and I was quite certain that nothing I said or did would ever make this better. I wouldn’t

be surprised if this Tanner guy decided to rip me out of his truck and leave me behind without a second glance the very moment I arrived.

I slowly coasted into the parking lot and pulled up next to my Ranger. Tanner leaned against the driver's side of my truck with arms folded across his broad chest. I couldn't make out his expression in the dim light, but I was certain he must be plenty upset. If some crazy person stole my truck when I came to help them, I would be fuming mad.

He stood perfectly still as I got out of his car and sheepishly approached with my eyes trailing the ground beneath my feet. My head throbbed and my stomach toiled with nerves. I finally looked up to see an unmistakably gorgeous face, even in shadow, clearly annoyed by my very existence. *Oh, why does he have to be so good-looking? Worst night of my life!*

I swallowed and found my voice at last. "So . . . you're a Chevy guy. I have to admit the Z71 Silverado is nicer than I expected. Drives like a dream. I like the way it looks with the all-terrain tires. Are they new?"

He lifted his brows in apparent disbelief and just stared at me in deafening silence.

*Okay . . . small talk to take the edge off is definitely a bust.* I cleared my throat and tried again. "Look, Sydney didn't tell me a guy was coming to rescue me. I thought you were a murderer trying to abduct me. I can't even express how sorry I am." Still, he stared at me without saying a single word, his expression unchanged, so I said, "If I had known who you were, I never would have tased you . . . or shoved you with the door . . . or hijacked your truck." My cheeks were burning with shame. "I promise I have never done anything like that before in my life. I am truly so sorry."

He blinked and exhaled slowly, his shoulders relaxing a fraction as his arms dropped to his sides. I internally debated whether or not I should offer to make him apology brownies. I

doubted it would help any. I bit my lip and stared at his deliciously muscular arms instead. They weren't overly huge, like he was trying to brag about how much he could lift. They were a more ordinary size that looked trim but strong. I could hardly believe I had brutally assaulted one of those arms with ten thousand volts of electricity. I forced my eyes to meet his gaze with an extra rippling of remorse. "How's your arm?" I asked quietly.

He extended his right hand, palm up, to show me. A small discoloration of the skin marred his forearm. Although it was hard to tell in this lighting, I figured it was probably a burn mark.

I cringed with regret and nearly jumped when he finally spoke to me. "I'm going to need my keys back."

It wasn't the ferocious growl I had expected, but my heart still sank at the command. He was leaving me, and I didn't blame him. Not one little bit. I nodded solemnly and relinquished his keys without a word. He secured the red lanyard around his neck and stretched out his hand again. "Now yours."

My brows lowered in confusion. "What?"

"Give me your keys."

I immediately fished the keys from my purse and handed them over, too, not really sure why he wanted them. He opened the unlocked door of my Ranger and leaned over the driver's seat. After sticking the key in the ignition, he turned over the motor, and my truck roared to life.

"What? How did you? There's no way."

Tanner stepped away from my truck and mumbled out a gruff, "You're welcome," when he passed me by.