

CLAIMED

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Amira Press
Charlotte, NC 28227
www.amirapress.com

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THEIRS TO CLAIM



THE FIRE OF HIS CLAIM



ACCEPTING THEIR CLAIM

Theirs
TO CLAIM
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Chapter One

The breath pumped out of her lungs like a locomotive, loud and startling in her ears. She knew he could hear it, just behind the pounding of her frantic, beating heart. She could feel him behind her, but she never looked back, just kept pounding the pavement, one foot in front of the other, as though the dogs of Hades were chasing her. . . Maybe they were. A cloying cloud of sulfur and brimstone choked her until her eyes were streaming and she gasped for those fading breaths.

"Please," she begged to no one and everyone, "please don't let me die."

Her heels had been tossed and forgotten minutes before, and she could feel the aching and stinging in her feet, but she couldn't stop. Frenzied thoughts passed through her head. Why had she decided to go on this blind date? Why in the hell had she let Jezzie, of all people, set it up? Why? Because murders on the quiet back roads of small-town Texas weren't supposed to happen! Screw it. She refused to be the first.

Biting down hard on her lip to keep her focus, Zelina tucked her pointed chin into her chest and pushed harder. She could hear her track coach in her head telling her to open her stride, not pump her legs faster. Work smarter, not harder. She

shook her hands loose, fell into the old chin-to-hip motion, and tried her best to breathe. She was going to get away, and if he caught her, she was going to make sure he wouldn't do this again.

When Jezzie had described that Z had to give someone other than "the brothers" a shot, she'd finally given in. Brian had been handsome, charming, and smooth. Striking gray eyes, expertly chopped dark hair, and an unembellished charcoal suit made him look as though he had stepped out of GQ magazine. At least in Z's mind it had. Jezzie was a senior editor for her publishing house. It really wouldn't have surprised Z in the least that she knew someone who looked like him and came from that world. That he also seemed to be equally mesmerized by her natural hair twisted into a side-hold bun, streaks of blond and lighter brown throughout, and her nearly six-foot height, she thought she had it good. When she caught him checking out her nice—if she must say so herself—behind in her pencil skirt, she figured he was on the right track. She'd even liked the combination of her darker skin against his much paler flesh.

From there, dinner had gone off without a hitch. He'd complimented her hazel eyes, her angular face, but in a way that didn't stink of flattery. It felt as if someone was truly seeing her for the first time, and she'd let herself relax, giving her bestie a mental high five for a job well done. By the time the damn dessert course was served, she could have sworn she could hear wedding bells in the distance. He was just that good, and Z couldn't figure out why a guy so easy with himself, no cockiness found, no need to over impress, or stress, seemed to be single. It just didn't ring.

When she'd stepped out of the bathroom of the restaurant, conveniently away from prying eyes and those trying to enjoy their food, he was waiting for her with the darkest look she'd ever seen. She'd kind of gotten a clue and the shock of her life.

Chapter Two

What—" was all she got out before he lunged at her. Fear kept her immobile for a moment until anger kicked in. Stepping back into the bathroom, nearly slipping on water on the floor, she'd taken another look at Mr. GQ. His face seemed longer, eyes sunken and dark, his hair slicked back over his scalp as though he'd been running a marathon. He looked. . . hungry. He'd continued his pursuit of her into the bathroom, and she'd seen something she never thought possible in her life. One loafer-covered foot stepped into the water, and Brian let out a wail like a friggin' demon spawn before jumping back, smoke rising from the melting material.

Frozen in a tableau of predator versus prey for those seconds, Z wasn't sure what to do. Someone must have heard the sound. Surely someone would come running, wouldn't they? But could they face whatever this thing was in front of her? Would he harm them for coming to save her? She looked over his shoulder, and Brian caught the motion.

"No one's going to save you here."

"What do you want from me? You won't get away with this. We're in a restaurant full of people."

"To answer your first question. . ." he said, smiling at her.

Zelina felt her knees turn to water as she slid to the ground, cold and wetness seeping into her dress. Four perfect pointed teeth hung down over his bottom lip, the exact stupid lip she'd wanted to come up close and personal with at some point. Damn, what a way to spoil the mood!

Sufficiently happy he'd gotten her attention, he continued as if her world hadn't been totally ripped from its foundations. "Good, you understand. Now, as to the second question, the moment you got up from your seat to find your way back here, you ceased to exist. They will never hear you scream."

His smile made her sick to her stomach. His assurance that she was beaten served to piss her off. Just the typical a-hole who knew he got everything for nothing. Zelina, shaking in her stilettos, wasn't going down that easy. Thinking quickly, she reached for the dampness she'd felt under her butt and splashed as much as she could at his approaching body. A lucky shot caught him across the eyes and face, dragging him to his knees. Amid the smoke and putrid smell of burning flesh, Z made a dash for the exit.

His fingers reached for her, nails slicing gashes into her thigh, but she slid past him. She ignored the burning as much as she could, sprinting through frozen, silent bodies to reach the door. He had been right. No one was coming, and no one had even heard her scream. They all stood like left-alone marionette dolls in the restaurant, still in midstride, mouths agape on silent laughs, and even poised on the brink of a kiss. None of them could help her. She was a space in time they wouldn't even remember.