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Crumple Zone

Psychological Suspense

Chapter 1

Tortured by a burning headache, Lara Carter curled up on her left side. Distorted memories stirred. Her stomach cramped as she tried to remember how many single malts she'd poured on top of her four beers. Her fingers clawed the mattress as high waves tossed her bed around.

No, the mattress wobbled. A warm hand reached around her waste and jolted her fully awake. No! Please! She opened her eyes and turned around. Oh God. What had she done? Daniel lay next to her, lips parted, face pale under the dark stubble. Fast asleep. A whiff of sweat, sex and whiskey attacked her nose and stomach.

Groaning, she stared at the ceiling. Daniel, her colleague and friend for years. A geek, who always worked overtime. He bought the latest gadgets and collected gigabytes of comics. She'd always been tempted to spice up his life, but never crossed that line before.

His hand burned her skin and brought back jumbled memories. Her head throbbed even more. A blade pierced her right temple and she deserved the pain. She glanced at the alarm clock. Twenty minutes after nine. Time to get going and suffer through the embarrassment.

Ugh. How could she forget? Nobody expected her at work. They'd fired her. And only a couple of months away from her thirtieth birthday, for which she'd already scheduled a nice little mid-life crisis. Technically they'd laid her off, but the result was the same. A kick in the butt.

More pieces of yesterday's puzzle fell into place. She eased out under Daniel's hand, trying not to wake him, and sat up. Big mistake. The room spun. The knife sliced through to the other side of her head. A long, dark hair tickled down her bare arm. She shook it off. Goosebumps popped out on her skin.

A new image flared behind her eyes. Dream or reality? Panic sped up her drowsy pulse. She had to find out. She put on her t-shirt, stumbled into the living room and picked up the

phone. Last night took on clearer shapes and glowed in colors far too bright. Feeling sick, she dialed Bridget's number.

After three rings her best friend answered. "Hey, you're alive."

"Did I book a flight to South America last night?"

Bridget giggled. "You sure did. Check your e-mail."

Lara sank onto her desk chair. "How could you let me do that?" An invisible torture master hammered against her temples, but at least the knife had slipped out.

"It sounded like a brilliant idea at the time. If I remember correctly you're leaving in two weeks. I'll water your plants."

Lara swallowed. "Don't bother. I'm going to cancel the reservation."

"Why? You've got nothing to lose. You're between jobs, remember?"

"You mean I'm unemployed." Anger flared when she thought about spineless Harold stumbling through his speech about not enough revenue in the last quarter . . . As if she were a sales rep, not a project manager. Her team made every deadline in the last—

Bridget's voice intruded. " . . . nice compensation pack. It's the perfect time for a getaway. Listen, if you don't go on that trip now, you never will."

Cold sweat made Lara shiver. "Chile, was it?"

"Yeah, someone called it the safest country in South America."

Through the haze, she remembered her colleagues getting all excited, recommending places for her to go: Bangkok, Fiji, Rio . . .

Too much to deal with on top of a hangover. "I'm going back to sleep."

"Wait. Daniel hasn't shown up yet. Do you know if he got home okay?"

Lara cringed. "He's fine, I think." She rose and walked over to the window, trying to get away from the next question.

"What?"

In the distance glittered the Puget Sound. She cleared her throat. "We shared a taxi and . . . things got a bit out of hand."

"Lara! With Daniel? What a dream couple: the workaholic and the nerd." She could hear the smile in Bridget's voice. "He's cute though. And maybe just what you need. I want to know all about it."

"Please, not now. Tomorrow, if I haven't jumped out the window by then."

Bridget laughed. "Can't let that happen. Charlie's Bar tonight. No excuses."

Lara slunk back to her bed to face another nightmare. Daniel lay on his side, one bare arm clutching the duvet. Underneath the tangle of black hair, his face looked so different in his sleep, boyish despite the three-day beard, vulnerable. No sign of his cynical wit or the hyper energy he often radiated in the office. She slipped into the bed behind him and poked his back. "Wake up."

Daniel grunted.

"You still have a job."

He turned around, squinting. "Lara?"

She couldn't help smiling. "Quite a surprise, eh?"

A grin spread over his face. After a few seconds, he said, "You know, I've been fantasizing about this."

Lara groaned and pulled the comforter over her head. The last thing she needed was a romantic entanglement.

Propped up on his elbow, he tugged on the cover and looked at her with his sparkling brown eyes.

Lara's gaze traveled over his smooth, hairless chest inviting her touch. Yes, she'd needed him last night to wipe away her anger and hurt. She forced herself to meet his eyes. "Oh please! Don't look at me like this."

"Like what?"

She hated herself even before she spoke the words. "You know it was a mistake."

The spark in his eyes died. He rolled onto his back and sighed. "A mistake?"

She heard the pain in his voice. How to take the sting out of her words, her actions, yesterday's selfishness?

He asked, "Mind if I use your shower?"

"Go ahead." Painkillers are in the cabinet behind the bathroom mirror."

"Thanks, but I doubt they'll make much difference." He sat up, slipped into his boxers and gathered his scattered clothes. Part of her wanted to pull him back into her bed, snuggle up against him—and more. Her skin remembered the sensation of his body against hers.

He turned and looked down at her, chewing the insides of his cheeks. Was he waiting for her to say it was just a joke?

She closed her eyes and heard his bare feet on the wood floor. She banned the blurred memories and hoped to sink back into oblivion, but different images of the previous night tortured her mind. She heard herself boasting that she'd go to some exotic country all by herself and have a bit of fun. Eddie, the traitor, had pulled out a laptop and connected to the wireless. They'd started searching the Internet for the cheapest flights to all kinds of destinations while Daniel's arm lay across her shoulders.

Lara heard the rush of water in the bathroom and felt sorry for kicking him out of her bed so cruelly, but she worried he'd take an apology as encouragement. She felt like screaming. No chance of sleep.

Escape to another hemisphere didn't sound like such a bad idea anymore. She needed coffee and had to check her e-mail, find out her destination and the details of her flight into unadulterated folly. Maybe she'd changed her inebriated mind at the last moment and booked a flight to Medellín for a fiesta with the drug barons.

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Dressed in a short skirt and tank top under a black leather jacket, Lara entered Charlie's Bar, her favorite and one of Seattle's little known treasures. And the last place she wanted to be right now. Blinded by the gloom, she pushed her sunglasses up into her hair and waited for her eyes to adjust.

Charlie waved from behind the bar. Lara smiled and strode toward him while she scanned the few guests. Bridget wasn't here yet so she hopped on a stool.

Charlie flashed his incredibly white teeth. "Hi sweetie. How are you?"

"Don't ask."

His expression wavered between sympathy and amusement. "That bad?"

"Worse. Gimme a Bloody Mary. How are things with your Brazilian beauty?"

His face contorted in a grimace. "Who?"

"Sorry to hear it."

"I'm off at eleven if you want to go dancing." He winked and poured tomato juice.

Lara winced. "I don't have too many male friends and I don't think it makes sense to sleep with every one of them."

Charlie laughed. "Okay, spill it. What happened?"

"I screwed up big time. I got laid off yesterday, drank myself silly then booked a flight to

Chile. And, to top it off, I slept with a good friend and colleague. Ex-colleague."

"Wow, Chile! Cool."

Lara sighed. "I have the feeling you aren't taking this seriously."

An arm wrapped around Lara's shoulders. She looked up into Bridget's smiling face rimmed by natural blond curls she'd always envied. "Hey, you took your time."

"Do you have anything typical Chilean?" Bridget asked Charlie.

He grabbed a bottle labeled *Pisco* from the shelf. "Sure, I'll make something up."

"Excellent." Bridget dragged her to one of the tables and slumped on the green leather sofa.

Lara sat opposite her in a matching easy chair, crossed her arms on the table and glared. "I'm not going. No way."

Bridget shook her head. "Why not?"

"I don't want to, so why should I?"

"Last night you wanted to travel the world."

"I was drunk."

Bridget looked smug. "In vino veritas."

"I drank beer and scotch, not wine. You can stick your Latin platitudes."

"Honey, you wouldn't have booked the flight if you didn't want to go. Now is your chance."

Lara sighed. "That's not the only thing I regret."

Bridget sat up straighter. "Right, tell me about Daniel!"

"Daniel was . . . wonderful, but I kicked him out this morning."

"You didn't!" She gaped at her, head shaking, curls bouncing around her face. "Then you better define wonderful."

Lara frowned.

Bridget pressed on. "Well, how was Mr. Geek as a lover?"

"Bridget!" Lara felt her cheeks burn. "You're married. Quit thinking about other men in bed."

Bridget leaned back and crossed her arms. "All right. Then tell me why you kicked him out if he was so wonderful."

"Because we've been friends for years. We know each other too well."

Bridget rolled her eyes. "And that means you can't fall in love with him?"

"Exactly. I'd only hurt him."

"If you ask me," Bridget said, "you've got a commitment phobia."

"I like to think that I was leading a rather happy life until yesterday."

Bridget sucked on the straw then shook her head. "You're a workaholic and you only go out with colleagues. What kind of a life is that?"

"What else would I need?"

"How about some excitement? An adventure? Love?"

Lara took a deep breath, but before she found an answer, Bridget continued, "When did you last have sex?"

Lara growled, "Last night."

"I mean before that."

She took a deep breath and sank back. "More than a year ago. So what?"

"That was Alex, right? How long did it take before you ran?"

"Half a year. My usual time for the dopamine level to get back to normal. Some call it love; I call it messed-up brain chemistry. Your so-called love lasts just long enough to make sure the female gets pregnant. And that's not only the case with vertebrates. Nature's tricks—"

"Oh please, have mercy. I wish you'd never studied biology. How can you live in such a disenchanted world?"

"Ain't always easy."

Bridget sighed. "Why don't you mount your horse and ride into the sunset, lonesome cowboy?"

Lara smiled. Talking to Bridget always cheered her up. "Let me finish my drink first."

"It'll be spring in Chile. You'll escape the rains and fog."

Sometimes the cheer only lasted a fleeting moment. She looked at her annoying friend through the dark fringe of her bangs. "What would I do there?"

"I believe under that tortoise shell of yours a child is hiding. Let it come out and play. Set it free. Start living and don't just go through the motions."

Lara shook her head. "I've got to find a new job."

"No you don't. Not right away. I don't want you to bury yourself in work again. You've got the money and the time. At least give it a try."

Lara managed a weak smile and felt her resistance crumbling. "I'll think about it."

Bridget nodded and finished her drink. "Okay. I've got to go. Can't leave Hank at home with the kids two evenings in a row." She sounded apologetic. "Are you going to be okay?"

"Sure."

Bridget rose and kissed her on the cheek. "You can do it. Live, love and take some risks."

Lara watched her walk up to the bar, put down some money and exchange a few words with Charlie. He nodded in Lara's direction without looking at her. Inside, she groaned, didn't want to imagine what they were discussing. She'd pay and escape as soon as Bridget left and before Charlie could corner her.

She turned away and sipped her drink. She loved her friends, except when they treated her like a child. She was happy with her life—more or less.

"I thought I might find you here."

Lara looked up into Daniel's face showing no trace of his usual smile. Her heart beat faster. "Daniel?" He still wore a black Silver Surfer t-shirt and tight-fitting black jeans.

He nodded toward the sofa opposite her. "May I?"

"Sure but I was about to leave." Even to herself her words sounded lame, like an excuse to run.

"I won't keep you." He sank into the cushions. "Are you okay?"

"Yes, much better, thanks to painkillers and an afternoon nap." She tried hard to sound casual, pretending that nothing happened. She hid her sweaty hands under the table, afraid they might tremble and betray her feelings.

"Lara, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to take advantage of the situation."

"Hey, it always takes two."

He remained silent for a moment. She didn't know what else to say, how to make last night undone and save their friendship.

"You're not mad at me?" he asked.

"No."

His eyes locked on hers. The left corner of his mouth forced a half-smile. "But you don't want to see me?"

Lara flinched, but she had to be honest. "We've been good friends, Daniel, and I'm sorry about what happened last night. It was a mistake. My mistake." Lara hated herself. She felt like

she'd kicked a puppy.

Daniel's gaze turned toward the door. After long seconds, he looked back at her.

Charlie appeared like a ghost. "Hi Daniel, what can I get you?"

He shook his head, eyes still fixed on her. "Nothing, Charlie." He cleared his throat. "I'm out of here. Have a good trip, Lara." He rose. "Call me when you've got over the shock."

Puzzled, Lara stared at him. "What shock?"

"That you've slept with someone who actually cares about you." He turned away and strode toward the door.

Lara watched him leave, yearning for him to spin around and flash his mocking smile at her.

"What did you do now?" Charlie asked.

She buried her head in her hands.