

# ROAM

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**THECKER  
BOOKS**

## ONE

If someone had asked Sarah Cate what she wanted for her twenty-first birthday, her response would have been this: a quiet, romantic night out with her boyfriend. It didn't matter if it was dinner and a movie or a drive under the stars—all that mattered was that they were together.

“Are you done yet?” Matt yelled.

She was still trying to figure out how she had ended up squatting in a ditch in the middle of nowhere. Now all she wanted was some toilet paper and her cell phone. Preferably in that order.

She swiftly finished her business and made her way back across the road. Matt was sprawled out in the passenger seat of her car with the door opened. His head was against the headrest, but his eyes were on her.

“It's getting dark,” she said, batting at a firefly. “Can you try your cell phone again?”

“I already told you there's no reception this far out. Maybe if you'd remembered *your* phone, we wouldn't be stuck here right now.”

“That makes sense,” she muttered. Her hands went to her hips. “Can you at least try to sober up so we can figure out what's wrong with my car?”

“I am not drunk,” he said, holding up a finger. It weaved and bobbed in the air as he climbed out. “I can hold my liquor, okay? I know my limits.”

“Fine. Whatever. I just want to get out of here. Do you want *me* to pop the hood and take a look?”

For some reason he found this hysterically funny and burst into laughter. It quickly turned into a coughing fit, and she whapped him between the shoulders hard enough to sting her palm.

His coughs shifted over to dry heaves and began to taper off. He didn't look good. His cheeks were completely drained of color and tiny beads of sweat peppered his forehead.

"Matt?"

He let out a small belch and wiped his mouth on his sleeve. "What?"

"Maybe it's the thing with the antifreeze. The radiator. My mom says she keeps seeing green puddles in our driveway where I park. Maybe it's low on fluid and the engine overheated."

"Let's leave the guy stuff for me to figure out," Matt said, pulling the latch and raising the hood. A cloud of smoke filled the air and he took a step back. "Whoa."

"Well?" she asked.

His face wrinkled in thought. It seemed to say *This is a very profound question you have asked of me, and I will take it under very serious consideration*. It was the same expression he had when picking out a movie or deciding on something from a menu.

"I think it's the radiator," he said in small voice. "Lucky guess."

*Baby-sitting*, Sarah thought angrily. *Baby-sitting on my birthday*.

Two weeks she had been dreaming of this night: a birthday to remember. Everything had been fine until he had talked her into stopping at a party for a quick drink after they had eaten. It was her night, and she had still gone out of her way to make him happy.

"Good Little Girlfriend," she said under her breath. She dug out her cigarettes and promised herself again she would not buy another pack when they were gone.

"This is insane," said Matt. He was standing in the middle of the road with one hand frozen halfway through his hair. "Where the hell is everybody?"

She looked around, not understanding. "What are you talking about?"

"This road should be *hopping*. It's the most traveled road between Norridge and Centerview."

On this she secretly agreed—everyone knew the interstate between the two towns took an additional fifteen minutes—but she wasn't about to give him the satisfaction of admitting it.

"I give up," he said, lowering himself to the pavement. "Just leave me for the buzzards and crows. And tell my mother that I love her . . . and to remember to feed my fish . . ."

She crossed her arms. This was the part where she was supposed to laugh and everything would magically return to normal. She knew the routine by heart. But he wasn't going to get off that easily—no way in hell. This was her birthday (the freakin' BIG one, at that), and it was being destroyed right in front of her eyes.

"Why don't you go sit in the car?" she said.

He lay back and draped an arm over his forehead. "I'm too drunk to do anything, remember?"

"Come on," she said, trying to keep her voice light. "Your clothes are going to get dirty."

She shot a glance at the curve behind him. A car speeding around it wouldn't have time to see someone sprawled across the pavement, let alone have time to stop. Kuennen Road wasn't only a well-known shortcut; it was also a popular road for speeding.

"Matt, come over here and help me fix this."

*He's going to get run over,* she thought, dumbfounded. *What a perfect ending to a perfect evening.*

"Matt, this isn't funny!"

She knew he wasn't going to budge—not until she went out and got him. Worse yet, she also knew that *he* knew this as well. If a car splattered him, it would be her fault, because she didn't do what she was supposed to do. It always had to be on his terms. When they went out to eat, it was up to her to choose the restaurant, but only after: "What do you think? Chinese or Mexican food?" At the video store, *he* would pick out two movies and then say: "These both look good . . . you decide which one." Her personal favorite was the first time she had

suggested a theater movie and received back: “Yeah, that looks pretty good, but it’s a half-hour longer than this other one, and it starts fifteen minutes later. Plus, that type of movie is just as good on DVD, not like this other one that really needs to be seen on the big screen. But hey, if that’s really the one you want to see . . .” The conversation might have been funny if it had been the gentle teasing that all couples did to each other, but he had been dead serious. He had weighed the pros and cons, formulated theories and opinions, and made a case. Just like a lawyer to the jury: *These are all the facts, and I know you’ll use common sense and make the right decision.*

“I’m going to wait inside the car,” she called out. “Okay?”

There was no reply. For a horrible second she thought he had passed out.

“Matt!”

“I can’t get up . . . or speak . . . in . . . complete . . . sentences . . .”

She pushed all her emotions into a ball and shoved it to the side the best she could. The forgotten cigarette dropped from her fingers as she walked over to him, hating herself for it.

“Come on,” she said, reaching down and grabbing his elbow. It was a futile effort, but she struggled with him nonetheless. “Work *with* me,” she said with a grunt.

“I’ll work something with you,” he grinned, grabbing her wrist and pulling her down into a clumsy hug.

“Let me go!”

“What?” he asked innocently.

She twisted and jerked as the smell of alcohol from his breath doused her face. Then she heard it: the low, deep rumble of a muffler from beyond the curve.

She tried to push him away. “Matt,” she snapped, “there’s a car—”

He kissed her sloppily and she lost it; her fingernails that had been so carefully filed and painted turned into claws, burrowing into his stomach.

“Hey,” he said with a faint laugh. “That kind of—”

She had a perfect view of his face when the pain finally registered, and then he wasn't only releasing her—he was *throwing* her.

“A car!” she shouted, scrambling over to the side of the road. “There’s a car coming, you stupid ass!”

She cupped a hand over her mouth, tracking the curve for headlights or sounds. There was nothing. She clambered to her feet as Matt came at her.

“You cut me,” he said in a shaky voice, holding up his shirt.

“I thought—”

“Look at this!”

She glanced at the three red lines above his belly button and decided she didn't care. It was his own damn fault and she wasn't taking responsibility for him anymore.

“I'm sorry,” she said. “I thought I heard a car.”

“Where, huh? I don't see anything!”

His face was a grotesque mixture of fury and rage, and in that moment, Sarah was afraid. He was drunk and pissed off and the situation was getting out of control. She took a step back and his hand latched on to her arm. Panic seized her by the throat.

*This is not happening*, she told herself.

He raised his fist. His upper lip was curled back into a snarl, and in that split second, Sarah understood what had happened: a case had been made and she had been convicted. She had hurt him and now he was going to hurt her.

It was as simple as that.

His fist whirled past her and slammed into the car. She jerked free and backed away in a series of harried steps.

“Shit,” he said, just under his breath. His head was lowered, and his palms were pressed flat against the trunk of the car. Between his thumbs sat a small, shadowed dent.

“My horrible temper,” he offered, and then pushed out a loud sigh. “I suppose that makes me a bad person, huh? Losing it like that?”

Sarah said nothing, and when his eyes swung toward her she realized he wanted a response. It wasn't rhetorical.

"No," she whispered.

A dark freeze came over his face, hardening his features. He seemed to still be questioning her: *Are you sure that's your final answer?* She found herself unable to look away, only because she didn't recognize the guy standing there.

"Work has been . . . difficult these last few weeks. You just don't know the pressures, Sarah. Not all of us can work part-time and live at home like you. Consider yourself lucky."

Her mouth opened, but only a small fit of air crept out. If he was supposed to be making an apology, it wasn't working. If he was trying to push her buttons, he was working straight from the manual.

"Just excuses," he added. "Things just haven't gone as planned lately. Like tonight. And now this has probably ruined your birthday present. I was planning on tonight being 'the night.' And for that, I'm sorry. But maybe it's not too late? You know . . . to start over?"

A slanted smile touched his lips, and for a moment she was so taken aback she couldn't speak. After everything that had been said and done, he was still trying to get laid. The path of the night wasn't going to end up where he wanted it, so the obvious solution was to admit he had been an ass and get things back on track. She knew he didn't believe it, but he knew enough to say it. This was his way. Again, if you examined the facts, there was only one reasonable conclusion to draw: they had been dating for three months; they had gone out for a nice dinner; it was her birthday.

She had a way as well. It was something along the lines of *No way was this asshole ever going to touch her again*. It didn't matter if she was with someone for ten years or ten minutes; all that mattered was that it felt right. There was no agenda.

Almost shyly: "What do you think, Sarah?"

She forced herself to look at him. He was playing the part beautifully: shoulders slumped, hands crammed into his pockets . . . even his head was bowed slightly, puppy dog eyes watching and waiting for a pat on the head. *Come on*, they said. *Be a sport*.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“Don’t apologize,” he said with a small smile. “There’s still time—”

“Sorry I ever *met* you,” she finished.

It was probably the cheesiest, most clichéd thing she could have said, but it still felt good. Good Little Girlfriends didn’t talk back.

“Sarah, you don’t mean that.”

He was grinning, but his eyes were two narrow slits. They told another story. They asked again if that was her final answer.

“You shouldn’t joke about that,” he said. He began to slowly roll up his sleeves. “It’s not funny.”

*This is wrong*, a voice inside her spoke up. *You need to get away from this situation right now*.

“We just need to get moving,” she stammered as he moved toward her. “We can figure out the rest later.”

His hands clamped down on her shoulders and she gave a startled cry.

“If you broke up with me,” he said, his fingers digging into her skin, “I’d make you so sorry you’d never forget it. I’d follow you to the ends of the earth, and you’d never have one moment of peace because you’d always be looking over your shoulder, wondering when the day would finally come that I’d appear out of thin air and drag you into your own living nightmare. Do you get me?”

“Matt,” she rasped, “I didn’t—”

“Kidding!” he laughed, and gave her a firm shake. He backed away with his hands raised. “I’m sorry. I was just playing. But you see how horrible that was? Jokes go too far. Just like you saying you wished you never met me. Yeah?”

She nodded furiously as tears began to sting her eyes. He gingerly touched her cheek, and it took all her strength not to pull away.



“I didn’t mean to scare you that bad,” he said. “Sarah, you’re the best thing I’ve got right now, and the last thing I want to do is push you away. Everything will be fine once we get back to my place. You’ll see. I’m going to go check out the car now, okay?”

Somehow she managed another nod, and the moment his back was turned she grabbed on to the car handle to steady herself. She told herself she was okay; everything was going to be fine. She was going to get through this and maybe never look back. Ever.

“Radiator’s probably still too hot to be opened,” he said, “but I got plenty of piss to spare. Gotta go *real* bad.”

Sarah blinked stupidly in his direction.

“It’s a guy trick,” he explained. “Piss works the same as water inside a radiator. When the radiator overheats and you don’t have any water, you just piss into it to fill it back up. Then you’re back in business.”

She opened her mouth to tell him not to *pee* into her car . . . but something inside her clicked. It was time for her to leave. It was such a simple idea that she didn’t know why it had taken so long to come to her. The road was deserted, but there were houses scattered along it. Farm houses with people and phones.

“Matt?”

It came out as no more than a croak, immediately lost within the rustling trees and screeching crickets. She swallowed and cleared her throat.

“Matt?” she said again louder.

He stepped out from behind the raised hood. There was a dab of dirt on his chin, and he was using the corner of his shirt to wipe his hands. The shirt alone probably cost more than everything she was wearing, and he was smearing oil and grime all across it. It was almost funny.

“Yeah, babe?” he asked.

A benevolent smile touched the corners of his mouth, and for a moment Sarah found herself stuck. He looked like the guy she had started the evening with again—the guy she had first met at the café who tripped over her shopping bags

and spilled coffee all over himself. He had laughed so hard she had been unable to stop from joining in. It had been his smile that had baited her into dropping her phone number in his direction. It was warm and inviting, and yes—it could light up a whole damn room.

“What’s up?” he asked gently. He literally looked like he would have swallowed drain cleaner for her if asked. And that was the problem. Five minutes ago he was on the verge of smacking her, and now he was Mr. Nice Guy?

“I just remembered that there’s an old family friend that lives in a house about a mile from here,” she lied. “It’s just down the road. I was thinking I would walk down there and ask to use the phone.”

His hands stopped and his smile dimmed. Sarah forced herself not to swallow.

“Why would you want to do that?” he asked. There was no trace of anything in his face now. “Don’t you trust me to take care of this, Sarah?”

“It’s not that,” she said, all at once aware of the small earthquakes erupting inside her hands. She stuffed them behind her back. “We just haven’t seen a car yet, and we might not see one for a long time. I mean, who’s to say they’d even stop? Not everyone stops for people in trouble, especially in the middle of a deserted road. I just . . . I thought that . . .”

His eyes crawled over her suspiciously, and she told herself to keep it under control.

“You don’t have to do anything, Matt. You can stay and keep working on the car, and as soon as I call someone, I’ll come back.”

He took a step in her direction and she exploded into tears.

“I can’t do this,” she sobbed. It came out in a loud burst, startling her as much as him. “Please don’t . . . please stay there. Please don’t yell at me anymore. Please . . .”

She wept blindly into her hands, knowing that he was storming toward her. She could hear the slap of his shoes against the pavement, could feel the barrage of fists that was sure to come. She had lost it and now he was done with her. No more Mr. Nice Guy; no more Good Little Girlfriend.

When she dared to look, she saw that he was in the same place. A troubled frown was etched across his lips.

“My God, Sarah,” he whispered. “I had no idea what I’d done to you.”

His words were so soft that she was barely catching them, and she tried to shift her breathing down to a lower gear.

“I don’t know what to say,” he choked, then placed a hand across his mouth. “This is my fault. This whole mess of a night.”

They stared at each other through the fading light, two figures not speaking or moving. Three hours ago she had picked him up in her car, the evening ahead of them brimming with excitement and anticipation. They had been Matt and Sarah: boyfriend and girlfriend. It was her twenty-first birthday and everything was going to be perfect.

“Whatever you want to do, Sarah,” he said. “If you feel better doing this, I completely understand.”

Shame and guilt threatened to creep up inside her, and it took all of her strength to force them back down. Too much had been said to even begin to sort it out.

“I would never hurt you,” Matt said roughly, but the anger was directed at himself. “And I’ll never forgive myself if this causes problems in our relationship.”

“I didn’t mean for . . . I just want to help. I didn’t mean to freak out—”

“Just be careful. Make sure to walk on the side of the road, and if I do get the car working and you hear me coming, be sure to raise your arms high in the air so I can see you.”

“Okay,” she said, slightly confused. The conversation seemed to have taken on the tone of a formal business meeting.

“I just hope you’re right about that house. If not, it’s ten miles back to town, and once you lose the last of the light, you’ll only have the moon to work with.” He let out a small, almost polite laugh. “Of course, if you don’t find the house, you’ll be turning around and coming right back.”

Sarah dropped her eyes. "Of course."

"Watch your feet," he continued, "because those sandals aren't going to be kind to you. They're prime material for blisters, especially on a hard surface like this. But it shouldn't be a problem because you're not going very far."

"No," she answered in a glassy whisper.

"And if I were you, I'd be skeptical about accepting a ride if someone does come by. Someone might drive past me and then stop for you. After all, you're a young, beautiful girl walking alone down a dark, deserted road, and I won't be there to protect you if something bad happens. I'm not trying to scare you, Sarah, but these are just facts. People get murdered and raped in this world every single day."

Sarah shot a glance down the road, squinting into the wind. There was nothing inviting about the scenario. The surrounding fields were bustling with strange noises and sounds. A thousand hiding places for the criminally insane were laid out ahead of her. Every horror movie she had watched came back to her, reminding her of what never to do. And number one was never be a young girl alone in the dark.

Stay or go. Go or stay. Either way was impossible.

She turned to say something and abruptly stopped. Matt was watching her, his face serious and attentive, but she had seen it. It had been so small and fleeting that she could have easily convinced herself it was imagined, but there was no doubt. The grin on his lips had been wiped away a millisecond too late.

"What are you thinking?" he asked somberly.

She carefully reached into her pocket. The key ring jingled in her hand as she wrestled off the ignition key, and when she held it out to him, there was no mistaking the movement of his lips: they coiled into a tight frown. His arm rose slowly and she dropped the key into his hand.

"I don't think you want to do this, Sarah," he said coldly.

She began to walk away, watching him over her shoulder as she went. His arm was still frozen in the air; if there had been a revolver in his hand, he would

have looked like a gunfighter after the draw. Her heart began to race, keeping a steady beat with her footsteps. Now he was going to come after her. Her hands tightened around the strap of her purse.

“If something bad happens,” he called after her, “I’m not taking responsibility for it.”

Once she made it around the curve she would be out of sight, and it would all be better. Then she could . . . could *what?* Walk the whole ten miles back into town? She knew there were people in the world that could run a four-minute mile, so the best she could hope to do on foot was maybe fifteen minutes a mile? Right there would be almost two and a half hours of panic-stricken, trauma-forming, alone-in-the-dark footwork. The sensible part of her said it wasn’t too late to turn around and forget the whole thing. Surely a car would be by soon and they could both get a lift. Then she wouldn’t be alone with Matt or alone with a stranger.

“You don’t want to do this, you *bitch!*” Matt yelled.

She shut her eyes, missing a step and almost tangling her feet.

She was walking.