

# BREAK IN TWO



MJ SUMMERS

## *Part One - They Meet*

### Chapter 1

#### *June*

Rain streamed down the windows of her car as Claire Hatley sat parked in front of the house that would never again be her home. She had just finished cramming the last of her things in her car and leaving the key on the kitchen table before walking out forever. Beside the key was a note that read, "*Antonio, I hope she's worth it. Fuck Yourself. Claire.*" He hadn't been home since their big fight two days earlier. It was clear to both of them that she was leaving, and he had stayed away, probably at Stacey's apartment.

Claire leaned her head on the steering wheel willing herself not to tear up again, exhausted from packing and crying since she found out Antonio had moved on without bothering to tell her. She started up the engine and took a deep breath as she pulled out onto the road. Without so much as a glance back, she headed onward to a new chapter in her life.

Claire was ready to get out of Seattle, a city she once had loved. She needed to be away from the rain, the memories, and the people she thought were her friends; friends who had betrayed her by not bothering to mention Antonio's affairs. She didn't know what hurt worse—his cheating or her so-called friends hiding it from her.

As she pulled onto the freeway, her cell phone rang. Hitting the hands-free button, she saw it was her sister, Janet, calling from her home in London. "Hey, sis, just calling to check on you. You okay?"

Claire stifled a sob. "Been better."

"Where are you, hon?"

"I'm on my way to Colorado," Claire replied with a sigh she could not contain.

There was a noticeable pause and then Janet used her softest voice, the one she only used when Claire was doing something she might regret later. "Sweetie, why don't you just come here. You can stay with Ted and me for as long as you need. You should be with people who love you right now."

"I can't. I appreciate the offer more than you know. But I just can't. I need to be on my own for a while. If I can't handle this, I promise, I'll come running to you. Besides, I don't want to go from one rainy city to another. I need some sun." Claire suddenly realized she was shivering and turned on the heat.

"Well, maybe if you need some sun, you and I could meet, say in Spain or Florida even, and have a holiday together? I promise it would be fun! We can make little voodoo dolls of Tony the fuckwit, drink too much, eat too much..." her voice trailed off waiting for a response.

"Thanks, Jan, but I really have to do this. I need to be in Colorado by Friday for the job interview. I told the owner of the ranch that I'd make it there by then. He needs a chef right away."

"You really think you'll be happy living on a dude ranch, cooking for a bunch of rough cowboys and middle-aged yuppies having mid-life crises?" Janet took one last shot to talk her out of it.

Claire dug in her heels, not wanting to be pushed. "That's kind of a snotty way of thinking, Janet. The guy is trying to change the image of his ranch; he wants to have the upscale cuisine that these wealthy clients expect. He wants to turn the cookhouse into a proper restaurant. It'll be a chance for me to run my own show, choose the menu, and help redesign the kitchen. It's what I've always wanted to do, and it gets me the hell out of Seattle where I have to see Fuckwit's face on billboards everywhere I go. Okay? So, can you just be excited for me, please?" She didn't have patience for anyone who doubted her right now, even if it *was* her big sister. She was too busy doubting herself.

"You're right. I'm sorry. I am excited for you. Promise me one thing—you'll sleep with the first sexy cowboy you see and fill me in on all the glorious details."

Claire managed a laugh. "Okay, deal. Now I better pay attention to where I'm going. I'll text when I can to let you know where I am."

"You'd better, or I'll have the state troopers out looking for you. Bye, sweetie! Love you! Be safe!"

"Love you. Bye."

Claire drove on for thirteen hours, well into the night, stopping twice for gas and to stretch her legs. She grabbed some coffee and fast food, which she barely picked at. She went from crying to being terrified to feeling excited at least twice an hour.

When she really thought about it, her relationship with Antonio had been bad for much longer than it had been good. He *had* been excellent at courting her and making her feel beautiful and special. They had a whirlwind romance, and after only four months, he took her to the Mayan Riviera and asked her to move in with him. She didn't hesitate for a second with her answer. Looking back now, she could see *that* was the moment when he lost interest in her. The chase was over, and for Tony, that was the best part. He quickly downgraded her from sexy girlfriend to more of a motherly figure. He beamed at her when she cooked for him or when the laundry was done, but he had stopped wanting to be romantic, go out together, and eventually even making love had become rare. He was always too tired from his work as a realtor or from going to the gym. When they did go out, he was flirty with the waitresses and gazed lustfully at other women. At first, she would argue with him about it, but eventually she gave up. He would say things like, "Who cares where I get my appetite, as long as I eat at home?" or "I'm with you, but that doesn't make me blind. I can't help but look. I'm a man, we're very visual."

Her mind drifted to their last fight for the thousandth time in two days. They were standing in the kitchen and Antonio was leaning against the counter, his keys in hand, ready to run. Claire was screaming at him and crying. When she had finally exhausted herself, she stopped and stared at him for a long minute and asked, "Why?" in a quiet voice.

"I don't know. She was there, she's young, and she really gets me, and I thought, 'Tony, this may be your last chance to get a girl so young.' And I went for it. YOLO, right?"

"YOLO? YOLO. That's your reason? You Only Live Once," she said incredulously. "Wow, all this time I thought you were one of the good ones, and it turns out you're not only a cheater, but a complete asshole as well."

"Screw you, Claire. You asked, so I told you the truth." With that he stomped over to the door and out of her life forever.

*If he's a complete idiot, what does that make me for not seeing it?* She thought as she drove on.

"Okay, Claire, make a list of all the things you hate about Tony," she said out loud to herself as she popped some trail mix into her mouth. "Then forget he ever existed."

She drew a deep breath, then started her list:

“Number one: The way he primps himself before going anywhere. He spends more time plucking, shaving, and fixing his hair than I do. NOT sexy.

Number two: His wandering eye. Asshole.

Number three: His wandering dick. He's more than an asshole. He's the devil.

Number four: How he belittles my appearance with suggestions that I spend more time at the gym and less time tasting my own cooking. Yeah, that one alone should have tipped me off that he was the devil.

Number five: His little comments about my clothing choices. 'Are you *really* going to wear that? We are *supposed to be* dressed up.' Prick.

Number six: His wandering dick. That deserves to make the list twice.

Number seven: How he replaced me with a twenty-two-year-old moron with the body of a fifteen-year-old boy. Have fun with that, dickhead.

Number eight: How he always makes irritating and horrible suggestions when I'm working on a new recipe. He's a realtor for god's sake, not a chef. He doesn't even know saffron from cilantro but he acts like he's the world's authority on the subject.

Number nine: How he NEVER helps out around the house. He leaves his shit all over the place, never once in four years picking up his clothes off the floor. He waits me out knowing it'll get to me, so I end up doing it for him. When I complain, he makes the same joke every time about the maid coming on Friday. Good one.

Number ten: How he never agrees to go visit my sister and her husband in London. He always has some lame-ass excuse, but is *certainly* ready and available to go on golf trips with his buddies. Son of a bitch.

Number eleven: How I feel around him. I always feel a bit nervous, as though I am constantly searching for his approval. I can never be myself and never dare to show my sense

of humor because to Tony "funny girls are not sexy." Yup, I'm *glad* to be rid of that shithead."

The more she thought about it, the more she realized she was a fool not to see years ago that he was bad for her. For four years, she had tried so hard to make it work, thinking that if she gave it time and enough effort, things would get back to how they felt at the beginning. She hadn't realized that it was an impossible task since she was the only one engaged in that fantasy.

Her thoughts wandered to her own parents' marriage when they were still alive. It was a world apart from her relationship with Fuckwit, they were true partners. As a teenager, she was always embarrassed at how in love they were with each other. Her sister, Janet, and her husband, Ted, were happy, too. They met in high school and had been together ever since. They frequently went out on dates and took romantic trips together. They laughed easily and finished each other's sentences. They just seemed to *get* each other.

*Why can't I find that? What is wrong with me?* She wondered.

She stopped at a Super 8 along the interstate, so tired she wasn't sure if she was in Idaho or Utah. By the time she checked in and sluggishly dragged herself to the room, it was after midnight. She had a long hot shower, ate a few handfuls of trail mix, and collapsed into bed.

## Chapter 2

Claire woke eight hours later, having had a solid night's sleep for the first time since discovering Antonio was cheating.

"Shit! Shit! Shit!" She should have been on the road two hours ago. She hastily brushed her teeth, threw her things in her bag, ran down to the lobby to check out, and grabbed a complimentary coffee before getting back on the road.

An hour into the drive, she was shocked to realize that she hadn't thought about Antonio once since waking. Of course, it helped knowing that there was no way she would run into him or any reminders of him for that matter. She could leave him behind, but would she ever shed that feeling of humiliation and self-doubt that comes with being cheated on? Those nagging questions—*Am I not sexy enough? Am I not smart enough, pretty enough, interesting enough to keep a man?*—occupied her thoughts. Her sister had tried, unsuccessfully, to reassure her that it was not her at all, but purely selfishness on Fuckwit's part. But Janet had to say that. She was her big sister.

At thirty-one, Claire felt old and used up. She had been traded in for a twenty-two-year-old hostess whom she herself had hired to work at the restaurant a year earlier. The owner had tasked Claire with finding a sexy hostess to attract high paying clientele, as it turned out she also managed to attract Antonio. Claire's mind wandered back to the moment she found out. She had called the restaurant from home to make a schedule change, and Stacey, the perky little hostess, picked up thinking it was Antonio. "Hey, Tony, did Fatty leave already? You calling to talk dirty to me?"

There was a pause on the line and then Claire spoke up. "No, Stacey, it's me, Fatty. Why the hell would Tony be calling to talk dirty to you?" Stacey, the cowardly bimbo, hung up.

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As Claire drove on through Denver, there wasn't a cloud in the sky. The sun shone brightly, bringing her a sense of renewal. Each mile took her farther from her hurtful past and toward an unknown future. Her heart pounded as she took in the scenery of the rugged Rocky Mountains to her right and the expansive plains to her left. This was a place like nowhere she had ever been, and the beautiful, unfamiliar scenery brought with it both a sense of exhilaration and a nervous knot in her stomach. She could hardly believe she was really doing this. Up until now, she had lived a safe, mundane existence, and here she was about to completely change her life. Colorado Springs seemed like just the place to do it. When she saw the job posting, something about it just felt right to her about it. A ranch close to the mountains seemed like a wonderful place to breathe again and get her feet under her after what had happened. No reminders. No connections. No humiliation. Just sunshine and fresh air to soothe her bruised ego and help her find her worth again.

Claire finally pulled up to the ranch at 4:30 p.m.; her eyes were burning and her body was sore and sweaty from the long drive. She shut off the car and took a moment to check herself in the mirror. She knew she didn't exactly look put-together. Although it probably didn't matter as much out here in Colorado as it would in Seattle, she hated the thought of making a bad first

impression. She pulled out a tube of her favorite lip gloss and tried to make a few minor improvements. She managed to find a comb and an elastic band in her purse and quickly threw her hair up into a ponytail. She took a deep breath and stepped out of the car, with her heart in her throat, trying to convince herself that she was ready to make a fresh start.

Cole Mitchell stood near the barn door watching as the woman pulled in and parked her car. He figured she must be the new chef that he had been expecting that afternoon. He was caught off guard when he realized he found something sensual about watching her in a private moment as she applied her lipstick and tied up her hair. He had yet to see her face up close, but he was somehow drawn to her already. As she got out of the car and stretched, he strode over to her and welcomed her with a warm smile.

Claire watched a man who looked to be about her age, early thirties maybe, and had on jeans, a fitted white t-shirt and a straw cowboy hat walk toward her. His gait was confident and self-assured, not in a hurry but not slow either. *Fuck me. There really are hot cowboys here*, she thought.

When he reached her, their eyes locked. Claire couldn't look away even though she knew she should. He was tall, so she had to tilt her head up to look at his face. It was all she could do to keep her jaw from dropping as she took in the sight of his gorgeous hazel eyes, his kissable mouth, his chiselled features and his short, sandy blond hair poking out from under his hat.

"You must be Claire. I'm Cole Mitchell. We spoke on the phone." His voice was just as sexy in person as it had been when they spoke a few days earlier.

"I am. Nice to meet you," she said, extending her hand. His handshake was firm, and he held the embrace maybe a second too long. She could feel that he had strong hands from working hard and was slightly shocked at herself when she realized she was imagining how the rest of his body would match. As she glanced down at the veins bulging in his forearm, she could feel her face heating up with thoughts she had no business thinking.

A large gray and white sheep dog came running up beside Cole, wagging his tail to greet her. He looked up at Claire and gave her a single bark as if to say hello.

"This is Otis. He loves everyone as long as I like them." Otis sat down beside Cole, panting from the heat.

Claire looked down at the dog. "Hi, Otis."

As if on cue, the dog walked over and nudged her hand in hopes of being petted. She grinned as she crouched down to comply with his request. "Aren't you a sweetheart?"

Cole watched her with an appreciative smile. "How was the drive?"

"It was long but good. It was a nice chance to see the country," Claire answered as she stood up again.

"You must be beat. I was thinking we could do the interview tomorrow if that's okay with you. I had something come up at the last minute that I can't get out of anyway, and I need to leave for a few hours," Cole replied, looking apologetic.

"That would actually be a relief for me. I could use a good night's rest to be at my best for the interview."

"Great. I'll show you to your cabin then. I can help you carry some of your things before I go. It's a bit of a hike to the staff quarters from here."

Claire opened the hatch of her car and a garbage bag full of clothes tumbled out. Cole caught it before it hit the ground, but not before a pair of lacy pink panties fell out. He caught those with his other hand and gingerly handed them back to her with a sexy little grin. "You sure know how to make a first impression."

Claire's face instantly burned with embarrassment. She quickly took the panties from him and shoved them into the pocket of her jeans. "Those aren't mine. I have no idea how they got in there," she said in mock denial.

Cole laughed at her reaction. He had a warm, deep laugh that made her heart skip a beat when she heard it.

Taking the garbage bag full of clothes along with a large suitcase, Cole waited while Claire grabbed her overnight bag, purse, and another small suitcase. As they walked down the paved path by the restaurant and lodge, it was her first chance to really take in her new surroundings, and she looked around in awe. Cole watched her as she gasped a little at the sight of the large lake. It was surrounded by tall grasses that led up the mountains on the other side of the water. "It's beautiful here," she said with quiet reverence.

Down the path they passed by a handful of two-storey guest cabins. They continued walking along until they reached the staff lodging—much smaller one-storey versions of the guest cabins. They stopped at the last in the row, and Cole put her bags down on the front porch and fished a key out of his pocket.

"This one's yours," he said, unlocking the door. "It's pretty small, but I think it has everything you need if you decide to stay. Let me know if there's anything missing."

"I'm sure it'll be just fine. The view alone is more than enough."

He carried her bags inside and set them down on the floor in the small open-spaced sitting-room and kitchen before handing her the key. They walked out together back down the path to the parking area.

"My brother, Ben, and his wife, Alicia, are making supper for everyone tonight in the restaurant. Nothing fancy, but I hope you'll join them. Dinner will be ready in about an hour."

Just then, two young ranch hands appeared at the door to the barn. Both were tanned and lean wearing well-worn cowboy hats. Cole called to them, "Trey, Dustin, this is Miss Claire. She'll be our new chef."

As the two walked over, Cole watched them, saying, "Trey and Dustin are my little cousins. They're working here until they decide to get off their butts and go to college."

"Not gonna happen, Cole. We were born to be cowboys," called Trey, the taller of the two. Both men tipped their hats at Claire and said hello. Claire liked them immediately.

"I have to run over to O'Reilly's. I'd like you two to help Miss Claire bring the rest of her things to her cabin, and then you're done for the day, all right?" Even though he asked if it was all right, there was no doubt in anyone's mind that it was an order, not a request.

Both young men headed towards her car. "Sure thing, boss," Dustin replied, giving Claire a little wink.

Cole turned back to Claire. "I should be back in a few hours. Ben and Alicia are in the restaurant if you need anything. Make sure you go get something to eat in a little while. Sorry again that I have to go."

"Please don't worry about me. I'll find my way around. Thank you, though," she said, realizing that she had forgotten how good it felt to have someone show concern for her.

Cole climbed in a big white Chevy pickup truck, and Otis jumped in beside him. He gave her a little nod before pulling out with a horse trailer in tow. Claire just stood there and watched the truck pull out of the yard, forgetting completely that Dustin and Trey were waiting to unload her things.

"Sorry," she said as she tried to shake the feeling of attraction she had for her new boss. "I'm a bit tired from the drive." She quickly unlocked the doors and started unloading the rest of her things from the backseat.

"No worries," Trey said, taking a couple of large garbage bags from her, both stuffed full of clothes.

She handed two more bags full of shoes and boots to Dustin. He looked at the bags with a surprised expression. "How many feet do you have anyway?" he joked.

Claire gave him a little laugh. "Just the two, but they are very spoiled."

She picked up a backpack and another couple of bags, and the trio headed in the direction of her cabin. Claire thought it couldn't hurt to get a little background info in preparation for her interview the next day, even though the way he had introduced her made it sound like she had the job already. "So, what's it like to work here?"

Dustin replied first. "Well, if you work here, you work hard, but Cole and Ben are really good to their people, too. They are very fair. The only things they won't tolerate are laziness and being rude to the guests."

Claire felt relief sweep over her. "Well, I don't think I'll have a problem with those rules."

After the bags were dropped at her cabin, Claire thanked the guys and followed them out onto the small porch. Trey glanced back at her as they started down the path. "Now, don't get all caught up organizing your shoes and miss supper! Alicia's making her famous lasagne."

Claire laughed. "I'll try not to!" Claire grinned a little to herself, relieved to have received such a warm welcome as she watched them stroll away.

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As Cole drove toward the Miller Ranch in the late day sun, he should have been thinking of the horse he was about to pick up. He should have been trying to figure out how they were going to load her up, given the fact that no one at the Miller's had even managed to get within ten feet of her since they brought her home from the auction. Once he figured that out, he should have been thinking about how he was going to train her for them. Instead his mind kept bringing him back to that pretty new chef that had just arrived. Claire Hatley. There was just something about her that he couldn't shake now as he pulled onto the narrow dirt road.

He thought of her voice, sultry even though that wasn't at all what she had been trying to project and her embarrassed laugh when her panties spilled out of her bag. It was a pleasing sound. He thought about her panties. They were lacy and tiny. His mind wandered to what those might look like on that curvy body of hers. *No way, Cole, you better shut that down. No matter how pretty she is or how good she'd look in those panties, she'd still be your chef in the morning. And that would be a problem you don't need right now.*

## Chapter 3

Claire dropped onto the couch staring at all her bags—the sum total of all of her belongings sat in front of her in disarray. Too overwhelmed to face the pile right then, she walked over to the fridge to see if there was anything in it. She was surprised to find it stocked with milk, a dozen eggs, cheese, some fruit, spinach, a loaf of bread, and a six pack of beer. Claire grabbed a cold beer, cracked it open, and stood at the kitchen window staring at the view of the lake in the late day sun. It shimmered, a deep blue color, with the Rockies acting as a majestic backdrop.

A feeling of excitement passed over her when she thought about all the possibilities of this place. And if she was honest with herself, when she thought about her new boss as well. He was sexy as hell and seemed so thoughtful, too. Her mind went over every detail of what she knew about him so far. On the phone, Cole had told her that he and his brother had taken over the family ranch a couple of years earlier. From their conversation, she had gotten the sense that he was ambitious but also kind. Seeing him with his cousins, she could see he had an air of calm authority in addition to that warm smile.

Soon, Claire's mind couldn't help but wander to how clean he smelled, as though he just stepped out of the shower in an Old Spice ad. His freshly shaved face, the touch of his hand as he shook hers, his sculpted body carrying her heavy luggage with ease. Her cheeks were suddenly flushed as she remembered the panties she had stuffed in her pocket. She pulled them out with a little laugh of embarrassment and tossed them on her suitcase. Digging around in her purse, Claire grabbed her cell phone and texted Janet to let her know she had arrived safely. After she hung up, she realized her stomach was growling. She hadn't eaten more than a few bites in days. She freshened up quickly, then slipping into her flip-flops, Claire walked over to the restaurant.

As soon as she opened the door, she instantly fell in love with the layout of the place; it was both rustic and luxurious at the same time. The windows on the back wall reached up to a peak in the center interrupted only by a large stone fireplace in the middle. The tables were cherry wood and each one had a candle in a glass jar placed as a simple, yet elegant centerpiece. Wrought iron chandeliers lit the seating area with a lovely warm glow. Near the fireplace, groups of brown leather couches and armchairs were arranged in cozy sitting areas, perfect for relaxing after a long day on the ranch. The walls were lined with black and white framed photos of the ranch over the years. Claire slowly walked along studying each one. She stopped at a picture of two boys sitting on a dock in their swim trunks and wondered if it was Cole and his brother.

A voice broke her concentration. "You must be Claire." A tall, willowy woman stood in the doorway to the kitchen smiling in her direction. "I'm Alicia, Ben's wife. I imagine you're starving."

"You're right on both counts. Nice to meet you, Alicia."

"Have a seat. What can I get you to drink?"

"I could use some water, thank you," Claire said as she chose a table near the window.

A minute later, Alicia came back with a plate of Caesar salad and a glass of water. "I thought you might like a salad to start with. I made lasagne, but I wasn't sure if you are a vegetarian, so I thought I'd better ask before I brought it out."

"That sounds lovely, thank you. I can serve myself, though. I feel silly sitting here." Claire gave Alicia an embarrassed look.

"No, tonight you are our guest. You must be exhausted after your long drive. I just feel funny serving a real chef my poor attempt at a meal."

"Oh, no, please don't be nervous. I'm sure I'll love it," Claire replied, giving her a reassuring smile. "Dustin told me it is your famous lasagne."

Alicia turned her back toward the kitchen as she called out, "Yeah, but famous for what?"

She came back carrying two plates piled high with lasagne, followed by a tall man in jeans in a ball cap. He bore a striking resemblance to Cole except for his nose, which was slightly crooked as though it had been broken more than once. He greeted Claire, introducing himself as Ben, Cole's big brother.

"Do you mind if we join you?" Alicia asked.

"I'd love it. I've had only my thoughts for company the last few days, and I can tell you the conversations aren't always worth having." Claire gestured for them to sit down.

Claire felt immediately comfortable with the couple. They were very friendly and asked her a few questions about herself, but not so many that she felt as though she was being interrogated. They talked about the ranch and explained that it had been in the family for over a hundred years. Ben explained that their parents had decided to hand the ranch over last year, choosing to travel around the world while they still could.

It was obvious from watching them that Ben and Alicia were very much in love. Claire felt a little stab of envy. She never felt as in tune with Antonio as these two seemed. They laughed easily and seemed enthralled when the other would talk. At one point, Alicia reached up with her napkin and wiped a tiny bit of food off Ben's cheek. Claire wondered if she would ever feel this at ease with a man. She had always felt a bit nervous around Antonio, as though she couldn't really be herself. They didn't share a sense of humor, and most of her jokes landed with a thud around him. She knew she never quite measured up to his expectations of what his girlfriend should be. She wasn't skinny enough for him and didn't have the proper breeding he wanted in a trophy wife.

As they finished eating, Claire stood up to clear the table. Ben gently took her plate from her hand. "We've got it, Claire. You're our guest tonight."

"Thank you. I feel bad not helping, though," Claire said.

"Don't even think about it," Alicia said. "Now, you must have some unpacking to do, or if you like, there is a swimming pool and a hot tub behind the lodge. I know I always want to soak after a long drive."

"There is? Really? I would love that!" Claire exclaimed with delight. "I think I will take a few minutes to get settled in and then go for a dip. Thanks again."

They said their good nights, and then Claire sauntered lazily back to her cabin, breathing in the fresh mountain air and listening to the evening sounds of the frogs croaking. She was surprised to realize how peaceful she was feeling, even though she was in a completely new place surrounded by strangers.

She unpacked her toiletries and searched her suitcases for her swimsuit. It was a royal blue two piece that brought out the color of her eyes. She had worn it on a trip to Mexico with Antonio four years earlier and had felt so beautiful in it then. It was back at a time when he was still interested in taking her on trips and in making love to her. She tried to shake the thought as she undressed and put it on, pulling on a black skirt and a gray t-shirt for the walk down to the pool.

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