

## Full Speed

### Prologue

Jamie Swift paced the parking lot of Hank's Pump-n-Pay as she tried to decide her next move. She was mad enough to chew a barbed-wire fence, and her anger had a name to it: Max Holt. Thanks to Max Holt.

Jamie needed help. She needed someone to talk to, and she needed a ride.

She spied the phone booth and hurried toward it. Who to call? It was after midnight. People with any kind of sense were usually home in bed at this hour. She had to calm down. She sucked in three deep breaths and was immediately hit with a wave of dizziness. She grasped the metal counter beneath the telephone. It would be her luck to hyperventilate right here in the parking lot, fall on her face, and be scarred for life. Yeesh.

Jamie spied the sticker on the pay telephone that read: desperate for help? call lenda- hand hotline. She leaned closer and read the small print: We're Here for You Twentyfour Hours a Day.

Desperate, the advertisement read. That was her all right. Desperate with a capital D. Plus, she was losing her mind. Or what was left of it after two weeks of dodging bullets from a drive-by shooting, almost getting blown to smithereens by a car bomb, and falling into a river and into the path of a hungry alligator. Hell's bells, she was lucky to be alive.

Jamie plunked two quarters into the pay phone. Her hand trembled. The fact it had started raining didn't even faze her. After what she'd been through, that was small potatoes.

Big potatoes was being stranded in a Podunk town she'd never heard of in the middle of the night, with her best friend more than two hours away. Big potatoes was being ogled by a gas station attendant whose oil-stained T-shirt stretched tight across a belly that had obviously sucked down a record number of Budweisers. She glanced his way. Even from a distance he looked dumb as cow dung. Probably had a tattoo on his butt that read This Side Down just in case he forgot. He looked at her like he hadn't seen a woman since inside plumbing. Like the kind of man people wouldn't let near their barnyard animals.

She dialed the number.

"Lend-a-Hand Hotline, this is Tanisha."

"Oh, thank God," Jamie said, glad to hear another voice. "I'm, uh..." She glanced down at the ad once more. "I'm desperate."

"Could you hold, please?"

There was a click. Jamie blinked. And waited. She would not cry. She was made of tougher stuff than that. Tough as nails, that's what she was. She glanced toward the man inside the gas station, not more than fifty feet away. Yeah, he really did look kind of goofy. Like maybe there were a couple of orangutans hanging from his family tree. Like maybe his parents had been first cousins. Jamie stared right back at him. Finally, he looked away.

"Hello?" The woman named Tanisha was back.

"Yes. My name is Jamie, and I'm in trouble."

"Are you pregnant and scared and suffering feelings of isolation and helplessness? Afraid of telling your parents?"

Jamie blinked. "No."

"Are you depressed?"

"Well, I..."

"Are you having trouble sleeping at night or sleeping too much? Experiencing appetite changes, feelings of sadness or doom, unable to get up in the morning?" The woman paused, drew in breath, and went on in rapid-fire succession. "Have you lost interest in people, places, or things that used to bring you pleasure? Do you enjoy sex?"

"Sex?"

Huge sigh. "Girl, you got to work with me, 'cause I've got a possible jumper on the other line and I'm the only one working the phones tonight."

"I've never done this sort of thing before," Jamie confessed.

"Me, neither. It's my first night."

Jamie slapped her open palm against her forehead. A rookie.

"Listen up. Does your problem have something to do with a man?" Tanisha said the word as though it weren't fit to be used in polite company. "'Cause I know about men, honey."

"Sort of."

"Sister, you hold right there while I try to talk this idiot off the roof of his house. If he don't get off this time, I'm going over there personally and push the SOB."

Another click. Jamie wondered if she'd made a mistake by calling. Maybe she wasn't as desperate as she thought; she certainly hadn't considered diving off a rooftop. That had to be a

good sign. The man in the gas station had settled down with a magazine, and the rain had slacked off. Things were looking up.

Tanisha picked up. "OK, I'm all ears."

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". . . And so there I was, running my little newspaper in Beaumont, South Carolina, minding my own business. . . ." Jamie paused. "Did I tell you that I own the newspaper? My daddy left it to me when he died. It has been in my family for years."

Silence.

"Hello? Tanisha? Are you there?"

The woman on the other end yawned. "Do you think we could cut to the chase, Jamie? I don't need your life history, and to tell you the truth, my attention span isn't that great. I think I have ADHD."

"Oh." Jamie realized she had been talking for some time, but she'd assumed Tanisha would need background information if she was going to help. "OK, so the next thing I knew, this gazillionaire, Maximillian Holt, blew into my life like a bad wind and turned it upside down. See, I need balance and predictability. Max is not a predictable person."

"So what's the problem? Were you born without feet so that you couldn't walk away?"

"It wasn't as simple as that," Jamie replied. "Max is my silent partner. He kept my newspaper from going bankrupt."

"OK, so this is a business problem."

"No." Jamie glanced toward the gas station. The man inside was sleeping, head thrown back, slack-jawed. Maybe he was harmless after all. She went back to her conversation. "Max and I were a team. Not only were we trying to investigate corruption in my town; somebody hired a couple of hit men to kill Max. And guess who found herself right in the middle of it? The gunfire shattered the windows at my newspaper office. If Max hadn't pushed me down on the floor, I wouldn't be talking to you right now."

"Wait a minute; what's with this hit men stuff?" Tanisha asked.

"We think this big-time preacher from Sweet Pea, Tennessee, ordered the hit. He has mob connections. He wanted to buy Max's TV network, but he couldn't scrape the money together fast enough. When Max sold it to another person, someone was mad enough to hire a hit."

"Girl, what'choo mean coming to me with hit men shit? Am I going to lose my kneecaps for hearing this?"

"Nobody knows I called you."

"Listen to me," Tanisha said. "This is police business. I'm going to hang up now."

"Hey, I put fifty cents into the phone. Don't I get some advice? Plus, I was hoping you could tell me where I could get a ride."

"I am not being paid enough to handle mob-related problems. I have a family: a husband, three kids, six brothers, and two sisters. I have cousins, aunts and uncles, grandparents. I have three cats and a beagle. I've got more relatives than the Brady Bunch and the Waltons put together. I can't just disappear into one of those witness protection programs, you get my drift?" The woman on the other end of the line gave a huge sigh. "Just answer me this: Where is Max now?"

"He dumped me."

"Excuse me!"

"We were on our way to Tennessee, you know, to go look for this minister and his mob friends. Max waited until we got two hours out of Beaumont, and he just stopped the car in the middle of the road and turned around. Said he was taking me home. Said I would, quote, just be in the way, unquote." She paused. "After all we'd been through together, I lost my temper. I made him stop the car. We had this huge fight on the side of the road, and, well . . ." Jamie paused as she recalled their argument. "It was bad."

"So what did you do?"

"Fortunately, it happened close to a gas station, so I walked over."

"And he just drove off and left you?"

"Actually, he came back for me, but I refused to get in." Jamie paused. "Maybe I overreacted."

"You think?"

"I'm better off without him, Tanisha. All I've ever wanted was to live a normal life. Max is not normal."

"Girl, there ain't no such thing as normal."

Jamie thought of Phillip, the man she'd almost married because he'd seemed so safe and normal. Yet his mother had been the ringleader of the corruption in Beaumont. "You may have something there, Tanisha."

"And you don't want to go nosin' around some crazy preacher with mob friends. Besides, it sounds like you and Max are done."

Jamie didn't answer.

"Hello?"

"It wasn't all about Max," Jamie said. "I was hoping to land a story for my newspaper. I could just taste the headlines, Tanisha: Renowned Evangelist Hires Hit Men to Take Out Millionaire Tycoon. This story could have given me my big break. Not only would it have sold newspapers; it probably would have been picked up by the Associated Press. I'll bet Newsweek or Time magazine would have bought it. This is the kind of story I have always wanted to write."

"Look, you asked for my advice and I gave it to you."

"You're saying I should walk away from my big story and let Max have the final say?" She was suddenly indignant. "I don't think so. I have always made my own decisions."

"Hey, it's not like I'm charging you for this, you know. You want to end up buried beneath a concrete building, "go for it. She sniffed as though she were truly peeved. "Besides, I think you had your mind all made up long before you called me."

Jamie stood there for a moment, letting the words sink in. "You're right, Tanisha. I just needed to talk it out. To hell with Max. I'm going to Sweet Pea, Tennessee, whether he likes it or not. Besides, I got something he doesn't have."

"And that would be?"

"I'm a woman, that's what. And from the information we've already gotten on the man, it seems this preacher likes women. They're his weakness. I'm going to bait him, Tanisha. I'll have him eating out of my hand so fast he won't know what hit him, and when I get finished I'll have the story of my life."

"What about Max?"

"What about him?" Jamie hung up, a satisfied smile on her face.

## Chapter One

Jamie's excitement about going to Tennessee was short-lived. How the heck was she going to get there without a car? Her vintage Mustang was in the shop back in Beaumont, South Carolina, riddled with bullet holes.

She needed a plan.

She needed wheels.

The rain started to fall once more. What she really needed at the moment was either a really big umbrella or a place to stay for the night.

Jamie glanced at the sign on the road that read: Whittville: 2 Miles. That didn't tell her much; she'd never heard of the town.

She watched a tow truck turn in to the gas station and pull up beside one of the gas pumps. A big man in navy overalls climbed out and began pumping gas. He glanced at her, politely tipped his cap, and nodded, as though it were an everyday occurrence to find a woman pacing the parking lot of a run-down gas station at this hour.

Hmm. Maybe he could give her a ride.

Jamie approached him. He looked harmless enough. He was middle-aged and wore a wedding ring. His overalls were snug; he looked well fed. Probably had a wife at home who spent a lot of time in the kitchen. They probably ate their dinner on those cute little folding tray tables in front of the TV set while sitting in matching recliners. Their relationship was probably simple and uncomplicated.

The man caught her staring. "Good evening, ma'am."

The name Buford Noll had been stitched on a little patch sewn to his overalls. Yep, he looked respectable enough.

"Good evening to you, Mr. Noll," Jamie said, trying to sound upbeat. "I was wondering if you could give me a lift into town. I'll pay you."

"Well, sure. Any place in particular?"

"I need to find a nice, inexpensive motel for the night."

"Oh, well." He rubbed his jaw. "The one in Whittville is pretty run-down. Probably have to go all the way into Jessup."

"How far is that?"

"'Bout twelve miles."

"Like I said, I'll pay you."

"Oh, you don't have to do that. I'm headed that way, but I got to make a quick stop first."

Jamie was relieved. "Thank you."

"You can go ahead and climb on in, Miss . . ."

"Just call me Jamie." She hurried around to the passenger's side. Things were definitely beginning to look up.

Parked in the shadows across the street, Max Holt watched Jamie climb into the tow truck. She had not seen him return; she had been talking on the telephone.

"What's she doing now?" a voice asked from the dashboard.

"Looks like she just found a ride home."

"Man, you really screwed up big-time."

Max stared at the blinking lights on the front of the dash. A former NASA scientist had designed his car, a Porsche look-alike, only bigger, with a virtually indestructible titanium exterior. The car held state-of-the-art equipment, which ranged from a global positioning satellite system to a full videoconferencing suite and a high-powered computer that ran it all. Max had personally created artificial intelligence with voice recognition technology that would not be available for years to come.

His invention, which he called Muffin, had a Marilyn Monroe voice and "she" could literally think for herself. Muffin was stubborn and mouthy and, as ludicrous as it sounded, capable of emotion. She was constantly taking in data, but unlike other computers, she formed opinions and made judgment calls. And thanks to his sister, Deedee, who was in the throes of menopause and had complained to Muffin of her symptoms, Muffin had processed the information and was now suffering the same proveness.

Muffin, too, was going through menopause. She had hot flashes, mood swings, and she threatened to shut down her own hard drive permanently each time Max crossed her. Currently she was having an on-again-off-again on-line romance with a laptop computer at MIT. She was almost more than Max could handle. To say that he had created a monster was an understatement.

"What are you going to do now, big shot?" Muffin asked. "Mr. Love-'em-and-leave-'em?" she added, never one to mince words.

"That's not the way it was between Jamie and me."

"Yeah, and that's what really has you pissed. I mean, who would have thought it? There's actually a woman out there who doesn't think you're the best thing since on-line trading."

Max tightened his grip on the steering wheel as he watched the tow truck pull away from the parking lot.

"I was trying to protect her. This job is going to be dangerous. The good Reverend Harlan Rawlins and his mob pals are probably looking for me as we speak."

"But that's not what you told her, was it? You told her she would only get in your way."

"That's how you deal with a woman like Jamie. If I had told her I was afraid for her she wouldn't have listened."

"So you decided to hurt her feelings instead. Great idea, Max. You shouldn't have agreed to let her come in the first place."

"You're the one who insisted I bring her."

"You never listen to me. Besides, I wouldn't have advised you to do it had I known you would dump her halfway to Tennessee."

"It's better this way," Max said. "I need to think clearly, and I can't do it if Jamie's around."

"Look, I don't have time to take on your personal problems, OK. My job is to keep you out of trouble and make you look good by providing you with any and all information you might need."

"Thank you."

"You still screwed up."

Max shook his head as he started his engine and put the car into gear. It shot off, leaving a dust cloud in its wake.

Ten minutes after Jamie had climbed into the tow truck, she found herself on a dirt road in a remote area. The truck's headlights provided the only light. "How much farther?" she asked.

"We should be coming up on it soon," Buford said. "We're looking for a pink-and-white house trailer with a brand-new SUV parked in front of it."

The shabby-looking mobile home appeared right after the next bend. A white Ford Explorer was parked out front. "Nice wheels," she said. "Looks like it just rolled off the show- FULL SPEED 17 room floor. Don't tell me the owner is already having mechanical problems."

Buford grunted. "The new owner is having problems making payments. That's where I come in." He turned into the driveway.

"What do you mean?"

"It's being repossessed. I'm here to pick it up. Thank goodness there are no lights on; that's means he's asleep. Makes my job a whole lot easier." He put the truck into reverse and backed toward the SUV.

Jamie gaped. "You're taking this person's car?"

"He hasn't made a payment in three months. I'm just doing my job." He put the truck into neutral, set the emergency brake, left the motor running. "Better lock your door. Some people don't cotton to having their vehicles towed off like this."

"Wait a minute," Jamie said. "You said you had to make a quick stop. To me a quick stop is hitting a McDonald's drive-through window or maybe grabbing a cup of coffee to go at the Waffle House. You never mentioned repo'ing somebody's vehicle."

"Won't take me long," Buford said, climbing from the truck.

"Oh, no." Jamie twisted around in her seat and watched Buford unwind a cable and attach a massive hook to the underside of the SUV. He hit a switch, and a motor churned to life. The vehicle climbed upward.

Suddenly a light flashed on inside the trailer. Jamie scrambled across the seat and leaned out the driver's window. "Someone's up," she said.

Buford glanced toward the mobile home. "Oh, shit."

Suddenly the trailer door was flung open and Jamie caught the silhouette of a man holding a shotgun. He fired into the air. Jamie ducked. Buford dived beneath the truck.

"Get away from my car!" the man shouted.

"You done missed three payments, mister!" Buford called out loudly. "I've been hired to tow it in! You cause trouble and I'm calling the cops!"

The man fired again. A bullet pinged off the side of Buford's truck. "Holy hell!" Jamie cried, and hit the floor.

"Stay down!" Buford told her. "They're always upset at first."

Jamie closed her eyes. It was happening all over again. For some reason that she couldn't fathom, people insisted on shooting at her.

"What are we supposed to do in the meantime?" she replied loudly.

Buford didn't hesitate. "I reckon we wait."

The smell of freshly cut lumber greeted Max as he stepped inside the cabin with his bag. No surprise there; the cabin had been renovated and redecorated for his use. Even so, the construction crew had kept the antique heart pine floors intact, knowing Max, who was personally doing renovations to his home in Virginia, would appreciate them. The furniture was simple; probably much of it had already been in place. Max was grateful for that as well. The fact that he could afford to build a brand-new cabin with all new furniture and appliances did not mean he preferred it. Simplicity and comfort was more his style.

As usual, his staff had taken care of everything from securing the place to providing groceries. Max looked inside the refrigerator and cabinets and nodded his approval. His people knew his likes and dislikes, right down to the brand of beer and cold cuts he preferred. He checked out the two bedrooms and decided on the loft area. He spent an hour on his cell phone, finalizing his plans. He and Muffin had worked tirelessly once they'd gotten back on the road, but Max was a man who left nothing to chance. He knew what he was facing, knew the dangers.

By morning he would have all the information he needed on Harlan Rawlins, celebrity evangelist. Max hoped Muffin would be able to get information on Harlan's mob connections as well. Max's plan was simple: First, find Rawlins. The hit man who'd tried to kill Max had been linked to Rawlins, and Rawlins was supposedly linked to the mob. Rawlins and his mob friends obviously felt they had a score to settle with Max because they'd lost the bid on his TV network. It would have been the perfect vehicle for Rawlins to spread his word and draw in literally hundreds of thousands of new members. New members meant more money, and owning a TV network would have made the mob more powerful than ever. It was no surprise they were angry; the only question was, How far would they go to get revenge? Max knew he would ultimately have to contact his friends with the FBI, but he needed more information. He needed to know exactly who and what he was up against. Finally, he showered and went to bed. He closed his eyes. He was not a heavy sleeper, and he had long ago adapted to only five or six hours of rest. He could exist on less if necessary, and there had been times in his life he had found it necessary.

This might be one of those times.

It was after 3:00 a.m. when Buford delivered Jamie at the front door of a motel called the Hickory Inn, less than a mile from Jessup. Jamie's back and legs ached, and it was all she could do to reach for her purse. She had crouched on the floorboard for hours before Gunsmoke, as Jamie referred to the gun-toting man in the trailer, had cut the lights and gone to bed.

"I'll have to file a police report," Buford said, "but I'll keep your name out of it." He was apologetic.

Jamie tossed him a weary look. "Well, thanks for an evening I'm not likely to forget. I just hope I never miss a car payment." She climbed from the truck and went inside the motel. The furniture in the small lobby was old, but the place looked and smelled clean. She rang the bell three times before a woman ambled to the counter, the hair on one side of her head mashed flat, her print dress badly wrinkled. The sign on the counter read: Mavis.

"I'd like a room, please," Jamie said.

The woman crossed her arms, glanced at her wristwatch, and shot Jamie a dark look. "Do you happen to know what time it is?"

Jamie was in no mood to argue. "Late?"

"I closed at midnight."

"You forgot to turn your vacancy sign off."

"That's beside the point. No decent woman would check into a room at this hour unless she had monkey business on her mind."

Jamie leaned across the counter. "Mavis, I have not had a good night. I want a room. And don't give me a room on the second floor, because my legs are sore and I am not going to climb those concrete stairs. And inside that room, I want HBO like your sign says, and I want one of those cute little coffeepots, and a soft bed with clean sheets. Now, either you give me a room or I'm going to go out into that parking lot and pitch such a fit that I'll wake up every one of your guests. That's how bad my night has been."

Mavis grunted and slapped a registration form on the counter.

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Max rose at 5:00 a.m. and, once again, checked the security monitor, computer console, and other gadgets at one end of the kitchen table where he would spend much of his time working. Outside cameras were connected to the CPU, and the monitors displayed the road leading to the cabin, as well as the surrounding property. He drank two cups of coffee, read his E-mail, and waited until the sun came up before stepping out of the front door. Electronic eyes and sophisticated motion detectors with image recognition enhancement were attached to trees and fence posts and would catch movement and set off an alarm inside the house. One of Max's employees had come in the day before to set it up, per Max's specifications.

All seemed well as Max started for the garage where he'd locked his car. He punched a series of numbers on a concealed security panel and opened the door. Muffin was waiting for him.

"How'd you sleep?" she asked. "I'll bet you didn't get a minute's rest worrying about Jamie and feeling like the biggest jerk in the world."

Max sighed. "Good morning to you, Muffin."

"See, you even sound tired. Guilt will do that to you. The first thing that goes is your appetite. Then you'll start tossing and turning all night in your bed, unable to forgive yourself for hurting someone's feelings."

"Is this going to take long?"

"Of course you're in denial right now, so you're probably OK. Once you accept the reality of the situation, all hell will break loose. Sleep deprivation, confusion, and disorientation will occur," she added. "You'll stop taking care of yourself, and your health will go to hell. Next thing you know, you've landed in the hospital with a life-threatening illness."

"I take it you're still sore with me?"

"No more than usual."

"Can we get down to business?"

"Fine. I worked all night, but I managed to get the rest of the information you asked for on Harlan Rawlins. Don't ask me how I got it or we'll both go to prison. Have you set up the printer yet?"

"Yeah, everything is up and running."

"OK, it's printing now. As for your schedule, a woman by the name of Karen Callaway will be here shortly to give you your new look, and your retired FBI pal will arrive at nine FULL SPEED 25 o'clock to take your picture and get your new identification in order."

"How long will it take?"

"Max, the guy is bringing his equipment in the trunk of his car. Is that quick enough for you?"

"Good old Paul. What else have you got for me?"

"You and Dave Anderson are now working part-time for Bennett Electric. Dave is bringing by a couple of uniforms later. Tom Bennett, the owner, is cooperating fully." Max was not surprised. He had bailed Bennett Electric Company from near bankruptcy several days ago. It was sheer genius that Max's mergers and acquisitions man had managed to find it so quickly; not only had the partnership been sealed within a matter of hours, but also Max and Muffin had mapped out a business plan for Tom Bennett that promised substantial profits within a year. Tom Bennett was one grateful man, and Dave Anderson, longtime employee of Holt Industries, was a top-notch mechanical and electrical engineer who could literally fill in wherever Max needed him. Dave had already memorized the layout of Rawlins's house and was ready to move on the project.

"What about transportation?" Max asked.

"You and Dave will be sharing one of Bennett's trucks." Muffin didn't sound happy about it.

"I'm sorry I'm going to have to leave you in the garage for a few days, Muf, but my car won't exactly blend with the community."

"That's not the problem."

"I'm listening."

"Why did you call Dave Anderson in on this job? You know how he gets. He can be so obsessive-compulsive at times he makes me crazy."

"Dave is having problems. He and his wife Melinda are divorcing."

"And we need to get involved in that for what reason?"

"Because Dave is my friend, and because he's an electrical genius who could rewire the entire White House in twenty-four hours if he had to. Besides, everybody has one or two quirks."

"OK, whatever. As far as sitting in a cool garage, that sounds good to me."

"Still having hot flashes?"

"If I get any hotter my hard drive is going into meltdown and the car's radiator will spew like a volcano."

Max nodded as though the whole thing made perfect sense. "Speaking of transportation, have you had a chance to check out a red Mustang?"

"I found a guy in New Hampshire who deals strictly with Mustangs. He has a 1964 1/2 red convertible, black interior and top. It's a V-8 with a stick shift. The guy said it looks like it just rolled off the showroom floor, and he should know, because he's one of the top dealers in the country. I checked him out."

"I'd like to see a picture of it."

"You will. I forwarded the scanned photos to you with the rest of the stuff I'm sending to your printer. Am I good, Max, or what?"

"Damn good."

"Oh, and this guy even agreed to deliver the car personally for the right price."

"Then I suggest we pay what he's asking."

"I know what you're thinking, Max. You're thinking Jamie is going to take one look at that Mustang and forgive you. You're thinking she's going to be waiting for you with open arms when you finish up here. You're thinking see-through nighties, edible panties, and hot steamy sex, but I'm here to tell you, it isn't going to happen."

"I'm not saying don't buy the car for her; it's your fault hers was sprayed with bullets to begin with. I know Jamie's got a thing for vintage Mustangs and that she needs transportation, but she's a proud woman and she might take it the wrong way."

"The two of you can think what you want, but my intentions are honorable. Have the guy deliver the car to the newspaper office and tell him to give the keys to Jamie's assistant, Vera Bankhead."