

# UNLEASHED

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FOREVER

NEW YORK BOSTON

# C HAPTER ONE

Cara Medlen felt the growl before she heard it, rumbling against her leg from the dog tensed at her side. She jiggled the leash to break his concentration. “Easy, Casper. You may not realize it yet, but today’s your lucky day.”

He looked up at her with dull eyes, one brown, one blue. A jagged scar creased his face. Ribs and hip bones jutted through his mangy white coat. And, oh boy, did he stink. Cara had yet to meet an ugly boxer, but Casper...well, he had the sort of face that made people cross to the other side of the street.

That same face grabbed at a tender spot in her heart.

“It’s a blessing that Triangle Boxer Rescue can take him,” the woman behind the desk, a volunteer named Helen, said. “Shelter life hasn’t been good for him.”

Cara nodded as she handed the signed paperwork to Helen. “I’ve worked with a lot of dogs like Casper. I’m sure we’ll have him ready for adoption in no time.”

But the warning she’d received from her homeowners’ association over the summer weighed heavily on her mind: Keep her foster dogs in line or face disciplinary action by the board.

The door to the kennels opened, allowing raucous barking to spill into the lobby. Casper peered around her and fixed his gaze on the man who'd come through the door. His ears flattened, and the hair raised along his spine.

Yep, this dog was trouble all right.

Cara sidestepped to block his view. "Thanks, Helen. Happy New Year."

With a quick wave, she hustled Casper out the front door. He tucked his tail against the cold air, then raised his nose and sniffed the sweet scent of freedom. He slunk onto the brown patchy grass of the shelter's front lawn and raised his leg on a tree.

When he'd finished, she loaded him into the backseat of her little blue Mazda. She smoothed her hands over her black dress, wrinkled since the funeral by hours in the car and now covered in Casper's white fur. The ache in her chest rose up, squeezing her throat, and she shoved it back.

Later, she'd grieve. Now she needed to get Casper home.

She swung into the front seat and cranked the engine. "So, you've officially been sprung from doggy jail."

He gave her a wary look, then turned his head to stare out the window. She pulled onto High Street and took the ramp to Interstate 85, headed for her townhouse in Dogwood, a small town on the outskirts of Raleigh, North Carolina.

"But listen, no more shenanigans, okay?"

Casper cocked his head, his mismatched eyes somber.

"One of my fosters growled at my neighbor's dog, and she filed a complaint against me with the homeowners' association, so I need you to be on your best behavior."

With a dramatic sigh, he sprawled across the backseat and closed his eyes. Well, she'd take that as a yes. She'd put in a few extra hours of behavior training with him in the meantime, just to be sure. Casper slept for the next hour as Cara drove them home.

The latest Taylor Swift single strummed happily from inside her purse, and she shoved a hand inside to grab her cell phone. Merry Atwater's name showed on the display. "Hey, Merry."

"Hey. Just wanted to see how you're holding up," Merry said. "I've been thinking about you all day."

Cara tightened her grip on the steering wheel, blinking away the image of Gina's pale face inside the casket. "I'm okay, or I will be."

"Oh, sweetie, I'm so sorry. Let me know if there's anything I can do. Are you still planning to go out tonight?"

"Yeah, I'll be there, just maybe late. Casper and I have some acquainting to do."

"How is he?" Merry shifted into her professional voice. As the founder of Triangle Boxer Rescue, she had a vested interest in every dog they saved. Cara had no idea where she found the time to run a rescue on top of her day job as a pediatric nurse, but Merry somehow managed to juggle the two.

"Well, he's only growled twice so far." Cara glanced over her shoulder with a smile. Casper watched, his head on his front paws.

"What happened? The shelter didn't mention aggression."

Cara flipped on her blinker and exited the highway onto Fullers Church Road. "I think he's just stressed out. I'm not too worried about it. What time should I meet you at Red Heels?"

"Why don't I come over to your place and we can get ready together? I'll help you get Casper settled, and we can talk."

"Sounds great, Mer, thanks."

"You bet. See you around seven."

Cara shoved the phone back into her purse. Truthfully, the last thing she wanted to do tonight was go to a New

Year's Eve party, but she refused to sit home and feel sorry for herself. She'd go, and she'd even have fun, dammit.

It was what Gina would have wanted.

She pulled into the parking lot of Crestwood Gardens, her townhouse community, and guided her Mazda into its assigned spot, right next to her sexy next-door neighbor's shiny black Jeep Grand Cherokee. The man in question stood in his front yard, deep in conversation with a perky brunette in tight jeans and a low-cut sweater.

Cara felt a twinge of something like jealousy, which was ridiculous because she didn't even know his name. And she'd prefer to keep it that way. She shut off the engine and hurried to fetch Casper from the backseat. "Welcome home, dude."

He hopped down, tail tucked. It had been a long and difficult day for both of them. Time to get settled in and relax for a while.

One of her neighbors—Chuck Something-or-other—passed with a nod as Cara headed toward her townhouse. She offered a polite smile, her attention focused on Casper. The dog looked up at the older man. Their eyes met. The hair along Casper's spine raised, and he released a low, guttural growl that sent Chuck scrambling into the parking lot.

Cara swore under her breath as she shoved the key into the lock and pushed open her front door.

So much for making a good first impression on the neighbors.

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Matt Dumont scrubbed a hand over his jaw as his Realtor snapped one last photo of the front of his townhouse. He watched peripherally as his elusive next-door neighbor scrambled through her front door with the mangy, miserable-looking dog who'd just growled at Chuck Sawyer.

It was a different damn dog than he'd seen in her yard last week.

In fact, from what he'd seen, there was a veritable parade of dogs in and out of her home, many of them looking rough, although this one had to be the worst. Matt didn't have much of an eye for dog breeds, but it looked like a pit bull from where he was standing.

He was starting to think something shady was going on next door.

"The listing will be live later tonight. It shows well, so I'm hopeful it will sell relatively quickly." Stephanie Powell pocketed her camera and pulled a red-and-white For Sale sign from her trunk.

He shifted his attention to the business at hand. "Mind if I do the honors?"

"Go ahead." She held it out.

Matt gripped the sign. With a grunt, he shoved the signpost through the grass and into the hard, red clay beneath. At least here in North Carolina the ground was still pliable at the end of December. Boston's frigid winters would be a re-adjustment.

But he could snowboard again. Yeah, he missed snowboarding, and skiing, and his mom's homemade meatballs. He was ready to go home.

He nudged the sign, then wiggled it a little farther into the earth. Satisfied it wasn't going anywhere, he turned to Stephanie. "All set, then."

She nodded. "I'll be in touch, and hopefully we'll have some showings scheduled for you in the next week."

"Great, Stephanie. Thanks." He shook her hand and headed for the front door of his townhouse, his thoughts again turning to the girl next door and her odd collection of dogs.

Matt knew most of his neighbors, was friendly with all of

them, yet she remained a mystery. He didn't even know her name. Perhaps that was why her face sometimes occupied his mind as he passed the long nights on surveillance.

His cell phone rang, and he swiped it from his back pocket. Felicity Prentiss. Shit.

"Mrs. Prentiss," he said as he strode toward his front door.

"I'm having second thoughts." Her voice was taut with nervous energy.

Matt held in a groan. He'd known when he met her yesterday that she was going to be a pain in the ass. Probably, he should have turned her down, but this job would bring in a lot of billable hours, extra cash to tide him over while he got things going up in Boston.

But honestly, Felicity Prentiss was one of the most uptight clients he'd ever worked with. Since she'd hired him yesterday, she'd already called five times, looking for updates, reassurances, and advice.

The woman needed someone to hold her hand. And that was not his job.

Not her husband's, either, since she had enlisted Matt's investigative services to secure evidence of his adultery for their divorce proceedings.

"I'll be honest with you, Mrs. Prentiss. I've never worked one of these cases where it turned out the spouse wasn't cheating. You want proof, I'll get it for you. You want to call it off, tell me now before there's no going back."

On the other end of the line, she sucked in a shaky breath. "I do want to know—I *need* to know. But what if he sees you? He'd kill me if he knew I'd had him followed."

Matt closed and locked the front door behind him. "He won't see me. Is your husband violent, Mrs. Prentiss?"

"No." A long pause, then a sigh. "No, he's a sweet and gentle man, or at least I thought he was until I caught him

sneaking into the house in the middle of the night smelling of another woman's perfume."

"All right, then. Let me do my job. I'll get what you need for the lawsuit, and your husband will be none the wiser. Don't worry."

"It's just... with the New Year and all, I'm ready to get on with my life, you know?"

Did he ever. Matt flipped on the overhead light and sank into his leather recliner. "I do, and you will. Since you'll be with him tonight, I plan to start surveillance tomorrow. Shouldn't take more than a week, maybe two."

Felicity Prentiss hoped to file an "alienation of affection" lawsuit, taking advantage of an outdated law in North Carolina that allowed a wife to sue her husband's lover. The problem was that Felicity couldn't file for divorce from her philandering husband until the necessary evidence had been gathered.

Matt planned to get the evidence she needed for her lawsuit and her divorce proceedings as quickly as possible. Because once he closed this case, he was going home.

He headed upstairs to log some background information on the Prentisses in his office. It always paid to know whose closets you were poking around in before you brought out the high-powered lens. A loud bark drew him toward the window in the hall, from which he had a decent view of his next-door neighbor's backyard.

Enough to see her outside with the white dog and another larger brown dog. She'd changed from her black dress and pumps into an ice-blue jacket and dark-colored jeans that hugged a shapely figure. Her hair was the color of his fantasies, somewhere between blond and red, a delicious apricot that shone in the sun with soft waves that brushed her shoulders.

As he watched, the white dog snarled. The brown dog



hesitated a moment, then they were on each other like a couple of wild animals, growling and snapping. The sound made the hair on the back of his neck rise.

Blood streaked the white dog's fur.

Holy shit. Was his pretty golden-haired neighbor training fighting dogs?

With a grunt of disgust, Matt stepped away from the window. It was time for them to finally meet, because there was no way in hell he was going to look the other way if she was mistreating those dogs.

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The dogs were fighting.

"Hey!" Cara clapped her hands and shouted, making as much noise as she could. Casper slunk off to hide behind a bush. Mojo trotted over, looking sheepish.

Cara knelt and ran her hands over him, checking for injury. She suspected the skirmish had been more bark than bite, but with Mojo's dark fur, it was hard to be sure, and she'd seen blood on Casper.

Mojo sat, tongue lolling, tail wagging, as she checked him out. Blood oozed from the gum behind his left incisor. With any luck, that was the source of the blood she'd seen on Casper. She shooed Mojo inside, then coaxed the frightened white boxer from behind the bush.

"Easy, Casper." She dabbed at the blood streaking his fur, and it came off on her fingers. He watched her with those unnervingly solemn, mismatched eyes. Other than Mojo's bloody slobber, he was unharmed.

*Thank God.* Cara plopped down on the grass at Casper's side, her legs rubbery, heart pounding. "You are not good for my adrenaline levels, you know that?"

Casper was going to take some work. He'd come into the

shelter as a stray, and he would need time to feel comfortable again as part of a family, if he ever had been. He wasn't a mean dog, just frightened and defensive. He lay beside Cara now, head between his front paws, weary eyes glazed.

In retrospect, she shouldn't have offered treats in front of both dogs so soon. Mojo had sniffed at Casper's cookie, and Casper had defended what was his. Resource guarding wasn't unusual for a dog like Casper, who'd been on his own for a while. Cara had made a rookie mistake. She was distracted today, but that was no excuse.

Mojo whined from the other side of the door. Casper watched, his posture relaxed.

She stood and opened the back door, keeping a close eye on her troublemaking canines. Mojo trotted out, nuzzled Cara's hand, and took off across the yard in search of a ball. After a moment, Casper got to his feet and followed him. Mojo spun around him, his front legs pressed to the earth, tail up, as he invited Casper to play.

*That's more like it.* Cara breathed a sigh of relief. She shoved her hands into the pockets of her jeans to ward off the cold breeze as she watched them.

Mojo was a funny-looking dog with brown brindle stripes that darkened to black along his back. He had a sturdy body, full tail, and a face thicker than a full-blooded boxer. No one knew what he was mixed with, but something in his coloration and stance suggested German shepherd to Cara. No matter his heritage, he was all fun, the most laid-back, well-mannered foster she'd ever had.

After watching Mojo try in vain for several minutes to get Casper to play, she headed for the house, chilled from too long outside in only a thin jacket. The dogs bounded ahead and waited for her at the sliding glass door.

"Lead the way, Mojo," she told the brown dog. His tail beat the vinyl siding as she opened the door, then he

scrambled across the kitchen to check his bowl, as if the dog food fairy might have filled it while they were playing outside. “In a little while. Let’s get Casper settled in first.”

Despite his emaciated appearance, Casper had been well fed at the shelter for the past three days, and she didn’t want him to get sick from eating before his nervous stomach settled. Cara flipped on the gas fireplace, then led the way upstairs.

Casper tucked his tail as he followed her into the master bedroom.

“It’ll be a while before we make it up here tonight, I’m afraid. It’s New Year’s Eve, and I’m going out. But I wanted you to see it first in the daylight. You can join Mojo and me in the big bed.” She eyed his soiled fur, then grabbed an old sheet and spread it over her pink-flowered comforter. Before she went out tonight, he definitely needed a bath.

She kept talking, knowing that her calm voice and demeanor, as well as Mojo’s, would put Casper more quickly at ease. She sat on the bed and patted it, inviting them up. Mojo leaped up and made himself at home, while Casper stood anxiously at her feet. She told him all about tonight’s party while stroking his chin until, with a shy wag of his nub, he hopped up on her other side.

“That’s a good boy.” She lay back and closed her eyes, a dog on each side.

What was better than that? Maybe she’d take a quick nap before Merry arrived. Gina’s funeral had left her drained.

The chiming of the doorbell sent Casper into fits of hysterical barking. He launched himself off the bed and ran a lap around the bedroom. Mojo jumped down and headed for the hall, his bark mixing with Casper’s as both dogs raced downstairs.

Cara glanced at her watch as she hurried after them. Merry wasn’t due for another two hours. Whoever it was had lousy timing.

She sprinted into the kitchen and grabbed a handful of peanut-butter dog biscuits from the counter.

“Come, Casper.” She used the biscuits as a lure, and the dog crept into his crate, still eyeing the front door with suspicion. She rewarded him with a handful of peanut-butter yummys, then draped the crate with a thick blanket, hoping the darkness would help calm him.

The doorbell pealed again. Casper’s booming bark filled the room, accompanied by the sound of his body slamming into the metal bars of the crate. So much for calm.

“Shhh,” Cara whispered, then hurried toward the front door. “Coming.”

Mojo stood in the hallway, tail wagging in anticipation of their visitor.

Without pausing to check the peephole, she yanked the door open, then gaped at the man standing there. He filled her doorway, tall and solid in worn jeans and a black leather jacket. Dark brown hair was pushed back from his forehead with a slight wave. His brown eyes settled on hers, and a little ping of warmth traveled through her.

“Matt Dumont. I live next door.” He jerked his head toward the townhouse to the left of hers.

Cara nodded. Oh yeah, she knew who he was, and she’d been doing her best to avoid him for the past year. Well, now she had a name to put with the face formerly known as “Mr. FMH,” a term she and her friend Olivia had coined back in college for a guy that was “fuck me hot.” Matt sure was, not that she had any intention of acting on it.

She glanced down at herself, painfully aware of the streak of bloody slobber on her shirtsleeve and the way she was panting for breath after wrangling an uncooperative sixty-pound boxer into his crate. Of course, if they had to meet after all this time, she’d be a mess.

She pasted on the sweetest smile she could muster as

Casper growled from the kitchen. “Nice to meet you. I’m Cara Medlen.”

“Bout time I knew your name, don’t you think?” The corner of his mouth hitched in amusement as those cocoa eyes searched hers. He was even more handsome up close, staring at her like that, so intense she almost forgot to breathe.

“I guess so.”

“So, what’s the story with your dogs, Cara?”

She sucked in a breath. “What story?”

His eyes narrowed, less warm now. “You tell me.”

She crossed her arms over her chest. What was it with her neighbors and their closed-mindedness about her foster dogs? “We haven’t broken any rules, Mr. Dumont, so if you don’t mind...”

She moved to close the front door, but he stepped forward, blocking her. “Actually, I do mind.”

Cara felt the force of his stare right down to her coral-painted toenails.

“The white dog—is he receiving some kind of medical treatment?”

He was so close now she could smell the faint scent of his aftershave. Too close, but she refused to give him the satisfaction of backing away. She straightened her spine, wishing for a few more inches so she could glare at him without having to look up. “What exactly are you suggesting?”

“I can see into your backyard from my upstairs hallway.” He tilted his head. “I think I know what’s going on here.”

Cara scrunched her nose. What in the world was he accusing her of, mowing her lawn in the wrong direction? Crap, had he been watching last week when she tripped over Mojo and fell in a pile of dog poop? She’d stripped out of her jeans right there in the backyard and run inside half naked. Her cheeks burned. “Perhaps you should be more specific.”

He glanced down at the dog at her feet. Mojo sat, ears

back, his shoulder against Cara's left leg. A crash echoed from the kitchen as Casper thrashed in his crate. "You fighting these dogs, Ms. Medlen?"

She couldn't help it; she snorted with laughter at the absolute absurdity of his accusation. "Are you serious?"

Matt pinned her in his laser-like gaze, looking deadly serious. "That a pit bull?"

"A boxer. Thank you for your concern, Mr. Dumont, but maybe next time you should mind your own business."

And with that, she slammed the door in his face.