

# BROKEN THINGS



**Warning:** *The following excerpt is unedited. Typos and grammatical errors galore.*

**Double Warning:** *Since this is rough-draft material, the scene I'm sharing with you may or may not end up in the final book...if the story even makes it to publication.*

**Triple Warning:** *Sorry, I don't really have a third warning; I'm just a goofball who wanted to write "triple warning." It's so fun! Anyway, enjoy the excerpt!*

# CHAPTER ONE

Thea Quimby had just popped her supper in the microwave when her work phone blared, “*Bad boys, bad boys, watcha gonna do?*” through her dim kitchen and Hopscotch began to growl. Rubbing the temperamental bulldog on the head to soothe him, she answered the call, cutting the ringtone off at ...*when they come for you.*

“Quimby,” she barked, using her authoritative, take-no-prisoners, chief-of-police voice.

“Hey chief. We got a 911 call for a domestic dispute at the St. James place,” reported Judy, the dispatcher on duty. She was a widowed, seventy-something grandmother of twelve who knitted multicolored potholders between taking calls for the department.

“Again?” Thea rolled her eyes just as her microwave dinged. Great. There went another hot meal. “Damn, I wish Keane and his wife would just kill each other already or get a divorce. Put us *all* out of our misery.”

Tucking the tiny cell phone between her ear and shoulder, she used the lime green and brown potholders Judy had given her for Christmas to drag her Lean Cuisine onto the counter.

“Careful what you wish for, Chief. This one sounded different. Came from one of the kids.”

“The kids?” Shock caused Thea to reach up to catch her phone as it started to slide from between her shoulder and ear.

But a call from Keane’s kids? This was new. Usually Vivian herself called in to whine and complain about her husband. Never had one of their two girls reported anything wrong.

“Yep. The oldest one, what’s her name?”

“Coral,” Thea answered automatically, hurrying through the house to her bedroom to fetch her gun.

“Yeah. Coral said her parents were screaming as usual, then she thought her dad left for a while. But he must’ve come back because the yelling started again until there were a couple big booms and—”

“Booms?” In the middle of digging up her paddle holster from her bedside drawer so she wouldn’t have to take the time to strap on her full duty belt, Thea paused and furrowed her brows. “What kinds of booms? Like *gunshot* booms?”

“Don’t know. But she said everything’s been quiet since then. She and her sister called us from their bedroom closet and have been there ever since. I told ‘em to sit tight.”

“Good, good.” Thea jammed the holster onto the waistband of her jeans and slid her Glock into the waiting leather. After she grabbed her badge and a pair of handcuffs, she started for the door. “I’m on my way.”

“Want me to call Stu and Barrett?”

The city of Beaumont employed two extra officers besides herself, and both men were off duty, just as she was. But in a town the size of theirs, the three of them were perpetually on call, whether they were clocked in or not.

“Not yet. It could be nothing. I’ll let you know.”

Thea raced for the door even as she was hanging up with Judy. She passed Hopscotch in the kitchen, who whined and pawed at the linoleum, letting her know he didn’t want her to go. “I’ll be back in a bit, buddy. I swear.”

Thea opened the back door and sprinted to the blue Tahoe with City Police branded across each side. Skipping the whole lights and siren routine, she pulled out of her drive and stomped the gas. Keane and Vivian lived less than a mile away, on the edge of town...in The Big House, as she’d always thought of the nicest mansion in Beaumont.

Thea could probably get to his address blindfolded. She had deliberately driven by the St. James place in her teen years more times than she was comfortable admitting because she'd had a crazy, unrelenting crush on the oldest St. James boy, Gabriel, and had come up with any and every excuse to pass by The Big House in the hopes of seeing him outside. Keane had bought his parents' place after all his brothers had moved out and his father had passed on, and he'd fixed it up into the even bigger, grandiose piece of architecture it was now.

She parked in the brick-laid half-circle drive less than two minutes later. The antique-looking mock gaslights circling the drive glowed softly in welcome, but there didn't seem to be any lights on inside The Big House. No automobiles sat in the drive, though they could easily be inside the four-bay garage around back.

The scent of the plumeria in the front flower garden greeted her as she popped out of the cruiser and half-walked, half-galoped to the front door. Thea set her hand on the butt of her gun nestled against her hip when a prickled feeling of unease snaked up the back of her neck, making the fine hairs at her nape stand at attention.

As soon as her first knock fell on the door, it crept open, not latched, almost as if inviting her inside.

"Ah, hell," she muttered under her breath. This couldn't be good. "One-oh-one to dispatch," she said into her radio. "Go ahead and call out the boys."

"Ten, four," Judy responded immediately. "What's going on?"

"Stand by. I'll let you know as soon as I do."

Silence eked from the cracked door in eerie waves. Her breathing grew unsteady as she toed it the rest of the way open and peered inside, ducking a little to the left and then the right to check out what she could see.

"Keane?" She called tentatively. "Vivian?"

“Here,” a voice answered, but she couldn’t tell who had spoken. Muffled from the center of the house, it could be anyone.

Following the direction in which it had come, she stepped over the threshold, taking stock of the situation. The foyer and living room looked untouched, not a single piece of furniture out of place in the massive space. In fact, it looked as if they were ready for their photo shoot to be on the cover of *Home & Design*.

Light filtered out into the front room from a hallway. As soon as she reached the entrance, she stopped dead in her tracks.

Keane St. James sat on the floor, his back propped against the wall and his elbows slumped onto his bent knees as he cradled his head in his hands. He looked like a lost little boy crammed into a grown man’s body. But that wasn’t what alarmed her most. He negligently cradled a gun in his large palm as if he didn’t even know he was holding it, pressing the flat side of the chamber against his temples as he clutched his cranium.

“Keane?” His name cracked on her lips.

He jerked his face up, and the handgun slipped from his fingers to thump dully to the carpet by his hip. Cheeks pale against the glistening tears that seeped from his bloodshot eyes, he gaped at her in horror.

“T?” He blinked once, twice, then wrinkled his brow into a confused frown. “What’re you doing here?”

God, he looked so much like his brother. Those blue, blue St. James eyes—even red and watery as they were—were the same shade and shape as Gabe’s. Her body responded, remembering a boy who’d stolen her heart so many years ago without even trying, or knowing.

But this wasn’t Gabe staring at her, and she sure as hell wasn’t here to catch up on old times. Crouched slightly with one foot strategically placed in front of the other, Thea swallowed, licked her lips and took a deep, steadying breath.

“The girls called,” she answered him.

He shook his head, clearly confused. “What girls.”

“*Your* girls. Coral and Emily. They called the station, scared out of their minds.”

His eyes flared with shock. “What? *When?* You mean, they’re *alive?* Christ!” He scrambled to his feet. “Oh, God. Oh, thank God.”

Locking her fingers around the grip of her weapon and ready to pull it, she held up her free hand in the universal sign for stop. “Whoa. Just sit easy, bud. Stay down there for a sec.”

When he didn’t seem to hear her, tripping into a run before he’d even gained his footing, she yelled, “Keane, *stop!*” Forcing her chief-of-police voice back into action, she pulled her weapon and took aim.

At Gabe’s little brother.

Her ears filled with buzzes as if a thousand ants were biting her skin. Scalp prickling with unease, she refused to shift her target, but gulped noisily as she held her gun steady on him.

Keane froze, his attention focusing on the end of her barrel. “What’re you doing?” His gaze dropped to the gun by his feet, and he blanched as he looked up. “Jesus, Thea. You don’t think I—”

He broke off to squeeze his eyes closed.

“I don’t know what to think right now, Keane,” she answered him honestly. “I just know something is seriously wrong here. And you have a dangerous weapon on you and are shocked to think your daughters are alive.”

“Goddamn,” he groaned. “What a clusterfuck.” His throat worked before he opened his lashes and looked at her from Gabe’s amazing eyes. Those hypnotic blues searched her as he slowly lifted both hands for her to see them. “Just let me go find Coral and Emily. I didn’t know they were—I thought they were like...Viv.”

At the mention of his wife, Thea nodded. “Where *is* Vivian?”

Keane winced, not budging from his spot. “She’s in the bedroom.” He hitched his head in the direction of a partially closed door fifteen feet away. “It’s not pretty.”

“Okay,” Thea said calmly, impressed by the rationality in her own voice when her heart was beating about three-hundred time per minute. “I’m going to check on her first, then we’ll find your girls.”

When he didn’t move or answer, keeping his hands lifted and his ravaged gaze on her, she started for his bedroom, kicking his gun away from him as she passed. When she came to the entrance of the room and almost stepped in a puddle of bile on the floor, she lurched back, wincing.

What the hell?

“I puked,” Keane explained, his voice beginning to go hoarse.

Oh, hell. This wasn’t going to be good at all. Thea closed her eyes briefly, bolstering herself before she used the toe of her boot to nudge this door open as well.

“Vivian?”

The smell reached her first. Death and the metallic hint of blood, laced with urine. “Oh, God. Oh, fuck.” Horrified, she stared inside, her stomach revolting, wanting to make its own little puddle on the floor.

She’d been in law enforcement for six years, and she’d never seen anything like *this* before. But the blood splatters on the walls and ceiling, not to mention the dead woman splayed in broken angles on the floor, imprinted themselves on the inside of her brain.

For the rest of her life, she knew she would never forget what Vivian St. James looked like dead.

She’d been much, much prettier alive.

Behind her, footsteps rushed down the hall, a body passed by, the breeze of his hurry rustling her hair. She whirled around, gun aimed. But Keane was too busy shoving open a closed door deeper down the hall to pay her any notice.

“Coral?” he called, barging inside. “Em?”

“Shit,” Thea muttered to herself for her stupidity as she raced after him. Just because she knew him didn’t make him safe. Knowing him obviously hadn’t kept his wife alive. “Keane, *stop!* You can’t just—”

She exploded into the room—definitely a little girl’s room from the looks of it with pink princess wallpaper and a white poster bed. Ignoring her, Keane looked under the bed before yanking open a closet door, where two frightened children clutching each other tumbled out, sobbing hysterically.

“Oh, my babies,” he breathed, his fatherly relief clogging the entire room as he fell to his knees and swept both girls into a comforting hug before he started patting them down for injuries. “You’re okay. You’re okay. Thank God, you’re okay.”

Coral and Emily St. James burrowed into their father’s chest, sobbing and shaking, asking where their mother was. Pain contorted Keane’s features, but he didn’t answer, just kissed their hair and held them close.

Thea lowered her gun and sagged against the wall. She didn’t try to interrupt their family moment, but she would soon. When she hooked Keane St. James up in a pair of handcuffs and brought him in for questioning.