An excerpt from *Brutal Game*, sequel to *Willing Victim*©2016 Cara McKenna. All rights reserved.

Flynn climbed into his car just after one on Saturday night, waking the grumpy engine on the third crank. It had to be ten degrees out, and just the short walk from the bar's exit to the curb had chilled his sweat and stiffened his spent muscles. He could feel frost in his hair and an ache growling in his wrists and fingers. Still, he didn't bother with the heater—it was a quick drive.

It was snowing, barely. Sick as he was of shoveling, he almost wished for a final storm. It was late February, the charm of New England winter gone with the abandoned skeletons of Christmas trees weeks before. The streets were crusted with brown-gray ice and these flurries would do jack to cover it over. It crunched under his tires as he pulled onto the street, South Boston all but abandoned this time of night, save for the odd car in the distance and scattered drinkers making their way home with clumsy, nervous steps along the slick sidewalks.

Flynn was beat, literally. Not defeated, but he'd taken a couple hard shots in his final boxing match, one to the temple and one to the chin, and his neck was sore, like whiplash.

You're not twenty-five anymore, his body bitched, but he ignored it. He'd be home soon, in his warm apartment, with a warm woman curled up and waiting on his couch or in his bed. Maybe already asleep with a book on her chest. Maybe amenable to having

that book plucked away, replaced by the weight of her lover lowering down, his lips on hers and sleep be damned.

Heat crept through him, not the radiator's doing. It kept the chill at bay as he slammed the car door and headed for his building, a hulking old brick behemoth.

Fight nights were Fridays and Saturdays. Laurel nearly always came to one or the other, whichever her waitressing schedule didn't clash with. Tonight she'd worked, and would've finished up around ten. She lived just a few blocks from the tourist-trap restaurant she worked at but she always came to his place on fight nights, letting herself in with her key and waiting up for him.

He tested the knob, pleased to find it locked. She'd been sloppy about that when she'd first started hanging out in his absence, and he didn't like it. Made him paranoid and protective, even if his building was pretty safe. The thought of anything bad happening to her, let alone in his place, with him not there...

He felt a flash of the heat that possessed him during a fight and pushed the worry from his mind as he opened the door.

Flynn's apartment was a studio—bedroom, living room, and galley kitchen all in one high-ceilinged square space, plus a full bath. Laurel was sprawled across his bed, a pillow on her belly and a closed book atop that, sock-clad feet flexing idly. "Hey, you." Her smile was dozy and sweet, hair a coppery tumble he'd be more than happy to mess up if she'd let him.

"You win?"

He dropped his gym bag on the loveseat by the door. "Always."

"How many matches tonight?"

"Three."

"You must be wiped." She knew better than that, though. She knew what fight nights did to Flynn, the way the adrenaline turned to lust the second he stepped out of that basement gym. He might be exhausted, but his body didn't plan to rest until his cock got its way.

"I'm gonna shower," he said. "I'll kiss you when I stink less."

"I like your violent musk, but suit yourself." She opened her book.

"How was work?"

She kept her eyes on the page. "It was work. Go get cleaned up."

"Yes, ma'am." He gathered a fresh tee and some flannel bottoms from the dresser then headed for the bathroom.

He needed this shower. He'd been up against his toughest rival in the final fight of the night. He'd won but that bastard always gave Flynn a run for his money, underlined the fact that he was thirty-three now, no longer invincible. They fought for glory and for fun, not for money, but that was no reason not to go hard each and every time. Flynn spent his days working construction, which wasn't kind to his body either, and in the past couple years he'd come to feel it. He ached in ways he hadn't before, even if his lust for the sport hadn't cooled a jot.

Something caught his eye as he set his clean clothes on the toilet tank—an old red towel slung over the shower curtain. Hunger rose inside him, exhaustion forgotten in a breath.

It was no simple towel. Sure, this was the towel Laurel used for a day or two after she dyed her hair each month, and the one they fucked on when she was on her period, but it was more than that. It was their little joke—the red cape. Laurel had teased Flynn about being a bull when it came to sex, and that towel was their inside joke. If he came home and found it hanging on the rod it was her way of taunting, *Gore me*. A red cape but also a green light, one that told Flynn that when he exited the bathroom, it was on. The things he craved in the darkest, homeliest shadows of himself were his to take.

They had a safe word but hadn't used it in ages. Hadn't needed to. As Laurel had grown confident playing tourist in his fantasies, he'd come to know her limits as intimately as he did her body. He could read her muscles like a blind man read Braille, could tell when their role-playing was riding too sharp and thin a line between arousing and upsetting.

When you had needs like Flynn's and you wanted them met, intuition was essential. This shit was dangerous and this shit was precise, like whipping knives at a woman strapped to a spinning wheel, circus-style. Get it right or get it very, very wrong.

Which was sort of funny, he thought as he stripped, as his appetites were, after all, so very, very wrong.

He spotted a note stuck to the bathroom mirror, an oversized, lined yellow Post-it bearing Laurel's tidy handwriting. He peeled it from the glass, eyes devouring each word.

I'm a groupie, she'd written. I come to watch you fight every week, infatuated, but I'm afraid of you as well. You offer me a ride home but take me to your place first. You're sick of the teasing and you're ready to give me what I'm too scared to admit I want.

Maybe I don't even want it at all. Maybe I'm in over my head. You don't care. You'll get what you want, either way.

What Flynn needed in bed was cruelty and dominance. Not every night, not even

every week, but the thing that lit him up like jumper cables was the dark stuff, the rough stuff. Ugly stuff it had taken him years to accept, and later embrace. Laurel had always been up for it, willing to go there and able to find pleasure in those dark places, too, but over the past couple months she'd begun discovering her own kinks nested inside his.

In the games they played, he craved brutality, but she wanted something more—a narrative. A role beyond mere victim. Flynn was happy enough coming at her like a stranger in a dark alley, but her pleasure deepened with some extra dimension worked in. She wanted layers of emotion—lust clashing with revulsion and fear and surrender. She wanted a character to play, he supposed, and he wanted nothing more than for the thing that set his brain and body on fire to do the same for her.

He twisted the hot tap open and stepped inside the shower, stood under the steaming, scalding water and sighed. He eyed that red towel draped over the rod, growing dark and heavy from the spray. A gash at his temple opened and stung but he didn't care. Just let the heat soften his muscles, wash the blood and sweat and grime down the drain. Wash his fight persona away and make room for another beast entirely.

A man capable of things few women would welcome.

A man capable of exactly what Laurel wanted, tonight.