





**NOW**

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## one. Tobey

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*29 October 02:29*

To Sephy Ealing:

From the video provided, you'll see that we have Troy Ealing and Liberty Jackman. This is not a joke or a hoax. You will ensure the instructions below are followed to the letter or you will never see your loved ones again. If you involve the police, or any other security detail, we will know and you'll never see your loved ones again. This has been sent to you so that you can keep your daughter Callie in line. Make sure she doesn't get any unfortunate ideas – like going straight to the police.

This will be our only communication.

Send the following messages to Callie Rose Hadley and Tobias Durbridge.

TOBIAS DURBRIDGE, you will do the following within the next twenty-four hours:

- Plead guilty in court to the murder of Dan Jeavons.
- Go public with the admission of your guilt.

If you fail to do either of the above, you will never see your daughter Liberty again. This is NOT a bluff.

CALLIE ROSE HADLEY, you will do the following within the next twenty-four hours:

- Remove the super-injunction forbidding the press from reporting on Tobias Durbridge and his forthcoming court case.
- Remove yourself as Tobias’s lawyer.

If you fail to do either of the above, you will receive your brother Troy back in pieces. This is NOT a bluff.

So many unanswered questions. I reread the text message forwarded to me by Callie, who had received it from Sephy, her mother. A man – who claimed to be working on behalf of Dan Jeavons – had called Sephy, using her son Troy’s mobile phone, to state his list of demands. He had followed this up in writing.

*Working on behalf of Dan Jeavons . . .* There was just one problem with that – Dan was dead. He’d been murdered and I was on the hook for it. Someone out there was

desperate to see me spend the rest of my natural existence rotting in prison.

*On behalf of Dan Jeavons . . .*

What did that even mean? Had someone from within ‘the Outfit’ decided to branch out for themselves and this was a way of proving their worth? Or were they doing it to avenge Dan’s death? Maybe this whole thing had been orchestrated by Owen Dowd, head of a rival set-up, in an attempt to cause real problems for the opposition.

Whoever it was who’d spoken to Sephy had backed up his verbal threat with this text message spelling out all the kidnapers’ demands. And now Troy’s phone was untraceable. On my instructions, my personal executive assistant, Jade Habari, had already tried to find out the location of Libby’s and Troy’s phones, but they’d been switched off – or smashed. The last recorded location of both was Heathcroft High School, the last place they were seen. No help there then.

Where was my daughter?

Had her kidnapers tied her up? Were they looking after her as the goose that was about to lay them a golden egg, or were they . . . abusing her? Perhaps they’d already got rid of her? Dark thoughts were knitting my insides together. I read the text message for the umpteenth time.

*Plead guilty in court to the murder of Dan Jeavons.*

None of the kidnapers’ demands had been met. In court yesterday, I had entered a plea of not guilty. Callie hadn’t recused herself as my lawyer, nor had she removed the super-injunction. In their text, they referred to themselves as ‘we’, so I had to work on the assumption that there was more than one.

Now I stood at my bedroom window in the dark. A black hole was opening in my gut and trying to suck me into it. I was officially, if covertly due to the press injunction my blackmailers clearly knew about, on trial for Dan's murder. I confess, a large part of me had thought the case would be thrown out by Judge Okafor on the grounds of insufficient evidence – or because I am now PM – ha! No such luck. I was in the fight of my life. Not just for my political career, but my freedom. My Liberty. There was a very real chance that after this trial I'd never look up at the sky from outside prison walls again.

I'd pleaded not guilty, rationalizing that it was the best way to try and keep my daughter alive. If I immediately gave in to the kidnappers' demands, what reason would they have to keep her in good health, knowing that if she was freed she could identify them? Pleading my innocence in court meant that her abductors had to keep her around to try to coerce me into doing what they wanted – at least that had been my frenetic thinking. I was doing this for my daughter. But was I really?

*Liberty . . . If anything happened to her because of me . . .*

I hated this. Patience was not one of my virtues.

Having refused to submit to the kidnappers' demands, Callie and I now had to wait for them to make the next move. But I was no good at waiting for the ball to be batted back to me. It was time to set wheels in motion. As Dan used to say, 'Some people have a plan A and possibly a plan B as backup. You, Tobey, use at least half the alphabet to work out your alternatives.'

I wasn't about to apologize for that. There was nothing

wrong in believing in the seven Ps – Prior Proper Preparation Prevents Piss-Poor Performance. That way Callie and I stood half a chance of making it through this and getting our loved ones back home safe and sound. And, once I had my daughter back, I intended to send a very clear message.

By the time I'd finished, no one, and I mean *no one*, would dare come after me and mine again.

Ever.



## two. Libby

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The silence in the basement after the last nail had been hammered home was deafening. I stared at the now boarded-up door, unable to look away. Troy and I had escaped; we'd even made it all the way to the harbour wall, but then I'd spoiled everything by not jumping into the river when we had the chance. And Troy had refused to jump in and escape without me. So stupid. If he'd left me behind and swum for the opposite bank, he could've escaped. He could've been miles away by now and getting help. But I can't swim and was too terrified to leap into the murky, dark water. Thanks to me, we'd both been recaptured and brought back to this hellhole basement.

And we were going to turn into dust down here.

Troy launched himself at the door, bouncing off it like a tennis ball to ricochet off the banister handrail behind him at the top of the stairs.

'Oof!' He rubbed his shoulder, then his back, before he tried again.

Surprise, surprise! The same thing happened, except this time it looked like it hurt much more.

'Troy, you're wasting your time,' I said.

For heaven's sake, if we couldn't open the door before it

was boarded up, what on earth made him think he could burst through it now? He glared at the door and leaned forward, slightly side-on, head down like some kind of demented charging bull. He flung himself at the door yet again, shoulder first. This time the rebound threw him backwards onto the handrail behind him again, except the rail cracked and snapped, and, with a startled cry, Troy fell through it, his arms flailing like a fledgling's wings.

I rushed forward, thinking I could catch him and break his fall or something. But I was too late. Troy hit the ground with a sickening thud, crumpling up like a concertina.

'TROY!' I rushed to his side, kneeling beside his motionless body. He lay half on his side, half on his back. I took his hand in mine and fumbled around on his wrist for a pulse, but I couldn't feel one.

I couldn't find one.

*TROY—*

Serves me right.

*This is not what I had planned. Not even close. It is, however, what I get for relying on other people. People always – and I mean **always** – mess up. I have yet to meet one who hasn't let me down sooner or later. Usually sooner. This was supposed to be an easy job, a means to an end – nothing more. A way to pay off some serious debts owed to some ruthless people and to make a very healthy profit on the side too. I should've guessed that Misty, Liberty's mother, and Pete, her equally worthless boyfriend, would muck things up. For God's sake, all they had to do was hold on to her daughter for a couple of days until Tobias Durbridge proved to the world, but mostly to himself, how much he loved his secret daughter by paying the ransom. It should've been a piece of Makeda sponge cake. But no. Misty and her shit-for-brains boyfriend decide to bring in his brother, Oliver, who had even larger quantities of shit for brains.*

*I first met Pete drinking alone in a pub while he was waiting for Misty to turn up. We got to talking and Pete lowered his voice to inform me that Misty claimed her daughter, Liberty, was also the daughter of Tobias Durbridge, the politician. Pete had laughed it off, not believing a word of it. Me? I wasn't so sure that it was all a fantasy. I mean, why claim something that would be so easy to disprove? DNA tests were now cheaper than a restaurant meal for two. So maybe there was something in it after all.*

*I hung around until Misty arrived and insinuated myself into their night out, laughing and joking and making sure I kept the drinks flowing. We all went for a meal, which I insisted on paying for. By the end of the night, I was their new best friend. I checked with the General Records Office, and Tobias Durbridge was indeed listed as the father of Liberty Alba Jackman. That's when I began to plant the idea of tapping him for money. After all, it was what Misty and Pete deserved. If Tobey had money and they didn't, surely it was only fair that they did what was necessary to balance those scales. Pete was all for it. Misty took a little more persuading – but not much. After a few weeks, I shared with them the plan that I'd taken great care to work out. It was foolproof. Or so I thought. I didn't count on the three biggest cretins on the planet ruining it.*

*Instead of grabbing Liberty off the street to keep it real, like we'd agreed, and just securing her for a couple of days, what did they do instead? They grabbed Libby's friend Troy Ealing as well. Troy Ealing, for God's sake. Just my damned luck. What was Misty thinking? Company for Libby? There was no other earthly reason to bring him along. For Shaka's sake, he's just a teenage boy. One punch and they could've knocked him on his arse and out cold, left him on the pavement and fled with Libby. Sweet as a honey-roasted peanut. But no – they just had to take Troy along for the ride as well. And who is Troy's sister? Callie Rose Hadley. I mean, you couldn't make it up!*

*Just my damned luck.*

*Oliver must've persuaded the other two that, though greed was good, to cut me out of the deal and go it alone*

would be even better. Well, look where that got them. Weighed down and feeding the fishes in the River Thames. The word is out that they breathe no more. Where does that leave me? Precisely nowhere – for now.

Liberty Jackman, or rather her father's money, was supposed to be my all-expenses-paid ticket out of here to a stress-free, very comfortable existence. Damn it, it's my due. Now all my plans have been shot to hell. So I have no choice but to play a waiting game.

What I need to do now is keep my mouth shut, my eyes open, and watch and learn. Then maybe, just maybe, there can still be a pay day at the end of all this for me. Perhaps there's even a way to turn this fiasco to my advantage. After all, who knows of my involvement? Damn few and they're all dead – or they soon will be. The first thing I need to do is get to Liberty and Troy before they can be interrogated by anyone else.

Lord knows what Misty might've revealed about me before she was killed. Did she tell Liberty that I was the one who masterminded the whole plan in the first place? If Liberty and Troy know enough about me to spill the tea before I get to them, then I'll be up to my bottom lip in churning-crap creek with my mouth wide open. The bullets in my gun have their names on them and the choice is simple – it's them or me. And it sure as hell isn't going to be me.

I wish it hadn't turned out like this, but it is what it is. I've come too far now to turn back. I can't and won't let anyone get in my way.

There's an unexpected vampire bite to the chill late October night air. Car horns blare. The laughter and chatter

*of late-nighters competes with the cacophony of too much traffic, even at this late hour. The residual smell of burgers, diesel and urine wafts round me. City smells – I love them. That’s why I’m driving with my car window halfway down. When I depart for pastures new, I shall miss this. The constant noise, the city aromas and, the cherry on top, all the people intent on minding their own business.*

*There it is, Ava’s – what used to be Dan Jeavons’ old nightclub. Now it belongs to Eva Foxton, Dan’s successor.*

*Hedda, my eyes within Eva’s organization, is inside. Almost three years ago, when I’d been trying to track down a missing bouncer who worked at the nightclub, I’d spotted Hedda entering the place. She was going to work in the kitchen as a sous-chef. I’d recognized her at once. Her husband, an ex-cop, had been banged up on corruption charges – not the sort of news Hedda had wanted to become common knowledge. It’d been a fraught negotiation, but I’d persuaded Hedda to provide me with info on Eva and her exploits as and when required – plus there would be a generous fee for services rendered. Although reluctant, she’d finally agreed. Even way back then, I knew Eva was one to watch.*

*Within the last hour, Hedda had sent me an urgent message to come and get her out. She’s afraid her cover has been blown, which – if true – is a damned shame. Over the years, the intel Hedda provided has proved priceless. What had she done to give herself away? It sure as hell can’t be my fault.*

*It might be a ploy to bleed me for more money. If, however, her fears are justified, we have a problem. On any other day*

of the week, extracting Hedda would be a straight in-and-out job – but not this evening.

This evening, I know for a fact that Eva is in there too. And, where Eva goes, at least two – usually more – of her armed, muscle-headed minions go as well. With her neatly bobbed silver hair, her cyanotic shade of lipstick and her round-framed, rimless glasses, she looks like a soap-opera regular just waiting to dish out praise and punishment in equal measure. Those who underestimate her because of her appearance or the quiet way she speaks don't live to repeat the same mistake.

I used to work for Dan on a mutual backscratching basis. I'd provide him with info as and when requested or required and he'd do the same for me. It'd been a symbiotic relationship based on need and greed – and it worked. But then Dan was inconvenient enough to get himself killed. And Eva had firmly closed the door on my services. Bitch!

The traffic is so bad that it takes me a ridiculous ten minutes to drive round the block as I search for a parking space, but it does give me a chance to get my head together. Earlier today, Callie Hadley proclaimed in court that she was Tobias Durbridge's defence counsel. That decision is going to bite her on the arse and then keep chomping.

I resign myself to yet another circuit in the hunt for a parking space when luckily someone pulls out of a spot almost in front of the nightclub where I imagine Eva sits like a queen spider in her web filled with silk-wrapped victims. Dinner for days. Before me, some stationary driver in an SUV has their reversing lights on, waiting for the car that's about to vacate the parking spot I've got my eye on. The

moment the car pulls away from the kerb, I nip into the space before the SUV driver has a chance to reverse. They beep their horn. Ignoring it, I get out of my car.

*'Didn't you see that I was waiting for that parking space?'* A beautiful Cross woman with locs and hooped earrings winds down her window to shout at me.

*Ignoring her, I head towards the nightclub.*

*'You! I'm talking to you. Didn't you see that I wanted that space?'*

*I call back. 'Like my mother repeatedly told me – I want doesn't always get.'*

*'Arse. Hole!'* the woman screams at me to a backdrop of other drivers beeping at her to move and stop blocking the road.

*I've been called worse. Besides, if you snooze, you lose. The woman driver should have learned that life lesson by now.*

*Looking at the nightclub, I decide that a more discreet approach might serve me better. I could just try walking in the front door, but if I did that the chances of being carried out in a rubbish bag were fair to middling. I don't fancy those odds. The alley at the side of the club it is then. It's lined with industrial bins, filled to overflowing with black bags. The smell alone is enough to knock anyone of a weak disposition off their feet. As I approach the back door of Ava's, I hear an unmistakable sound which pins my feet to the ground.*

*Pop! Pop!*

*Pause.*

*Pop! Pop! Pop!*



*The sound is like hands being clapped with cupped palms. I'd know it anywhere. The pitch of the second set of pops was slightly lower than the first, indicating at least two different guns had been fired. Guns with suppressors to silence the blasts.*

*I stumble backwards into a bin that scrapes along the wall thanks to the weight of my body. The noise isn't a lot, but it's enough. And enough might as well have been a trumpet blasting. I turn and sprint back down the alleyway, hugging the bins as I run. Behind me, I hear the back door that leads straight to Ava's kitchen being opened, its prolonged creak an indication of years of neglect.*

*I duck down behind the closest bin. Some bags of rubbish have spilled out beside me and onto the ground. I don't hesitate. Squatting down on my haunches, I pull the filthy bags over myself. My hand bursts right through one of them, entering a slimy, stinking mass that's a mess, but the least of my worries at the moment. Running footsteps are fast approaching. I duck down further, pulling another reeking bag over my head. The smell alone makes me want to gag. I clench my lips together and hold my breath to try and control my upchuck reflex. Two sets of footsteps run right past.*

*'Shit! Where did he go?' A woman's voice begins to curse up a blue streak.*

*'He can't have got far.' The accompanying man's voice answers her.*

*Their footsteps start again, fading away like a sinister Doppler effect. I throw off the bin bags and immediately strip off my jacket to give it a good shake. Bits of food and*

worse fly off my now-ruined woollen jacket. My olive-green jeans are in only marginally better shape. Wiping my hands on my jacket and using it to brush down my trousers, I fold it over my arm and stroll out of the alley like I haven't a care in the world, heading in the opposite direction to the footsteps.

I force myself to saunter. Running into a crowd of ambling pedestrians will immediately give the game away. I head back to my car. Those around me who get too close take one whiff and immediately widen the distance between us, giving me a whole colour palette of dirty looks. Like I set out to pong like this on purpose. Anyway, let them gawp. That's fine by me. I turn my head with a deliberate frown, hoping it seems like I'm looking for someone.

Ah . . . A few metres behind me, among the pedestrians, stands a Nought man with collar-length blond hair and matching blond eyebrows. He's wearing a mac and dark trousers. Beside him is a taller brunette woman in jeans, a dark jumper and a brown leather jacket. I might not have noticed them if they hadn't been standing and scanning the people around them who are all on the move. The man and woman each have one hand tucked beneath their coats. They still have their guns.

Heading towards my car, I dig into my trouser pocket and press the car-key fob. Thankfully, there's no need to take it out. I open the door with slow, steady movements – nothing rushed, nothing suspicious. Immediately locking the doors from the inside, I wait for a gap in the traffic to pull out. A sudden rap on my window makes me start. The tall brunette woman, with doll's eyebrows and a vivid red-lipstick smile, is

peering in at me. She indicates that I should lower the window.

'Can I help you?' I take a surreptitious glance in the driver's mirror. There's a bus behind me indicating that it's about to pull into the kerb.

'Could you wind down your window, please?' the brunette says, one hand still inside her jacket. 'You've got a lettuce leaf stuck to your arse.'

'And you think it's yours?'

A tap on the passenger window. The blond guy has joined her in flanking my car. He taps again on the window and points downwards. The bus pulls in, momentarily blocking the traffic. I floor it, wrenching the steering wheel round to dart out into the street. The woman beside my car leaps out of the way, only just in time. I see the two of them racing after me, arms outstretched, guns pointing in my direction.

A single shot shatters my back window and whizzes past my ear out of the front windscreen, leaving a hole with a spiderweb of cracks around it. Rude! The traffic light up ahead turns amber, then red. I'm practically standing on the accelerator now. My car roars over the junction just as the oncoming traffic starts moving. I hear the squeal of brakes and a colossal bang as one car rear-ends another, but I don't look back. What the hell just happened? That was clumsy. I can't believe I was amateur enough to let Eva's minions almost get the drop on me. And, worse, they'd seen my face.

I must be losing my touch. Another reason to get the ransom money quickly and run. Proof positive that I'm getting too old for this shit. I'll need to ditch the car and

report it stolen. Damn shame. I like it. Time to regroup and do some fast thinking. First and foremost, I need to find out who it was in Ava's nightclub who'd just gone to meet their maker. If it was Hedda, then I only have a couple of days to voluntarily vamoose. My to-do list for the next twenty-four hours has to be strictly priorities only.

- Job number one - find Troy Ealing and Liberty Jackman.
- Onerous but necessary: next job - keep them alive just long enough to ensure I get money from Tobias Durbridge.
- No mercy. Dispose of Troy and Liberty and get rid of any and all evidence that I had anything to do with them reaching their expiry dates.
- No slip-ups. Disappear to somewhere lush where no one will find me.
- Yay for me! Live in comfort and harmony with my conscience and, more importantly, my bank account for the rest of my days.

Now that was a plan I could definitely live with. First things first. Find Troy and Liberty.

# Daily Shouter Online

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## **Prop use skyrocketing among Crosses. Juma Diniti, Health Secretary, calls for a 'whole-health approach' to solving drugs crisis**

Figures released by the National Public Health Authority (NPHA) revealed a significant rise in the number of Crosses addicted to Prop. The synthetic drug has long been a scourge within Nought communities, but there has been a sharp rise in its use among the rest of the population of Albion.

Juma Diniti, Health Secretary, stated that the government had to employ a 'whole-health approach' to tackling the drugs crisis. 'This government is committed to rolling out more drugs prevention programmes across our schools nationwide and the building of many more rehabilitation centres. We will also be working tirelessly to hunt down and bring to justice those involved in the manufacture and distribution of this evil drug. Prop ruins lives and families. We in the government need to fight fire with fire.'

Sean Laverty, director of Abbey Rehab Centres, said that the government have been slow beyond belief in tackling the serious problem of Prop addiction in this country. 'Funny how, when Prop was seen as a mainly Nought problem, the government's rhetoric was all about punishment and prison. Nought kids on Prop – lock them away. Nought men and women on Prop – send them to prison. Nought families and communities devastated – don't do drugs then.'

But, when the Prop problem begins to spill over into Cross communities, then it's a different story altogether. Cross kids on Prop? Send them to hospital and juvenile rehabilitation centres. Cross men and women on Prop? Send them to rehab and spend money to help them get their lives back on track. Cross families and communities devastated? Track down and crack down on Prop drug manufacturers and dealers. We have been begging the government for years to take this problem seriously. If they had listened, Prop use and abuse wouldn't be sweeping through the country at the rate it is now.'





**THEN**

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**Dan's Dinner Party**





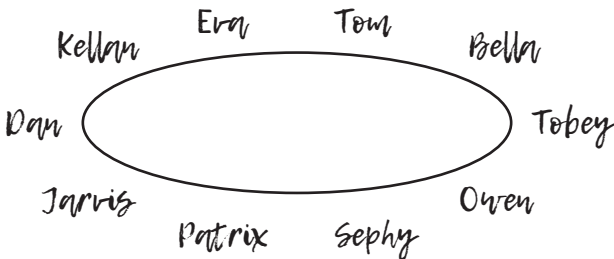


### three. Place Names

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As I circled slowly round the dinner table, checking the place name cards, my frown deepened. No, no, no. This wouldn't do at all. Irritation rose, entirely focused on George, my absent butler, and the proposed dinner-guest placement, even though I'd given no specific instructions as to where my guests were supposed to sit. Gathering up the cards, I buzzed round the table, rearranging them.

Each card was thoughtfully placed with malicious intent and a satisfied smile. That was better! I was at the head of the table where I should be, and directly opposite Tobey. I wanted to look my so-called friend in the eyes when I rained down vengeance on him.



My forthcoming *sinner* party was going to be a winner. There wasn't a single guest attending who didn't have a dodgy past or something to hide. Not one.

That's what made each of them so perfect.

They had all accepted my invitation to dinner after it was made clear that *no* was not an acceptable answer. I didn't particularly care what made them turn up so long as they came. Because, as much as they loathed me, each of them despised Tobey Durbridge that much more – and that's precisely what I was relying on.

Tobias Durbridge, set to be elected Prime Minister of the entire nation within days, was about to choke on his just deserts. And I was going to be front and centre to do the serving. Tonight was all about payback.

Tobey had moved onwards and upwards from Mayor of Meadowview to Junior Minister for the Environment to Shadow Minister for Education to actual Prime Minister. Quite a trajectory for someone still in his thirties, and until now unheard of for a Nought. And, on his journey, Tobey had lost sight of the first rule of getting ahead: don't forget your friends. Certainly don't abandon them. He'd conveniently ignored who'd been instrumental in getting him each and every one of those political positions. That's what raked at my skin with fistfuls of needles and pins – the utter ingratitude. Tobey wouldn't have anything, *be* anything, without me and my support and, more importantly, my money over the years. Even now, I didn't want to believe it, although my suspicions had proved to be well founded and grounded in actual fact. After all the many sacrifices I'd made, Tobey was going to kick me in the teeth by kicking

me to the kerb. He thought he could toss me out like yesterday's garbage. Well, I had a gift bag in mind for each of my dinner guests, something none of them would ever forget.

Including Tobey.

*Especially* Tobey – the unappreciative son of a bitch. Tonight he was going to get exactly what he deserved. The anticipation was delicious.

'Mr Jeavons?' There came a discreet knock on the dining-room door before George the butler appeared. 'Mr Jeavons, I thought I should let you know that Ms Monroe has found her present and its accompanying note.'

*Shit.* 'And her mood?'

'I think it's fair to say she's not happy, sir.' George was, as ever, the master of understatement.

'Where is she?'

'Looking for you, sir.'

'I'll see her in my study.'

'Very good, sir.' George left the room as discreetly as he'd arrived.

I wasn't far behind him. I headed through the kitchen and straight along the hall to get to the study, circumventing the rest of my apartment. I'd barely sat down and warmed the leather chair behind my desk when Bella flung open the door and burst into the room like a tornado. An extremely pissed-off tornado. I braced myself.

Incoming.

## four. Isabella Monroe

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‘Dan, what is this?’ Bella strode up to my desk and jiggled the necklace in her hand in front of my face. I leaned back. She was too close. I didn’t appreciate people getting all up in my personal space like that, not without an invitation.

‘A sapphire necklace. What does it look like?’ I asked. ‘Chopped liver?’ It was a gift, and a bloody expensive one at that. ‘Don’t you like it?’

‘It’s ridiculously garish.’

More ingratitude. ‘Give it back then.’ I held out my hand.

Bella ignored the gesture. ‘Never mind the necklace – I’m talking about the note attached to it.’ She was furious. She lowered her gaze and started to read out my handwritten note. “‘Bella, thanks for the fun times and memories. George will take you to wherever you want to go. Good luck.’” What the hell is this?’

‘I’m letting you go,’ I said evenly. ‘It is what it is.’

‘You’re doing *what*?’

‘Did I slip into some obscure Martian dialect or something?’ I frowned. ‘OK, here it is in as few syllables as possible. You’re out of here. You don’t live here any more. It was fun while it lasted, but we both knew it wouldn’t be forever.’

The range of emotions twisting on Bella's face was fascinating to watch. She was trying to figure out precisely how to play her next card.

'But, Dan babe, we're good together. You said so yourself.' Her voice took on a wheedling, needy, baby-girl tone.

The wrong play. I shook my head.

'We *were* good together. For a while, you served your purpose,' I said honestly. And yes, I admit I was being brutal, but it would take nothing less to shake off Bella. Any hesitancy on my part and she'd cling like a limpet mine – with the same destructive results. 'We've had some fun these last few weeks, Bella. Let's just leave it at that, shall we?'

'But I love you, Dan—'

I burst out laughing, a genuine, raucous chortle. I couldn't help it. 'Oh, please don't insult my intelligence, Bella. You chased after me for one reason and one reason only: to get back at Tobey. And, as you're not a Neapolitan Mastiff to look at, I let you. But it's over.'

'What about you? Why did you ask me to move in with you? Why let me live here all these weeks? Because it suited your inferiority complex to have someone who was once with Tobey warming your sheets? That's it, isn't it? You are so jealous of Tobey that you can hardly see straight. He's smart, ambitious, good-looking, charismatic and a great lover – all the things you will never be and can never buy, in spite of all your blood money.'

*This bitch!*

'And what does that make you?' I asked, forcing myself to stay calm. 'I'm so deficient, yet it didn't stop you accepting my invitation to live here for a while, did it? And no doubt

it'll take you less than a week to find some other poor rich schlub to take my place. Bella, it's over. Tomorrow morning I want you gone. Be a good girl and accept that.'

'You bastard!' The change in Bella's tone was not unexpected, but chilling nonetheless. 'You're throwing me out? Well, this *woman* is going to make you regret treating me like shit on your shoe. You just see if I don't.'

'I hope you're not going to make a scene in front of my guests tonight,' I said with a sigh. 'You know how I hate unnecessary drama. I had hoped to give you the necklace tomorrow morning – that's why I hid it in my desk drawer – but I guess you had to go and snoop.' I couldn't resist adding, 'You're good at that.'

'What's that supposed to mean?'

*Really?*

'Oh, we both know exactly what it means – *babe*. You're a sensei at minding everyone else's business but your own. Now leave. I have some phone calls to make.'

'You are a scum-weasel and I'll make you pay for this,' said Bella stormily.

'Oh, have some class and get lost,' I said, my patience finally at an end.

A moment later and the study door was slammed with such ferocity that my ears popped. What were the chances of Bella leaving my apartment before the dinner party? Slim to microscopic. Not while she still thought she stood a chance of changing my mind. My guess was she'd be the perfect dinner-party guest, alluring and entertaining, to try to make her last night in my apartment the perfect one. No doubt she was hoping that I'd be stupid enough to think

twice about kicking her out. It wasn't going to happen, but it'd be fun to watch her work. What were the chances of Bella accepting that it was over? Slim to non-existent. And the chances of her finally leaving my residence within the next twenty-four hours with no drama whatsoever? Minuscule.

We were all in for an evening of fireworks – to say the least.





## five. Kellan Bruemann

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Kellan Bruemann was the first external guest to arrive. Of course he was. Free booze. He wasn't so much a man as an odious little dagger tick, latching onto my skin every chance he got, to try to suck the lifeblood from me. George came into the study to announce his arrival, but, as it was only Kellan, I didn't bother to get up. He and Bella could entertain each other for a while. Kellan was a bore and a tedious one at that. No doubt he'd already found his way to the drinks cabinet and was making friends with some of my finest cognac. There'd be time enough to deal with him later.

However, the desire to finish some paperwork didn't save me from interruption. Less than five minutes after George announced his arrival, Kellan strode into my study uninvited and unwelcome. His cornrowed hair was not as neat as it might've been, and he wore khaki trousers with a nondescript grey shirt under a mud-brown jacket. Had he got dressed in the dark? Kellan had barely taken a couple of steps into the room when he stumbled and had to grab the back of a chair to steady himself. Tippy already? Typical of that clown.

'What d'you want, Bruemann?'

'I want to buy back all the shares in my company that you currently own,' said Kellan as he straightened up.

*What?*

*Well now . . .*

‘You’re broke. How d’you propose to buy them back? With your leg hairs?’

‘I have a sponsor,’ Kellan announced with a degree of arrogance I hadn’t seen from him in quite some time – a number of years, in fact. ‘A backer who is prepared to lend me money on very favourable terms to help me get back my company from you.’

And the joker honestly thought that was all there was to it. He really was a fool. His sponsor though . . . Now that was troubling. Who’d be crazy enough to lend this drunken sot that kind of money?

‘I want to buy back my business and buy out the mortgage you hold on my home. Everything you own of mine, I want to buy back,’ Kellan continued.

‘Just who is this benefactor of yours?’

Kellan clamped his lips together like a petulant child.

‘When did this angel first get in touch with you?’ I asked.

‘Last week.’

‘By phone? In person? By intermediary? How?’

‘What difference does it make?’ Kellan said with hostility. ‘The point is, I can reclaim everything that was once mine. Everything you took from me.’

‘Not without my agreement you can’t. Just because it was once yours doesn’t mean it stays that way for ever and ever, amen. You sold your shit to me, Kellan. That makes it legally mine, and I have the paperwork and the lawyers to prove it.’

‘I will pay you the market price for my company’s shares

and repay you more than my home is worth. I just want to wind the clock back and turn my life around,' said Kellan.

'Wouldn't it be lovely if life had an undo-redo button like that?' I smiled.

Kellan shook his head. 'Dan, please. I'm making you a more than fair offer. Please.'

'Tell me who your sponsor is and I might consider it.'

'I can't do that.'

I shrugged. 'Then I can't help you. The answer is no.'

'Please, Dan. This is my last chance to get my wife and children back.'

'Which part of "no" is confusing you? The N or the O? I'm not selling you one share, one brick, one molecule of air that you previously sold to me. Everything you once owned belongs to me now and that's the way it'll stay.'

Kellan stood before me, pure, undisguised hatred freezing on his face. He was not so much shaking as actually vibrating with rage. I couldn't suppress the smile that played on my lips as I watched. This man truly hated my guts. I had better buckle my breastplate.

'Serves me right for thinking I could do business with a man like you in the first place,' said Kellan, bitterness deepening his voice.

'A man like me?' I enquired.

Kellan's eyes narrowed. 'A money-grubbing, no-class thug who's read a few books and throws around the odd fancy word or two to try and convince everyone that he's not the scum-sucking turd he really is.'

My smile broadened. 'That's quite accurate actually. No lies detected.'

How fascinating that, in his summation of my many deficient qualities, being a blunker was not mentioned as one of them.

‘But, Kellan, don’t forget: you came to me because no bank would lend your failing business any more money. You were running your construction company into the ground by not moving with the times, and you wanted money and muscle, and didn’t care where either came from. Don’t come bleating to me because you couldn’t be arsed to read the small print.’

‘I had some cash-flow problems and some union-activity snags. You took advantage—’

‘I took advantage?’ OK, now I was triggered. I stood up. ‘You had some . . . stains in your life and I took care of them as requested. You’re the one who reneged on our contract to pay back what you owed and you want the whole world to feel sorry for you. Why don’t you try owning your shit instead of dumping it at my front door?’

‘Dan, I’m warning you. Give me back what’s mine while you still have the chance,’ said Kellan.

‘Or what?’

‘Or suffer the consequences.’

‘Oh, do be brief! Is that all you’ve got, Bruemann? What will you do? Give me a sideways look? Stick pins in a straw effigy? Damn, but you’re pathetic. Listen closely because I’m only going to say this once more. I have no intention of selling my shares or anything else back to you. It’s called business, Kellan. Just business. Close the door on your way out.’

‘You don’t want to test me, Dan,’ said Kellan quietly. ‘You don’t want me to get drastic.’

I burst out laughing. ‘You? Get drastic? Oops, did I blink and miss it? Go away, you pitiful parasite. Go drown yourself in a drink or five.’

I sat back down and bent my head to peruse the paperwork on my desk. I didn’t look up again until I heard the study door click shut.

Loser!



**NOW**

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