

# CHAPTER 1.

O h, Jonathan.

I mentally rolled my eyes, if such a thing were possible, and kept my physical eyes focused on the woman singing. She had a lovely voice, not quite like a bird, more like a sky full of them, layered one on top of the other, canaries, crows, sparrows, harmonizing and reveling in their differences. The effect was hypnotic.

I glanced at my brother again.

“Excuse me,” I said.

“Yeah?”

“You just agreed to wear pink at my wedding.”

He tore his gaze from her, and I felt the air between them rip. I hadn’t felt anything but annoyance until he looked at me again, and his entire face changed from voracious and single-minded to the usual; bemused and arrogant.

“I agreed to let Leanne make my suit in the downtown factory on the twenty-fifth of January.”

“I’d never know you were paying attention.”

“I was.”

He was, but the pull of the woman standing by the piano was too much for him, and he looked back at her, sipping his drink. I felt a sudden yarn ball of tension wrap up in my chest. I couldn’t exactly place it, but it irritated me.

“Do you know her?” I asked.

“We have a thing later tonight.”

“Good, because I was going to say, you might want to introduce yourself before you slobber on her. Maybe dinner and a show.”

He smiled a big, wide Jonathan grin. We all knew he was a womanizing prick, but he rarely let us see that side of him. He was always a gentleman on the face of it, until I saw him look at that singer. It made me uncomfortable not just because he was my brother, which should have been enough, but because of something else, an uneasy, empty feeling I chased away.

“You’ve planned this wedding to within an inch of its life,” he said. “Go to Tahoe or something for a few months. Slap some skis on. You’re giving yourself an ulcer.”

“Mister Control, calling me too controlling?”

The singer stopped and people clapped. She was good. The ovation was fully deserved, but my brother just applauded with his eyes and tipped his glass to her. When she saw him, her jaw tightened with anger. Apparently, he knew her well enough to piss her off.

He leaned over and whispered in my ear, “It’s the control that makes the challenges worthwhile. Otherwise, it’s just luck.”

I didn’t know if he was implying that I should just let my wedding plans make themselves. It stopped mattering when the singer made a beeline for our table.

“Hi, Jonathan,” she said, a big, fake smile draped across her face.

“Monica,” he said. “This is Theresa.”

“That was beautiful,” I said.

“Thanks.”

“You were incredible,” Jonathan said. “I’ve never heard anything like that.”

“I’ve never heard of a man trying to sandwich another woman between fingering me and fucking me in the same day.”

I almost spit out my Cosmo. Jonathan laughed. I felt sorry for the girl. She looked like she was going to cry. I hated my brother, just then. Hated him with a dogged vehemence, because not only was he messing around with her feelings, he still looked at her like he wanted to eat her alive. When I saw how she looked at him, I knew he was going to win. He was going to have her and a dozen others, and she wouldn’t even know what was happening, until he let her go. I couldn’t watch.

“I’m going to the ladies’,” I said, and slid out of the booth, not looking back at my brother and that poor girl.

I leaned against the back of the stall, staring at the single strip of toilet paper dangling off the roll. I had a few squares in my bag, just in case my brother brought me to yet another dump. But I didn’t want to use them. I wanted to dig into that feeling of emptiness and find the bottom of it.

wanted to dig into that feeling of emptiness and find the bottom of it.

*You always have a few squares in your bag. And two advil. And a tampon.*

Daniel's voice in a recent memory, listing the stuff I carried for emergencies; his face, smiling as we were out the door for some charity thing; him in a tux, me in something or other, with a satin clutch into which a normal woman couldn't fit more than a tube of lipstick and a raisin.

"You got your whole kit in there?" he'd asked.

"Of course."

"Space and time are your slaves."

I'd been pleased at the way he looked at me, as if he couldn't be more impressed and proud, as if I ruled the world and his servitude was the natural order. Pleased as a king opening a pie and finding the miracle of four and twenty blackbirds.

But though I'd been with him seven years, he'd never looked at me the way Jonathan looked at that singer. Never.

And there, in Daniel's look of reverence, was why I wasn't like that singer. That look from a man was temporary, lasting only as long as the length of his sexual curiosity. My fiancé's love was forever, and it comforted me.

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Cinderella didn't turn into a pumpkin at midnight, her carriage did, but Daniel looked at his watch every time I came home late and said, "I was just heating the oven to make a pie out of you."

It was our joke, and I enjoyed the familiarity of it. Once, the oven had actually been turned on when I arrived at 12:11. He'd been leaning over the counter in his pajamas, reading the paper. I came in from a night chasing Deirdre across a bar. He looked at the oven clock and said it.

"I was just heating the oven to make a pie out of you." He'd smirked, and I heard a hiss from the oven. I hit him in the arm and he gathered me in his arms as if he never wanted to let me go.

But even if he'd baked me into a pie, he wouldn't eat it. He'd revere it. He'd honor it, leave it untouched on the counter with candles burning. It would be safe, undamaged, an altar to his idea of perfection.

At least, that was what he told me.

"You leaving?" Jonathan said when I met him back at the bar.

"What gave you that idea?"

"You're holding your keys."

"I saw her on the way back from the bathroom. The singer. She apologized. For what, I don't know."

He laughed. "We had an encounter a few hours ago at her job. She thought you were my date. Cute, wasn't it? The way she just came right up and laid it down? Bold. I like that."

"I told her you were an asshole."

He laughed again. The guy was unflappable.

"You know what you need?" I said, "A stalker. You need to push a woman just an inch too far until she goes off the deep end."

"I'm honest with—" He started his usual, but I cut him off.

"It doesn't matter if you're not honest with yourself. It taints everything."

"Are you all right?"

"I wish you'd stop messing around. It's unbecoming. And honestly, I don't think you can be happy in the end like this. All these women. Maybe you feel a little satisfaction in the moment, but it eats away at a person."

He pushed his elbows back and leaned on the bar, whiskey at his waist. "How would you know?"

"I know *you*. What you're doing now, it's making you dissolute."

"Big fucking word, Theresa."

I'd gone too far. I'd done the high horse thing again, or I was about to. Because the words on the tip of my tongue sounded like, *the last time you looked happy you were married*. After that came comparisons to Daniel and me, the happiest couple in Los Angeles. We told each other everything, paired like perfect puzzle pieces, affectionate and strong, even through two power careers. After his wife leaving for another man, letting the words on the tip of my tongue free would have been cruel. His happiness was with her, and his misery was her fault.

"I have to go or Daniel's going to—"

*Bake me in a pie.*

I didn't finish, just waved the end of the sentence off. Jonathan put his arm around me. "Come on, then. I'll walk you out before he worries you were out with a womanizing asshole."

It was my turn to laugh.

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We lived in an old corset and girdle factory downtown. It had been abandoned in the sixties, used as a warehouse for a stonecutter and cabinet maker, then expanded and converted into lofts just before the Great Recession. The units had gone at firesale prices, which didn't matter to me. I could afford whatever I needed, but Daniel insisted on paying half, and the recession had hit him hard. So a fire sale downtown loft at a million and change it was.

In the intervening years, the blocks surrounding had turned around. The city cut off traffic to the streets at night, and restaurants servicing the three buildings in walking distance had popped up; nice restaurants with thick wooden tables and recessed lighting and brushed chrome fixtures. The place Daniel and I usually met was in the first floor of our building. Town & Country served the basics, made to gourmet standards. Macaroni and cheese with gruyere and Roquefort. Hamburger with truffle oil and sourdough. Chicken salad with wasabi mayo and dandelion greens, which was a combination so hot and bitter they served it with a side of dried fruit.

Ten years ago, you couldn't get a donut three blocks away without getting jacked; the story of Los Angeles at the turn of the second millennium was the story of the wealthy moving from the city's perimeter, back to the center. And if anyone was "the wealthy," it was me.

This was today's campaign angle. Our beloved district attorney bought in a distressed neighborhood, and because of his efforts, look at it now. Daniel Brower, youngest mayoral candidate in the history of Los Angeles. And he was going to win.

The place was usually crowded with late diners, mostly our age, early to mid 30s, no kids, dressed from work in some creative field or another. He was typically at the bar watching the Padres lose, fingers stroking the condensation off a bottle of something foreign. But not today. Today, the place was wall to wall reporters and hangers on.

I said my hellos to reporters and staff I knew, stopping at Clarice, the twenty-five year old Stanford PhD who had worked her way up to speechwriter in four short months.

"How's he doing?" I whispered, getting jostled.

"Taking it up the ass over Donna Maria Carloni."

I'd asked her to not speak like that, anyone could hear and it wasn't her reputation she'd hurt with her filterless mouth. She didn't listen.

I pushed my way through to Daniel. The lights washed out his face, and the pace and clarity with which he made his point made him look more like a white hot laser than a man. He saw me and smiled, holding his hand out for me. I melted the same as I had the day we met. I slipped my hand into his, and he touched my engagement ring with his thumb before tightening his grip. He kissed my hair and looked back at the cameras.

"You haven't prosecuted a major case in eighteen months," Max Brecker of WPSN shouted. "How can you take credit for turning this neighborhood around?"

"It takes more than eighteen months to turn a neighborhood around. It takes commitment. And that's what I have. A commitment to Los Angeles and its people. Every neighborhood, every block, every house." He spoke to Max as if they were friends, which they weren't, unless you consider two people who needed their conflict to maintain their careers friends.

I managed well under the lights. I stood straight and still when he spoke. When he put his hand on my lower back I let him guide me to wherever his handlers had signaled. My role felt real, as if I'd trained for it my whole life.

"Manny Guevarra was shot down in East Hollywood two years ago," Brecker shouted, thick black frames slipping down his nose. "You haven't brought a single charge against anyone."

"Who should I bring to trial, Max?" Daniel's game was to look so angry, he used the first name. We'd worked on that and his execution was flawless. "You want me to put an innocent citizen in jail? Or should I drum up some charges and disrupt a man's family? What would make you happy?"

"The killer in jail, Dan."

"Me too," Daniel said, dripping integrity and sincerity. "Me too. And throwing charges up against El Gato Blanco or whatever Italian organizations look convenient at the moment, well, that's not justice, and it won't make our city safe."

He looked down at me. "Time to go."

I squeezed his hand and let myself get pulled away.

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"Brecker's a hack," Clarice said as she walked us over the concrete floors of the building's hall, under the warm, recessed lighting, black and white archival photos of the old city, the dark woods imported from an Asian island.

"Shh," I said. The concierge was right there.

"It's all right Tink." His name for me was short for Tinkerbell, the magician who whispered in a boy's ear.

"No it's not—"

Clarice interrupted, "You have a five a.m. at Dome Diner. I have some phrasing for—"

"I can't," he said, frustration all over his tone. She looked petulant over it. "I need to sleep in. That's the final word." He stared her down. "We can use the phrasing some other time. I need sleep."

In addition to her filterless mouth, she didn't have the poise or grace to hide her expressions, and this one said she was very annoyed that he couldn't make an appearance with truckers and early-morning laborers. She took it all a little too personally for me, but Daniel liked the way she strung sentences together.

"He'll see you at seven tomorrow," I said, pulling him away. We left her in the lobby and exited into the courtyard where our loft opened.

The eight foot-high door opened with a whoosh, pushing the mustard curtains aside. The whole front of the loft facing the courtyard had tempered glass windows, two stories high, in metal framing, exactly like the loft next door, and the five to the left of that. We had a little front yard with a table, and container flowers, and we had Daniel, who was finally going to bed with me at the same time.

"Come on, honey." I said. "Let's just go upstairs."

I cut myself an apple while Daniel brushed his teeth. I hadn't eaten nearly enough during my dinner with my brother. He'd put me off my meal with his feral look and his philandering ways. And that woman, the way she'd looked. Lonely, somehow. Bereft.

I heard the water run for a spit, then stop, then start again. Way back when, we would have brushed our teeth together, entangling our arms and switching brushes, doing each other's teeth, swapping spit without touching, and laughing at the distastefulness of it. But the campaign had taken a lot out of him, and he usually slipped into bed with me in the wee hours.

Daniel padded down the stairs in his tee and boxers. He was beautiful, even slumped over from a bad day. Broad in his chest and shoulders, flat in the stomach, with lovely soulful blue/grey eyes.

"You coming?" he asked.

"Maybe." I put the last apple slice in my mouth and hopped onto the counter, putting my palms out. He paused, as if I'd done something wholly unexpected and stepped toward me, sliding his hands over mine, up my arms and around me, resting his head on my chest.

"How's your brother?" he asked.

"Still philandering until Jessica comes back." I said it around the apple, and put it to his lips. He took it with his fingers, and I bit my half off.

"She was perfect for him."

"I know."

"What are you doing?" he asked, chewing as the tip of my nose explored his jawline.

"Kissing your neck." I wrapped my legs around his waist.

"You have apple in your mouth."

I swallowed. "No, I don't."

"It's late."

"So?" I put my lips on his and pressed his stomach against me. He opened his mouth, which tasted of the same apple, and beer, and minty fresh toothpaste. My tongue tested for his, waiting for it to awaken and invade my mouth. It did, and he pushed his body against mine, hitching himself up so I could feel his erection between my legs. I pulled my skirt up so I could spread my legs farther apart, and feel all of him, that beautiful, comforting dick. He slipped me off the counter and carried me to the couch. I wiggled out of my underpants and he released himself from his shorts.

When he leaned down to kiss me, I felt his erection on my clit, just a touch, and I groaned.

"Do we need the lube?" he asked.

"I don't think so."

"Good." He held the head against me, and I braced against him as he pushed forward, finding the opening. Halfway in, he took a deep breath. "You're right about the lube."

"Yes."

"Yes."

He thrust forward, gently, until he was all the way in.

"Oh, Tink." He whispered in my ear. I clutched his t-shirt and he moved over me, his breathing steady, then less so. I felt the tinglings of something at the outer edges of my awareness, a sparkle of sensation, a general pleasantness. He sped his thrusts, and I made my hips rigid to meet him. He placed his forearms on either side of me and in three hard jerks, he groaned into my neck.

He felt good sliding in and out of me. The pulse at the base of his dick was a sweet finale with his shortened breaths. When he kissed my cheek with a heavy breath I knew he was done.

"How are you doing?" he asked.

"Little help."

He got up onto his knees and looked down at me for a second before gently spreading my legs. He kissed inside my knee. up my thigh. to my center. He never complained about having just had his dick there.

instead loving pleasing me after sex, or before, sometimes he'd stop making love to me just to put his lips to me.

I put my hand on his head and stroked his hair. He kissed my clit gently, then flicked his tongue over it, spreading me apart with his thumbs, exposing me to his eyes, the air, his mouth, which surrounded it in a warm embrace, a funnel of dampness and light suction.

His tongue was made of magic and fire, teasing and taunting me. When the air dried the exposed skin, he used it to reawaken the surface, bringing every millimeter of me to life, my throbbing full opening got the benefit of his fingers, gently coursing around it, keeping it aroused, needing more, while his tongue ran slowly up and down my clit, punctuating his ministrations with a little suck, a flick, then moving slowly again.

His tongue was sweet and gentle, coaxing pleasure out of me like a kitten in a crawlspace. His fingers worked the outside of my opening, never entering me. He knew I couldn't come with something inside me, not since I was thirteen had that miracle happened, but the teasing threat of it brought me close. He was so good, so skilled, knowing my body better than I did.

He seemed to know when I was about to burst, and slowed down, pulling his mouth away while keeping his fingers working. He kissed my clit sweetly, once, twice, until a squeak came from my throat, and he sucked on me again, tenderly at first, then with increasing vigor, until the whole of the world became the movement of his tongue, the heat of his mouth, the burst of dimensions and space between my legs. My back stiffened and my hips levitated from the cushions he held himself firm on me, still sucking to the point of glorious release and I twisted. He let me go.

I reached for him and he crawled into my arms and wrapped myself around him.

"Tell me," I whispered in his ear, his smooth cheek against mine. "What's bothering you?"

"There's nothing. I need a big takedown before the election and there's nothing there. The Donna's clean."

"You're not looking hard enough."

"It's complicated, but all up front. Brecker's pushing me to open a case on someone clean, and if I don't I look like the wrong guy for mayor."

"How complicated are the books?"

"A spider web." He let his lips brush my neck. "You smell nice."

"Let me look at them. The books."

"Absolutely not."

"Why? You think I can't find something?"

"If anyone can unravel it, you can." He kissed my earlobe. "But these guys? I'm not exposing you to them. If they knew my fiancée found something—"

"You're being silly. No one has to know. I don't have to tell anyone at work. I'm a superstar. Remember?"

He pulled away and looked me in the eye. "No. But thanks. Come on, let's get some sleep."

The next morning, he was so rested he found the energy to make his 5am. When he kissed me on the cheek before he left, he smelled of after shave and a dry cleaned suit. I pulled his pillow under me and buried my face in it, catching another hour of blissful sleep.

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In the next section, we meet Antonio Spinelli, we learn some ugly truths about Daniel, and start Theresa's adventure. There's a good chance I'll distribute this part the same way, mailing list and bloggers, but no promises.

Why am I doing this?

*Spin* is probably maybe going to be late.

Maybe not...but.....

(hides under couch)

Okay, so but....the mailing list got this early. If you weren't on the list, and you want the next chapter early, get on that mailing list....

<http://bit.ly/18bj9oD>