

Chapter 1

Terrence

“Yeah! That’s what I’m talking about, baby!” Terrence Murdoch yelled over the heavy bass before tossing one-hundred-dollar bills into the air and letting them fall like confetti. The cute brunette in front of him showed her appreciation by doing a split on the stage, clad in only a smile and a bright yellow G-string that glowed under the blue-hued stage lights. Two other strippers danced beside her in clear platform stilettos, gyrating and swinging around each pole as Terrence and his friends hooted and yelled with delight in the VIP section of the club.

Terrence didn’t know where to look first. It was a delectable sampling of full breasts, round thighs, and pert behinds. He just wanted to dive in and bask in all the womanly beauty.

He raised his beer bottle and toasted the sexy performance. “I’ve died and gone to heaven!” he cried. He then turned to his older brother, Evan, who had hung back from the stage and chose to stay at the table behind them. “Ain’t they beautiful, man?”

When he saw what Evan was doing, his grin disappeared. He slammed his bottle back to the table in outrage. “Ev, what the . . . what the fuck? Are you kidding me?”

Instead of admiring the strippers, Evan had been peering down at his BlackBerry under the flashing strobe lights. At Terrence’s cry of outrage, the company CEO glanced up from his phone screen.

“Huh?” Evan asked absently. “Oh yeah, it’s great, Terry.” He began to type on the phone keys again.

“Ev, put that damn phone down and look at this, man!”

“I’ll be right with you. Just let me finish this e-mail,” Evan said, still furiously typing. “Got to get this out tonight. They’re in a different time zone.”

Terrence reached over and yanked the BlackBerry out of Evan’s hand, catching his brother by surprise.

“No, look at it now! How can you be doing business when you have this in front of your face?” he asked, jabbing toward the stage.

One of the women dropped to her knees before turning her ass toward the men huddled around her. She did a twerk that made the men holler for more. Another stripper hopped up on a pole and twirled around and around, letting her blond curls dangle inches above the ground.

“I mean . . . come on!” Terrence turned back to look at his brother with a grin that was so wide it could barely be contained on his face. “Look at this!”

Evan gazed at the two strippers, inclined his head, and nodded. “Nice,” he said thoughtfully, like he was considering a new pair of shoes.

“Nice?” Terrence comically looked at the women onstage, whipped his head to glare at his brother, then stared at the women on the stage again. “What the hell do you mean, ‘Nice’?” He jabbed his index finger at the strippers. “Those women are fuckin’ perfect, Ev!”

Evan emphatically shook his head and smiled as he reached into his jacket pocket and whipped out another cell phone. He dragged his index finger across the screen, scrolling through a series of photos. “No, this is perfect.”

He held the glass screen toward Terrence. Terrence squinted under the club lighting to see what his brother was showing him. It was a photo of Evan’s fiancée, Leila. She was wearing a tank top and yoga pants and rolling her eyes as Evan took the picture, like she had wanted anything but to be photographed at that moment.

Terrence had to admit that his future sister-in-law was one gorgeous woman. And Evan had been pining after her for years—hell, decades! He had been secretly in love with her since he was nine years old. In Evan’s mind, Leila Hawkins had probably reached almost mythical proportions in beauty, brains, and loveliness.

But still, how could a man ignore what was right in front of his face? It destroyed the whole purpose of Evan being here at the strip club if he sat toward the back of the room, fiddling on his BlackBerry.

Terrence had invited Evan out with his friends for a night of drinking and debauchery to give Evan a long-needed break. His older brother was a consummate workaholic, and now, when he wasn’t working, he was almost plastered to the side of his new fiancée. Terrence had wanted his big bro to have some fun. But Evan looked like he would be more entertained if he was sitting at his desk going over contracts and sales figures at Murdoch Conglomerated, where he was CEO. Or maybe he’d rather be sitting beside Leila, staring at tablecloth swatches for their wedding reception.

“Are you telling me you aren’t just a little bit interested in looking at those titties?” Terrence pleaded. He once again pointed to the stage. “Not just a little?”

Evan burst into laughter. “I’m sorry, Terry, but from here they look like average breasts to me. But you know what? Go ahead and enjoy yourself. Don’t let me ruin your fun.” He yanked his BlackBerry out of Terrence’s hand. “But if you don’t mind, I’ll take this back.”

Terrence slowly shook his head in bemusement as he watched his brother sit down in one of the leather club chairs and start scanning through his e-mails again.

Operation: Get Evan Turnt Up was going downhill—fast.

Terrence glanced at the drink Evan was now sipping: a Shirley Temple. He could try to ply Evan with alcohol to make him loosen up, but he knew that wouldn’t work. Evan didn’t drink thanks to his alcoholic wife, Charisse. Her drunkenness had been part of the reason they were now getting a divorce—that and the fact that she had been cheating on Evan.

Nope, getting him drunk is out of the question, Terrence thought.

An idea suddenly popped into Terrence’s head. A wicked smile crossed his full lips.

“Well, if they just look like average titties from here. I guess you’re going to have to see them up close.”

Evan frowned quizzically as he lowered his glass back to the marble tabletop and looked up from his e-mail. “I’m sorry . . . what?”

Terrence suddenly turned on his heel, marched toward the stage, and shoved a group of his friends aside so that he was front and center.

“Ladies!” he shouted as he whipped out a series of hundred-dollar bills, spread them into a fan, and brandished them in the air. “My brother would like a lap dance. Now! A grand to the first woman who does it.”

The three strippers paused mid-routine. One almost fell off her pole. Another scrambled off her knees. The three women ran off the stage and came barreling toward Evan, whose mouth was agape. One looked like she nearly twisted her ankle trying to make her way down the short staircase.

“No!” Evan said, holding up his hands in protest and furiously shaking his head. “Really, ladies, I’m fine. I don’t . . . I don’t want a lap dance!”

Terrence cackled as he watched the strippers shove and elbow-check each other to get to Evan first. The blonde turned out to be the victor and promptly fell onto Evan’s lap and started gyrating for all her worth.

“Terry!” Evan yelled, trying his best to rise out of his chair without touching the half-naked women who were huddled around and over him. “Terry!”

“Enjoy it, Ev!” Terrence grabbed his beer and held it up before tossing the hundreds in his hand into the air and taking a swig. “You deserve it!”

“Hey, you forgot this,” Terrence said as he handed Evan his suit jacket.

The two men walked out of the strip club almost two hours later into the chilly February night. A few of Terrence’s friends trailed behind them, laughing and joking with one another.

“I didn’t forget it,” Evan mumbled as he tossed the suit jacket over his forearm. “It was stolen from me.”

Terrence chuckled.

One of the strippers had ripped off Evan’s suit jacket as soon as they had descended on him like a herd of locusts. His necktie had been removed, too, when one of the other strippers used it to bind his hands behind his back when he kept struggling. Another had smothered his verbal protests by shaking her double-Ds in his face.

“Come on! Admit it!” Terrence prodded, looping an arm around Evan’s neck in brotherly affection. “You had fun, didn’t you?”

“It was . . . interesting,” Evan said just as one of the guys behind them leaned over and vomited on the walkway not too far from the club’s red carpet.

“Oh, hell no!” the burly bouncer boomed, hopping off of his stool in front of the door. “Ya’ll better get his ass outta here!” he ordered, making one of the guy’s companions nod and grab his sick friend around the shoulders. Another helped guide him toward a car that was parked at the end of the block.

Evan and Terrence shook their heads in disgust as they watched the trio walk off.

“Is your friend gonna make it?” Evan asked.

Terrence waved his hand dismissively. “He’ll be fine. One of them will get his sorry ass back home tonight. I don’t know what his wife will think when she sees him like that, though, but”—Terrence shrugged—“that’s his problem.”

Evan narrowed his eyes at Terrence. “You had plenty to drink yourself. Are you going to be okay driving back to your place?”

“Me?” Terrence pointed at his chest and laughed. He had a slight buzz, but that was about it. He could remember being in far worse states than he was now. “Man, please! I am far from drunk. Trust me. I’ll be fine. ”

“You sure about that?” Evan asked again, just as a black Lincoln Town Car pulled up to the curb. Evan’s driver climbed out, quickly walked to the rear door, and held it open for him. Evan paused before climbing onto the leather seat. “I could give you a ride, you know.”

Terrence waved him away again as he started to walk in the opposite direction in search of his Porsche. “I’ll be fine, Miss Daisy. Just give Lee a kiss for me. All right?”

“Oh, I most certainly will,” Evan said with a wink before climbing into the sedan. The driver shut the door behind him.

Terrence turned and walked down the block back to his car. He raised the collar of his wool coat to block out the chill and rubbed his hands together to warm them. He bet Evan would give Leila a kiss as soon as he got home. Thanks to the erotic performance the men had witnessed tonight, he bet Evan would give her a lot more than that.

After a few minutes, Terrence spotted his silver Porsche two-seater, and he breathed a sigh of relief. “There’s my baby,” he whispered, almost with reverence.

The strip club hadn’t had valet parking, and he had been loath to leave her parallel-parked along the curb in this neighborhood, but he had had no other choice.

Terrence inspected his car with a careful eye and whispered a prayer of thanks when he saw no dents or scratches. The paint on his Porsche still glistened, and the rims still sparkled from the wash, waxing, and buffing the car had gotten earlier that day.

If the love of Evan’s life was Leila Hawkins, then the love of Terrence’s life was certainly his 2015 Porsche 911 S Coupe. A close second was maybe the De’Longhi ESAM6700 Gran Dama Avant Touch-Screen Super-Automatic Espresso Machine on the granite kitchen countertop back at his condo in Chesterton, Virginia. If he could be buried with that thing, he would.

Terrence didn’t have a love of the female variety, and he had no desire to fall in love with anyone. Oh, he was no monk; he dated often. He had his fair share of girlfriends and one-night stands. But so far, no woman had made him want to “put a ring on it,” so to speak. Terrence had seen the ravages married life could have on a person by witnessing his parents’ horrendous marriage for decades and the trials Evan had gone through for the five and half years he was married to his soon-to-be ex, Charisse.

Though Evan often encouraged him to finally settle down, Terrence couldn’t work up enough optimism about love and relationships to try his hand at anything permanent with a woman. He’d rather live in the moment and collect honeys like they were Pokémon trading cards.

He opened the door of his Porsche and climbed inside. As he drove, he listened to the voice messages on his iPhone. Unlike Evan, he had turned off his cell while inside the club, not wanting to be disturbed.

“Hey, Terry,” a female voice cooed over the phone’s speaker as Terrence merged onto a roadway, “it’s Asia. I’ve texted you three times today, baby! Where are you? I was hoping we could meet up this weekend. Give me a call back when you get this. I miss your fine ass. Byeeeeeee!”

Asia was a waitress at Cuban restaurant downtown. She had full lips, big thighs, and a beautiful smile, but lately, she had become kind of clingy. Terrence wondered if he should call her back or cut her loose.

“Bonsoir, mon ami!” Terrence heard next, instantly making him smile. “Ça va?”

He knew that throaty purr from anywhere. It was Georgette, a blond Victoria’s Secret model based out of Montreal whom he had met back during his modeling days. He loved Georgette because of her good taste in food and wine, her French accent, and because she understood the true definition of “no strings attached” sex. They had been hooking up off and on for the past six years.

“I will be in the city for a few weeks,” Georgette continued. “Let me know if you wish to meet, huh? I packed the lace teddy you like and the . . . you know . . . the stuff that you lick . . . qu’est-ce que c’est? Ah, who cares! I show you, Terry! Je te veux! Can’t wait to see you, mon ami. Au revoir!” He heard kissing sounds and then the line clicked.

Oh hell, yeah, he thought.

He would call her back as soon as he got home. He would check her schedule and make reservations at their favorite spot. After dinner, he’d take her back to his place and they would try out “the stuff that you lick.”

“Terry!” a voice suddenly screeched from his iPhone, snatching him out of his sexual reverie and making him wince. “Terry, you know who this is. Don’t play like you don’t! I saw you with that chick

yesterday. Yeah, she was all up on you. Is she your new girl now? How dare you dump me like I was yesterday's trash, you son of a—"

Terrence reached over the armrest and immediately pressed a button on the phone's glass screen to delete the message.

Oh, Monique, he thought with exasperation.

Now, that was a girl who definitely did not understand the definition of "no strings attached" sex. Monique Washington had given off alarm bells the moment he had met her—she had been high-maintenance, constantly had checked her reflection in mirrors, and had wanted to talk endlessly about trips to Europe and trust funds. But he had pushed his misgivings about her aside. So what if she was a little shallow? He wasn't a deep man himself. And besides, she was good in bed, and when he had told her that he wasn't ready for a real relationship, she had seemed okay with his revelation. But he should have trusted his first instincts. She had turned out to be a real nutcase. She went past clingy and straight to Fatal Attraction, showing up at his condo at all times of the day, threatening other women that he was dating. When he had tried to shake off Monique, she started blowing up his phone, leaving pissed-off and threatening messages.

He wouldn't make that mistake again. If he sensed that a woman wasn't up to staying at a distance, then he wouldn't bother to start anything with her. For now, he would just have to block Monique's number.

"On to the next one," Terrence murmured as he pulled to a stop at a stop sign.

"Hey! Heeeeeeeey!"

Terrence frowned and turned to find two women smiling and waving at him on the sidewalk. Despite the temps being in the low thirties, both women were wearing short skirts and flimsy shawls. One had flowing dark hair. The other looked like she was wearing an auburn wig. They both seemed to be heading home from a hard night of partying.

"Hey, cutie!" the dark-haired one yelled, motioning wildly for him to lower his car window.

Terrence obliged.

"Evening, ladies," he said in his smoothest Billy Dee Williams voice.

They ran toward his Porsche—or more like stumbled—holding onto one another for balance. "Is that your car, baby?" the auburn-haired one slurred, leaning on her friend.

Terrence inclined his head. "I'm driving it, aren't I?"

"Where you headed?" the other asked eagerly, sticking out her chest.

"Home," he answered.

The dark-haired one licked her red lips and smiled. "Well, it looks like we're headed there, too."

"Home with me?" He raised his brows.

The two women nodded in unison. "Yeah! Let us in!" the auburn-wigged one shouted before groping for the passenger door handle and missing it by several inches. She fell back onto the sidewalk instead and landed on her rear, making her wig shift askew. Her friend burst into laughter.

Terrence shook his head. "I'm afraid not, ladies. But get home safely, okay?"

Terrence waved at the comedic duo and floored the accelerator, unaware of the Mitsubishi Galant that was simultaneously plowing through the four-way stop in the opposite direction. It hadn't paused or stopped.

"Hey! Watch out!" one of the girls shouted.

Terrence turned in just enough time to see the bright headlights of the Mitsubishi coming toward him, but not in enough time to brake before the two cars collided.

Tires squealed. Metal crunched. Glass shattered in all directions. That's when the two women began to scream.

Chapter 2

Evan

"Goodnight, Mr. Murdoch," the driver said as Evan climbed out of the Lincoln Town Car while it idled in the circular driveway in front of his home.

"Night, Bill," Evan called back. He paused to tiredly rub his neck. "Oh, and tell your wife I'm sorry for keeping you out so late. All right?"

The driver waved away Evan's apology and grinned over his shoulder. "Don't worry about it, sir. If you keep giving me those bonuses you've been giving me, she won't care if I don't ever come home!"

Evan laughed and shut the passenger door. He watched the car pull off and then slowly climbed the stone steps leading to Murdoch Mansion. Though the floodlights were on, illuminating the exterior of the expansive estate, only one light inside the mansion burned bright. Evan smiled when he looked up and realized that light was in his own bedroom. Though it was almost three o'clock in the morning, Leila had waited up for him.

Unlike Charisse, he thought grudgingly as he inserted his key into one of the French doors and stepped inside the silent three-story foyer. Charisse either would have been passed out drunk on her bed or too preoccupied sharing that bed with someone else.

While he had been pulling long hours at Murdoch Conglomerated after taking the position of CEO, trying to maintain the legacy that his father had left to him, Evan's wife, Charisse, had been occupying her time carrying on a hot-and-heavy affair with his backstabbing half-brother, Dante. But Evan wasn't too upset when he finally had proof that she had been cheating on him. He had suspected it all along. His marriage to Charisse had been in name only for years, even if Evan had been unable to admit that truth to himself until he caught his wife screwing Dante in their marble shower. The blow of betrayal had been softened because he had been already firmly in love with someone else: Leila.

Evan quickly climbed the staircase to the west wing, hearing his footsteps on each riser. His steps echoed off the walls and high ceilings. He couldn't get to the second floor fast enough, so impatient to slide into bed next to his fiancée.

Leila had been his childhood friend and lifelong crush. For years, he had hidden his feelings for her, only to watch her marry another man, whom he still despised. It had taken more than twenty years, Leila getting married and divorced, and Evan getting married and separated, before the two finally ended up together.

They no longer had to hide their feelings. Leila was no longer another man's wife, and he would soon no longer be another woman's husband. No more clandestine nights at his office, where they made love on the leather couch with the door locked. No more ultimatums from Leila about ending their relationship or revealing to his wife and everyone else in the world their own affair.

"We're better than this, Evan," she had told him back then, and it had humbled him to admit that she

was right.

They were engaged and out in the open. She lived in his mansion, and so did her daughter and mother. Evan was ready to start the next chapter in his life, and he was beyond happy that he was starting that chapter with Leila at his side.

A minute later, he pushed open the door to his bedroom. The crystal pendant lamp on Leila's night table was on, but unfortunately, Leila was fast asleep. She was propped up on several pillows in her silk nightgown. The hardback novel she had been reading had fallen from her hands and was fanned open on the bed beside her as she snored.

Evan inclined his head and smiled. Well, at least she tried to wait up for me, he thought before softly shutting the bedroom door behind him. He tiptoed across the room so as to not wake her, though it wasn't necessary. The plush carpet drowned out any sound his footsteps could make. As he walked quietly, he took off his coat, tossed it onto a footstool, and began to unbutton his dress shirt and remove his cufflinks. He finished undressing and prepared for bed in the bathroom after shutting the door behind him. Minutes later, he returned to the bedroom in his boxer-briefs to find Leila still slumbering.

She had sunk lower on the pillows and was now partially splayed onto the bed. She was on her side facing him. Her peach silk nightgown was bunched around her hips, showing a great deal of thigh, both of her calves, and all of her delicate, red-painted toenails. The top lace panel of the nightgown had fallen open on one side, revealing one lone honey-hued breast and a dark nipple that was already hardening and puckering with goosebumps in the cool bedroom air.

Evan's smile widened as he leaned against the bathroom doorframe. This was what he had been trying to explain to his little brother as they had watched the cosmetically enhanced, topless strippers pump, grind, and hump on stage. It wasn't that he hadn't found the women or their performances seductive, but he found it exceedingly more erotic to stumble on a subtle scene like this: a beautiful, sexy, natural woman whom he loved, fast asleep, unwittingly showing all her assets to him and turning him on in the process. Watching her lying there, Evan hardened.

He walked around the bed, extinguished the light, and placed her book on the night table. The bedroom fell mostly into darkness except for the glow of the full moon filtering through the gossamer curtains on the other side of the room. Leila didn't stir as he turned off the light or even when he walked around their king-sized bed to the side where he usually slept. She shifted slightly only when the bed dipped as he climbed in naked beside her after tugging off his boxer-briefs. She mumbled something unintelligible, then started snoring again.

Evan let his eyes trail over her in the dim lighting. His gaze not only lingered on her breasts and long legs, but also rested on her slightly parted lips and the dark lashes that swept her cheeks. He pushed a lock of hair off of her brow, then let his fingers lightly trail down her neck and along her collarbone before descending even lower. He ran a finger along her breast, then her nipple, before cupping the full breast in his hand.

Leila still didn't rouse, but her breathing instantly changed. Her snores halted and became sharp, quick breaths. She shifted and moaned softly in her sleep as he trailed his thumb over the nipple again and again, flicking his finger across the dark bud. When he leaned forward and lowered his mouth to her breast, she breathed in sharply. Her eyes fluttered open.

"Ev," she murmured sleepily as he eased her onto her back, "what are you—"

"Sssshhhh," he urged, holding a finger to her lips. He grinned. "Just lie back and relax."

He then returned to suckling her breast, and her strangled moans became even louder. As Evan tugged the straps of her nightgown off her shoulders, he raised the hem of the nightgown even higher. He was delighted to discover she wasn't wearing underwear beneath it.

Good, he thought. There would be less fabric in between him and what he wanted: her.

His mouth didn't leave those delectable nipples even as he eased his hand between her legs, coaxing her to spread them wider. He massaged her clit with a practiced touch and felt her grow wet beneath his fingertips. Her moans shifted to yells and back again. Just when he sensed her getting close to the edge, he pulled his hand and mouth away, and she whimpered in protest.

"What the . . ." She pushed herself up to her elbows so that she could glare down at him.

Leila was barely wearing her nightgown. It was now nothing more than a silken, crumpled belt around her waist. At that moment, she was naked, resplendent, and absolutely indignant. "What the hell, Ev? Why'd you stop?" she grumbled.

She looked so angry that he had to laugh.

"I didn't stop, baby," he said as he climbed between her legs. "I'm only getting started."

He reached down and started massaging her again, bringing her back to the brink of ecstasy that he had dragged her to before. But this time he quickly replaced his hands with his mouth, licking and kissing the juncture between her legs until she was bucking underneath him, until she was balling the sheets in her fists and screaming his name. His dick ached to be inside her, but he held back, wanting to give her pleasure first. When the orgasm hit her, he sat back on his elbows and watched her stomach rise and fall. He watched her thighs tighten, then go slack.

When the last wave washed over her and she fought to regain her breath, he slowly climbed back on top of her.

"I love you, Evan," she whispered to him in the dark, wrapping her arms and legs around him, drawing him close.

"I love you, too," he assured her just before he entered her and she cried out his name again.

Evan drove hard and deep, loving the way she felt around him, loving her welcoming warmth. Leila clawed at his back and dug her nails into his shoulder blades. She widened her legs even further to let more of him inside her, and he readily plunged into her over and over again. She bucked her hips to meet each stroke.

As they made love, Evan rode the rollercoaster of sensations, felt the thrill of each plunge, and knew what awaited him at the end: pure bliss.

He closed his eyes and let out a long, tortured groan when the release finally came. His hold around her tightened to the point that he worried he might be crushing her, and then he went slack. He collapsed his full weight on top of her and panted against her ear. When he finally regained his strength, he peered down at her. She was beaming.

"So this is what you're like when you come back from a strip club?" Leila asked with laughter in her voice. She licked her lips seductively. "Remind me to send you there more often."

Evan pushed that bothersome lock of hair out of her eyes once more and kissed her chin, cheeks, and lips. "We could save the money and you could just strip for me every night?"

"For free?" she asked with mock outrage, cocking an eyebrow.

He chuckled. "No, for a nominal fee."

She inclined her head and pretended to consider his offer. "Eh, you're cute. I guess I could give you a discount."

"I'd appreciate that." He pulled out of her and turned onto his side, dragging Leila with him. Evan wrapped an arm around her shoulder as they lay naked beside each other in bed. Sex with Leila was

always amazing, but the quiet moments they spent in bed alone together afterward were definitely a close second.

“Did you guys have fun tonight?” she asked, trailing her fingers along his arm and shoulder.

“It was okay.” He shrugged. “I think Terry had a better time than I did, though.”

She chuckled. “Of course, Terry did. Strip clubs are right up his alley.”

“I felt bad while I was there.”

“Why?” she cried, looking taken aback. “I told you I didn’t mind! I meant it.”

“I know, but it’s not like I have a lot of nights at home. I mean, I’m always at the office. Tonight could have been time we spent alone together.”

“You have nothing to feel bad about, Ev. You can have some nights out with your brother and your friends. I don’t mind!” She shook her head. “Besides, tonight I had to help Izzy with her science project. I was up to my ears in Styrofoam and glue, trying to re-create the solar system.”

Izzy was Leila’s daughter.

“I could have helped, though.”

“You didn’t have to help. We had it covered!” She waved her hand. “We’ve got just a few more finishing touches and we’ll be done. She’s going to present it to her second-grade class on Thursday. She’s excited.”

“If you have a few more things you have to do, I can help. I did science fair projects back in the day, remember?”

“I told you . . . We have it covered, Ev.”

“No, seriously, Lee, what can I do? I want to help.”

Leila’s smile faltered. For the first time, she looked uncomfortable. “Actually, I think Izzy would . . . would prefer if just . . . you know . . . she and I work on it . . . alone.”

He tightened his jaw. “You mean, she doesn’t want my help.”

“Ev,” Leila began, “she’s still adjusting to all this, to us being together. I told you, bonding with her isn’t going to happen overnight.”

“I know that, Lee,” he said tightly, releasing his arm from around Leila’s shoulder.

He was a businessman. He understood things took time and that building relationships with people could sometimes be a slow process, but his relationship with Izzy was painfully stilted, almost prickly. She wouldn’t even let him call her Izzy.

“My name is Isabel,” the precocious seven-year-old had softly but firmly corrected him once when he used her nickname.

He had tried to be kind to Izzy, to shower her with attention, to joke with her, to pull her into conversations. Hell, he had even tried to ply her with gifts, but so far, nothing had worked.

“You’re just trying too hard, Ev,” Leila had insisted. “Let it happen naturally.”

Maybe Leila was right. Maybe eventually Izzy would warm to him. But for now Izzy was adamant that she had one dad and one dad only, and his name was Bradley Hawkins, not Evan Murdoch.

“She will eventually bond with you,” Leila now argued as they lay in bed together. “Please just give it ___”

“Time? I know. But all the time in the world isn’t going to help if Brad keeps making her hostile

toward me.”

Leila bit her bottom lip and fell silent. She knew he was right.

Though Brad, who lived back in California, was also engaged and planned to get married in the upcoming months, he didn't seem as willing to let his ex-wife move on with her new life. He argued with Leila by phone and had threatened to file for sole custody and “take back what's rightfully mine.” The only thing that kept Leila from worrying about losing Izzy was that Brad had been found guilty of fraud and embezzlement for an elaborate pyramid scheme and now faced jail time. With a criminal record, the likelihood of him getting custody of his daughter was very remote. But that didn't stop Brad from pouring poison into Izzy's ear, saying things about her mother and her mother's “big-shot, millionaire sugar daddy.” So far, Brad hadn't managed to turn Izzy against Leila, but it seemed he was having much more success in turning her against Evan.

“I'm sorry, but I have no control over what Brad says or does,” Leila now whispered, gazing at Evan in the darkened bedroom.

“Which is why you need to try even harder to sway Isabel in my direction,” he argued.

“Ev, that's not how kids work.”

Leila sounded tired, and it wasn't just because it was three o'clock in the morning. He knew she was tired of having these arguments, and frankly, so was he. But he also knew that even though Leila loved him, she would end their engagement if Izzy gave her an ultimatum or told her she didn't want her to get married. He had seen before how much investment Leila had in making sure that her daughter was happy. On the rankings of importance in Leila's life, Isabel Hawkins came first. That left Evan with a lot at stake in this.

“Then how the hell do kids work, Lee, because I don't know what else to—”

He was stopped short by the ringing of the telephone. Both Evan and Leila paused, surprised to get a phone call at this late hour. When the phone rang a second time, Evan's stomach instinctively tightened. Whenever he received late-night calls like this, it was always because something had gone wrong. And something had gone wrong—he could sense it.

He slowly picked up the cordless phone on his night table. “Hello?” he asked with a frown.

“Hello, this is the Metropolitan D.C. Police Department,” a woman's voice answered. “Am I speaking to Evan Murdoch?”

“Y-yes. This is he.”

“Are you the next of kin for Terrence Murdoch?”

“Yes,” Evan nearly shouted, instantly sitting bolt upright at the mention of his brother's name. Leila jumped at his side, startled. “I'm his brother. What's . . . What's wrong?”

“Sir, your brother has been in an accident.”

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