

## Chapter One

‘Pregnant?’ Lacie asked.

‘Everyone will think I’m such a hussy.’

‘Well—‘

‘What?’ Sorcha snapped.

‘I didn’t say anything,’ Lacie said placing a calming hand over her best friend’s knee.

The women sat together on Lacie’s second-hand, moss green couch in the middle of her living room; the piece positioned like an island. Lacie was beginning to envy the notion.

‘How am I going to explain this to my father?’ Sorcha asked.

All of the peace had been shattered from Lacie’s day when Sorcha had phoned from the car to say she was on her way over.

Lacie hadn’t lived in this apartment for long but she enjoyed the quiet street and the unassuming neighbours. Making a final decision had been easy when she’d been introduced to the trapdoor in the bedroom floor, which led to a secret cellar. The mystery of it appealed to her curious side.

Sorcha had been on at Lacie about certain throw pillows that were required to “disguise the couch”. Ordinarily Sorcha was observant about the most benign things and the sincerity of her panic only amplified when Lacie realised Sorcha hadn’t noticed the throw pillows she’d finally got around to purchasing. But now that she’d heard the news Lacie could understand why.

‘I don’t understand how it’s possible,’ Lacie said. Sorcha narrowed her eyes. ‘I mean I understand how but... I didn’t know you’d been with anyone.’

‘It’s Bruce’s,’ Sorcha said.

‘What?’ Lacie exhaled. ‘But I thought... he left town when you broke up, but that was about...’

‘Three months ago,’ Sorcha said.

‘It took you three months to notice?’

‘I think I was trying to pretend it wasn’t happening,’ Sorcha said. ‘I got a test, in fact I got a few – they all came back positive.’

‘When did you take them?’

‘This morning,’ Sorcha said lifting her purse from the floor behind her feet then dumping out the contents on the centre cushion of the couch.

Dozens of the pregnancy tests lay between them and though Sorcha waited for a reaction, Lacie had nothing.

‘Wow,’ Lacie said overwhelmed by the white plastic sticks scattered amongst Sorcha’s usual purse paraphernalia. ‘You got more than a few.’

‘How am I supposed to tell my father?’ Sorcha asked. ‘I’m Catholic! He’ll go berserk.’

‘He can’t think you’re still a virgin,’ Lacie said. ‘You’re twenty-eight.’

‘I don’t... I doubt he does believe that but we don’t talk about it. He’ll expect me to get married! How can I get married when I don’t have a baby daddy, or rather a groom?’

‘Will Bruce marry you?’ Lacie asked.

She and Sorcha had been close friends since they met in college. Lacie was new to the country at that time and Sorcha had educated her in all things American. While Sorcha was tall, elegant, and perfect, Lacie was a few inches shorter, much less refined, and far less confident with the opposite sex. Sorcha simply had to walk into a room to get the attention of every man there, which had always been fine with Lacie. She wasn’t really sure what to do when a male paid her any attention but then she had different priorities.

Sorcha Reynolds was the eldest of two daughters to Lawrence and Amelia Reynolds – she came from high society, and still slurped from her silver spoon occasionally. As a result Lacie was used to digging Sorcha out of any dirty pit she found herself in, except this time there was little she could do for her friend.

‘He won’t have a choice when I get hold of him,’ Sorcha said.

‘Are you sure you would want to marry him? He always seemed a little self-absorbed to me.’

‘And thus ends your introduction to the pretty boy. He’s hot, and he’s rich, he doesn’t need a decent personality.’

‘Is that your opinion or your mother’s?’

‘What else can I do Lacie?’ Sorcha said snatching Lacie’s hands and pulling them to her lap. ‘I have to at least find him. I have to tell him.’

‘There are options if you don’t—’

Sorcha was visibly startled. ‘I wouldn’t have thought that was your type of thing.’

‘We’re not talking about me,’ Lacie said steering away from the subject of her sex life, which had been non-existent for more than a while now. ‘This would be your decision.’

‘I don’t know,’ Sorcha said on a long inhale. ‘I’m terrified of my father, but I’m twenty-eight, what if this is it? My last chance.’

‘Last chance at what?’ Lacie said on a laugh.

‘You know,’ Sorcha said. ‘I have to find Bruce. We have to get married before my father finds out about this.’

‘Ok. So where is he?’

Sorcha slumped back on the couch in the most unladylike pose Lacie had ever seen her in; usually Sorcha was the epitome of poise. ‘I have no idea.’

‘Can you call his work?’

‘And say what?’ she said. ‘He told me he got a big promotion somewhere. He’s not even working for Lewis Fund and Investment anymore.’

‘What about family?’

‘I never met them,’ she said. ‘I suppose I could ask my mother but... I don’t really want to talk to my family about this until... you know.’

‘So you don’t have a clue where he is,’ Lacie said trying to find a different route of information for her friend. ‘Hey, what about that guy?’

‘What guy?’ Sorcha asked.

‘I don’t remember his name, I never met him... The guy you were seeing when I was in the UK.’

‘What guy, I don’t—oh, you mean Shep.’ Sorcha’s blanched expression regained some of its rosy hue as a smile curled her lips. ‘He really was something... it’s just a shame about...’

‘About what?’

‘I told you,’ Sorcha said. ‘The man was useless in bed. I tell you it’s a waste on someone as hot as he was.’

‘Didn’t you say he was some kind of investigator?’

Sorcha sat bolt upright. ‘That’s right. Yes, he does private investigations.’

‘Hire him. He can track down Bruce for you.’

‘I can’t,’ Sorcha grumbled. ‘He was really pissed when I broke up with him. I can’t go back to him now and ask him to look up another of my ex-boyfriends.’

‘Isn’t it better than facing your father without knowing where Bruce is?’

Sorcha considered this for a moment. ‘You could hire him.’

‘Hire who?’

‘Shep,’ Sorcha said. ‘Just tell him I referred you, he’ll probably want to help when he hears my name.’

‘And what do I tell him?’

‘Tell him you need to find an old boyfriend. He’s hardly going to ask any questions about your motives, and all he has to do is find Bruce. So it’s not like you’ll have to actually talk to Bruce. Shep can give you the information, and then you give it to me. Bingo, everyone’s happy.’

‘I don’t like it,’ Lacie said.

‘It’ll be easy. All you have to do is go down there give him the name, the money, and the information, after that he can phone you with the results. Boom, done – one conversation.’

‘Sorcha, how can you be sure he’ll—’

‘Money,’ Sorcha said raking in her purse. Producing a pen then her check book, Sorcha scrawled out the details. ‘I’ll pay you, and you pay him.’

‘But what about—’

‘That ought to be enough.’

Lacie glanced at the check her friend had handed over. ‘Ten thousand? You think it will cost ten thousand dollars to find out where someone is?’

‘I don’t care about the money,’ Sorcha said. ‘But, Shep will never turn down money, he’ll see that, and all of his other questions will go away.’

‘I’m not sure about this,’ Lacie said.

‘Trust me,’ Sorcha said. ‘And I’d really owe you if you help me out.’

How could Lacie say no to her best friend who’d found herself in this pickle. They’d been through a lot together, and Sorcha was always there when she needed a friend. Boom, done – one conversation... she could handle that.

Ryder opened the top drawer, and then the middle one, raking through each in turn. It was a sad state of affairs when one investigator had to poach off another but being that he was poaching from Seth Sheppard the world’s laziest investigator he didn’t half mind. Shep took his fee and then some, sleeping with most of the wives who came in for information on whether their husbands were cheating. Plus, Sheppard had stolen more than a few potential customers from Ryder and his partner Jamie by undercutting them on price only to lump extras on the final bill... and usually his information wasn’t that extensive; or accurate.

This time Ryder had happily taken a job from the husband of a former client of Sheppard's. The client Rich Gillespie wasn't that interested in whether or not his wife knew he was cheating, he was more interested in other information Sheppard may have found regarding a few dodgy business deals Gillespie had been doing on the side. Deals with regards to a certain white powder that supplemented the respectable Mr and Mrs Gillespie's income.

Ryder knew Sheppard's habits and like clockwork, Sheppard had left to go on a "job", which meant hanging out at a pool hall a few streets over. Tiffany – Sheppard's nineteen year old assistant – had toddled out a few minutes later going to the nail salon in the mall. Tiffany took as much advantage of the client's money as Sheppard did – and Ryder figured they were sleeping together too.

So, knowing all of these facts, Ryder had watched from his truck as events played out just he had predicted. Sheppard should have noticed him sitting there, but that spoke to his inherent detecting skills, or rather lack of them. Ryder waited a respectable time then got out of his car, crossed the road, and walked into Sheppard Investigations like he owned the place. The small entryway opened from the glass shop front and showed a desk, computer, and a few personal items of Tiffany's. In the corner, there were four plastic chairs, and a fake ficus – Sheppard really was the last of the big spenders.

On the back wall, there were two doors, one was a small restroom, and the other was Sheppard's office. Upon opening the office door Ryder saw piles of files, paperwork, discarded magazines, and newspapers, in every corner of the room. It was a wonder Sheppard got any business at all when his office was in this state. Never known for loitering Ryder ignored the mess and got searching. When the filing cabinets came up empty he went across the room to the desk that stood angled in one corner in front of a closet door. Now in the leather captain's chair Ryder hunted through the drawers, and desk, for the file on Rich Gillespie. Then when raking through the last desk drawer for any clue that Sheppard kept notes at all Ryder heard the squeak of hinges. He sat up expecting to see Sheppard back early, or his assistant – it was neither.

The brunette stood straight while looking around the room. Her expression displayed the same disgust he too must have had on his face when he walked in. He'd put her height at five six, maybe five seven, and her sun-bleached hair hung in loose waves around her shoulders. When her attention came to him he noticed striking green eyes that were a little unsure of themselves. Whatever it was, or wasn't, his dick jumped to attention in two seconds flat. But, what it was ready for he didn't know, because the woman was still a clear twenty feet away. He didn't know her name, her business, what she felt like... what she tasted like. He hadn't had such an impulsive and instant reaction to a stranger in, well... ever.

'I'm sorry,' she said in smooth honeyed tones. 'There was no one out there, and—'

'What can I help you with?' he asked.

This was a woman with business; business she was apparently taking to Sheppard, or so she thought.

'I don't know. I need to find someone.'

'Well, you came to the right guy,' Ryder said though he wanted to point out she'd come to the wrong office, but an investigator was an investigator. Yet Ryder couldn't imagine stretching the definition to encompass Sheppard.

'Can I...?' she asked taking another step into the room and pointing at the seat opposite the desk he still sat behind.

'Um... yeah.'

This might be risky but he couldn't exactly tell the woman in the blue tea dress that he was actually an imposter she'd caught in the middle of a little B and E.

She crossed the room and took the seat then smoothed her dress over her knees, all the while not making eye contact until she'd taken a few fortifying breaths.

'Don't worry, this is the easy bit. I've heard it all, so don't worry about saying anything you might think is inappropriate.'

'I have to find a man.'

'Need a little matchmaking?' he asked. On her next breath, her expression relaxed. Now she was a little more at ease his dick tried to jump through his zipper again – thank goodness there was a desk between them, or not.

'I've never done this before. I don't exactly know how—'

'It's easy. You tell me who you're looking for, give me as much information about possible whereabouts as you can, and then I go to work.'

'Ok,' she said. 'I'm looking for a man called Bruce Booth. He used to work for Lewis Fund and Investment in town.'

'I know them,' Ryder said linking his fingers as he rested his forearms on Sheppard's desk.

The pose wasn't normal for him but for some reason he was concerned his hands would take on a mind of their own. Overcome with the need to touch, to feel, his fingers tingled. He'd have to lunge over the desk to do it, and that wasn't exactly professional – though it was probably the norm for the man who usually occupied this chair.

'He got a promotion, or a better job, or... something. He left town, and now I need to know where he is.'

'What about his family? Friends?'

She inhaled while her eyes slinked to the corner behind him, a classic sign that she was hiding something. 'I'm trying to stay under the radar.'

'Right,' Ryder said. 'Does he owe you money?'

Her brows came together in a show of curiosity rather than irritation. 'Why would you—?'

'Sometimes people don't want to be found, and a guy in his industry...'

'Oh no, it's nothing like that,' she said shifting to the edge of the chair and flattening her fingers on the opposite side of the desk to him.

Her nails were short, and neat, but there was a faint sign of colour around her cuticles, like a smoky dust not quite removed. She'd awoken his dick the minute she walked in, now his mind was buzzing with a dozen questions about what was behind those mesmerising eyes, and the chalk on her fingers.

'Listen Dusty, I don't care about your motives. But, I do need to know if I'm getting into anything illegal, or that's likely to give me trouble.'

'Dusty?' she asked wrinkling her nose.

Her whole face was expressive, she shifted the angle of her head, the pout of her lips, the gap between her eyelids, the muscles of her cheeks, her forehead, like a child curious about a world they knew nothing about. Ryder found himself wondering how her expression would change if he kissed her, about how those wide, inquisitive eyes would look when he sheathed himself inside of her.

'Mr Sheppard?'

It took him a good eight seconds to realise she was talking to him. ‘Sorry, what?’

‘I can completely understand that you wouldn’t want to jeopardise yourself or your business by getting into any trouble. But perhaps this would be an appropriate time to tell you that a good friend of mine referred me to you.’

‘A friend?’ he asked wondering if he was about to be made.

‘Yes,’ she said, and blinked as though sorting through her thoughts before she spoke. ‘I wouldn’t want this to be awkward. But, I can assure you that I would never bring any aggravation to your door, and I’m assured that your services are top notch, so I...’

He hadn’t noticed the small strap over her shoulder that attached to a tiny bag under her arm. Now, she slid it down into view and opened the clasp to draw out a slip of paper, a check.

‘I didn’t know if I should make it out to you personally, or if you had a company name that it should be made payable to,’ she said.

She pushed the check the width of the desk, and for the first time since she’d entered he took his eyes away to look at the paper under her fingertips. ‘Whoa,’ he said when he read it. ‘This is way too much.’

‘Like I said I want to go under the radar, and it’s important.’

When he took his attention from the check their eyes locked and she didn’t blink. The tip of her pink tongue darted out to moisten her lips, her shoulder came up as her head tilted, and he had to grit his teeth against the pain in his jeans at that innocent little expression. Had she ever been taken? A woman like her couldn’t be real; she sure wasn’t like the women he was used to. Those women knew what they were, and how to use their sexuality to their advantage, which worked for him because he got off, and didn’t feel guilty about not calling the next day. Both parties knew what they were getting into. Either this woman in front of him now took a different angle completely and did it to leave men like him panting like desperate dogs – or she had no idea how luscious she was.

‘If it’s not about money, it’s about sex,’ Ryder said unable to stop himself from watching her mouth when her lips parted, then she wriggled in her seat – Jesus this woman was going to have him shooting his load in his underwear if she moved again. A man couldn’t be with a woman like this, she didn’t sit still, her eyes, her mouth, her neck, her body loosened, and he had another first – he wished he was that goddamn chair. ‘He’s your boyfriend.’

Words were on the tip of her tongue but she held them in. A curious frown flashed to her face only to be erased when her eyes rolled upward while her lips moved silently, and then they fell back to his.

‘You could say that,’ she said.

‘This guy ran out on you?’

‘Mr Sheppard I appreciate that we’re acquainted by proxy but it’s a very difficult situation to explain.’

‘Acquainted by proxy,’ he said reminding himself of what she’d said about the referral.

‘I do hope that your break up won’t flavour your angle on this case.’

‘My break up.’

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘I told you that Sorcha referred me.’

‘Sorcha,’ he said wondering when he’d become a parrot.

‘She is very sorry about the way things ended between you.’

‘Sorcha.’

‘Yes, Sorcha Reynolds... she assured me that you would be fair, and I would hope that the fee would settle any misgivings you might have about working on my behalf through Sorcha’s referral.’

Again Ryder found himself reading the zeroes on the check she’d passed to him. ‘Will Sorcha be involved in this case?’ he asked.

‘Oh no,’ she said. ‘No. She’ll stay far away from this. She’s on vacation at the moment, she left just this morning.’

Ryder would hate to see these zeroes in Sheppard’s bank account but Shep would take it willingly, and probably do his best to sample this delectable client at the same time despite the previous relationship with her friend. Ryder couldn’t refuse her because if he did the chances were that she would show up on his actual doorstep, and he didn’t want her to know that he was in Sheppard’s place unlawfully. What choice did he have? This woman needed honesty and guidance that Sheppard would give for an overinflated price; and while pawing her.

Ryder had no intention of ever cashing the check, chances were that a quick computer search would locate this guy for her but he folded it in half, and slid it into his back pocket as he stood up. She fumbled with her bag then stood up too. Five seven he decided but hadn’t noticed if she was wearing heels. At six two he was used to towering over women but by itself height difference didn’t usually prompt feelings of protectiveness in him. Usually he’d prefer his women taller. But this woman made him want to tuck her in close, and keep her there for as long as he could.

‘We’re having a problem with our phone connection,’ he said. ‘It means our phones and our internet are down. Do you have a pen?’ She nodded and took a pen and a receipt from her bag, which she then handed to him. He tore it in two and wrote down his cell number then handed it all back to her. ‘Write down your number.’

She nodded, and scribbled it down giving him the slip with the number, and then putting her pen and his number in her bag. ‘You’ll call me?’

‘As soon as I have something,’ he said. ‘One more thing, what’s your name?’

‘Lacie,’ she said. ‘Lacie Hart.’

‘It’s a pleasure,’ he said extending his hand.

Immediately he wanted to take it back because she tilted her head to the side like a confused puppy. Then her hand leapt to his and before he’d curled all his fingers around hers his dick pulsed again. Chastising himself for the reaction to the simple touch he wasn’t ready for the moment their eyes met, and neither was she.

A heat zinged through him and their hands sprang apart; obviously, she’d felt it and been as unsettled as he had.

‘Miss Hart,’ he said pressing his hand to his chest to quell his urge to grab hold of her.

‘Mr Sheppard,’ she said.

She thought he was Shep, he’d forgotten about that, and if that zap was anything to go by this sensation wouldn’t disappear in a hurry... He’d known her five minutes and he was in deep already. This ought to be interesting.

Drying her hands on a towel Lacie was satisfied that her heart rate had returned to normal. After that meeting with Sheppard earlier she had come home, taken a shower, and worked. She worked to forget the chemical reaction that fizzed in her belly from the moment

those dark eyes had leapt to hers when she entered the office. He'd seemed uneasy, but confident; he was cool but aware... But, that wasn't what made her fizz. That was the heat in his eyes. Pure, unadulterated desire though his voice hadn't spoken of it; somehow she'd known what was on his mind, which was unusual – normally she had no idea what was going on in the head of a man.

Under normal circumstances, she'd have been anxious at such an understanding, but this time it was different. This time she was disgusted with her own body's reaction to the knowledge of his longing. Part of her wanted to skirt that desk, straddle his lap, and let actions say what words didn't. In her entire life she had never been bold, and she'd certainly never wondered what a stranger would look like naked, and if he would let her touch, to trace the lines of him with her vocational fingertips.

Throwing the towel to the back of the couch, she drove her fists into her eyes trying to erase her own traitorous libido. For months, she hadn't been with a man... maybe years. It had been so long she could only vaguely remember the sensation of impotent frustration as her lover grunted and rutted over her for those few minutes before he collapsed to a heap at her side. She hadn't made a sound, and he hadn't noticed.

Sorcha had told her that Sheppard was good looking, but Lacie was used to good-looking men. She was used to men of flash, and no substance and Sorcha had told her how useless Sheppard was in bed so why was she thinking these thoughts? Sheppard was her friend's ex-lover, Lacie would never go there not in a million years, and it made her feel sick at the thought of the comparison Sheppard would have to draw between her and Sorcha. If a man was used to prime venison like Sorcha he'd never be satisfied with the fast food burger Lacie would be in contrast – except she'd never go there. The unspoken code wouldn't allow Lacie to lust for her best friend's cast off, and she already knew that the man was shallow, and not at all her type. Yet, she closed her eyes again to relive that moment their eyes met over their joined hands. It was physical, visceral, and so much more intimate than a handshake, but she didn't know what it was.

Sorcha was away, and would be until this was over. Sorcha had never been a good liar, and she wouldn't want to be near her father, mother, or sister because she'd drop herself in it, no doubt about that.

Darkness formed around the grey clouds, and Lacie knew she should think about eating but the thought of anything made her stomach roil. Dropping to the floor she lay flat on her back dropping a hand over her eyes. She liked the floor, she liked firm, unyielding surfaces that offered security and stability. The squeal of her phone came from within her purse that lay only inches away so she reached over to retrieve it.

'Hello?' she asked. She hadn't recognised the number flashing on the screen.

'Miss Hart,' the male voice was deep and a shiver went down her spine. 'I'm the investigator you spoke to this afternoon.'

'Yes,' she said annoyed that her thoughts had somehow conjured him. 'That was very quick. Have you found him?'

'I've got a couple of hits. But I can't ID him. Do you have a picture that you could send me?'

'A picture,' she said lifting her torso to prop herself against the front of the couch. 'If you give me the addresses I can check them out for myself.'



‘That’s not how this works,’ he said. His voice had gone from drilling her deep to making her light-headed with the amusement that floated in his tone. ‘You gave me a very big check today. I intend to earn it.’

‘I don’t have a picture,’ she said. ‘Honestly, if you give me the addresses I can check them out, and if it’s not him then I’ll get in touch, and—’

‘One address is relatively local,’ he said. ‘The other is not. I appreciate that you are hesitant to give me the details. But I would be uneasy about sending a woman such as yourself into unknown territory.’

‘Bruce isn’t violent,’ she said wondering what “a woman such as yourself” meant.

‘Not the one you know maybe,’ he said. ‘But I could be giving you dud addresses and maybe those Bruces’ aren’t as placid.’

‘That’s a point,’ she conceded. ‘Is it your plan to go there?’

‘To the addresses? Yes. But there’s no point in me staking them out when I don’t know who I’m looking at.’

‘I’ll come with you,’ she said. There was no response. ‘We might not know each other very well but Sorcha trusts you and I have no reason not to. It’s about the only thing I can think that could solve the problem.’

‘This guy was your boyfriend?’

‘I can assure you that you’re not being drawn into a lovers tiff.’

‘That’s not what concerns me,’ he said.

‘So what are your concerns?’ she asked.

‘When can you leave?’

‘Ready when you are,’ she said.

‘I can pick you up if you give me your address.’

‘That is very generous of you. I could meet you at your office if—’

‘No,’ he said. ‘I’m not at work. If you’re uncomfortable giving me your address—’

‘It’s nothing like that. Sorcha trusts you. I just wouldn’t want you going out of your way on my behalf. If there are any expenses incurred—’

‘I think your check today will cover everything. Give me your address.’ She did. ‘I’ll be fifteen minutes.’