

Chapter One

Sometimes the harsh realities of life seemed too much to bear. When circumstance tried to overwhelm her, the only thing that Molly Ashton knew to do was to keep on going.

So, after squirting cleaning fluid onto the bar, Molly pushed her cloth in lazy circles, wiping away her woes with the water rings. Going through the motions of tending bar was something she'd done for her whole adult life, just as her parents had done before her. Growing up here with her brother had given Molly an affinity for the place, and she was proud of it. Being that she was the only member of her family left alive, the reins were hers, and she worked hard to make Ashton's Bar a success. But tonight her mind wasn't on business, it was elsewhere.

'Buck up, Mol,' Joel said from his regular perch on the other side of the bar, while he shook his empty glass in her direction.

'Just cover the cracks with a smile?' Molly said, and took his glass.

Dipping below the bar, she reached for the warm metal handle on the door of the glass washer. On opening it, the flurry of scalding steam clouded her, causing her to lean back out of the mist.

'Service industry and all that,' Joel said. 'You're depressing the patrons.'

Molly scanned the dismal sight in front of her. Ashton's had always been bustling on a Friday night, except they couldn't be accused of being busy tonight. The rectangular space had stools along the L-shaped bar, a dozen tables dotted around, and couches flanking the swing-door entrance.

Fewer than a dozen people occupied her workplace tonight. In addition to Joel, there were two older women at the bar. A couple of couples occupied the couches, and there was a group of women seated next to the old Wurlitzer jukebox.

'If what happened to Steven wasn't bad enough in itself, it's affecting business,' she said.

'Way to have a heart,' Joel said.

'Make up your mind! One minute I need to forget it, the next you want me to shed more tears.'

'It's a shock to lose anyone, especially someone you've known for so long,' Joel said.

'I'd known him all my life. Both you and I did. You guys used to hang out.'

Cal and his gang of high school buddies were always hanging around together, Joel and Steven spent most of their teenage years in this bar or in the park opposite where they'd play sports and ogle girls.

It wasn't a surprise that everyone knew everyone around here. There were less than a hundred families in this suburb. The city border was a dozen miles away, but it didn't matter that they were so close to the metropolis. Their area had a small-town mentality where everyone knew everyone else's business.

'I hadn't heard from him for years. He left town when he finished school, didn't he? What was that? Ten years ago?' Joel said.

'Longer than that now, you should know when you left high school. You think you're younger than you really are,' Molly said, taking the glasses from the washer to dry them off and put them away. 'Steven was full of ambition back then. He thought he could own the world.'

'I didn't think we'd ever see him again.'

'It was only a couple of months ago that he got back into town,' she said. 'I was over the moon to give him a job. I like employing people I can trust, and you can't get more trustworthy than Steven North.'

During his high school years Steven was known as being a straight-A student, though he never really had to study to get the grades. He was good with the girls, and his reputation was one of being respectful and never pressuring a girl into anything. More often than not the girls were the ones trying to move things along with him.

'I'll bet he regrets coming back now,' Joel said.

Molly narrowed her eyes at him. The beer tap wasn't far enough away from Joel for her liking tonight. Usually she considered him harmless enough—she'd known him all of her life—but Molly didn't feel like shooting the breeze with anyone right now.

Joel too had left town to make his fortune; he'd gone so far as to leave the country, in fact. But it was all for naught, and he'd returned to town a couple of years ago worse off financially than he had been when he started. His trouble was that he liked to party too much, especially back then, so anything he earned was frittered away. Since he'd been back, Joel had frequented Ashton's and was here almost every night.

Tradition seemed to be that the youngsters fled town as soon as they could. But more often than not, they returned poorer. Though Molly herself didn't fit the mould; she had never lived anywhere except right here, in this structure.

The solid plastic of the tap she pulled toward her filled her heart with dread. Even with all the changes she had made to the place, it was still her father's bar. It would always be her father's.

In an attempt to better herself, she was working through an online course to gain a business degree. But it was purely an academic exercise; she had no intention of leaving Ashton's. Supervising this place was all she knew, and while she didn't work behind the bar every night, she rarely left the building.

'What are you going to do?' Joel asked, as Molly handed him the glass of draught beer. She accepted the bill he proffered and turned her attention to the register.

'I have a "help wanted" notice up in the front window,' Molly said, watching the two women who'd been at the bar get up and leave. 'I'll just have to wait and see what happens.'

'It's been up there for two days. Do you think anyone will really want to work here now?' Joel asked.

'What choice do I have?' she asked, and handed him his change. 'I can't staff the place myself. Vanessa is the only employee I have left.'

'You should employ more women,' Joel said. 'They have nothing to be afraid of.'

'Neither do the men,' Molly said. 'I grew up here. Thirty years I have lived in this very building, and I've never known there to be any trouble... not any serious trouble.'

'Three men have died on your doorstep in the last six weeks.'

'It's your doorstep too,' Molly said.

'Yeah, but I'm not trying to employ guys and asking them to be out after dark.'

'True.'

'Three victims, all local, murdered in the same way.'

'I am aware of that,' Molly said. 'I read the headlines too. Steven was one of my best workers. When news of his murder came out, the other two idiot barmen working for me ran scared.'

'Why not employ women?' Joel asked. 'Funnily enough, they will be safer.'

'I need a guy here,' Molly said. 'I do. It's not exactly unheard of for things to get rowdy in here on the weekend.'

'You need muscle,' Joel said.

'Yeah, but look around you, Joel,' Molly said. 'There are three men in the room right now, and all of them are on high alert. Even you have a suspicious glow behind your paranoid eyes.'

'We're not used to being the victims,' Joel said. 'We're used to being the perpetrators, so it's natural for us to be on guard... Especially when you know how they died.'

'No one knows how they died,' Molly said. 'Everyone is just throwing their theories into the ring.'

'They were all naked, in their homes, after having enjoyed themselves.'

'So?' Molly asked. 'What does that have to do with anything?'

'I think it's pretty obvious to everyone that the killer is a woman.'

'The press are only speculating,' Molly said. 'The police have nothing.'

'We don't know that. The newspapers say that they have nothing, but they could be closing in on her as we speak.'

'Doubt it,' Molly sighed. 'We know how useless cops are. They'll be lucky to ever find the murderer.'

'Murderess. Business will slow down until they get her, and so will your hirings. But your dad paid this place off, right? It's yours?'

'Yeah,' Molly said. 'That's not the point.'

'What is the point?' Joel asked.

'Forget it,' Molly said. 'I just need... someone. Anyone who can double as security.'

‘So anyone male,’ Joel said. ‘A knight in shining armour.’

Molly exhaled a laugh. ‘I’d take a squire in rags at this point. As long as he is old enough to serve liquor, I don’t care about the rest of the package.’

Molly glanced over Joel’s shoulder. The women by the jukebox were arguing about money. The redhead dismissed the other two and began to move toward the bar, so Molly saw this as her cue and headed toward the fridge. The group of females weren’t ordering the house wine, so Molly made sure to keep a couple of bottles of what they were drinking chilled for them. By the time the redhead had reached the bar, Molly had popped the cork.

‘Perfect,’ the redhead said.

Molly put fresh glasses onto a tray with the wine in the middle. ‘We aim to please,’ she said.

The redhead handed her a couple of bills. Molly retreated to the register and got the change, but when she turned back, the woman had already taken the wine to the table. Molly rolled her eyes and walked around the curve in the bar. Descending the step from behind the bar to the front of it, she crossed the hardwood floor to the women’s table. Collecting up the old glasses in one hand, she didn’t interrupt as the women whooped about one of their latest conquests.

‘Where’s all the talent in here tonight, Mol?’ Belinda asked.

Belinda and her sister, Melissa, were locals as well, and she had gone to school with both of them. Belinda was larger than life. She had big hair, big eyes, and a big heart behind that big mouth. It was no surprise that her younger sister was quiet and withdrawn, especially in comparison. Though the redhead was seated with the sisters tonight, Molly was unfamiliar with her identity. She had never been in Ashton’s before.

‘Home scared,’ Molly said, while trying to hand the redhead her change, except she was dismissed with a shake of the redhead’s hand.

‘One for yourself,’ the redhead said.

Molly looked at the cash in her hand. With what was left she could have her own bottle of wine, not that she would. But never being one to argue with a customer, she tucked the money into her apron, realising it would cover her newspaper subscription.

‘You’re joking!’ Belinda exclaimed. ‘They are all terrified, because of Steven and the others?’

Molly lifted one of her shoulders and gave the table a wipe. ‘I suppose we would be too.’

‘A woman being attacked by a man is a different thing,’ Belinda said. ‘I don’t know what the men are all so worried about.’

‘You’re just horny,’ the redhead said.

‘What’s wrong with that? I’m familiar with the feeling myself,’ Belinda said. Her attention was on pouring out the wine in equal measures. ‘This place always had talent, always. There was always something to look at, especially behind the bar. All of the under agers used to try their luck in here when we were at school just to get a look at Cal... remember, Mol?’

‘That was a long time ago,’ Molly said with half a smile. ‘We’ll try to do better for the next time you’re in.’

The squeak and rush of wind on her legs told Molly that she had another customer. She thanked her lucky stars, but didn’t screech with delight because the echoing thud of the door on the doorframe came all too soon, signalling that whoever the new entrant was, they were alone.

‘I’ll take what you’ve got now,’ Belinda said, with her eyes fixed on the latest patron.

Molly lifted her head from her wiping to see all of the women staring agog at the door. They were all frozen in the moment. One had her hand on her glass, the other had her drink half way to her mouth, and the third’s glass lingered on her lips. Molly grabbed the wine bottle from Belinda before it tipped to spill and as she put it on the table, she took a quick glance over her shoulder.

Whoever he was, he was a new face in here. His dark scrutiny scanned the room, and if she didn’t know any better, she would say he was looking for someone. It was only when his shadowed brow stopped on her that Molly knew she was right.

It would be too much for her to hope that this guy wanted a job. He was probably from the brewery looking to settle up. Although he didn’t look like the brewery type. But he certainly fit the thug stereotype, on the lookout for his boss’ debtors. He was all intimidating height and practised muscle. His

leather jacket hung loose. The definition of his broad chest and flat stomach were visible through his straining white tee-shirt.

While hooking his thumbs into his faded jeans, one side of his stubbled jaw twitched, and Molly realised that there was a hint of a smile on his face. Not a smile of joy, his expression betrayed a subtle satisfaction that she couldn't pinpoint.

Molly wasn't one to loiter long, but the place still appeared to be on pause. Even the couples weren't moving. The men glared as the women salivated. Putting the dirty glasses on the tray the wine had been on, Molly lifted it and went back toward her station, hopping up the step to ensconce herself behind the bar again.

The slow heavy thump of the new arrival's boots on the floor dominated the space, echoing through it ominously. If it wasn't her establishment Molly would be intimidated by the ownership this man exuded. She knew for a fact that he had never been in here before. But if she didn't know any better, Molly would say it wasn't her establishment at all, but his.

'What can I get you?' Molly called to the guy, as he approached the bar.

'You,' he said.

The gruff, low tone that he released sent tingles from her toes to her skull. 'I'm not on the menu,' she said. 'But nice try.'

'I'm serious,' he said, and slid himself out of his jacket, only to lay the apparel on the stool beside him. Then one of his sculpted forearms relaxed along the edge of her bar.

'Barking up the wrong tree there, dude,' Joel said from his position further along the bar.

'Excuse me?' the stranger asked.

'Our Molly isn't one for dating customers. She's not one for dating at all,' Joel said, and slurped his beer. 'Trust me, I've tried it.'

The attention of the dark stranger moved from Joel back to Molly. 'Do you want a drink?' she asked.

'No,' he said. 'I saw the sign in your window.'

'What sign?' Molly asked, wondering why a man such as this would come to a bar and not have a drink.

'About the job.'

'What? You want a job?' Molly said, her eyelids had never been so far apart. Maybe there was hope yet. The idea of a guy like this wanting to work behind her bar was exactly what she'd needed. No one would mess with him.

'Yeah,' he said.

'You're hired,' Molly blurted out.

'Wow,' the stranger said. 'That was the easiest job interview I've ever had.'

'Sorry,' Molly said, with a faint blush in her cheeks. 'We've had a bit of bad luck with staff recently.'

'Why are you so desperate?'

'You must have heard about the murders,' Molly said.

'What's that got to do with you?'

'We lost one of our bartenders, and it spooked the others.'

The stranger's lips sloped lazily upward. 'I'm not easily spooked.'

'I can tell,' Molly said, as she drank in all she could see of his powerful demeanour. 'You look like the type who does the spooking.'

His hand left the bar and came toward her. 'Blake.'

'Molly,' she said.

Her hand appeared tiny when she wrapped her fingers around his. His rough grip swaddled hers as he shook her hand.

'I was just saying how I needed someone who could handle disruptive customers, a security type as well as a bar tender.'

'I can do that,' Blake said, looking around at the customers. 'Doesn't look like you have many scuffles in here.'

'You'd be surprised, under normal circumstances, but with the murders and the loss of Steven... people are staying home.'

'Except me,' Joel grinned, and lifted his glass. 'I'm always here.'

'Yes,' Molly said. 'We can't get rid of Joel; he's a regular.'

'Molly and me are tight; we've been friends for a lot of years.'

'For better or worse,' Molly said. 'But I do trust him to keep an eye on things for me. He's pulled a pint or two behind this bar in his time.'

'You didn't want to help out?' Blake asked Joel.

'I would. I've offered,' Joel said.

'Joel would prefer to be on that side of the bar with his glass,' Molly said. 'I prefer my employees sober. But Joel can help you out if you need it. He'll always watch my back too. He knows how things work around here.'

'Got you,' Blake said. 'He'll always be looking over my shoulder.'

'Exactly. When can you start?' she asked.

'Whenever you need me,' he said.

'There's a keg that needs changing... Do you know how to do that?'

'I grew up around places like this,' Blake said. 'I've been doing it since I was five.'

Molly didn't have to say a word, her expression betrayed her smirking disbelief. 'A yes would have sufficed. I'll show you.'

Experience worked in his favour, and if he'd seen the notice after walking by he had to be connected to someone or something local. No one else would have a reason to be walking these streets on a Friday night. A tough guy with connections locally, that was pretty much all she needed from her newest recruit.

Nodding him toward the door to the back, she walked around the curve of the bar with him mirroring her locomotion on his own side of the bar. Their gazes caught, but Molly quickly looked away, knowing that it was ridiculous for her to find this short walk awkward. As they headed for the door, he watched her, scrutinizing her every move as they moved in sync toward the other end of the bar.

'It's back here,' she said.

Blake stepped up behind the bar beside her, and she was cast in the shadow of his looming form. Ignoring the awareness shimmering in her, Molly threw her shoulder against the door in front of them. It had a horrible habit of sticking in the frame, so she was used to giving it a good thump.

'There is a trapdoor behind the bar,' Molly said. 'But we never use it.'

'Why not?' he asked.

'We just never do. It's relatively terrifying and has serious accident potential.'

Molly searched her apron for the cellar key when they stepped into the rear hallway. In front of them were the stairs that led up to her apartment. To their left was the staff restroom and kitchen. The cellar entrance was on the right hand side, on the same wall as the bar door. Perpendicular to that, at the bottom of the stairs, was the external residential access, which led out to the street.

The cellar door was waist high and angled against the stairs it led to. Retrieving the key from her apron, Molly dug it into the lock, and twisted it back and forth, shaking the lock until she heard the unfastening snick.

'Everything sticks here,' Molly said, choosing to ignore his last question.

His blank expression didn't register, and for some reason Molly suddenly became aware of how little she actually knew about this guy. Stepping over the kickboard, she rested her foot on the top stair, then froze.

'Is everything ok?' he asked, crowding in behind her, ready to descend into the murky cellar.

'Do you live around here?'

'Excuse me?'

'Where do you live?' Molly asked, turning her attention to him. His exhale rustled the hair over her forehead, which sent hot tickles downward.

'Over on Willow Bank in Schenectady,' he said.

'Are you married?'

'No,' he said.

'Kids?'

'No.'

'Live alone?'

'Yes,' he said. 'Why all the questions?'

'I've never employed a stranger before,' she admitted. 'I'm used to being able to trust whoever walks through my door, so just supposed I could trust you. I'm pretty desperate, and I was so amazed that you wanted the job.'

'I do want the job. But if you're having doubts...?'

'If there's going to be trouble in here, it will be on a Saturday night. You showed up right on time. I kind of need a bouncer in here tomorrow night no matter what.'

'Do you think we're going to go down into the cellar and I'm going to attack you?'

'No,' Molly said, but tipped her chin toward her chest. 'But I need to know that I can trust you, and putting myself in a vulnerable position of being alone with you in a secluded place...'

'Do you think if I was planning to rape or rob you that I would tell you?'

'No,' Molly said, seeking out his dark chocolate eyes. 'But I wouldn't look as dumb to the police if I could at least say I asked.'

'I think the police would think that you would only ask if you were suspicious. And if you were suspicious, then you should never have put yourself in the vulnerable position in the first place. They would expect you to have trusted your instincts...' he said, not retreating from their proximity. 'Despite that, you have a bar full of drinkers. Everyone has seen both you and me tonight. If you don't come back, they'll notice. They would also all be able to identify me.'

'I haven't even seen any ID,' Molly said. 'I have no idea if you are who you say you are.'

'I wouldn't think that my name was relevant to my intention,' he said, but retrieved his wallet from his back pocket to show her his driver's licence. 'Rapists don't usually have that label in their name or as a title.'

Molly needed a male bartender, and this guy could keep the peace, which would minimise the chances of her needing to have any involvement with the police in the event of patrons getting out of hand. Much as she didn't appreciate his sass being directed at her, he had a good point. She checked the ID and handed it back to him, satisfied that he was at least who he said he was.

'I don't think that you want to rape me,' she said, then lifted a shoulder in confession. 'But this place is my life; I have to be able to trust you.'

'I can give you references.' He put his ID and wallet away. 'Are you still suspicious?'

'I watch a lot of scary movies,' Molly said. 'And a lot of thrillers. I'm the girl behind the pillow screaming "Why are you running up the stairs?"'

'You're not the rom com type?'

Molly snorted, but her hand went to her mouth as she composed herself. 'Men are a waste of time and energy. Whoever writes those scripts has had one too many happy pills or knocks on the head... in my opinion.'

'The guy at the bar is starting to make sense now,' Blake said.

'I could be a nymphomaniac, and I still wouldn't sleep with Joel. I wouldn't even go out for coffee with him.'

'Why not?' Blake asked. 'He seemed alright, and you said that you trusted him.'

'Joel likes... stuff.'

'Stuff,' Blake repeated, with the crook of an eyebrow. 'What kind of stuff?'

'Him and Vanessa had a thing a while ago. She said he had a penchant for... kinky stuff.'

'I'm intrigued. Who's Vanessa?'

'My barmaid,' Molly said. 'The only one I have left.'

'I can't wait to meet her,' Blake said.

Molly rolled her eyes and started down the stairs. 'Vanessa will definitely sleep with you,' she said over her shoulder, and gripped the wooden rail at her side as she descended the stairs while taking long breaths.

'That's good to know,' Blake said.

'I love her to pieces, and she is great with the customers. So don't scare her away, or be scared away.'

'Why would I be scared?' he asked.

Molly led him to the kegs and kicked the centre one before she leant back against one of the supporting columns next to the trapdoor. 'Vanessa can be a bit... exuberant.'

'How so?' Blake asked.

Molly went to the stack of kegs and pulled one down. Behind her, she heard Blake disconnecting the empty keg. 'You should meet her and decide for yourself.'

Dragging the keg around, she came up short when Blake appeared straight in front of her, ready to take the barrel. Molly didn't argue when he lifted his hands toward it and their vision locked. His fingers slid against hers, and then the weight was gone from her hands. Blake turned to carry on with the job at hand.

Molly had changed a million kegs in her time, but the experience had never made her mouth dry and her heart pound like this. Nerves were the obvious answer. She met strangers in the bar all the time, but she was rarely alone with them. Her employees tended to be friends, or friends of friends. Everyone had been connected to her or recommended. Blake was the first stranger ever to be in her cellar. Even the brewery guys had been coming here for so long that she felt like they were family.

'All done,' he said, and brushed his hands together as he turned back to face her. 'What were we talking about?'

'I can't afford to pay you much,' Molly said, because she had no idea what they'd been talking about.

'I'm sure we can work something out,' he said.

Molly was mortified when he winked at her and moved past in the direction of the exit. 'Wait,' Molly said, and spun to see him at the bottom of the stairs.

'Yeah?'

Sex wasn't something that was on her mind very often. It certainly wasn't something she gave up to random men willy nilly. Although that wink had made her think of sex for some reason, he hadn't actually mentioned it or made any advance, and she didn't want to betray where her own thoughts had slunk to.

'We need more peanuts,' she said, and pointed behind him to where the box was situated by the stairs. Molly wasn't quite comfortable enough to accuse him of something he hadn't actually done. The wink was possibly just meant as reassurance.

Blake went for the peanuts and as he stretched up, his tee-shirt lifted and revealed a narrow streak of supple skin. Closing her eyes against the sight of his rippling back muscles, they opened again when she heard peanut packets hitting the floor. She was then faced with the view of him bending over picking them up. His tight behind drew her gaze and turned her mouth from dry to overflowing, until her chest felt like it was shaking as it ached against the fabric of her shirt.

'Sorry,' he said, and stood up with the gathered peanut packets. 'Are you ok?'

Molly swallowed down her urge to whimper. 'Mm hmm,' was as much as she could muster. 'Can you pull?'

His lips curled up again. 'Who?'

'No,' Molly stuttered. 'I... I meant... Can you pump?'

'Pump?' he asked, with a snigger in his voice.

'Draught... I mean... Can you pour drinks?'

'I can,' he said.

'What about the cash register?'

'You're sure you can leave me alone with it?' he asked.

'We haven't taken much in tonight. I didn't have a chance to get to the bank today, so the float was next to nothing. Would you cover for me for a bit?'

'Sure.'

'Joel will keep an eye on you. He'll report back to me if there are any issues,' she said, and gestured for him to go up the stairs.

'Ladies first,' he said, but stepped back only a fraction of an inch.

Molly squeezed herself between him and the banister, and her chest crushed itself against his ribs, so she cursed herself for not turning the other way. Of course that would have meant that her ass would have been pressed into his groin. Her eyes wandered up to once again find his locked onto her.

The candid way he stared at her made her skin itch. She wanted to be freaked out or scared, except it wasn't intimidating. It wasn't fear that she felt, perhaps because the staring wasn't angry or pushy. His gaze consumed her, and yet it was more curious than intrusive.

'Thank you,' Molly murmured.

'Manners cost nothing,' he said. With his free hand, he took a stray lock of hair from her lip and tucked it behind her ear.

'The ladies upstairs are drinking the wine in the bottom of the fridge. Be nice to them,' Molly said, as a way to change the subject. 'But not too nice.'

'How nice is too nice?'

Molly continued up the stairs and listened to the heavy pound of his footsteps behind her. Each one shook her chest again and sent a harsh bolt to her heart.

'I have no problem with you dating, or sleeping with, anyone you meet upstairs. Just don't do it while I'm paying you or you're on my property.'

'Fair enough,' Blake said. 'Any other rules?'

'Uh... ' Molly thought about this as she dropped the cellar door closed behind him. She turned off the light with the switch on the wall and began jiggling the key in the lock again, hoping it would catch soon.

'Is that a no?' he asked.

'Rules... just the usual. Don't steal, don't drink... anything alcoholic that is. You can help yourself to soda. Get any troublemakers out the door, but unless you think they mean real trouble, we only toss them. Don't call the cops.'

'What if I do think that they mean trouble?'

'Calling the cops is a last resort around here, very last resort. If you feel that you absolutely have to call them then just say you're a concerned citizen, don't invite them to the bar. Try not to get too involved.'

'Why not?'

'They ask too many questions.'

'Oh,' Blake said. His interest had obviously been piqued. 'Are you selling knocked off goods or black market cigarettes?'

'No,' Molly said. 'Everything in this place is above board. It always has been. If I was to find one of my employees doing anything other than that, then they would be out the door.'

'Noted,' Blake said. 'So why do you dislike questions?'

'It's not the questions that I dislike,' Molly said, with one hand on the banister that led up the stairs. 'They give you false hope. They ask you all these questions and you answer them in the belief that your answers will make a difference... They don't.'

'Not a fan, then.'

'Nope,' Molly said. 'They are as useless as all the other men out there.'

'You'll give me a complex.'

'Men are good for some things,' Molly said, and took a step upward.

'Such as?' Blake asked, moving in one stride to the bottom of the stairs.

'I'm sure you'll find out when you grow up.'

'I'm thirty-four.'

'Physically maybe,' Molly said. 'But if you're like every other man out there, then you probably have the mental and emotional age of a thirteen year old.'

'How is your bitterness working out for you?'

'I'm not bitter,' Molly said with a loose shrug. 'It's just the way of the world.' She took another couple of steps up. 'Oh, the women... Belinda is the one in the green top with the blonde hair and the generous chest. Her sister is Melissa, she's sitting next to her, quieter, more modest. She's wearing the pink shirt and the heart pendant.'

'Ok,' Blake said. 'Why do I need to know this?'

‘It’s Melissa’s birthday. The sisters are regulars, but I don’t know the woman they are with. Anyway, knock a few bucks off the wine and make sure they get in a taxi when they leave. Don’t let them just walk out.’

‘Will do, Boss,’ Blake said.

‘Prices are all labelled out,’ Molly said. ‘If you have any problems that Joel can’t help you with, just shout up the stairs and I’ll come down. Don’t come up here. Ever.’

‘Oh ‘kay,’ he said.

‘Just shout,’ she said, with her best adamant look. ‘This is important, it’s rule number one... Thanks.’

As she ascended the stairs she was tempted to glance back over her shoulder, because she could feel him watching her again. His stare burned into her skin through her clothes. When she reached the top, the drive to turn was overwhelming, so she gave in to it and allowed her focus to drift down. Sure enough, there he was, at the foot of the stairs with his hand on the newel ball, gazing up at her with those still-curious eyes.

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