

CHAPTER ONE

'It couldn't have been that bad,' Lacie Hart said to her best friend.

'You've met my mother, have you ever known her to be speechless?'

'It might have something to do with Bump,' Lacie said, eyeing Sorcha's belly over the square aluminium table between them. 'You're six and a half months pregnant and you're only just now telling your parents about the baby. Of course they're surprised.'

'We had to wait for Bruce to... you know.'

Bruce Booth was Sorcha Reynold's baby daddy. Their relationship had ended three months before Sorcha discovered she was pregnant. When she did, Sorcha sent Lacie on a mission to seek out Bruce, who had gone missing. Sending her to another of her exes, Sorcha had assured her that Seth Sheppard, PI, would help Lacie track Bruce down. Having never met Shep herself, Lacie had mistaken Ryder Stone—her now boyfriend—for Shep when she discovered him snooping in Shep's office.

The journey Lacie went on with Ryder did end with them finding Bruce, although they found him engaged in crime with Ryder's best friend Jamie Wallace who then kidnapped Lacie in a vain attempt to keep his secret safe. It didn't work. Ryder found Lacie, although by then, Bruce Booth was believed to be dead and Jamie Wallace was arrested. It was only later when one of Jamie's men, Eric, turned on him that they found out Bruce wasn't deceased at all.

'The bruises have healed and the statements are in,' Lacie said to reassure her friend. 'Wallace's bail was refused. It's all a waiting game now.'

The pair sat in this unassuming coffee shop enjoying one of their frequent girlie lunches. Lacie had never been sure what was "girlie" about them, other than the gender of those present, but that was what Sorcha dubbed them. The sun was pouring through the huge windows at the front of the café, which was situated on a busy street in the centre of town. Sorcha still enjoyed being a girl about town. She hadn't quite come to grips with how motherhood might change her lifestyle.

Lacie had no children and no experience with them, but even she knew that long, relaxed lunches would be a thing of the past as soon as Bump made an appearance.

'How are things going at SW?' Sorcha asked, finishing her food and wiping her hands on a napkin. 'Are you going to finish that sandwich?'

Lacie switched plates with Sorcha in answer to the question. 'The sale's done. Two weeks left until the exchange.'

SW was also known as StoneWall, the company Ryder had run with Jamie Wallace for years before the whole debacle.

'How's Ryder doing with moving on?' Sorcha tucked into the remnants of Lacie's lunch.

'He spends most nights at my new apartment,' Lacie said.

'I wonder why,' Sorcha said, her playful eyes glowed and her sleek smile giggled.

Lacie averted her attention from her friend's suggestive expression. 'The SW boys are taking the hiatus as extended vacation time, though none of them are venturing out of the city.'

'You're still coming to the party at my parents' house tonight, though, aren't you?'

'Yes, don't panic. I said I would, didn't I?'

'Bruce says he's got a family thing. Some baby daddy he is,' Sorcha said, gobbling down the food. 'He's not coming.'

'I knew that,' Lacie said, rubbing the corner of her paper napkin between her thumb and forefinger. 'That's why I'm your date tonight.'

'It will be the first time I've seen my parents since I told them about the baby. They didn't seem very impressed with Bruce.'

'You haven't sounded impressed with him yourself recently.'

'It's difficult, he's...'

'He's what?' Lacie asked.

Their friendship had endured every negative experience they'd encountered and now that the friends were paired off, this should be a time for happiness. But from their conversations, she didn't get the impression that Sorcha was enamoured with the man she was supposed to be spending the rest of her life with.

'I just don't know...' Sorcha exhaled. 'He says he's always busy. I can't get him to engage. He's just... no fun.'

'It's grown up, though,' Lacie said. 'That's what you told me when you demanded that he buy you that diamond.'

'Which he bought with his parents' money, you should add'—Sorcha licked her fingertip to smudge up the crumbs from her plate into her mouth—'his accounts are still frozen. He has no money, he's just freeloading now and I don't think that even bothers him.'

'You dumped Shep. You chose Bruce.'

Sorcha had been decisive with the men in her life once it became clear that Bruce was alive. Being associated with the Reynolds family gave Bruce some credibility, but he still hadn't found himself a job.

'Shep was a loser,' Sorcha said, wiping her hands again. 'He was as annoying as hell... he wasn't a forever guy. But he was a lot of fun.'

'You can't compare Bruce to Shep,' Lacie said as Sorcha drank from her water glass. 'You wanted different things from them.'

'I know, but... do you remember what I said I would want from a partner?'

'Fidelity,' Lacie said, sipping her water while watching a group of women enter the coffee shop and take up position at three broad tables in the corner.

'He hasn't asked me to move in with him.'

'You're lucky,' Lacie said, switching focus back to her friend. 'Ryder blew a gasket when I told him I was renting my place. He still smarts about it.'

'That's because he loves you,' Sorcha said, finishing Lacie's sandwich. 'You're still not eating right.'

Trying not to roll her eyes, she made herself smile because Sorcha meant well and didn't know about how Ryder always hounded her about taking care of herself. 'Ryder's got you covered on that too.'

'Do you ever worry about Ryder's fidelity?'

Lacie laughed, almost spitting out the water she'd just tipped into her mouth. 'Sorry,' Lacie said, wiping her chin with her napkin.

'You're laughing,' Sorcha huffed. 'You think the question is hilarious.' Sorcha dumped her napkin on the table and her petulant lower lip made an appearance. 'You have to help me.'

'Help you what?'

'Bruce keeps disappearing,' Sorcha said. 'Sometimes he calls, and sometimes he doesn't. Sometimes I see him every day, then sometimes he's nowhere.'

'What are you thinking?' Lacie asked, but worried that she already knew the answer. 'Do you think he's getting himself in deep water again?'

'No,' Sorcha said. 'None of that was his fault. He'll never get mixed up in crime again. Jamie Wallace certainly scared him straight.'

'So what?'

'You need to go to Shep.'

Lacie's wandering attention snapped back around to Sorcha. 'You're kidding. Please, tell me you're kidding. We've been here before.'

Sorcha held her palms open at head height and framed her expression of joy. 'Yeah, and look how well that turned out for you after...' her hands and her glee fell. 'You know, other than the kidnapping thing.'

'What do you want me to say to Shep? If you need information, Ryder will get—'

'As long as you two are seeing each other, Ryder will be socialising with Bruce, and they've met. Bruce will notice Ryder watching him.'

Lacie had followed through on Sorcha's request for her to seek out Shep before. Back then, it sort of made sense as Shep was the only PI either of them had personal contact with. But since Sorcha had dumped Shep to go back to Bruce, Lacie had noticed how mooney her friend was and she'd feared that Shep was the reason, now it seemed she might have been right.

‘Ryder knows how to be covert. He presently has a team sitting around on their asses. They could help. But what do you want Bruce watched for?’

‘He disappears,’ Sorcha said, rubbing her fingertip back and forth on an inch of the table surface.

‘And you want fidelity.’ Lacie exhaled and leaned in. ‘You think he’s cheating on you?’

‘I don’t know,’ Sorcha said and Lacie hated to see her friend look so defeated. ‘I’d like to know.’

Lacie had to make sure that Sorcha knew she was playing with fire that could burn her if things didn’t turn out the way she wanted them to. ‘Are you sure you want Shep involved? He wasn’t happy when you broke up with him... again.’

‘That’s why Shep can’t know I’m involved,’ Sorcha said and the way her eyes grew more alert and her tone lowered told Lacie that Sorcha had thought this through... maybe a little too much.

‘So, why would I—?’

‘You’re a concerned friend,’ Sorcha said with a shrug and open expression like she was showing Lacie how to react if asked the question.

‘My boyfriend is better at this than—’

‘Bruce knows Ryder, and Ryder’s got enough on his plate with the sale of the SW premises, and getting a new business started while trying to find somewhere else to live. Oh, and he has a girlfriend who demands his body at every opportunity.’

Lacie couldn’t hide the width of her smile behind her glass. ‘He provides plenty of opportunity. I have to do my part.’

‘Look at you all happy and smiley,’ Sorcha beamed. ‘If I wasn’t so insanely jealous I’d be over the moon for you.’

‘You have the diamond and a child on the way. Your future is set. This is a time for you to be happy.’

Sorcha’s happiness was important to Lacie. They’d been friends since college and been through a lot. Sorcha’s respectable family and Catholic upbringing made her believe that marrying the father of her child was her only option. They hadn’t been back together for more than a few weeks and the relationship had lost its sheen already... if it had ever had any. If Sorcha wasn’t enamoured with Bruce now, Lacie couldn’t imagine her friend walking down the aisle carrying that kind of unhappiness.

‘Bruce and I haven’t had the time to... figure things out.’

‘Like how you feel about each other?’ Lacie asked, considering this the most important question facing the couple at this time. ‘Ryder and I only had days together before I was abducted, but it was him I thought about constantly.’

Losing some of her glum, Sorcha peered at her friend with curiosity. ‘How did you know that Ryder still cared? He could have been off with dozens of women while you were locked up.’

‘Wallace told me that you and he—’

‘After that I mean,’ Sorcha said, glazing over the lies Jamie Wallace had fed to Lacie during her captivity. ‘After all of the drama was done and when you two decided to make a go of it.’

‘I never asked him.’

‘You just...’ Sorcha didn’t finish. She turned her attention to her water glass before she spoke again. ‘Either you’re super secure, or super naive.’

Lacie smiled. ‘Could be either, I suppose.’

‘So, you’ll find out?’ Sorcha asked, some of her sapped colour had returned now that she had been fed.

‘If Ryder had sex while I was chained up?’ Lacie asked, being deliberately obtuse.

‘No,’ Sorcha said, rolling her eyes. ‘Go to Shep, hire him to find out if Bruce is screwing around on me.’

‘Have you asked Bruce?’ Lacie asked.

‘I can’t do that,’ Sorcha said as if this was the craziest suggestion in the world. ‘If he’s messing around, he won’t be honest, and then he’ll be super careful. I have to know.’

‘I can ask Ryder—’

‘Please,’ Sorcha said, launching her hand over the table. ‘We trust Shep, and Bruce doesn’t know him. Please.’

Lacie took a long breath. ‘Fine, I’ll go and see Shep, but he’s not going to be happy.’

‘Thank you,’ Sorcha sighed. ‘And you can’t tell Ryder.’

‘What? Why not?’ Lacie asked, snatching her hand back.

‘He’ll think I’m a nut,’ Sorcha said with a dismissive wave. ‘Men never understand these things. Plus, he and Bruce will socialise for as long as you and Ryder are seeing each other.’

‘You’ve said that twice now. Why do you say it like that?’

‘I don’t see a diamond on your hand.’

Lacie looked at her hand but thought better of telling Sorcha the story of conversations she and Ryder had on that subject.

‘Men understand that women have their secrets, especially between girlfriends,’ Sorcha said. ‘You will do this for me, won’t you?’

The main door opened and the man that swaggered in stopped every woman mid-chew. Whatever their previous task, it was abandoned when their drooling attention became more enthralled with his every stride. Sorcha was the exception, she was busy eyeing the muffins at the counter.

Lacie admired the man too. Enraptured by those long, strong legs in his faded jeans and the crisp white tee shirt that strained across his broad chest and shoulders, she smiled at the sight of his biceps testing the stitching. Ryder was ripped to perfection and she knew that from up close, personal experience.

He’d said he needed to cut his hair, but Lacie liked it wild. She also liked his stubble-roughened chin that made him look so dangerous, especially with those new reflective aviators hiding his eyes. When one corner of his mouth tilted up, she knew exactly what was on his mind.

‘Baby,’ Ryder said to her when he stopped beside their table.

Sorcha was talking again, but Lacie couldn’t tear her eyes from Ryder’s still-shrouded ones. She didn’t need to see his eyes to feel them trail down over her body. He undressed her slowly, exposing her in his mind for his mental visual consumption. It sent a shiver through her body, snapping her nipples to attention and moistening her core in preparation for his welcome intrusion.

‘Uh, hello!’ Sorcha shrieked. ‘I’m sitting here, and you’re in a public place, stop with the foreplay.’

Lacie blushed and dropped her eyes. ‘Hey, Sorcha,’ Ryder said.

Removing his sunglasses, he hooked them into the neck of his tee shirt. It didn’t matter that Lacie hadn’t looked at him again. He scooped her up and sat on her seat, moving her to his lap in the process as though she was his napkin.

‘We’re having lunch,’ Sorcha said.

‘You’ve been in here nearly two hours,’ Ryder said. ‘You spent most of that on the coffee course while you decided what to order.’

Lacie looped her arms around his neck and rubbed her nose on the stubble on his cheek. The hiss from the women around them was audible, but it didn’t put Lacie off. His hand slid from the small of her back all the way around her body to her abdomen. He didn’t have to switch his focus to her, the reaction in his jeans against her thigh almost made her squeal. Her body pressed closer, her peaked nipples crushing themselves into his chest.

‘Are you stalking us?’ Sorcha asked.

‘Don’t have to,’ Ryder said. ‘My girl and me got the comms down.’

‘I didn’t know you were joining us,’ Sorcha prickled.

Though she could tell by Sorcha’s tone that her friend was unhappy, Lacie couldn’t stop herself from rasping her teeth against Ryder’s jaw. His smile spread, and when he glanced down at her, she pulled herself closer, still conveying without words exactly what was on her mind.

‘Remind me to sneak out on you more often,’ he said, bumping her nose with his.

They’d had dinner in front of a movie last night and gone to bed early. Since her return from Wallace’s lair she’d had several issues at night, nightmares and restlessness, as well as an increase in her sleep talking.

Last night after a bout of lovemaking, she’d settled to sleep in Ryder’s arms. When she’d awoken in the dark, he was gone. But he was here now, sliding that hand on her lap up her skirt.

‘You ate?’ Ryder asked her with a squeeze.

‘I ate,’ Sorcha said. ‘Can we help you with something?’

‘Actually, I have to go,’ Lacie said, lifting Ryder’s hand to read his watch.

‘You do?’ Sorcha asked. ‘You better not be running off to get laid.’

‘We’ve been here for two hours, Sorch, and I’ll be over at eight,’ Lacie said.

‘Make it seven, and come to my place.’

‘Will you give me a ride?’ Lacie asked Ryder.

'I'll leave you the truck before and drive you home after,' Ryder said. 'We're working security at the party.'

'What?' Sorcha screeched.

'We've done Reynolds' events for years,' Ryder said. 'They haven't been impressed with the other contractors they've used while SW's been on hiatus. Your father called me this morning. I didn't want him to beg, and he was offering big bucks—five times what we usually charge.'

'You're extorting my father?' Sorcha asked.

'I'm not taking the money,' Ryder said. 'I told the story to demonstrate how desperate he was.'

'Sounds like my dad alright,' Sorcha said, tidying up her place setting. 'Always wanting the best of the best.'

With an amused smile, Ryder waited a beat. 'Why Sorcha, are you paying me a compliment?'

Sorcha didn't look too sure about that. Her friend and her boyfriend clashed, but their conflict was suppressed for her benefit and Lacie was grateful for that. Though it did lead to frequent displays of passive aggression.

'Why are you smiling?' Sorcha asked Lacie. 'How are you going to get to my house now?'

'I'll drive us,' Lacie said.

'In that monster of a truck?' Sorcha stuttered.

'I've got other vehicles,' Ryder said. 'You're welcome to any of them. Lacie has full security access.'

'Really?' Sorcha glowed and her eyes began to dance. 'You've got a Spyder convertible.'

'Yeah, it was a gift from a client,' Ryder said.

'No,' Lacie said, digging her nails into Ryder's neck.

'Dusty has a thing for the truck,' Ryder explained.

'You know how I feel about loyalty. We've made some memories in that truck,' Lacie murmured, flicking his earlobe with her tongue.

'We have,' he said. After he squeezed her thigh, his fingers extended, tracing his knuckle over her panties—the man was a covert pro.

'Stop making gooey eyes,' Sorcha tsked.

'You're engaged,' Ryder said. 'Gooey eyes come with the territory, don't they?'

Lacie raced in before her hormonal friend either cried or stabbed someone, though she was sure Ryder could deflect her if it came to it. 'I should get going,' Lacie said.

'You'll do that thing?' Sorcha pleaded when Lacie bent to pick her bag from the floor, squeezing Ryder's hand between her thighs.

'I said—'

'Today,' Sorcha said.

Lacie looked at Ryder's watch again. 'I'll try, but it's already after three, and—'

'Please,' Sorcha said, placing a hand on her swollen abdomen.

'Ok,' Lacie said. Sorcha beamed. 'Do you need us to drop you somewhere?'

'No. I've got a nail appointment next door in ten minutes.'

Lacie nodded, locking her fingers between Ryder's while they stood together. 'I'll see you—'

'I do need a chocolate muffin,' Sorcha said.

Ryder sighed but he released Lacie's hand and went to the counter to purchase the muffin without further complaint.

'Shep might say no,' Lacie said, keeping her eyes on Ryder to ensure he didn't come back while they were talking. 'You broke his heart the first time you dumped him.'

'I did not! Hearts were nothing to do with it. That was only sex. We both knew that.'

'Maybe. But we all went through a lot together, and you dumped him again—'

'We thought Bruce was dead,' Sorcha said, but lowered her chin when Ryder approached.

Ever vigilant, Lacie knew that Ryder spotted the abrupt end to their words, but he didn't mention it. Both of them said goodbye to Sorcha, though Sorcha was more interested in beseeching Lacie with her desperate, innocent glances.

She would do Sorcha's bidding, because she always did. Lacie didn't mind dealing with Sorcha's messes because it allowed her a distraction from any mess in her own life. At the moment, she had it sort of together, but Jamie Wallace had taught her how quickly things could change.

She and Ryder left the coffee shop, and he led her to the truck which was further down the block. After helping her into the cab, he rounded the truck to enter on his own side. But he didn't start the engine to get them moving. He leaned over to kiss her thoroughly and got his hand up her skirt again.

'People can see through these windows you know,' Lacie said when he pushed her skirt all the way up and shoved his arm behind her hips, forcing her to the front edge of the seat.

'I thought we could make a memory.'

'On a public street?' she asked, leaning in to kiss him again. His finger slid under the cotton of her panties and it was inside her before she could breathe out.

'Ryd,' she gasped, grabbing at his shoulders for stability.

Slowly he slid his finger out only to join it with a second digit. 'Mm,' he hummed.

Resting his head on her shoulder, he buried his mouth on her neck and sucked as his fingers increased pace.

'What... are you... oh God, Ryder...'

Lacie grabbed for the door, and her other hand landed on his thigh, grasping for some kind of anchor. When he sucked her neck, she recognised that the sting would leave his mark on her. His fingers almost left her completely but his thumb grazed her clit.

'Do you like that?' he murmured against her.

'Uh, uh... I...'. Her heart wanted out of her chest, so she tried to measure her panting, to slow it and breathe through the pleasure. But Ryder's digits delved back into her and his thumb curled around her nub, squeezing her hard.

'Talk to me, Baby,' he said, lowering his head further.

But she'd lost all perception of the situation, his teeth grabbed her nipple through her blouse and she shouted his name, then whispered it on an exhale. The fireworks in her gut bubbled to her aching breasts. The permanent clench of her inner muscles locked his fingers in place, but that didn't prevent his thumb from massaging her off the cliff again.

'Yes, Baby,' he whispered. 'Good, more?'

Her eyes remained closed. Breathing became harder, and clenching again, she pulsed around the fingers he used to torment her with. Pushing them deeper, he curled around to push the cushion of her G-spot, while spiking her clit.

'Baby?'

Wriggling further down in her seat, Lacie rode his hand, rocking her hips against his digits. 'You like that,' he exhaled.

Dragging his teeth on her shoulder, Ryder made her blouse flutter down her arm. Her fingers twisted into his hair to direct his mouth upward as hers descended. Leading the kiss with her tongue, Ryder gratefully received her initiation, accepting her battling intrusion with his own.

He slipped a digit into her again. Her arousal forced her to push back, while rubbing herself on the pleasurable pressure he offered. 'Good,' he said on her mouth. He nipped her lip, then pushed her head aside to suck her earlobe.

Sliding her hand up his thigh, Lacie pressed her palm to his solid length, and at the discovery of his equivalent arousal, her moisture seeped over his digits. Ryder hummed against her again and took her hand from his lap. She tried to resist, but he held her hand away from his groin by pressing her hand over her own knee.

Just as she was sure he'd brought her to the brink again, his fingers slid out, causing her to yelp. Blinking stars from her eyes, Lacie looked at the shops and the greenery of the plaza where a smattering of people went about their business.

The truck started up, and Ryder pulled into the flow of traffic. Shaking off the mist, he carried on like nothing had happened.

'What was that for?' she said, when she was ready to attempt speech.

'What?' he asked.

'That.'

His lips curled at one corner, and he rested his hand on her still-exposed thigh. 'I love you.'

'Ryder,' she sighed with a smile. Taking his hand in both of hers, she lifted it to her mouth and covered his knuckles with kisses. 'I love you too.'

'You like orgasms,' he said. 'And I wasn't around to serve any up this morning.'

‘Our bed feels odd without you in it,’ she said, receiving a smile. Kissing his hand again, she laid it on her thigh and covered it with her own hand while the other reached to his tee shirt and nabbed his sunglasses. ‘What time do you have to be at work?’

‘The boys are over there just now,’ Ryder said. ‘I’ll join them in an hour.’

‘Really?’ she asked. ‘You have a free hour?’

‘You’re not interested in how I knew you were still at lunch or why I crashed it? We haven’t talked all day.’

‘Is everything ok?’ she asked.

‘Yeah.’

‘If there was anything wrong you would’ve told me as soon as we were alone.’

‘Yeah.’

‘So I knew there was nothing wrong. And I was happy to see you. I like it when you surprise me. I have nothing to hide, Ryder. You’re not going to catch me in the act of anything untoward.’

He laughed and squeezed her leg. ‘Not when I’m the one acting with you. If you want to have a tempestuous affair, you just let me know.’

‘What did we just do?’ she asked when he pulled up outside her new place.

Ryder jumped out and came around to lift her out of the truck before he answered her. ‘What we’re about to do again,’ he said. Locking the truck, he took her up the building stairs to unlock the communal door with his own key.

‘You know I have a date tonight,’ Lacie said, struggling to keep up as he increased his speed on the stairs.

‘Yeah, I met her at lunch, she’s cute. The kid yours?’

She came up short at his back when he halted to unlock the front door. Once it was open, he swept her feet from under her to take her inside, past the door to her workroom and up the stairs to the loft with the mezzanine bed.

When he came down on top of her on the bed, she rubbed her hands from his chest to his shoulders. ‘Are you getting this out of the way so that you don’t have to come home with me later?’ she asked, running her hands into his hair.

‘I’m coming to bed with you tonight too.’

‘I’ll probably crash at the Reynolds’ tonight with Sorcha,’ Lacie said, kissing him and reaching for the hem of his tee shirt.

‘Why?’ he frowned.

‘It’s what I usually do after a couple of glasses of wine. I don’t like to drink and drive.’

‘Mm,’ he grinned. ‘So you’re going to be lubed without a ride home. I have to stay sober.’

‘So I get sex now and later?’

‘Anytime I get the chance, you get it.’

‘I love you, Ryd,’ she said. ‘Promise me that you’ll never let me screw this up.’

‘What?’ he asked, brushing her hair from her face. ‘What would make you say something like that?’

‘Just... if I do anything wrong, or... insensitive, give me a chance to fix it.’

‘Baby, I’ll fix it for you, guaranteed.’

Speech was forgotten when their mouths merged in prelude to what their bodies were about to mount. No matter how many times they were intimate, it got better every time.