

Chapter One

Brooklyn Jameson stared at the man across the desk from her, wondering when her life had taken a hard right turn into the truly absurd. Being a private investigator sounded glamorous when she was eighteen and desperate to stick it to her parents, but now, thirteen years later, the shine had more than worn off. There was nothing glamorous about long nights camped out in her car, eating too much fast food and drinking a terrifying amount of bitter coffee, waiting to catch cheating spouses in the act.

This potential client was a new low, though, even for her.

She pressed her lips together and calculated how far off from making rent she was this month. *Too far*. Cora could cover the difference, but that wasn't a path she wanted to go down. Brooklyn didn't do handouts—not even from her best friend. She had to take this case. No help for it. She huffed out a breath. “Let me make sure I have this right.”

The man sitting in the sole chair on the other side of her desk looked as out of place as a peacock who wandered into a desert. There was nothing overtly ostentatious about how he was dressed, but she'd grown up with money, and she knew what rich looked like. Richard Fisk was rich, born and bred. He cleared his throat. Since sitting down five minutes ago, he hadn't stopped looking around her office like he expected to catch Ebola from every surface he touched.

She looked around the space, trying to see it from his point of view. Both the desk and the chairs they sat on were secondhand, mostly because the only time she was here was to take clients. The beige paint on the walls probably would have been at home in a prison or insane asylum... *Damn, maybe I should get a fake pot of flowers or something to liven up the place.*

The only rich clients she dealt with were acquaintances of Cora, and she went to them instead of having them set foot in the office.

Since he didn't answer, other than to give her a nervous nod, like he thought she might... Brooklyn didn't even know what. He was nervous and twitchy, but angry enough that he'd managed to get over himself and walk through her door. She sighed. "You bought a dog—"

"Tibetan Mastiff. He's worth over a million, and that's not even counting stud fees."

She was relatively sure stud fees were exclusively for the horse world, but Brooklyn wasn't exactly an animal person, so she could be wrong. "Yes, a Tibetan Mastiff. You purchased this dog earlier this year—"

"In March."

She held onto her temper through sheer force of will, reminding herself yet again that, short of bowing to her parents' wishes and cleaving to the plan they'd set out for her—marriage and babies and none of that work nonsense—she didn't have the luxury of turning down a paying client. No matter how often the client interrupted her. "So you've said. And your dog went missing a week ago."

"He was stolen. Which I already told you."

"Yes, yes, you did." It was entirely possible he was telling the truth. It was just as likely that he'd bought a stupidly expensive animal and then moved on to the next bright and shiny thing he could spend his daddy's money on. He hadn't even bothered to chip... She checked her notes. Barbaras. Who the hell named their dog Barbaras? If he had chipped him, it would have taken all of thirty seconds to track the dog's location.

Richard shoved a flier across her desk to her. "See for yourself."

She gingerly picked up the flier and stared. Whoever had taken Richard's dog didn't seem to like Richard much. The picture on the paper depicted the giant beast—the dog looked more like a lion than a canine—next to a masked man giving the camera a thumbs-up. The caption read:

Have you seen your dog? He's mine now. I love him. Funny. “And you think you know who this man is?”

“I don't think I know. I *do* know. Not that the goddamn police will believe me.” He pointed a shaking finger at the paper. “That's Levi Turnbull. He's had it out for me since he moved into our neighborhood. He's trash, and this is exactly the sort of shit he'd pull.”

She knew of Levi Turnbull—the whole damn city did—though she'd never met him in person. He was a geeky tech wiz, and he'd invented a video game that had become a worldwide phenomenon. She hadn't played the game, but she'd watched all three of the movies—so far—that the game had spawned, and they weren't half bad. Not that Levi himself had his hands on every aspect of the empire his popularity had created, but still.

Brooklyn also had the inside bonus because Levi happened to be friends with the guy currently head over heels in love with *her* roommate and best friend, Cora Landers. *Oh, what tangled webs we weave.* She wasn't sure if that connection would count for her or against her, but at least she had an inside edge if she needed it.

None of that explained why her potential client had a hard-on for the guy. “Is there a reason you think it's him, specifically?”

Richard turned the color of a ripe plum, his knuckles white as he gripped the arms of the poor chair. “That bastard has had it out for me since he moved in. He's a piece of shit.”

She tapped a finger on her desk. This reeked of a private vendetta, and the last thing she needed was to get involved in something like that—especially since Levi would likely be a groomsman at Cora and Jack's wedding, and there was nothing like a restraining order to put a damper on a good time.

But money was money. “Let's talk fees.” She named an amount, doubling her usual charge.

“Done.” He didn’t blink.

Should have quoted him a higher price. “I require half the money up front. I’ll set up surveillance of his property and attempt to get photographic evidence that he is, in fact, responsible. I’ll also put out feelers in case he’s not.”

“That’s not necessary.” Richard pulled out his wallet and smacked a huge wad of cash onto her desk. “I know it’s him. Don’t waste your time looking elsewhere. Here’s your full fee. I’ll double it if you get my dog back.”

Brooklyn blinked at the cash. *Didn’t see that coming.* “You understand that I might not be able to prove anything.”

“You have a reputation.” He smirked when she raised her eyebrows. “What? You don’t think I found you by accident. You caught a friend of mine in a, let’s call it a questionable situation. Your pictures were the reason his wife is walking away with sixty percent of everything he owns. Billy covered his tracks and the other P.I.s she’d sent after him came up with nothing. You found what they missed. You’ll find that fucking dog.”

Motherfucking Billy Reynolds. He was a philanderer with a taste for what he called “exotic” women. Talk about racist bullshit. She’d set up a bug in his car and, though the recordings were technically illegal and she hadn’t shared them with the wife, the things he’d said... Yeah, that guy had been a class act.

Richard considering him a friend was a giant red flag waving in front of her face.

This is a bad idea.

Too late. I need the money and I won’t see an offer that pays anywhere near what this one will—no matter how strange it is. She took the cash. “I’ll start tonight.”

Richard smiled. “Perfect.”

As soon as the door closed behind him, she shut her laptop, folded up the flier and tossed it into her purse, and threw on a light jacket. The sooner she got this done, the sooner she would get the rest of that money. *That means a couple months' worth of rent. I could afford to take Cora out for dinner for once.* Not that her best friend minded footing the bill, but it was a point of pride. She wasn't a mooch. She just didn't have the disposable funds that a child-star-turned-divorce-attorney did. *I chose the wrong profession.*

Levi Turnbull lived in Cantwell. It was quieter than most of the options in his income bracket—the average listing price was a cool ten million—with lots of trees and each house sitting well back on acreage. *Video game tech is the place to be, apparently.* Her old Honda Civic might as well have been a cockroach in the middle of a spotless kitchen. She cruised past the street that was now essentially owned by Levi Turnbull. *Turnbull is a terrible last name.*

And she was most definitely stalling.

Just don't get arrested. Cora is getting tired of bailing you out.

Sometimes her job took her into weird places, and cops tended to frown upon things like trespassing. Throw in Brooklyn's temper and a mouth that could get a wee bit away from her, and it all added up to trouble. How her parents thought she could be a debutante was beyond her. She'd always preferred scraped knees and living on the edge to the life they wanted to confine her into.

Twenty-eight and still rebelling against your parents. You, Brooklyn Jameson, are a gem.

She parked and climbed out of her car, mostly to get out of her own head. Her camera wasn't fancy—she couldn't bring anything too bulky unless she had a place to set up—but it would do the job. Staking out a billionaire whose neighbor was accusing him of stealing his million-dollar dog... Life was weird. Weirder than normal.

She'd scoped out the place on Google Maps before driving over, but Google hadn't updated since Levi moved in, so the information was less than helpful. Levi had apparently bought the three lots at the end of a dead-end street, ensuring as much privacy as one was likely to get this close to LA. Even with the construction, it appeared he'd left most of the trees—a point in her favor.

The coverage should provide a legit place to figure out the best way to go about getting evidence that he was the dog thief in question.

Brooklyn shot a look down the street and scaled the short fence before she could think of the dozen reasons why it was a bad idea. They were bitches to climb, and there was the added risk of motion sensors or cameras or whatever the hell rich people dreamed up to protect their precious possessions. But the alternative was to try to go around the coast by boat and that was...not an option.

The trek to get within sight of the house was made treacherous between the trees and the growing dark, but she managed with only cursing under her breath. Once she was close enough, she found a promising tree, gritted her teeth, and scrambled up. She was only mostly out of breath by the time she found a branch to sit on, her long hair tangling in the leaves. *Just another terrible life choice in a long history of terrible life choices.*

She surveyed the house. It was too big to see all of it, but she had a good view of the west corner, which was lit up as if in welcome. *Thank you, Levi. I appreciate you making it easy on me.* The house might be massive, but with a dog that looked like a freaking lion, it shouldn't be too hard to figure out if there was any truth behind Richard's suspicions.

She pulled the binoculars she always carried with her out of her purse since this camera wouldn't zoom as well as her other one. First, she needed to confirm the dog was there. Then,

she'd come back with the proper tools to get her evidence.

There was a man in the downstairs room—living room—who looked like he was having one hell of a day. Brooklyn frowned. He looked like he was...herding something? She adjusted the zoom on her binoculars and watched as a large dog—a mutt with strong blue heeler vibes—leaped onto the pristine white couch, leaving muddy footprints everywhere, followed by a cat who was almost as large as a dog...followed by *another* dog who was small enough to fit in her purse. “What the hell?”

The man snatched up the dog, his mouth moving as he must be delivering a blistering lecture. The dog's ears drooped, and its tail went between its legs, but the second the man's hold shifted, it was out of his hands and off again. He disappeared for a few seconds, reappearing with the cat and the smaller dog beneath each arm, and he hustled them through a doorway leading deeper into the house.

Brooklyn laughed softly. She might not be an animal person, but she sympathized with the beleaguered man. As entertaining as the show was, they weren't what she was looking for. She shifted her attention to each of the downstairs windows, but they didn't reveal any giant animals conveniently standing there, waiting for her to find them.

Movement in an upstairs window caught her eye. She looked up and froze. She'd seen pictures of Levi Turnbull before, and he was attractive in a gruff man-bear sort of way—shaggy dark hair and beard that was trimmed to a reasonable length. He didn't seem to like reporters that much—something she could sympathize with. He never left his house without a uniform of dark sunglasses and ugly gray sweatshirts that were almost interchangeable.

He wasn't wearing one of those sweatshirts now.

He stood shirtless, talking to someone she couldn't see. Her hormones surged, and that was

the only excuse she had for lingering on the muscles lining his back, touching on the dimples peeking out of the top of his low-slung jeans. *Sweet baby Jesus.*

Apparently, this job wasn't going to be all that bad if she got to creep on *him* while figuring out if he was a dog-stealing bastard like Richard accused him of being.