

Chapter One

“I can’t do it. I won’t.” Jessica Jackson backed around the kitchen table, feeling like seven different kinds of a fool when Brooklyn Jameson followed her, waving the invitation that had caused all of this. “Stop it. You’re being ridiculous.”

“No, *you’re* being ridiculous.” Brooklyn lunged.

Jessica scrambled back, nearly taking out a chair as she did. The open and airy kitchen felt too small for the first time in the five years she’d lived here. “I’m not going. End of story.” She edged around the corner of the island, not liking the way her friend eyed the counter like it was an obstacle to be overcome.

“Bullshit. It’d be one thing if you were like me, who barely went to high school enough to pass. Or Cora, with her fancy private tutors.”

“I can hear you.” Cora Lander’s voice floated down from her room upstairs.

Brooklyn shot a look at the open balcony and then refocused on Jessica. “You have to go.” She raised her voice. “Cora, tell her she has to go.”

“You have to go.”

Jessica glared and slid back a step, eyeing the French doors that led out to the beach. It would be a perfect escape—if Brooklyn wasn’t standing in the way. “What is this? Why do you care so much if I go to some stupid reunion or not?”

“Oh please.” Brooklyn huffed. “I’m a private detective, remember? Even if I wasn’t, I could detect that you want to go to this damn reunion by the longing looks you’ve been sending this invitation ever since it showed up in February—four freaking months ago. Just suck it up and go.”

She wanted to, but only because it seemed she had a masochistic streak a mile wide. Jessica

stopped trying to flee and threw her hands up. “You don’t get it. I was a bitch in high school—no, I was the *queen* bitch. I was so terrible to some of those people. How am I supposed to face them knowing some of the crap I pulled?”

Brooklyn snorted and cocked her head to the side, sending her fall of auburn hair cascading over one shoulder. It was the only part of her that was girlish to the extreme. The rest of her was dressed in layers designed to make people look right through her—even in the heat of Los Angeles’s summer. She rolled her eyes. “It was high school. Everyone was a little shit in high school.”

“Not like me.” Jessica had taken mean girl to a whole new level. She’d been so sure of her place and life—and that she ranked above everyone else. Since the catastrophe that was graduation, she’d more than balanced her karmic debt. She hoped. If there was anything left to pay, going back to face her former victims would do it. “Please don’t make me go.”

Brooklyn narrowed her amber eyes. “This isn’t about you being a dick. This is about *him*.”

“No, it’s not.” She spoke too quickly and then mentally cursed herself for giving away the truth.

Not that her friends were unaware of her history with Jake Davis. She’d met Cora in her third year in LA, and Brooklyn a couple months later. They’d lived together for five years. These women had seen The Breakdown of 2012, when she’d hit rock bottom so spectacularly that she’d plowed right through it to a whole new low. She’d lost the only acting job she’d been able score in five long years, lost her sorta-boyfriend, and lost her apartment in the space of a week. It was in the midst of that she’d gotten the drunkest she’d ever been in her entire life and confessed everything.

About how she’d been so crazy in love with Jake the entire time they’d dated in high school.

How they'd been each other's firsts. How they'd planned a perfect future together.

And how she'd dumped him on his ass the first hiccup they had, because she was sure he was going to hold her back from her destiny.

Jessica snorted. Destiny. She'd been a little twat. Knowing that now didn't mean she was eager to face the one who got away. *More like the one I kicked to the curb.*

"Oh, good Lord, you have that moony look in your eyes." Brooklyn made a gagging sound. "Cora, come talk some sense into her!"

Footsteps padded upstairs and then Cora's head appeared over the balcony. Her dark eyes took in their positions—Jessica still wanting to flee and Brooklyn standing in her way—and huffed out a breath. "You're going, end of story. If it will make you feel better, you can pretend I forced you."

Considering Cora could be downright scary when she wanted to be, there was some truth to the statement.

Jessica wasn't backing down this time. "You don't get it."

"Wrong. Out of all of us, I know all about having to face down your past on a daily basis. I manage. You will, too."

Okay, maybe you do get it. Jessica gritted her teeth. It didn't matter. It was apples and oranges. "Y'all cannot seriously expect me to go face the firing squad. I'm willing to eat my humble pie when the situation calls for it, but this is just too much. I don't have anything resembling a boyfriend. I am almost thirty years old and have two roommates. I haven't accomplished jack all that I said I would when I blew out of town with two middle fingers in the air."

Cora smiled, her teeth perfectly white and straight against her blood red lips. "I thought your

therapist said facing down your past was an important part of your journey.”

“I *have* faced down my past. I’m reformed. That doesn’t mean I want to be thrown to the wolves so I can play a damn martyr.”

Brooklyn laughed, her long brown hair swinging in its ponytail. “A martyr. You have such an inflated opinion of yourself.”

“Shut it.” She turned a pleading look at Cora. “Let’s just pretend this never happened, okay?”

Cora’s expression turned contemplative. “You know what your problem is? It isn’t going back to Catfish Creek. It’s going back alone.”

Something like hope blossomed in Jessica’s chest. She’d seen both her parents and her brother quite a few times over the last ten years, but she’d never been brave enough to cross the town lines. Though she was mostly too proud—even now—to admit it, she missed at least some parts of Catfish Creek. “You have an idea.”

“I have a *brilliant* idea. Come on.”

Jessica headed for the stairs, Brooklyn hot on her heels. She found Cora back in her bedroom at the desk she’d set up for when she needed to work from home. It was just as light and airy as the rest of the house, the big windows overlooking the beach giving the space plenty of natural light, and the seafoam green walls and white furniture gave the space a restful feeling.

Though Jessica wasn’t feeling particularly restful at the moment. One look at Cora’s laptop had her shaking her head. “No way.”

“One of my clients used the company, and they’re perfectly respectable.” Cora scrolled down, giving them an eyeful of the classy website that offered all manner of dates. Jessica caught sight of one package that included having a beautiful man show up to a residence and clean for the allotted time.

“You have got to be kidding me. Escorts?”

“That’s illegal in both California and Texas. No, the sex isn’t included—it’s strictly forbidden. You can’t even kiss them.” Cora touched the screen. “There we go. This is the package Hilary went with. She had a wedding and didn’t feel like dealing with people gossiping about her cheating ex-husband, so she took a date. He charmed everyone and kept them distracted from unfortunate lines of questions, which freed her up to have a good time. That’s exactly what you need.”

It sounded too good to be true. Jessica leaned forward, scanning the package Cora had brought up. She would put in her information and her basic requests—everything from looks to background—and once it was all agreed upon, her date would meet her locally and play his role for the duration of the trip. They limited these to three days, but she wouldn’t need much more than that. Get in, attend the reunion, get out.

Then she noticed the price. “Oh, hell, no. I can’t afford that!”

Cora rotated her chair around and considered her with unblinking dark eyes. “You need this, Jess. You need to go face him—and everyone else—so you can move on. All the therapy and self-help books in the world won’t mean a damn thing if you can’t take this step.”

Jake. It all came back to Jake.

The rest of her graduating class weren’t terrible people or anything, but she didn’t feel the loss over not being in contact with them. Jake was just this gaping hole in her chest. Oh, it had scabbed over in the years since she’d seen him, but the boyfriends she’d had since then couldn’t hold a candle against the phantom of Jake.

She’d never be able to have a lasting relationship if she didn’t put him firmly in the past where he belonged, and she couldn’t do that until they had a very painful and much-needed

conversation.

For me, at least. He's moved on with his life.

One night a couple years ago, driven by Brooklyn egging her on and just enough tequila to drown out common sense, she'd searched him out on Facebook. His profile was only half private, so she could see a few pictures of him, but nothing else. He had looked even better at twenty-six than he had at eighteen, and that he still had his annual fishing trip with the boys, but she had no idea if he was married or had kids.

The thought made her sick to her stomach.

She pressed a hand there, as if the pain was a physical thing she could combat. "I don't know."

"Too late."

Jessica spun to face Brooklyn so fast, she almost fell on her ass. "What did you say?"

Her friend didn't look up from her phone. "You're booked. It's paid for. You can assist me on a couple stakeouts to pay me back."

She grabbed the phone from Brooklyn's hand and read with dawning horror. *All American guy, blond, painfully hot. Needs to be able to deal with the fact that I was a bitch in high school and so most of these people are going to hate me and be dicks.* "Are you kidding me?"

"What? It's the truth." Brooklyn snatched the phone back. "You can thank me later."

Jessica stood there as the truth came crashing down around her. She was going back to Catfish Creek. She could cancel the date, but it wouldn't change anything because Cora and Brooklyn were right—she needed to face her past. Her hand itched with the need to call her therapist or pop a Xanax, but she resisted both urges. She'd been using crutches for far too long. Maybe it was time for her to do what was necessary to finally move on.

She just hoped it wouldn't kill her in the process.

Jake Davis stared at the computer, wondering if he was hallucinating. That would explain seeing goddamn Jessica fucking Jackson's name on the newest batch of requests for Diamond Dates. He sat back and took a long drink of his coffee, but nothing changed.

She was coming back for the reunion.

More than that, she was obviously single if she was looking for a fake date to bring with her.

Of course she was. If she was single, she wouldn't want to face Catfish Creek—face *him*—alone.

Jake couldn't begin to count the number of times he'd shown up for events around town since high school and been party to pitying looks and barely concealed whispers. Nothing people loved more than a good scandal, and his ex was nothing if not a good scandal.

It was when he ran into Rae Evans that things started to come together. They'd both been invited to the wedding of one of their graduating class, and agreed to go together just to avoid dealing with the nonsense.

It worked.

No one bothered them. There were looks, of course, but neither of them had to answer any uncomfortable questions about being single—or what their exes were up to.

And so Diamond Dates was born.

He sat back in his chair and looked around, trying to get some distance on this. His office was the same as it had been since the day he moved the company here—dark gray walls, a generic sofa that could double as a bed in a pinch, and a single window overlooking the street. It wasn't fancy, but he didn't need fancy. Diamond Dates didn't meet its clients face to face. They

handled everything online or over the phone. If a meeting was required, he set it up in a public place.

In the years since he'd started the company, he'd only had to deal with one over-zealous client, but one was more than enough. His guys trusted him to keep their personal information locked down and to keep things professional. The best way to do that was to confine the entire encounter to whatever event they were contracted for.

None of that made a damn bit of difference when it came to Jessica Jackson. There would be no *distance* for him. Even trying for it was fucking impossible.

If he was a petty asshole, he could use this application to humiliate the hell out of her. They might have graduated ten years ago, but there were still people walking around Catfish Creek with emotional scars from shit she'd pulled back in the day. They'd be like sharks scenting blood in the water, glorying in seeing her brought to her knees with them standing witness.

He stopped and really thought about it. What was the point? Hurting her now wouldn't take him back in time and erase the pain he'd felt. Would he like to see her with some egg on her face? Sure. He wasn't a damn saint. But that didn't mean he could be the one to pull the trigger.

She might have ripped his still-beating heart out of his chest and ground it beneath one of her spike heels, but she'd been his first love. Fuck, she'd been his *only* love—being burned so spectacularly created a whole hell of a lot of trust issues, and he hadn't bothered to get past most of them.

Fuck, I'm depressing.

He brought up the information that Jessica had sent in. Jake did background checks on all his potential clients. Just because the majority were women didn't mean his guys were safe. It paid to be safe and to have his shit together before sending them out.

He'd thought about checking up on her over the years, but Jake had never crossed that line. She was his ex for a reason, and she'd made it abundantly clear that she was better off without him after the injury that killed all his college and NFL plans. It had been hard enough recovering while dealing with a broken heart. He didn't need to get kicked in the teeth of his own volition.

Now, he was practically required to look her up.

Jake plugged her information into his program and then pulled up the photo she'd sent while it worked on the search. He set his coffee on the desk so he didn't spill it on himself. *She looks good.* Better than good. The Jessica he knew had been all angles as harsh and unforgiving as the personality she showed the world. Whoever had taken this picture had captured the softer side of her that she'd only ever shown Jake...right up until she didn't.

She was half turned toward the camera, the sun behind her left shoulder and giving her dark hair an angelic cast as it tangled around her head in a breeze he could almost feel. With the ocean at her back and the half smile on her face, she looked...happy. She'd been hotter than hell as a blonde. With her natural dark hair, she was downright stunning.

He spent one useless minute wondering if a boyfriend had taken the picture before Jake made himself set it aside. He should reject her request. She obviously didn't know that he owned Diamond Dates or she wouldn't have tried to use it to book a date. If she realized, she'd be humiliated, even if he was the only person who knew it happened.

While he considered his options, he scanned the info the search had brought up. A few unpaid parking tickets, an address that was right on the beach, and a job she'd worked at for five years. An insurance company. He pulled up a new tab and Googled the name, and then huffed out a laugh. He hadn't realized that a person could insure their individual body parts. "Only in LA."

What the fuck was he going to do about this?

Even as the thought crossed his mind, a plan formed. Jake shook his head, a rueful grin taking root. Apparently, he wasn't as above petty revenge as he'd thought. He wouldn't reject Jessica's bid. He wouldn't be sending one of his guys to meet her, either. Even after all this time, Jake couldn't stand the thought of seeing her with someone else, even knowing it'd be fake.

No, *he'd* be the one waiting for Jessica when she got off that plane.

And then?

Well, then they'd see how things fell out.