

Chapter One

“Our father is back in Houston.”

“That’s hilarious. You should be a comedian.” Journey King sat down in the chair across from her brother’s massive desk and waited for him to laugh. But the devastating sympathy in Anderson’s blue eyes told her that he wasn’t joking. She cleared her throat, trying to speak past the sensation of it closing off her ability to take in air. “Oh God. No, he can’t do this.” She shivered, then cursed herself for showing even that much reaction.

“I’m sorry, Jo. I would’ve told you sooner, but I just found out thirty minutes ago he’s on his way here.”

Journey had always felt safe in the Kingdom Corp offices, totally in control, knowing she had her family at her back. But recent events had turned their world topsy-turvy and shaken some of that innate trust. With so many skeletons dancing in their closets, she should have expected her own personal one to come calling at the first available opportunity.

He’s just a man.

The lie was as substantial as smoke. Elliott Bancroft charmed everyone he met, masking the truth until up was down and down was up.

The silence threatened to suck her under. *No.* “No.” She spoke aloud, trying to break the spell already weaving around her. “I will not let him win.”

That battle was fought a long time ago. He won. You lost. You all lost.

Stop it.

Anderson rounded the desk as she shoved to her feet. “Jo...” He grabbed her hands, easily encompassing them in his own.

There wouldn’t be time to run. Running and hiding had never worked with Elliott Bancroft anyway. She sank back into the chair, her body a marionette whose strings had been cut. “I’m okay.” She wasn’t, but if their father was on his way, Anderson needed to be focusing on the coming confrontation and not on her. She lifted her chin. “I’m okay. You should sit behind your desk. Start this off from the right position.” The posturing wouldn’t work, but it was *something*.

The door to Anderson’s office swung open, and she tensed at the familiar footsteps even as she forced herself to twist and face him.

Elliott. Father. Monster.

Journey folded her hands in her lap. *Breathe. Just breathe. Do not react. If he knows you’re afraid, it will make him happy.* “Elliott.”

It had been... five years? Five years since she’d seen her father last, though she would have happily gone fifty more. He’d aged in that time, his skin darkened from too many hours in the sun, his dark hair shot through with silver. The blue eyes were the same, warm as a summer day...if one didn’t know what lurked beneath. He’d turn more than a few heads in any room he walked into.

Except this one.

His smile widened when he caught sight of her. “Since you stopped taking my calls, sweetheart, I thought it was time to come to you.” He spread his arms wide to encompass both Journey and Anderson. “Things are changing here at Kingdom Corp.”

Journey forced her hands to relax. It didn't matter what he said or her reaction to it—the only thing that mattered was the truth, and the truth was that her mother would throw herself on a literal sword before she let her estranged husband anywhere near her company. He was bluffing. He had to be. “You don't have a say when it comes to Kingdom Corp. It's our mother's company.” Or it had been. It belonged to Journey and Anderson and their other two siblings now. “She gave it to us when she left town.” The paperwork still hadn't been completed because of all the red tape, but that didn't change anything.

It *shouldn't* change anything.

Elliott smiled. “Actually, the company isn't hers to give.”

Her stomach twisted in knots, the knots growing thorns when Anderson didn't immediately jump in to contradict their father. The walls inched closer, the large room morphing into something too tight and close and cramped to fit three people. *Not enough air. I can't get enough air.* She lost the battle for calm and clenched the armrests of the chair.

Anderson shifted, drawing her attention to him like a drowning victim seeking a life preserver. His blue eyes, so similar and yet so different from their father's, held rage and regret. “Unfortunately, he's telling the truth. It appears the Bancroft family helped fund the initial seed money that got Kingdom Corp off the ground. Elliott stood as silent partner while our mother ran the company, but he's technically in possession of twenty percent of the company shares.”

Quadruple what she and her three other siblings held individually. Journey gripped the chair tighter, digging her nails into the wood to keep herself from bolting. *Damn you, Anderson, you had to know this before today. Why didn't you tell me?* “Mother signed over her shares to you. That should put you firmly as the main shareholder with twenty-five percent.”

If anything, Elliott's smile widened. "Her shares have to, by contract, be divided equally among our children. That puts each of you at ten percent—and leaves me as main shareholder. No, sweetheart, you won't get rid of me that easily. I'm here to stay." He shifted ever so slightly, and Journey flinched. Elliott chuckled and crossed over to sink gracefully into the unoccupied chair next to Journey. "Like I said, there are going to be some major changes happening here at Kingdom Corp now that I'm in charge."

I know what happens when he's in charge.

The pressure cooker inside her exploded, forcing her into motion.

She had to get out of there. Out of the office, out of the building. Getting out of Houston itself sounded even better, but that wasn't an option. Kingdom Corp needed her—and needed her more now than it ever had. The company was *theirs*, by right and by blood. She hadn't worked her ass off and bent over backward to meet her mother's every demand just to hand over the reins to Elliott fucking Bancroft.

"I'll talk to you later," she told her brother as she leapt from her chair and strode out of the room as quickly as she could in her heels.

Journey passed her office and took the elevator down to the ground floor. If she could just get to her apartment, everything would be okay. She'd cook some extravagant recipe that required intense concentration and blocked out all the jumbled thoughts kicking around in her head. She'd even work remotely so it wasn't a wasted evening. At some point, Anderson would come over and he'd anchor her until she was strong enough to face the world again.

If she went home and hid, *he* won.

Journey stopped on the sidewalk outside Kingdom Corp. Turn left, walk home, go through the same series of events she enacted every time her past showed up to slap her down.

Or turn right, and try something new. She didn't have to go home yet. She could walk for a while. Go get a drink. Dance a little. *Live*. Do something—anything—to prove to herself that she wasn't still that broken little girl.

Even if it was a lie.

[ORN_SB]

Frank Evans kept one eye on the monitors as he went over the financial reports a third time. He'd purchased Cocoa's with the sole goal of getting access to Houston's elite who frequented the club, and several months in, it had already paid for itself several times over. Deals were made and broken within these walls. Now Frank didn't need an extensive network of people reporting information to him—he just needed the VIP section of Cocoa's.

It didn't hurt that the club made money hand over fist, either.

A stir on the cameras had him leaning closer with narrowed eyes. He knew who it was the second she strode into the VIP section simply by the way the men's body language shifted. They turned to Journey King like flowers seeking the sun. Even the women weren't immune, though most of their attention wasn't sexual in nature.

Frank could hardly blame them. He'd spent far too much time watching Journey since they met. She presented a puzzle box he couldn't unlock. The woman had more personas than he'd ever seen, and even with his substantial resources, he couldn't nail down which was the real woman and which was pretend. Party girl. COO of Kingdom Corp. Loyal daughter. Shunned almost royalty. Friend.

It didn't help that she was gorgeous and confident and showed every evidence of being a decent person despite having a harpy for a mother and working for company he disliked on

principle. Her mother trying to have Frank's best friend murdered should have cooled his interest.

It hadn't.

He studied her as she cut around the dance floor and made a beeline for the velvet rope dividing the VIP section from the rest of the club. It created the effect of putting the rich and powerful on display for those drawn to that sort of thing, which should have been enough to dissuade said rich and powerful from showing up, but people with money were never logical when it came to soaking up attention from what they considered the rabble. Frank banked on it.

Even obviously distracted, Journey moved with the confidence of a woman who'd never once questioned her role in the world. And why should she? The King family was a staple in Houston since Journey's great-grandfather settled there and invested in the oil business. Though many of the families who'd done the same thing had fallen off in the intervening years, the King fortune and influence only grew.

Even splitting the family down the middle thirty years ago hadn't been enough to lessen that influence.

He expected Journey to take up residence on her favorite spot—the oversized throne that could have easily fit five people—but she strode to the small bar available only to the VIPs. She held up two fingers, and the bartender obediently lined up two shot glasses and filled them to the brim with top-shelf whiskey.

What the fuck?

Journey drank—all the Kings seemed to—but in the time he'd been watching her, moving just out of her sphere, Frank had never seen her drink destructively. She was now.

He should just leave her to it.

It wasn't his business.

He had a small empire to run and bigger fish to fry than Journey King. If she was in the middle of some kind of crisis, it sure as fuck wasn't Frank's problem.

Except...

He watched her down both shots in quick succession and hold up her fingers for two more. *She's running from something.* Why she'd chosen to run to *his* club and make it *his* business was beyond him, but he couldn't sit there and allow it to happen. Not on his watch. Three guys had moved to the bar just down from Journey's stool, and he didn't like the way they eyed her. Predators scenting weakness. "Goddamn it." It wasn't his business. He had people depending on him that actually needed and wanted his help. Journey King could take care of herself.

The trio of men had shifted closer, two on the left side of Journey and *one* on the right. She made all appearances of continuing to ignore them, but the tense line of her shoulders and the way she kept her gaze pinned on the bartender spoke volumes. He watched a few seconds more, gripping his pen tightly as the nearest man leaned over and spoke directly into her ear.

Here's where you tell him to fuck off.

But she didn't.

Her shoulders bunched and she shifted slightly away from him—which put her up against the other two. Instead of coming back swinging like he'd seen in the past when someone stepped out of line, she shrank in on herself.

Something's seriously wrong.

Frank picked up his phone. "Dylan, I need you to send someone to collect Journey King and bring her to my office. Be subtle if you can, but get her the fuck out of there now." He hung

up without waiting for a response. Dylan had been with his company, Evans, Inc, for years, and right now he served as the manager for Cocoa's while they cemented the changeover. He was a jack-of-all-trades, but over the last month, he'd done an excellent job of managing the club, so Frank intended to keep him in that position for the time being.

On the screen, a woman approached Journey, inserting herself between her and the pair of men at her elbow. *Smart of Dylan to send her instead of a man.*

Journey shifted and seemed to shrug off her fear for a few seconds. She pinned the camera with a smirk, a single eyebrow lifted, every line of her body conveying belligerence instead of the fear of expecting to be kicked at any moment. She flipped the camera the finger but didn't make a scene otherwise as she followed the woman out of the VIP section and toward the stairs that would lead up to his office.

To him.

Frank turned to face the door and braced himself. The few seconds of preparation didn't make a damn bit of difference when Journey marched in like she owned the place and flung herself into the chair across from his desk. The security cameras hadn't done her justice. They never did. Her little sister was the model, but Journey had the cutting kind of beauty that would have made a killing on the runway. Her long blond hair, big hazel eyes, and strong brows drew him in despite himself. After half a dozen business meetings, he should have been immune to her beauty. It was only a gift of genetics, after all.

"You summoned me?" She arched one dark eyebrow, though the earlier flash of attitude didn't quite hold. Something lurked in her eyes, in the tense way she held herself as if prepared to flee at a harsh word. Once again, he couldn't shake the feeling she was running from something.

But what?

Frank propped his elbows on his desk and studied her. She'd always been lean, but she'd lost weight in the months since he saw her last, and dark smudges beneath her eyes hinted at sleepless nights or stress—probably both. *This will require careful handling.* “I’m calling a cab and sending your ass home before you embarrass yourself and your family.” He gave his voice a bit of a lash, needing her to fight back, to regain her equilibrium. To get back to being the woman he’d come to expect.

Journey’s mouth dropped open, which only prompted him to notice she’d painted her lips a bright pink. *Yeah, 'cause I definitely didn't notice before now.* She shoved her hair back. “You’re out of your damn mind. You don’t give a fuck about my family. Why should my embarrassing myself and them matter?”

“Because my best friend is your cousin and, like it or not, what you do reflects back on him.” It wasn’t, strictly speaking, the truth, but Frank wasn’t all that interested in the truth. He was interested in getting Journey King the fuck out of his club before he did something unforgivable like involve himself in her problems. He knew better. Picking up strays might be a weakness he had, but he’d turned it into a strength and built an empire as a result.

Journey wasn’t a stray. She was a fucking King.

She sat back, putting herself on display whether she meant to or not. Her dress was perfectly professional—hitting a reasonable two inches above her knees and with just enough give to the fit that it showed off her body without being actively provocative—but that didn’t stop his gaze from catching on the slope of her small breasts, the curve of her waist, the long lines of her bare legs.

Trouble.

“I’ll leave, Frank. No problem.” She grinned, though it didn’t reach her hazel eyes. “If you give me the building I’ve spent the last six months trying to buy from your contrary ass.”

He stared. Of all the reactions he’d expected of her, tossing their thwarted business deal in his face wasn’t one of them. He’d never had any intention of selling that damn building to Kingdom Corp, and Journey had to know it. “No.”

She shrugged a single shoulder, her smile falling away. “Then I guess you’re not getting me out of your club without causing a scene. The media loves to hate me, you know. I make excellent headlines. How much profit do you think you’ll lose if it comes out that you blacklisted Lydia King’s daughter?”

“Slow your roll, Duchess.”

She straightened, eyes flashing. “For the last goddamn time—do *not* call me that.”

Frank was supposed to be above petty bullshit. He’d worked damn hard to elevate himself over the mistakes his parents had made and the consequences those same mistakes generated. If he wanted to take someone down, then he took them down piece by piece. Methodically. Ensuring that, when he walked away, they wouldn’t have the energy or the willpower to hold a knife to his back. All being petty did was create unnecessary enemies.

He didn’t need help in that department. Frank made enemies simply by being what he was—a powerful black man moving among Houston’s elite.

He couldn’t seem to resist needling this woman, though. He raked his gaze over her, forcing his expression to be impassive. “You can’t bring up the media without mentioning the nickname they coined for you. They still use it. Might as well get used to it. You were the one who tried to marry into royalty.”

Her pink lips thinned. “You are *such* a dick.”

No point in denying it—it was the truth, after all. He reached for his phone. “I’m calling you a cab and you’re going to get your ass into it, even if it takes me hauling you over my shoulder to make it happen.”

She narrowed her eyes. “You’d like that, wouldn’t you?” Journey pushed out of her chair and took two large steps to put herself right up against the desk. She planted her hands on the dark wood and leaned over, looking down her nose at him. “Get off your fucking power trip, Frank. You’re nothing. You’re less than nothing.”

He sat back in his chair. Journey might be impulsive and speak before thinking when she was in social situations, but she was a damn professional the rest of the time. She wasn’t like so many of the others of her kind. No matter what she thought of him, she wouldn’t give it voice under normal circumstances. Trying to ice Frank out would only result in Kingdom Corp suffering the consequences when he blocked any future real estate deals they sought. She *knew* that, and if there was one god Journey King worshipped, it was Kingdom Corp. She’d never let something as mundane as personal opinion negatively affect her company.

He stood, using his size to push her back.

Except she didn’t back up. She glared at him from the other side of the desk as if whatever had crawled up her ass was *his* fault. He braced his hands a bare inch from hers, leaning down to get right in her face. “Watch your tone, Duchess. The rest of the world might line up to blow smoke up your ass, but I don’t play that game. Words and actions have consequences. You want to play in the big leagues? You