

Chapter One

Jack McArthur rolled over and didn't even have the energy to curse at the stabbing behind his eyes. He was too fucking old for Vegas. He'd avoided the place after he turned thirty, but bachelor parties were the exception to the rule.

The hangover to end all hangovers effectively reminded him *why* the rule was a rule in the first place. He inhaled and froze. *Is that perfume?* It took more effort than it should have to crack his eyes open and look around his suite. Nothing looked particularly different from when he'd checked in yesterday, but it hadn't smelled like a hothouse flower then.

Had he brought a woman back here?

It wasn't his norm. Drunken sex was ultimately unsatisfying, and drinking enough to blackout like he obviously had last night? Jack didn't do it. Too many things could go wrong, and while directors might not be beneath the public microscope the same way actors were, if he fucked up spectacularly, he'd make the headlines.

He'd learned that lesson all too well twelve years ago.

A quick and painful exploration of his suite didn't turn up anyone else, and he breathed a silent sigh of relief. He still wore all his clothes from last night, and from all appearances, he'd walked into the room and face-planted onto the bed. Without even a button done up wrong, the chance that he'd hooked up with anyone was low. *Thank God.* That kind of complication was the last thing he needed when he was on the verge of succeeding in his dream project. It was years in the making, and any distraction was unacceptable.

The worst part was he didn't remember how he got back to the room. There had been the requisite gambling before heading to one of the high-end gentlemen's clubs Vegas hosted. He'd barely touched his drink during blackjack, but there had been a few shots while he bought his

buddies lap dances. He must have just kept going, though hell if he could figure out where the turning point was. Jack wasn't a big drinker. He never had been.

First time for everything.

He managed to scrub the godawful taste out of his mouth and showered. All the guys were flying home today, though they'd meet up next weekend for the wedding itself. He needed to find some food before heading to the airport, otherwise the flight would be just another form of hell.

On his way back into the main suite, something white on the floor caught his eye. He frowned and picked up the trio of papers that he must have been carrying when he walked through the door.

It took him several long seconds to process the words printed across the top of the first paper. *Certificate of Marriage*. And there was his name under the slot for the groom, and his messier than normal signature. "Fuck me." He read the bride's name. *Lysa Smith*. It didn't ring any bells, but this was Vegas, land of the drunken weddings.

Just not for Jack.

He set the marriage certificate down and rubbed his temples. There had to be a way to fix this. He'd known more than a handful of actors who'd walked into this exact situation. Jack opened his eyes. Well, not this *exact* situation. Most of the guys he knew had been on weekend benders and ended up sleeping with some woman, and the alcohol and sex went to their brains and they jumped the gun.

From what he could tell, he'd skipped straight over the sex and into the chapel.

It didn't make any sense. With two exceptions in his thirty-three years, he'd played by the rules and kept away from anything resembling a scandal—as much as a person could while

navigating Hollywood. The first was when he'd left his Podunk Midwestern small town against his family's wishes and booked a train to Los Angeles.

The second... He turned away from the entry table. The second time had no bearing on the current situation.

His phone and wallet sat on the nightstand next to the bed. A quick check found the former untampered with and the latter containing all his credit cards and cash. There were devices that could clone the cards, but if that was this Lysa's goal, she could have managed it without walking down the aisle with him.

He dialed Blake Jacobson. It rang and rang and then switched over to voicemail. Jack sighed. He should have considered that Blake, being the groom-to-be, would spend most of the morning before his flight sleeping it off.

Next up was Levi Turnbull. It rang twice, and a gravelly voice answered, "Do you know what time it is?"

"How sober are you?"

Some of the sleep faded from his friend's voice. "Sober enough."

It wasn't in Jack's genetic makeup to ask others for help, but he didn't know how he was going to get out of this one without egg on his face—and potentially flushing his dream project down the drain. "Can you come up to my suite? I'll order room service, but I need your help with something."

"You gave Blake a bachelor party to remember—or not remember, as the case may be. I think anything beyond making sure he gets home to his fiancée is overkill at this point."

"Levi, get your ass out of bed and get up here."

"Yeah, yeah. Give me five."

It only took him four before he lumbered through Jack's door. He wore a faded pair of jeans that was too hot for the desert and an equally faded T-shirt for Britney Spears circa 2001. He combed his fingers through his beard and blinked at the shades that Jack had pulled as soon as he was mobile. Levi's thick brows lowered. "We've had this conversation, Jackie-boy. I don't swing that way."

"If you remembered that conversation, you'd know neither do I." He rolled his eyes, which only made his headache worse. "Look at this." He held up the marriage certificate, no more able to believe it now than he'd been when he found it.

Levi read it and flipped it over. "Got the seal, so you're fucked. This is as official as these things come. Where's the lucky lady? I guess congratulations are in order?" He gave Jack a sidelong look. "Or maybe condolences. You're a grouchy bastard."

"You're one to talk." He ran a hand over his face. "I don't know where she is. I don't know *who* she is. That's why I dragged you up here. You were damn near sober last I remember. Did you see me with anyone?"

"I didn't stay damn near sober for long—Blake made sure of that." Levi scratched his chest. "I don't remember anyone in particular. The ladies at the club liked you just fine, but that started and ended with the cash you were throwing around."

"It was for *Blake*."

"Sure, sure." Levi nodded. "But shift changed right in the middle of the night, and none of them stuck around."

"And after?" He glared at the incredulous look on his friend's face. "Don't take that judgmental attitude with me. I blacked out. It happens."

Levi held up his hands. "Sure. It happens. But not to you." He frowned. "After we came back

here, and Blake wanted to gamble. You were falling down drunk and said you were going to bed. That's the last I saw you—and you were alone.” He glanced at his massive watch and then shrugged. “It was three, maybe four. Time runs funny in these damn casinos.”

“Shit.” That wasn't what he wanted to hear. Maybe the woman was as embarrassed by this whole thing as he was, but in that case, the only way to go about it was to get an annulment. The disappearing act didn't do either of them any favors.

“What are you going to do?”

There was only one thing to do. “I've got to track her down and get a divorce.” It sounded simple enough, but Jack had a feeling resolving his current fuckup was going to be anything but simple.

And for that, he needed Cora Landers.

“Absolutely not.” Cora Landers didn't look up from her computer. She could see her roommate standing in her doorway out of the corner of her eye, and if she thought for a second that Cora would give in, she'd never hear the end of it. “We're already going to Texas in September for Jessica's wedding. I'm not going *now*. Do you know what their temperature is in June?”

Brooklyn Jameson huffed out a breath. “You're being dramatic. It's only like eighty-eight.”

“With ninety-eight percent humidity. Jessica and Jake can come out here for the weekend. She was just telling me that she misses the ocean.” Something Cora was more than willing to leverage into seeing Jessica Jackson again. She'd moved back to Texas in the name of love, and while Cora was happy for their friend, she missed the hell out of having her here. “In fact, I'll

book the flights.” Jessica wouldn’t be able to turn that down, and Jake was smart enough not to try.

“Whoa, there.” Brooklyn grabbed the back of her desk chair and pulled her out of reach of her keyboard. “That’s high-handed, even for you.”

“Says the woman who booked her friend a fake date—with her ex.”

She turned Cora’s chair around and headed for the door, the plastic wheels rumbling over the hardwood floor. “You’re just mad you didn’t think of it first. And that was for love—*this* is to protect your precious hair.”

“I hate humidity.” The words sound petulant...maybe because they were.

“Noted.” Brooklyn turned the corner into the hallway. “I’m not even up here to talk about whether we are or aren’t taking that trip, but you distracted me with all your whining.”

“It’s not whining. It’s a very clear and concise argument detailing why Texas is the absolute worst.” It wasn’t fair for her to blame an entire state for Jessica leaving—especially since Jessica was from Texas to begin with—but even on her best day, Cora wasn’t fair.

Self-pitying much?

She tried to shake the mood that had dug its insidious tendrils into her earlier that day. The funk. She seemed to swing negative more often than positive these days, and as much as she wished she could blame it on their friend’s absence, the truth of it was that *Cora* was the problem.

She just didn’t know how to fix it yet.

Brooklyn stopped and stepped in front of her. Her friend’s brown hair was pulled back into an easy ponytail, and she wore jean shorts that were a little too long to be fashionable with an off-brand white T-shirt. Nondescript, which served her well as a private investigator. Though, to

be fair, Brooklyn had dressed like that from the time she was a teenager, so Cora could hardly blame it on her career.

She pointed at the jean shorts. "I'm going to take those out to the fire pit and burn them."

"Okay, now I know something's wrong." Brooklyn propped her hands on her hips. "You never threaten bodily harm on my clothes unless you're feeling pissy."

"I'm not feeling pissy."

"You're the very definition of pissy." Brooklyn pointed at the door leading out to the porch—and the beach. "Twenty minutes, minimum. I don't care if we run or walk, but you're getting your ass out there until you're ready to talk about it."

She didn't bother to protest. Brooklyn could be like a terrier when she set her mind on something, and Cora wasn't in the mood for a fight—especially since her friend was right. She needed out of this house and away from her computer and work. It might be enough to reset whatever the hell had gone wrong in her head.

At least for a little bit.

"Okay. Let's go."

Brooklyn eyed her dress. "Walking it is."

She didn't bother with shoes. There was something about the sand beneath her bare feet that settled her. It reminded her exactly how small she was in the world—the universe—and tended to put things into perspective.

Five minutes later, she sighed and released the last bit of tensions lingering between her shoulder blades. "Do you think it's possible to have a midlife crisis at thirty?"

"We're in LA."

"That's not an answer." But in a way, it was. She might not be an actress anymore, but

apparently, the dread of thirty had imprinted itself when she was a teenager. If an actress wasn't careful, she could get shoved onto the shelf before she knew had happened, replaced by a younger, more nubile model. She started to wrap her arms around herself, but stopped the motion halfway through. "I'm a goddamn attorney. Thirty is the start of me hitting my prime."

"Mm-hmm."

She glared. "It's true."

"I know that. You know that. I'm waiting to see if you're going to start screaming it at the ocean and throwing rocks. Maybe waving that cane you're about to need, being thirty and all."

She rolled her eyes. "You're not helping."

Brooklyn shrugged. "Sure I am. You know you're being ridiculous. You also know that something has been off for a while. Maybe it's time to do some soul searching and try something else. It's kind of what you do."

Kind of what she did.

Brooklyn of all people would know that. She'd met Cora when Cora was still famous. A child star with three movies and one very successful long-running series under her belt. Hell, she'd been a *brand*. Every time she turned around, she was on some Next Big Thing list for when she hit eighteen and officially became an adult.

Until she'd burned her reputation down around her and left nothing but ashes in its wake.

"I don't want to talk about it."

"Okay." Brooklyn had always known when to push her and when to let her stew until whatever was *really* bothering her cropped up. It was only a matter of time.

What would I do if I wasn't a divorce attorney?

A question for another day. Right now she had two clients to focus on, and a trip to negotiate

with Jessica and her fiancé.

Cora stopped short as they reached the steps leading up to their house. A 1970 black Cadillac sat in their tiny driveway, taking up too much space. That alone shouldn't be enough to have her stomach sinking, but she *knew* that car. She'd only driven in it once, but it'd been a memorable experience during a memorable night. "Shit."

"What?"

Heavy footsteps creaked over the porch and a man, just as familiar and yet strange as the Cadillac, stopped at the top of the stairs. *Jack McArthur*. One corner of his mouth quirked up into something that might have resembled a smile on anyone else. "Cora."

It took two tries to find words, and they erupted from her lips, harsh and cutting. "What are you doing here?" *Why here? Why now?* She wasn't exactly hard to find, but Hollywood had left her in the dust twelve years ago, and good riddance. The only time she dealt with A-listers now was to handle their divorces and line her pockets with their money. She didn't need it, but she enjoyed the thrill all the same.

Jack McArthur was as A-lister as they came, even if he'd gone from actor to hotshot director—but he should have no reason to be *here*. He was single, and had been for years if the tabloids were to be taken seriously. Cora didn't believe a word in them, but if Jack had a woman—or man—hidden away, they would have sniffed the poor unfortunate soul out by now.

Nothing stayed secret for long in Hollywood.

Her breath caught in her chest as a wild thought cascaded through her mind and took root. What if... What if he was here for *her*?

She'd barely had a chance to bask in the warmth that theory brought before he crushed it under the heel of one of his absurdly expensive loafers. Jack crossed his arms over his chest. "I

need your help.”