

Chapter 1

LEILA

Leila Hawkins paused as she mounted the last concrete step in front of the double doors of the First Good Samaritan Baptist Church—one of the oldest and largest churches in Chesterton, Virginia, her hometown. Nestled on Broadleaf Avenue across the street from rustic Macon Park, the house of worship had hosted many a baptism, funeral, and nuptial inside its brick walls in the one hundred and some odd years of its existence. And since 1968, a stark white sign had sat along its exterior, highlighting a Bible verse chosen by the honorable reverend, or the assistant pastor when the reverend was ill or on vacation. Leila stepped aside to let a couple pass as she squinted at that sign, which hung a foot away from the doors and several feet above her head.

A FOOL GIVES FULL VENT TO HIS ANGER, BUT A WISE MAN KEEPS HIMSELF UNDER CONTROL,
the sign read in big bold letters. PROVERBS 29:11.

Her eyebrows furrowed.

What the hell . . .

Was someone reading her mind?

Who cares if they are?

She grabbed one of the church's stainless-steel door handles.

She was on a mission today and she wasn't going to be deterred from it. She was giving "full vent" to her anger, whether any celestial being liked it or not. Leila was crashing this hifalutin wedding, and only lightning bolts or locusts would keep her away!

She walked into the vestibule, then tugged a heavy wooden door open, preparing herself to be met by a hundred stares, finger pointing, and indignation the instant she stepped inside the sanctuary.

“Hey! You’re not supposed to be here!” she waited for someone to shout at her.

Instead, she was greeted by a light melody played by a string quartet and the polite chatter of the two hundred and some odd guests who were taking their seats in the velvet-cushioned pews.

No one stared at her. Hell, they barely seemed to notice her!

The tenseness in her shoulders instantly relaxed. Her white-knuckled grip on her satin clutch loosened. She reminded herself that she was walking into a wedding, not a gladiator pit.

“You’re here to talk to Evan,” a voice in her head cautioned her. “Not to fight with him. Remember?”

That’s right. I’m just here to talk to him, to have a conversation with an old friend.

And if Evan chose not to be polite or listen to her, then and *only then* would she go off on him.

She looked around her.

The sanctuary was filled with splashes of pink and lavender, which Leila remembered were the bride’s favorite colors. Roses, hydrangeas, freesias, and lilacs decorated the pulpit and pews, filling the space with their alluring scent. Ribbons and ivy garland were draped over anything and everything, and free-standing candelabras were along each aisle and by the stained-glass windows.

Leila felt an overwhelming sense of *déjà vu*. She hadn’t set foot in this church since her own wedding day ten years ago. As she gazed around her, all the memories of that day came

rushing back like a tsunami: the anticipation and nervousness she had felt as she waited for the church doors to open, the happiness she had experienced when she'd seen her handsome groom waiting for her at the end of the aisle, and the overwhelming sadness that had washed over her when she had looked at the wedding guests and had not seen her then best friend, Evan, among their friendly faces.

But she had known Evan wouldn't come to her wedding. Stubborn Evan Murdoch had told her in the plainest way possible that there was no way he would stand by and pretend that he was happy about her nuptials.

"That son of bitch is going to break your heart," Evan had warned her over the phone all those years ago when she'd made one last-ditch effort to ask him to come to the wedding. "He's going to drag you down. And when he does, don't come crying to me."

Leila wasn't sure what had made her angrier: that Evan had given her that dire, bitter prediction on the eve of her wedding—or that his prediction had come true. But today she would have to put aside all that resentment and anger if she was going to get Evan to do what she needed him to do for her mother. Her mother . . . a proud woman who had juggled multiple jobs and saved every dime she had for decades to gather the money to put Leila through school and give her a reasonably happy life. Leila had tried to repay her by purchasing her a two-bedroom bungalow in a middle-class neighborhood where they still held summer block parties, where neighbors still waved and said hello. But now Leila's mother would lose her home in a few months without Evan's help.

Leila's grip on her purse tightened again.

She'd argue. She'd beg. She'd do what she had to do to get Evan to listen to her.

For Ma's sake, she thought.

“Bride or groom?” someone asked, yanking Leila from her thoughts.

“What?” Leila asked.

She turned to find an usher leaning toward her. An officious-looking woman stood behind him with the kind of pinched face reserved for those who waited at the counter at the DMV and dentists’ offices. A clipboard covered with several stacks of paper was in her hands. The woman discreetly whispered something into her headset while the usher continued to gaze at Leila expectantly.

“Are you with the bride or groom?” He gestured toward the pews. “On which side would you like to be seated?”

That was a tricky question. The bride hadn’t invited Leila to the wedding; neither had the groom. But Leila certainly knew the bride better. Paulette Murdoch, Evan’s sister, was someone Leila had once considered a friend—almost a little sister.

“Umm . . . uh, bride . . . I-I guess,” Leila finally answered.

They noticed her hesitation and exchanged a look that Leila couldn’t decipher. The woman behind the usher whispered into her headset again and waited a beat.

What? Leila thought with panic. *What did I do wrong?*

The woman stepped forward, plastering on a smile that seemed more forced than friendly.

“I’m sorry. Would you mind giving me your name?”

“Uh . . . why?”

“I just want to make sure you’re seated in the proper area.” The woman then pulled out a pen and pointed down at the stack of papers. Leila could see several names listed along with check marks next to each of them.

You've gotta be kidding me, Leila thought.

They actually had a guest list for the church! What did they think? Someone was going to sneak into the wedding?

“You are sneaking into Paulette’s wedding!” the voice in her head chastised.

But still, this was ridiculous! Leila wondered if the guest list had been Evan’s idea.

Wouldn't want the unwashed masses to wander in off the street, would we? Leila thought sarcastically. *Wouldn't want the poor people to stink up the place! Only the best and the brightest for the M&Ms!*

M&Ms or Marvelous Murdochs . . . People had been muttering and snickering over that nickname for decades around Chesterton, using it to derogatorily refer to the Murdochs—one of the most wealthy, respected, and (some said) stuck-up families in town. Of course that was better than their old nickname, the “High Yella Murdochs.” That name had faded once the Murdochs became more equal opportunity and let a few darker folks like Evan’s mom into the family.

“Well, my . . .” Leila paused, wondering how she was going to get out of this one. She most certainly wasn’t on the list. “My name is . . . my name is, uh—”

“Leila! Leila, over here!” someone called to her. Leila turned to find her childhood friend Colleen waving wildly. Colleen sat in one of the pews toward the front of the church.

Saved by the bell!

“Come on, girl!” Colleen shouted, still grinning. “Sit by me!”

“I guess my ‘proper area’ is up there, then?” Leila asked.

The usher laughed while the woman with the clipboard continued to scrutinize her, not looking remotely amused.

“Go right ahead,” he said, waving Leila forward.

She walked down the center aisle to Colleen. As she did so, she ran her hands across the front of her pale yellow dress. It was an old ensemble that she had thrown on at the last minute after raiding her closet. She hadn't worn it in years, certainly not since she had given birth to her daughter. It felt a little tight and she worried that it wasn't very flattering. The ill-fitting dress only added to her already heightened anxiety.

"I haven't seen you in ages, girl! I didn't know you'd be at Paulette's wedding," Colleen cried, removing her heavy leather purse from the pew and plopping it onto her ample lap. She shifted over, causing an elderly woman beside her to glance at her annoyance. Colleen then adjusted the wide brim of her sequin- and feather-decorated royal purple hat. "I saw you come in, but you didn't notice me waving at you. What were you thinking about, staring off into space like that?"

Leila pursed her lips as she took the seat nearest to the center aisle. "Just took a little trip down memory lane, that's all."

"*Memory lane?*" Colleen frowned in confusion. Suddenly, her brown eyes widened. "Oh, I forgot! This was the church where you got married too, isn't it?"

Leila nodded.

"Ten years ago last month! Girl, I remember," Colleen continued. "It was a beautiful day, wasn't it? And you had looked so pretty in your gown." She patted Leila's hand in consolation. "I'm so sorry to hear about you and Brad, by the way."

"Don't be sorry," Leila assured.

I'm certainly not, she thought.

Not only had Brad broken her heart, like Evan had predicted, but that man also had put her through so much pain during the course of their marriage—between the lies, philandering,

his get-rich-quick schemes, and his all-around bullshit—that he was lucky she hadn't thrown her wedding ring down the garbage disposal in outrage. Instead, she had pawned it to pay for a hatchback she'd purchased for her move from San Diego back to Chesterton. She'd had to get a new car after her Mercedes-Benz was repo'd thanks to Brad neglecting to mention that he hadn't made any payments in four months.

“So it *is* final then?” Colleen asked. “It's over between you two?”

“Almost. The divorce should be finalized in a few months, I guess.”

Leila certainly hoped it would be. But frankly, it was no telling with Brad. He had been dragging his feet on the divorce proceedings, saying that his focus was instead on his criminal case. He faced charges for fraud and money laundering because he and his partners had bilked several wealthy clients in Southern California out of more than twenty million dollars with some elaborate Ponzi scheme.

Thanks to Brad, his lawyer, and the California court system, Leila's life was still in limbo. She felt like she was *still* swimming her way out the whirlpool Brad kept sucking her into.

“Well, I'm glad you came back here,” Colleen said. “We missed you. I know I certainly did. I'm sorry your divorce is the reason why you came, but . . . you tried your best, right?”

Leila nodded then turned away to stare at the front of the church, wishing desperately that Colleen would drop the topic. She didn't want to think about Brad right now. She had enough on her plate today.

“You put up with more than most wives would,” Colleen continued, oblivious to Leila's growing discomfort. “It's a wonder you lasted as long as it did. I know I wouldn't have!”

Leila's smile tightened.

“All that lying and cheating—and now that pyramid-scheme nonsense! That man has dragged you through the mud, Leila. Right on through it!” Colleen shook her head ruefully.

“Girl, I would have taken a frying pan to the back of that man’s head *years* ago!”

It was bad enough to have a wreck of a marriage, to find out that you were sharing a bed every night with a liar and a hustler. But it was ten times worse knowing that everyone in town also knew—and Chesterton was a town that loved its gossip. She was sure her failed marriage and Brad’s criminal charges had been gossip du jour in every beauty salon, church gathering, and coffee shop in Chesterton for months!

Of course, Evan had discovered the truth first, but he hadn’t needed the town gossips to tell him. He had figured it out himself. He had seen through the varnish and spotted the shoddy workmanship underneath. He had seen the *real* Brad back when she met the smooth-talking Casanova her junior year in college. Though Brad had blinded Leila with his sweet talk, worldliness, and charm, Evan had called him on his bullshit. But she had been too naïve and lovesick at the time to listen to her then best friend. She wished now that she had. It could have spared her a lot of disappointment, agony, and heartbreak in the long run. It could have spared her from severing ties with Evan and the humiliation she was suffering today.

“The flowers are beautiful,” Leila said with a false cheeriness, trying to change the subject from Brad. She looked around her again, taking it all in.

Paulette Murdoch was probably deliriously happy with how the decorations had turned out. The décor fit her to a T.

“I knew everything would be this nice though,” Leila said. “Paulette’s dad never spared an expense, *especially* when it came to his little girl. I’ve been away for a while, but even I remember that much.”

Colleen shook her head and leaned toward Leila's ear. "Not her father, honey," she whispered. "All this was arranged while he was sick in the hospital and after he died seven months ago. It's Evan who dished out the money for this wedding. He controls the purse strings now!"

Of course he does, Leila thought sullenly. Evan controlled everything. He held all the cards, which was why she was here today.

The last note of the melody the string quartet had been playing ended and the violins started to play *Canon in D Major*. The chatter in the sanctuary ceased as the church doors opened. The groom and his six groomsmen strolled toward the front of the church, near the pulpit, in single-breasted tuxedos with pink calla lilies pinned to their lapels.

The groom was a handsome man. He stood at six feet, had ebony-hued skin, and wide shoulders.

Just Paulette's type, Leila thought, remembering when Evan's little sister had described her ideal man more than a decade ago as Leila painted the teen girl's toenails.

Leila watched as the bridesmaids began the processional. They were all wearing satin gowns of various designs, but in the same shade of lavender. They clutched bouquets of hydrangea, freesias, and roses. The adorable ring bearer and the flower girl made their way down the center aisle next. The little girl reminded Leila of her own daughter, Isabel.

Suddenly, the music changed again. This time it was Vivaldi's *Spring*. Everyone took their cue and rose from the pews in anticipation of the bride's entrance.

Seconds later, Paulette stood in the church doorway, and she took Leila's breath away.

Leila couldn't believe this was the same unassuming teenager she had last seen ten years ago. This woman was beautiful and regal. Her long, dark glossy hair cascaded over her bare

burnt-copper-toned shoulders. Her curvy figure was accentuated by the mermaid cut of her strapless wedding gown, which was decorated with Swarovski crystals and lace. A cathedral-length veil trailed behind her dramatically.

Paulette looked so beautiful, so stunning, so absolutely—

Perfect, Leila thought as she stared at her in awe.

And holding Paulette's satin-gloved hand was Evan. Being the new family patriarch, it only seemed right that Evan would give the bride away today. Judging from the grin on his strikingly handsome face, he seemed proud and happy to play the fatherly role.

Evan hadn't aged much in the past decade, but he certainly looked more handsome and distinguished than Leila remembered. He had the same coppery skin as his sister and was even taller than the groom. The glasses he'd often worn during childhood were gone. Leila was happy to see he had finally given them up for good. She had always thought he had the most soulful dark eyes that shouldn't be hidden behind thick, plastic lenses.

As the brother and sister walked down the center aisle toward the altar, a lump formed in Leila's throat. Her heart ached a little. This was the man whom she had once called her best friend. Once, they had been so close. She had been able to turn to Evan in her darkness moments, to confess to him her worst fears. Now he wouldn't even return her emails or phone calls. He hadn't met her daughter. He had gotten married five years ago and she had found out about it months later. She hadn't even met his wife!

Leila stared at the front pew, looking at the faces of the folks who sat there, wondering if his wife was among them.

She and Evan were practically strangers now. What the hell had happened to them?

Time . . . distance . . . silence, she thought.

But they could still make it right, she told herself, filling up with the warmth of the moment. They could put the past behind them. They could make amends. The guy standing in front of her didn't seem petty or angry. Maybe she had just misunderstood him. Maybe they just misunderstood each other. Once she told Evan why she needed his help, he would listen. She knew he would!

As Paulette and Evan drew closer, Leila grinned at the bride, whose loving gaze was focused solely on her husband-to-be.

Meanwhile, Evan's eyes drifted to the wedding guests. He nodded at a few in greeting. Finally, he noticed Leila standing in the pews near the center aisle.

"Hey, Magoo," she mouthed before giving him a timid wave.

Magoo. It was the nickname she had given him back when they were kids. Whenever he hadn't worn his glasses, he had squinted like the cartoon character, Mr. Magoo. His nickname for her had been "Bugs" after Bugs Bunny, thanks to her bucked rabbit teeth, which had thankfully been corrected over time by a good set of braces.

When Leila waved at him as he walked past, Evan did a double take. Leila watched, deflated, as his broad smile disappeared. His face abruptly hardened and his jaw tightened. The dark eyes that she had once admired now snapped back toward the front of the church. Evan looked more than irritated at seeing her standing there in the church pew. He looked downright furious.

The warm, mushy feeling that had swelled inside of her abruptly dissolved. Her cheeks flushed with heat. Her heart began to thud wildly in her chest again.

"There goes that fantasy," the voice in her head scoffed.

She should have known it wouldn't be easy. Evan was obviously still cross at her and even more so now that she had sneaked into his sister's wedding.

Fine, she thought angrily. *Be that way, Evan.*

But she wasn't giving up. She was still going to find a way to talk to him today—or yell at him or plead with him, whatever was required. She would find a way to plead her mother's case.

Chapter 2

EVAN

“What the hell is Leila doing here?” Evan snarled as he stood at the bar in the hotel’s immense and elegant ballroom.

“Paulette said she doesn’t remember inviting her,” his equally handsome brother, Terrence, replied. “Maybe there was a mix-up.” The younger man adjusted the bowtie at this throat. “Hey, is this thing on straight? It feels crooked.”

“There was no goddamn mix-up! I can’t believe Leila had the balls to just . . . to just *show up!*”

And to think, Evan had initially balked at the idea of having a church guest list when the mother of the groom had made the request. She had explained that she wanted to make sure the VIPs, like Mayor Crisanto Weaver and his wife, were properly seated in the church, but Evan suspected that the meddling mama really wanted to make sure no undesirables made it into the wedding. Evan had thought it was not only in poor taste but outright rude to ask people to give their names as they entered the sanctuary, though now he was starting to have second thoughts about that.

The list didn’t work anyway. Leila still made it in!

Terrence lowered his hands from his bowtie. “I know you’re pissed, Ev. But just chill out, all right?” He shifted a shot glass toward Evan. “Here. Have my drink. Maybe it’ll calm you down.”

Evan highly doubted that. He was too hot with anger to be cooled down right now.

Terrence nudged the glass again with the tip of his finger, easing it closer to his older brother. “Go on.”

Evan hesitated for only a few more seconds before he raised his shot glass to his lips and downed his drink in one gulp. He then slammed the shot glass down on the bar’s granite countertop and grimaced. “*Ugh*, what the hell was that?”

“Tequila,” Terrence answered as he sniffed the shot glass. “Why? What was wrong with it?”

“It tasted like shit!”

“No, it didn’t.” Terrence held up two fingers to the bartender behind the counter, silently conveying that he wanted a double. “You are such a pussy now, man! There was nothing wrong with that drink. You’ve just lost your taste for liquor. That’s what happens when you act like a monk and stop drinking alcohol.”

“You know why I don’t drink,” Evan said tightly, silencing his brother. “Charisse drinks enough for the both of us,” he muttered.

In fact, seeing his wife, Charisse, slur and stumble her way around their home had put Evan off drinking for years. The taste of the stuff he had just imbibed told him he wasn’t missing much.

“She’s lucky I don’t have her ass thrown out,” Evan said.

“*Who?* Charisse?”

“No, not Charisse! Leila!”

Terrence tiredly closed his eyes, which were a shade of caramel that he had inherited from their father. “So we’re back to Leila, huh? Ev, we all know how you feel about her, but Paulette said she’s okay with her being here. So why don’t you just—”

“But what if *I’m* not okay with it?” he asked indignantly, pointing at his chest.

“Yeah, I figured you’d say that. I told Paulette you wouldn’t like it. She said . . . and I quote . . . ‘It’s my wedding day and Ev will just have to get over it.’”

Evan blinked in amazement. Did he hear him correctly? “*Get over it?*”

Terrence shrugged. “That’s what she said.”

Evan turned his menacing gaze to the parquet dance floor, where his mutinous sister and her new husband danced under the misty glow of an orange spotlight. He gritted his teeth. *Get over it?* So this was the thanks he got for the more than two-hundred thousand dollars he had spent on this little shindig?

Paulette had nearly fainted when she’d seen her Vera Wang wedding gown at the bridal shop and she’d just *had* to have it. Had Evan balked when he’d seen the fifteen-thousand-dollar bill months later? *No.*

Had he complained when the wedding guest list got as long as his arm? *No.*

Had he objected when he’d heard about the ice sculptures, four-foot chocolate fountains, performance artists, and fireworks display planned for the reception? *No!*

And why had he simply opened his checkbook and wordlessly written check after check?

Because I wanted to make my little sister happy, Evan thought irritably. Whatever Paulette wanted on her special day, he promised he would give it to her. Even their crusty father would have done as much. But how had Paulette repaid Evan’s graciousness? By siding with the one woman he had avoided for almost decade, the one woman who had betrayed him and broken his heart.

“Look,” Terrence began, reaching for his own shot glass, “Leila is one out of I don’t know how many guests here tonight. I wouldn’t worry about her. You probably won’t run into her again anyway.”

“But what if she’s here to start some shit? What if she’s here to ask about—”

“But what if she’s not? Maybe she came because she just wanted to see Paulette get married.”

Evan squinted in disbelief. “You don’t really believe that, do you?”

“Yes, I do, and I’ll bet you a hundred bucks that I’m right. If I’m wrong, then you get hundred bucks and we’ll have her escorted out. Until then, just forget that she’s here and go enjoy yourself. Do some schmoozing.” Terrence smirked. “You’re a Murdoch. It’s what we do best.”

Evan gazed around the darkened ballroom, his expression grim. That was easier said than done. Even if he didn’t see Leila, he knew she was probably out there sitting at one of the banquet tables. Feeling her presence in the room ruined his evening, though he kept telling himself that such feelings were nonsense.

“Just misplaced anger,” a voice in his head said.

Maybe, he conceded.

The person he was really mad at was Charisse, who hadn’t bothered to stay sober enough to at least make it through the entire wedding. She had sat bleary eyed during most of the ceremony, hiding her hangover and her bloodshot baby blues behind tinted sunglasses. After a few drinks during cocktail hour, she was back to her outgoing self, laughing and charming everyone. But, of course, she had started to go downhill by the time the bride and groom had their first dance. She had been constantly tripping over the hem of her evening gown. Her words

had become more and more slurred. She had been on the verge of getting full-on drunk and making a real ass of herself when Evan had her spirited away.

His half brother, Dante, had agreed to drive Charisse home. Dante had only connected with the family less than a year ago, not too long after their father's death. He was eager to be accepted into the Murdoch fold and wanted to be helpful. Thank God he had offered to handle Charisse!

But now Evan had another headache to deal with, thanks to Leila Hawkins crashing his sister's wedding. He could feel the tenseness winding up inside him, making the muscles in his neck and shoulders rigid. His eyes darted anxiously around the darkened room, anticipating the moment when he would spot her again. Would she come up to him and tap him on the shoulder? Would she corner him and confront him in the open? It was like he was preparing for battle.

"Hey, sexy," a female voice said from over Evan's shoulder. He turned to find one of Paulette's bridesmaids smiling up at him. She laid a warm hand on his arm. "Wanna dance, baby?"

"There you go! A distraction, Ev," Terrence said. "Just what the doctor ordered! Go out there and get your groove on, boy!"

"Uh, I'm married," Evan muttered to her, holding up his ring finger and ignoring his brother. He returned his gaze to the ballroom.

"So! I'm not asking you to run away with me! I'm just asking you to dance," the bridesmaid persisted. She wrapped an arm lazily around his shoulders. "Come on! Dance with me!"

Evan narrowed his eyes down at her.

Her name was Angie. Or was it Amy? *Something that begins with an A*, he thought.

Loose curls had fallen out of her chignon and one lock hung limply over her heavy-lidded, glazed brown eyes. One of the straps of her satin dress was hanging off her shoulder, revealing the lace bra underneath.

If he had wanted to dance with a drunken woman tonight, he would have just asked his wife for a twirl on the dance floor.

“Look, why don’t I do this?” he asked, gently shifting the young woman toward the bar counter. “Instead of us dancing, why don’t I get you a cup of coffee?” He then motioned to get the bartender’s attention.

“I don’t need a cup of coffee,” the bridesmaid argued. “I said I wanna *dance!*”

She then shoved away from Evan and turned, snagging the heel of one of her stilettos in the hem of her dress. She stumbled forward with arms flailing wildly.

“Oh!” Terrence shouted. “There she goes!”

Both brothers caught her just before she tumbled.

“You got her?” Terrence asked, shifting her toward his older brother.

Evan nodded, slowly bringing her back to feet. “Yeah, I got her.”

The bridesmaid gazed up at Evan and Terrence woozily. She slumped against the older brother’s broad shoulder. “I don’t . . . I don’t feel so well. I think I’m gonna be sick.”

“*Sick?*” Terrence exclaimed. He eased back and pointed at his tuxedo. “Oh, no! Not on this! *This* is a Tom Ford.”

“You’re a real prince, Terry,” Evan murmured sarcastically. He then returned his attention to the bridesmaid. “Let’s get you out of here. I’ll get you to the ladies’ room. All right?”

She closed her eyes and weakly nodded.

Evan guided her across the crowded ballroom to the double doors, drawing a few curious stares from wedding guests. There was nothing he hated more than making a scene. Having a woman besides his wife clinging to him was bound to cause some talk, but he couldn't let her stumble drunkenly around the reception, or worse—lose her five-star dinner right there on the parquet dance floor. Like with Charisse, it was better to spirit away the bridesmaid to a place where she could recover privately. Terrence was obviously no help so Evan would have to take care of this himself.

Evan stepped into the carpeted foyer with his arm wrapped around her waist and her arm draped around his neck.

“I'm really going to be sick,” she murmured again.

“I know. I know. I'm working on it,” he grumbled, glancing frantically around him.

He struggled to remember where he had last seen a women's bathroom. Finally, he saw a few women streaming out of a door on the other side of the foyer's winding staircase. He walked toward them and started to ask if one of them could help him, but when the women's bathroom door opened again, the words halted in his throat.

Leila Hawkins stepped out of the tiled bathroom into the foyer. She dropped a compact into her clutch purse, snapped the steel clasp shut, and looked up to find Evan staring at her. Her mouth fell open in shock.

“Evan,” she whispered breathlessly.

Shit, he thought. This was the last person he wanted to see right now!

His jaw clenched. “Leila.”

As much as he hated to admit it, Leila was as gorgeous and sexy now as she had been ten years ago. The only thing that was different was her hair. It was shorter now, chin-length and cut

in a fashionable bob. He also noticed that she was wearing heels, something she had never worn when they were younger because she had said she didn't know how to walk in them.

Her honey-hued skin glowed under the foyer's chandelier lights, and she looked elegant and alluring in the simple pale yellow cocktail dress that hugged every delectable curve in just the right place.

She doesn't have a right to look this good, he thought. He'd prefer for her to be a hunchbacked cyclops, or at least to have gained forty pounds or more. Then he wouldn't have to worry about reacting to her like the way his body was responding now.

"I'm glad I ran into you, Ev," Leila said as she took a step toward him. "I mean I'm glad we . . . we ran into each other. I wanted to talk to you about . . ." Her eyes shifted to the drunken bridesmaid at his side. "Is she okay?"

"No, I'm *not* okay!" the bridesmaid garbled against his shoulder.

"She's had a little too much to drink," Evan explained now that he was cornered. "I was trying to get her to the bathroom."

"I can take her," Leila volunteered. She grabbed the bridesmaid's hand. "Let's get you into one of those stalls, honey."

Evan watched as Leila guided the hapless young woman through the swinging door. He heard the loud retching and dry heaving a few seconds later and cringed. He could have left then. His intoxicated charge was now in capable hands, but he would feel bad if he didn't stick around to see if the bridesmaid survived.

The young woman and Leila emerged from the bathroom fifteen minutes later. Angie (or Amy . . . he still couldn't remember her name) looked more sober and slightly less ill, but still seemed out of sorts. Leila had an arm wrapped around her protectively.

“I think I’m going to say good-bye to Paulette and go home now,” the young woman mumbled, wiping her mouth with a wet paper towel. “I’ve had enough fun for one night.”

“I think that’s a good idea,” Leila said.

The bridesmaid looked at Leila, then Evan. “Thank you for your help—the both of you.”

“No problem,” they answered in unison. They then glanced at one another. When their eyes met, they broke gazes.

The bridesmaid walked back toward the ballroom doors, looking worn and tired.

“Do you think she’ll be all right?” Leila asked, watching the bridesmaid’s retreat. “Does she have a safe way to get home? I hope she’s not driving.”

“I’ll have my driver take her home. He can come back later to get me.”

Leila turned to him. “That’s very nice of you.”

When she beamed, something inside his chest warmed instantly. He shouldn’t still be reacting to her this way.

Not after all these years. Not after what she did.

Leila had long ago proven that she couldn’t be trusted.

“I’m not being nice,” he answered firmly, so that there was no misunderstanding that he was a pushover anymore. He could tell from the look on her face that his tone had caught her off guard. “I don’t want her driving home and getting into an accident. Something like that would end up in the paper, probably on the front page. Paulette doesn’t need that type of drama around her wedding.”

Leila’s smile disappeared. “Yeah, Ev, because it’s less important that the poor girl might plow into a tree and kill herself, than whether her accident might ruin the vibe at the wedding

or”—she mockingly raised her hand to her lips and widened her eyes—“bring shame to the Murdoch name.”

Sarcasm. He should have expected as much from Leila. It was a shield she had always used in the past. Well, he had a shield too—a formal blandness he reserved for business meetings and acquaintances he wanted to get rid of quickly.

“Well, thank you very much for your help earlier. It was a pleasure seeing you again,” he lied, buttoning his suit jacket, then gesturing toward the double doors. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I should get back to the reception.”

Just as he turned to head back to the ballroom, Leila grabbed his arm, making him pause. “Evan,” she said softly. “Evan, please . . . please wait.”

Her touch ignited a small spark inside him that he hadn’t felt in quite a while. His pulse quickened, and his skin tingled on the spot where she touched him. He wanted to take her hand within his own, tug her toward him, and kiss her. Instead, he forced himself to pull his arm out of her grasp.

“What, Leila? Look, I’m supposed to be hosting this thing. I can’t just disappear and—”

“No one’s going to think you’re a bad host if you disappear for a few minutes! No one’s going to look down on you for taking time to talk to me . . . *me*, Ev.” She pointed at her chest.

“Someone who used to be your friend!”

“The operative words are ‘used to be,’” he said coldly, making her cower as if he had hit her. He began to walk away again.

“What did I do?” she asked as she trailed him, taking fast steps to match the strides of his longer legs. “What the hell did I do to you to make you . . . you cast me out like this? You treat me like I’m some leper!”

“Keep your voice down,” he snapped as he turned back to her. They were drawing stares from a few of the guests who lingered in the lobby.

“No, I’m not keeping my fucking voice down! I’ve tried doing this quietly and privately! I’ve tried emailing you . . . *calling you!* But you never responded! I need your help!”

Of course she does, he thought bitterly.

Terrence owed him a hundred bucks! He knew Leila had shown up here because she wanted something, and he suspected he knew what that something was. But Leila had always needed his help. She had always needed *him*. In their friendship, he had been the one she would lean on when things went wrong: when her father walked away from her family, when her mother lost a job, or when one of Leila’s boyfriends broke up with her. But Evan would be damned if he’d be the shoulder for her to cry on or the shrink for her to drone on and on to today. He wasn’t that guy anymore.

“My mother is going to lose her home! Look, I fell behind on the payments. I mean . . . well, Brad *and* I fell behind. I thought he had it covered, but he didn’t. Anyway, Murdoch Bank owns the mortgage now and—”

“I don’t want to talk about this,” he said as he neared the double doors. “Not here. Not now.”

“But all we need is one word from you! If—”

“I told you that I don’t want to talk about this! This is a wedding, Leila. Not now!”

“If you would just make one call—”

“What did I just say?” he boomed.

“But you don’t understand!”

No, he understood perfectly well. He knew that her mother was in default of her mortgage and the bank was now taking her home. Almost more than two dozen other mortgage owners at Murdoch Bank were in the same situation.

Evan had inquired about the loans when the stories first started to appear in the local newspaper about how several homes in one neighborhood in Chesterton with mortgages all owned by Murdoch Bank had either fallen into arrears or were in foreclosure proceedings. The neighborhood also happened to be on land that a major corporation wanted to purchase to build a new shopping center in town. The reporter shared a few of the homeowners' conspiracy theories that the bank was in cahoots with the corporation to push them off the land to make way for the brand-new center.

When Evan's father, George, had told him two years ago that Murdoch Conglomerated was acquiring the local savings and loan bank, Evan had thought it odd. Banking didn't really fall under the company's portfolio. Their company focus was usually foods and retail. Why did his father want to purchase a bank? But when the news stories came out soon after George's death, all the pieces of the puzzle had fallen into place. His father wanted that shopping center so that Murdoch Conglomerated could open a new store there. The houses were an obstacle to his goal and he had found a sneaky way to get around it.

But, of course, George wasn't a stupid man. What he did may have been unethical, but it certainly wasn't illegal. All of the homeowners were behind on their mortgages. The bank had every right to use its own discretion to try to reach some settlement or simply allow the homes to go to foreclosure. Evan had no desire to micromanage and tell Murdoch Bank what to do. He had enough to worry about with his own duties as new CEO of Murdoch Conglomerated.

“Do you want me to beg, Ev?” Leila yelled, drawing more onlookers. “Is that what you want? Because that’s what I’ll do if it’ll mean you’ll—”

Her words were cut short. This time he grabbed *her* arm. He practically dragged her across the carpeted foyer to a secluded spot near a trickling water fountain. He finally let her go with a shove.

Evan glanced over his shoulder, making sure they were no longer being watched. “Are you trying to embarrass me? Are you trying to embarrass Paulette?”

“No, I’m trying to make you listen, damn it! I can’t let my mother lose her house!”

“So get your husband to take care of it. He’s the big shot. Let him pay off her mortgage!”

Her face crumpled. That was a low blow and Evan knew it, but he couldn’t help himself. She had cast her lot with Brad and it had turned out ugly. Now she had gone running back to Evan like he’d always known she would.

Leila crossed her arms over her chest. “If Brad had the money, believe me, I’d ask. Unlike you, I’m not too proud to humble myself to help a friend!”

He fixed her with an icy glare. “You said what you had to say. You asked the question you wanted to ask and the answer is still no. So now I’m going to ask you as politely as possible to leave.”

She raised her chin in defiance. “*Or what?* You’re gonna have someone come over here and toss me out?”

“No,” he said menacingly, taking another step toward her, “I’ll toss you out myself.”

“Yeah, right! Like you’d ever get your hands dirty, you self-entitled son of a bitch!” She shoved him aside and walked off. “Tell Paulette I said congratulations,” she muttered over her shoulder.

Evan then watched Leila stomp toward the hotel's revolving doors, leaving him both stunned and furious.

Chapter 3

DANTE

“Oh, yeah! Yeah, baby! Oooo, yeeeee! Right there,” she moaned, making Dante Turner roll his eyes even while he continued to lick to ecstasy the woman bucking on the white satin sheets beneath him.

He liked for a gal to be expressive in bed, to let him know she was enjoying herself, but all this moaning, groaning, and yelling was starting to get a bit tiresome—even for a guy like him who was more than eager to please, who liked to have his ego stroked as much as his dick. Not to mention the fact that she was holding his head between her smooth, pale thighs so tightly that he was starting to get a headache.

“Yes! Oooo, like that! Right there!” she shouted, squeezing her nipples as the death grip around his head tightened.

Dante shoved her thighs open, raised his mouth to take a few quick breaths, then dove in again.

He soldiered on despite the theatrics, despite the pain, because there was more at stake here than getting off the very loud and moderately drunk Charisse Murdoch. He had something to prove as he brought his sister-in-law to a fist-pounding, pillow-biting orgasm. He wanted to prove that he was a better man than his half brother, Charisse’s husband, Evan Murdoch.

Because I am, he thought as Charisse continued to writhe and scream.

Too bad his late father, George, hadn’t bothered to notice, or Dante would be the CEO of Murdoch Conglomerated, not his pampered pussy brother, Evan.

While Dante had had to fend for himself most of his life—dodging bullies and bullets in the rough D.C. neighborhood of his childhood, and working his way through college and law school—the little Sun King known as Evan Murdoch had grown up in a mansion high up on the hill with tennis courts, swimming pools, and nannies. And why had the two men grown up so differently? Simply because Evan, Terrence, and Paulette had been born to a woman George chose to marry, while Dante had the unfortunate luck of being born to a woman George had accidentally knocked up during a clandestine one-night stand.

In fact, Dante hadn't known who his real father was until about two years ago, when his dying mother had told him the truth on her death bed. His entire life he had thought his dad was one of her junkie live-in boyfriends, some forgettable bum that no one but his kind-hearted mother would want anything to do with. But no, instead he found out his sire was esteemed local businessman and millionaire George Murdoch. His mother had also revealed that for years George had sent her hush money to ensure she would never tell his wife or anyone else the truth.

“Your father . . . is a . . . is a very proud man,” Mary Turner had said between coughs in the hospital room after pushing aside her oxygen mask so that Dante could hear her more clearly. She was in her last throes of emphysema and lung cancer at the time. The diseases had winnowed her down from her hefty two-hundred-and-ten-pound frame to a mere hundred pounds. “George thought a . . . a baby by a girl like me would ruin his . . . you know, his reputation. Plus, he was. . .” She paused to let out another chest rattling cough. She smacked her parched, blood-encrusted lips. “. . . was married at the time. He had a-a lot to lose, honey.”

But even more to gain if he would have accepted me and taken me under his wing, but he was too dumb to realize that, Dante now thought bitterly.

He had turned Dante away when Dante had finally gone to see him at his office and had introduced himself. He had insisted on continuing to pretend that Dante wasn't his son long after his wife had died and no one else would care. It had been Dante's siblings who had finally acknowledged him after his father died. They had found out his name when he was mentioned in George's will—a line item where Dante was given a measly two hundred and fifty grand when, as the eldest son, Dante felt he was owed more . . . a *helluva lot* more!

Why hadn't George realized that Dante was a son cut from the same cloth, carved out of his own image? Couldn't he see that Dante was as shrewd, cunning, and ruthless as he?

“Oh, God,” Charisse moaned as she flopped back against the mattress, shuddering all over. She raked her fingers through her tousled blond hair while Dante pushed himself off his elbows and sat upright at the foot of the bed.

“Damn, you're good,” she whispered.

Tell me something I don't know.

He grinned. “I just love to please a beautiful woman.”

“Yeah, I bet you do,” she drawled.

Charisse gave a throaty laugh, then shifted onto her side to turn on a nearby crystal table lamp. She fumbled around woozily—undoubtedly still feeling the after-effects of the glasses of champagne she had downed at Paulette's wedding—and opened one of her night table drawers. She pulled out a dainty silver cigarette box that could have been made in the early last century, and accidentally dropped it to the hardwood floor. She let out a few snorts and giggles, laughing at her clumsiness. Dante reached for it and handed it to her.

“Thanks,” she mumbled before pulling out a cigarette. She fished for a lighter in the same drawer, fumbling again. He sighed and found the lighter for her, then handed that to her too.

When she made several attempts to light the cigarette that dangled from her lips but didn't succeed, he lit it for her.

Dante gazed at Charisse as she smoked. Usually, Charisse was a woman whose gorgeousness made men do double takes, but at this vantage point, with the harsh light of the lamp playing on the angles and planes of her face, her "cracks" were starting to show. Maybe it was the years starting to catch up with her, carving away at her youthful beauty, or the alcohol or the smoking, but she was beginning to look a bit haggard. The first signs of crow's-feet were at the corners of her baby blues, despite her monthly Botox injections. Wrinkles were around her puckered lips. Red capillaries were etched like spider webs along the edges of her nostrils and pale purple circles were under her eyes.

He wondered if it was her good looks that had drawn Evan to her in the beginning, or maybe it was her pedigree. Charisse was the granddaughter of a former governor of Virginia and had a family history in the state that went as far back as the antebellum South. The fact that a white woman like her had married a black man such as Evan was a major coup for him and showed how far the Murdoch family had come. Of course, now that she was a sloppy drunk, Charisse wasn't quite the prize that she may have been a decade ago.

She noticed him staring at her, but mistook his gaze for admiration. A smug smile slowly crossed her collagen-plumped lips. "Want one?" she slurred, offering him the silver case.

He nodded.

The two sat and smoked in silence, gazing at the dark landscape outside of Charisse's bedroom window.

The first time Dante had fucked Charisse at her home, he had rushed the deed like he was on a stop clock, wanting to get it done before Evan came home and walked in on them. It wasn't

that he was afraid of confrontation with his brother. Dante just had a few things he wanted to accomplish before Evan figured out he was boning his wife. He had to keep up the pretense of the friendly brother who was eager to please his long-lost relatives. But Charisse had later assured him that the rush wasn't necessary.

"Evan hasn't set foot in my bedroom in more than a year. He sleeps down the hall . . . when he *is* home," she had muttered, making Dante stare at her in disbelief at the time.

"What do you mean, 'when he is home'? Are you saying he doesn't come home anymore?"

She had shrugged in response. "Maybe twice a week, if that."

"He isn't fucking around on you, is he?"

She had smirked before sipping from her glass. "Yeah, with a mistress called 'Murdoch Conglomerated.' Please! Evan is a total workaholic. He wouldn't find the time to screw around on me unless his secretary typed it into his Outlook calendar for him!"

Since then, Dante took his time whenever he and Charisse hooked up. Hell, he had even gone downstairs naked to make himself a ham sandwich once—that's how bold he had gotten! He had just missed the housekeeper, who had stumbled into the kitchen to make herself a late-night snack.

He now eased back on Charisse's bed and continued to stare out the window. From this vantage point and with the help of the floodlights hanging along the mansion's brick exterior, Dante could see most of the grounds: the paved stone circular driveway, the sculpted hedges, the neatly trimmed rose bushes, and the garage that housed Evan's four cars, ranging from a Range Rover to a 2014 Maserati GranTurismo convertible.

Dante slowly took it all in, admiring it and envisioning that one day, it would all be his.

Just give me time, he told himself.

“I wonder if the fireworks have started yet,” Charisse murmured as she reached for the glass of bourbon on her night table.

“What fireworks?”

“For Paulette’s wedding. They’re supposed to have some . . . I don’t know. Some big fireworks display at the end.”

Dante tried to recall his own marriage—a quick, understated ceremony with the justice of the peace. The bride had wanted to celebrate with a small reception with family and friends afterward, but Dante had thought it a waste of time and money. Instead, he had headed back to the law office where he was clerking to finish the work day. It didn’t seem worth making a big deal about it. It was just a wedding, after all.

Maybe that was why they got divorced three years later.

Her priorities were obviously out of whack, he thought.

“Fireworks,” he repeated, blowing smoke out of the side of the mouth. “It would have been better to set stacks of hundred-dollar bills on fire. What a waste of damn money!”

Charisse chuckled, cocking one leg and absently tugging down the bedsheets, revealing her bare breasts and pert pink nipples. “Yeah, but it’s the Murdoch way. They like to do things big.”

“It’s because they’ve never had to work hard for anything. They’ve had everything handed to them on a silver platter so they can just throw money around like it’s nothing.”

“That may be true about Terrence or Princess Paulette, but not Evan.” Charisse tapped the ashes of her cigarette into a glass ashtray near the lamp on the night table and stretched. “They live off their trust funds, but he doesn’t. He’s definitely a hard worker . . . always has

been. He's just like that—all sense of obligation and what? I don't know the word . . . duty, I guess. That's how he's made.”

Dante narrowed his eyes at her. “Oh, so we're sticking up for Evan now?”

She cringed with disgust. “I'm not ‘sticking up’ for him! I'm just saying that—”

“That's he's a hard worker. Yeah, he's a great goddamn guy. Well, if he's so great then why am *I* the one here eating you out and not him? *Huh?*”

“You are so . . . so crude,” she huffed.

Crude? Dante almost laughed. Here she was pretending to be the demure socialite when she had been anything but that less than five minutes ago. He wished he had a tape to replay to show how fast she had ripped off her reception gown, reached for his pants' zipper, and had his dick in her mouth. He wished he could replay all the moaning and yelling she had done.

“Let's cut the bullshit, Charisse. I'm crude, but I'm honest, which is more than I can say for that corny-ass husband of yours.”

Charisse scowled and extinguished her cigarette. She climbed off the bed, stumbling slightly before she regained her footing. She grabbed the pink silk robe that was tossed over the side of her grand oak headboard.

“I'm, uh . . . I'm getting tired,” she mumbled as she started to shove her arms into the robe sleeves.

Tired?

Okay, maybe he had pushed her a bit too far with his honesty. He knew he could be a little caustic, and maybe even crass, at times and often found it hard to keep himself in check. But he wanted to woo this woman, to win her to his side, because there were sides here in the

war he was waging. He wanted to use her affections in his favor in the future. He couldn't do that if he pissed her off.

“Charisse, come on, baby—”

“You should . . . you know, probably head home now,” she said, stepping out of his grasp. She tied the robe belt into a bow and pushed her hair out of her face. “Evan might be heading back from the wedding soon.”

Not likely, Dante thought. She was just making up excuses to get rid of him, but he wouldn't be put off that easily.

“Honey,” he whispered as he stood from the bed and walked naked toward her. “I'm sorry if I upset you.”

She looked away and pretended to cry, wiping at her eyes, puckering her lips. He wrapped an arm around her slender waist as she dropped her head to his shoulder.

“Evan's so mean to me, Dante,” Charisse whimpered with a sniff, slurring some of her words again. “I don't . . . I don't need for you to be mean to me too.”

He wondered if those fake tears worked on her husband. They certainly didn't work on him, but he was willing to play along.

“I know. I'm sorry if I hurt you.” He reached for her now empty glass, grabbed a nearby decanter, and filled the glass again. “Here, have a drink. It'll make you feel better.”

She hesitated before accepting his liquid peace offering. He knew her. She was never one to turn down a drink. She sipped from the glass before raising her head from his shoulder and looking up at him.

“Do you mean it?”

He nodded. “Of course, I do.”

After that, she downed the rest of her glass in one gulp.

Dante reached for her robe belt and began to slowly untie it. “What do you say we have one more go around before I leave?” he asked, pulling open one of the robe panels and cupping one of her breasts. He ran his thumb over the nipple and could feel her tremble slightly under his palm. “One more before I hit the road, baby . . . before Evan comes home?”

If he comes home . . .

“I don’t know, Dante,” she whispered.

Then his hand descended to the moist spot between her thighs. “You sure about that?” he asked, rubbing her there. He lowered his lips to her neck and kissed her pulse then her shoulders.

She set her glass back on the night table and pushed the robe off of her shoulders, letting it fall to the hardwood floor, her tears now forgotten. “Well, okay, but we’ll have to be . . . you know, quick.”

“Quick, huh?” he asked before roughly shoving her back onto the bed, then flipping her over so that she was face down on the sheets.

She raised herself so that she was kneeling on all fours. “Well, not too fast,” she moaned as he began to stroke her again with the tantalizing slow circular motion of his fingers, making her wetter. She balled the sheets in her fists. “We . . .” She groaned and started to pant. “We still have to enjoy ourselves, right?”

“Damn straight,” he said, parting her legs further and climbing between them. He then reached for one of the unopened packets of condoms still on her night table.

Because if there was one thing he did do for Charisse, that was help her enjoy herself. He offered her booze, conversation, and “no-strings attached” sex while she played poor little rich girl in her jilted husband’s mansion.

And she better remember that shit when I need a favor from her one day, he thought as he entered her and the yelling started all over again.