

Noah heard his cell phone ringing. He peeled one eye open and saw that he had indeed fell into the bed last night instead of the floor.

High five.

He was sprawled out on his bed sideways, his cell phone just a foot or so away. The fucking thing sounded like a blow horn to his alcohol-injured brain. He picked it up and looked at the number. It wasn't one he recognized, so he put the phone back down and gingerly raised himself from the bed. He felt like he had been in a high-speed collision with a bus. Or a semi. Yeah, probably a semi.

And the semi had definitely won.

He groaned and made his way under the sheets. His phone started blaring again.

"Fucking shit," he muttered and picked it up. Same number. Still didn't recognize it. He decided to answer it anyway. If it was a wrong number he could tell them to piss off and he could go back to his hangover.

"What."

"Um...hi. I'm...I'm looking for Noah?"

The female's voice on the other end instantly calmed his raging headache. He opened his eyes and looked at the ceiling.

"Yes?" *Just keep talking, sweetheart*, he thought. *Keep talking until you have talked this beastly pain away.*

"Well...is he there?"

Oh, right. Might be a good idea to let her know she was talking to the right person.

"Sorry. Yes. I mean, I'm here. Shit. I'm Noah." He had obviously destroyed some of the brain neurons that connected his thought process to his mouth.

"Hi. My name's Abby. I work for the Reno newspaper, and I was wondering if I could talk to you about yesterday's murder. Just for a few minutes. I won't take up much of your time."

The sound of her voice sent waves of relaxation and peace over his brain, bringing the pounding to a low hum. How did she do that? What was so special about her voice that it actually calmed a headache? It wasn't until she stopped talking that he realized he was supposed to answer something.

"I'm sorry," he said. Jesus, he was certain his tongue had grown hair overnight. "What did you say?"

This time he listened to the words, and his brain worked well enough to put them together and actually hear something beyond the tone of her voice. And then it registered. Reporter. No. Negative. Abort the phone call. Hell, no.

"No." He made it a priority to stay away from anyone or anything having to do with news organizations. He needed to remain anonymous so he could continue his work somewhat under the radar.

She sighed. It was a pretty sound, he decided, but it conveyed a lot of frustration.

"Look, I don't want details about the murder. I get that you can't comment on an open investigation, and I won't ask you to. Detective Wilson told me you're a murder investigator, sort of freelance. I was interested in hearing more about your job, the work you do."

He shut his eyes. He bet Wilson also gave her his number. Prick. Sending a reporter on his trail did not bode well for the detective. Payback would be nothing short of a bitch. "No."

Just as he was about to hang up she said, "Please, Noah."

It wasn't a desperate plea, but a simple statement. It made his finger stop a second before it reached to the OFF button. Before he knew what he was doing, he was making plans for later in the afternoon to meet her at a small coffee shop he liked in Sparks, an area between Reno and Fernley.

He hung up the phone and rolled over. Before sleep overtook him, he realized he didn't know what she looked like, so he wouldn't know her in the coffee shop. He figured it would work itself out. He shouldn't be meeting her anyway. At least she had gotten rid of most of his headache, though, so he supposed he owed her.

Chapter 9

Abby arrived at the coffee shop twenty minutes before their scheduled appointment. She was nervous, but excited. She hadn't been excited about anything in a very long time. She had a few so-called friends who she met for coffee every once in a while or saw in her spinning class, but she kept her guard up around them. She just never felt comfortable enough to open up to them. She still talked to her old college roommate, Candace, every now and then, who she had considered a true friend. Candace had embraced Abby—weirdness, shyness, idiosyncrasies and all.

Abby fell into the shy side, and she knew that the depression lingering around her was due to the fact that she was so terribly unhappy with everything in her life, both professionally and socially. Her heart was beating a little quicker, and she was looking forward to laying eyes on the man from the pictures she was certain she knew. But from where? That was the hundred thousand dollar question that she didn't know the answer to. She hoped she would be able to place him when she saw him face to face.

So, yes, she was excited for this meeting.

She had worked on her list of questions, making sure that they did not point to any specific crime, but more about the man himself and his job. She wanted to know why he was in this line of work, and how he had gotten there. She thought it would make an excellent feature for the crime section of the newspaper, and maybe save her job. She also hoped that once she met him, she would know where she knew him from. The fact that she couldn't place him was an uncomfortable itch that needed to be scratched. She thought about her weekly routines and where she went. Did she know him from the gym? The grocery store? The little bookstore over on Fourth she frequented? She just couldn't figure out from where.

A black Escalade screeched to a halt in front of the coffee shop. As a tall, lumbering male got out of the car, she recognized him from the picture. Although she hadn't been able to see his full face in the photo, she knew him by his size. She was shocked at the pure raw power that radiated from him. She watched as he walked into the shop and stood at the door for a minute looking around. He took off his sunglasses and looked around again. His dark eyes landed on her, but she found herself frozen in place. He ran his hand through the dark waves of hair, and she couldn't help but notice the

flawless face, the high cheekbones, the strong jaw covered with more than a day's worth of scruff.

His gaze met hers again, and she found it within herself to give him a quick wave. A small smile crossed his face and he walked toward her.

No, he didn't walk.

He rolled.

It was a wall of sheer energy moving toward her, and she had the thought that he resembled some force of nature, like a hurricane or tsunami.

He wore a pair of jeans, some leather boots, and a black shirt with *Tapout* blazed in white lettering hugging his wide chest. As he approached, she found herself thinking how she was woefully unprepared for this meeting. She was certain she was going to say something stupid, like that time she had met an old acquaintance at Target. He had told her about his new job, and mentioned that it was very lucrative. She had stumbled around her words, and then came up with the brilliance of, "You must be making good money!" Like she didn't know what lucrative meant. Or the time Candace took her to a party and she was so nervous about meeting new people she had called the hostess by the wrong name the entire night. She had also spilled her vodka and cranberry juice on the white rug when she tripped over her own feet.

Or maybe she would do something, like try to sit down in her chair and miss it, ending up sprawled on the floor, as she had done in one of her classes in college. And then there was the time she had met a man at a meeting and extended her hand to shake his. Only he was missing his hand. She became so flustered she offered to fist bump instead of shake. The list of her social mishaps was long and painful for her to think about. And the more she thought about what she shouldn't do, the more nervous she became.

She felt herself shrinking within her body. She had to take a deep breath so she didn't drown within her own insecurities that were bubbling up at a terribly fast rate, reminding her what a high level of idiocy she could attain in a very short period of time.

Beyond her own insecurities, there was that uncomfortable itch of recognition turned into an anthill of irritation scratching at her skin. Not only was she sure that she had seen him somewhere, but she felt a draw to him that bordered on insanity. Her heart

began to beat harder, and she actually felt a sheen of sweat on her brow. She had the brief vision of the magnets in her middle school science class, slamming together when spaced just a few inches away.

You are one.

What?

She tried to clear her thoughts as he approached the table. She would deal with the craziness in her head at another time. Right now she needed to focus. Say hi. Shake hands. Get the interview. Hopefully save her job. Then, mission accomplished.

He arrived at the table, and somehow she got to her feet. "Noah?" she said, like she didn't know.

He nodded.

She checked to make sure he had a hand to shake, and then stuck hers out and gave him her best "I am a professional smile" she could muster. "I'm Abby. Thank you for meeting me."

As Noah took her hand, he felt as though he had just hooked himself up to a battery charger. His heart actually skipped a beat as their hands touched.

He loved the feel of her soft, cool hand. It was so dainty and fragile inside his big paw. She stood about six feet tall, he noted, but she also had on high heels. He looked over her face. Her bone structure was delicate, her skin a milky white with a splash of brown freckles over her nose and cheeks. Her mouth turned up slightly in a smile, and her full lips had just a hint of pink coloring. Her large brown eyes stared into his. When he let go of her hand, she shyly brushed a lock of auburn hair behind her ear and studied the table as she sat down.

He watched her fold herself into her chair. Her skirt rode up a bit, and her long, slim legs tucked themselves under the table. He pulled the chair out across from her and looked her over again as he sat down. She may have been the prettiest thing he had ever laid eyes on. He let his eyes travel from her face to her neck, and down to the V of her white blouse, which promised a glimpse of cleavage if he got the right angle.

"So, um..." she began. He immediately averted his eyes back to hers. By the look on her face, he had been busted.

When their eyes met, her cheeks got a little pink. Was he making her blush?

"I'm sorry," she said. "Have we met before? I feel like I've seen you somewhere..."

Noah let his eyes scan her face again. He would have most certainly remembered meeting her before.

"I don't think so," he said quietly, holding her gaze. He watched as the color on her cheeks deepened, and then she looked down at her pad of paper.

After a moment of silence she said, "So, I prepared a list of questions. Like I said on the phone, I'm not looking to get into specific crimes. My interest is in you." Noah watched as she seemed to flinch at her own words. "I mean, it's in your job, how you became a special investigator, what your job entails, etcetera. I envision it being a feature piece in the crime section of the paper."

He nodded and sat back. If he had to assign a word to this meeting, it would be weird. Not that he was any wordsmith or anything, but there wasn't another word to describe it. Never, ever, on Earth had a woman gotten his attention the way this blushing, beautiful woman did. Sure, he had seen good-looking women—he did have eyes after all—but none of them had affected him like Abby. What was it about her, he couldn't quite put his finger on, but he felt something within him come alive for the first time. He didn't know what the feeling was, but it was like a Phoenix rising from the ashes of his almost-dead soul.

How dramatic.

Take that, Shakespeare.

He had taken six Excedrin and slept most of the day, so as far as his hangover went, it was hovering in mid-range. Definitely on the north side of "Oh my God, I may die," but on the south side of feeling good. He hadn't eaten since last night, and he heard his stomach give a growl of protest at the neglect, which was getting difficult to ignore. But really, it was the simple physics of a serious hangover. When you drank as much scotch as he had the night before, what went down was certain to come up, and he wasn't big on the whole exodus of food from his gut that came with an epic hangover.

As she talked, he watched her lips move, but he wasn't hearing the words. He loved the sound of her voice—warm and soothing. Those lips looked so soft and full. And he liked the fact she didn't slather them up with a bunch of goop.

"Noah?"

He returned his attention to her eyes. This simply wasn't working. He was a hung-over piece of shit, he was hungry, and his brain wasn't functioning. He hadn't heard one word she had said. He shouldn't be thinking the way he was about this woman. He shouldn't be here, period. She had caught him at a moment of weakness this morning. He should've called her back when he reached some level of sobriety this afternoon and canceled. No, this whole situation had Really Bad Idea stamped all over it.

Before he knew what he was saying, the words popped out of his mouth. "I'm hungry, Abby. Will you have an early dinner with me?"

Really? What the fuck was he doing?

"There's a great steakhouse a few doors down. We could head over there."

Oh, Jesus. Shut up!

"We could kill two birds with one rock. Or stone. Take your pick. You could do your interview, and I could eat. Of course, I would be more than happy to buy you dinner as well."

Where was this coming from? Did he really need to cut out his own tongue to make it stop?

To make matters worse, she just stared at him. Okay, maybe the whole dinner thing was an even crappier idea than agreeing to meet her in the first place. Well, actually there was no maybe about it. The dinner invitation took the top prize for Bad Idea, and would remain there for a long, long time. Possibly forever.

A slow smile crossed her face. "I would like that."

Okay. Looked like they were going to dinner together.