

Still Standing

By Kristen Ashley

TEASER CHAPTER

Chapter One

Earthquake

I pulled into the back lot next to the huge warehouse beside the super-hip home improvement store, Ace in the Hole, and as instructed, kept driving around the back of the warehouse to get to the long, squat building next to it.

I did this practicing deep breathing.

I'd done my research at the library the day before and I'd lived in Phoenix all my life.

I'd heard about Ace in the Hole, but I'd never been there.

Rogan took care of the house, or at least he took care of calling the people who took care of our house.

That was, he did that before he was incarcerated.

There was a large area between the warehouse and the building next to it.

At the end, there was a line of four vans facing the chain link fence that protected the area from the street (a fence with razor wire on top—it wasn't a great neighborhood in north Phoenix, it also wasn't the worst neighborhood in town—I knew this because I lived in the worst neighborhood in town, and that was on the south side).

The back doors of the vans had a decal of a playing card—the ace of spades, with the curves of the symbol being the eyes of a skull, flames coming out the top, black rivulets (meant to denote blood? eek!) dripping from the bottom, spatter around it (again, blood?)—and next to it, it said ACE IN THE HOLE CONTRACTING.

That area between buildings also held a variety of Harleys parked in a line. This in front of the long, squat structure. Under the overhang that ran the front of that space were three (three!) barrel grills. Two picnic tables. A scattering of mismatched outdoor chairs with equally mismatched tables, almost all of which had empty beer bottles or cans or overflowing ashtrays or all three on top. And I could see there was a misting system built into the overhang to cool it down during hot Phoenix days, of which, that day was one, it was just that the mist wasn't on right then.

The Aces High Motorcycle Club hangout.

Where I was heading because I was stupid.

Stupid and desperate.

“You’ve done this before, Clara, you’ve done it twice,” I told myself under my breath as I parked outside the building, next to the bikes. “You did it and you walked away. You’re fine. You’ll be fine. You’ll say what you have to say and then go. They’re not going to kill the messenger. Right?”

I said these words to convince myself I was going to be perfectly okay.

And, truth be told, this was actually one of the less dangerous messages Esposito had sent me out to deliver.

The Aces High Motorcycle Club owned this long stretch of property on which they had a large home improvement store, a larger warehouse, and this building.

They were well-known.

This was because it was Phoenix. A haven for bikers. A haven for badasses. And perhaps the last bastion of the Wild West.

I’d heard others who did not grow up there say they’d lived their whole lives going into places of business and not seeing a NO FIREARMS ALLOWED sign on the door.

To me, that was shocking.

To them, seeing that sign was more shocking.

During my research at the library the day before, I’d pulled up a variety of stuff that included a couple of articles about the opening of a home improvement store run by a gang of bikers and how that was instantly popular.

How Aces High MC were “changing the face of the MC culture” by running two successful businesses (the store and the contracting) as a club.

How people, especially Phoenicians, found it cool to turn away from a chain store like Lowe’s or Home Depot and “shop local,” when that local shop was owned by bikers.

I’d also seen pictures of the members of the club, all rough-looking guys. But they were bikers, they were bound to look rough. It wasn’t like they were the kind to gussy up to have their picture taken for an article in a newspaper.

Or maybe they did gussy up and in real life, they were *really* rough.

Bottom line, I didn't know much about bikers (at all), but I figured they were who they were and part of who they were was rough-looking.

But whatever they did behind the scenes, they had a very visible face. A woman couldn't drive in broad daylight to their hangout and then disappear.

Unfortunately, no one but Esposito and Tia knew I was there.

If something happened to me, I doubted Esposito would care.

Tia would, but she wasn't in a place to do anything about it.

This part was bad.

And try as I might, I couldn't find good.

But I hadn't had much good in a long time (say, since the moment I was born), so at least I was used to it.

I switched off the ignition, grabbed my purse and slung it over my shoulder. Then I exited my car hoping that the repo man wasn't following me.

I suspected, however, that my car was safer outside the Aces High Motorcycle Club's hangout than it was anywhere.

Repo men undoubtedly had a variety of ways and means, but I didn't figure one of their ways was to repossess a car right outside a possibly dangerous motorcycle club's clubhouse. I figured members of the club might frown on that simply for territorial reasons alone.

I slammed the door to my car and walked to the hangout still sucking in deep breaths.

My message was short.

They were going to be angry, but that was Esposito's problem. Not mine.

I was just the messenger.

Simply the messenger.

That was it.

The front door to their lair was off to one side, close to the end, away from the street.

I pulled it open and stepped through into the dark, my eyes taking a moment to adjust as it was a shock after being out in the bright Phoenix sunshine.

This was unfortunate because I immediately heard the low, angry growl of a man.

"You've gotta be fuckin' shittin' me."

I turned my head toward the sound and my eyes adjusted.

It looked like a bar. A comfortable one like you'd have in your house if you owned a very big house, you'd lived in it a long time, you had a great number of friends, and you partied frequently.

Two pool tables. Some couches and armchairs. Some tables and chairs (most of these poker tables). A massive wide-screen TV hanging on the side wall close to the door. A long bar at the wall across the wide room opposite the TV. A bar with shelves behind it, liquor on the shelves, some glasses, stools in front, but no cash register. Things on the wall: pictures, plaques, flags, stickers, *carvings*.

Yes.

Carvings in the wood paneling on the walls.

Jagged ones.

Although I was surprised at this choice of decoration, and what it said about the easy and prolific access to knives the people who used that space had, I was on a mission, and thus, didn't pay much attention.

I took in what I could of the environment just to understand where I was, because I felt it prudent to focus on the humans and not the décor.

This was due to the fact that the room was also filled with about ten big, rough-looking, *angry*-looking men.

I focused on the one I was guessing spoke and said, "I'm here to see a Mr. West Hardy."

"Fuck you," the man replied, and I squared my shoulders automatically as a thrill of fear raced down my spine.

I wasn't one of those people who liked fear, who fed off it.

I didn't like fear.

In fact, I hated it.

And in all this time, the eighteen months since Rogan was arrested, feeling it nearly every day, I still wasn't used to it.

But I was desperate. I had no choice.

"Get your ass outta here," another man ordered, and I looked at him.

"Are you Mr. Hardy?" I asked.

"Get your ass outta here," he replied.

I ignored him because I had a job to do and I needed to do it. Desperation, obviously, made you do desperate things.

And, like I said, I was desperate.

My eyes scanned through the men.

I had to take this. If I didn't take this and say what I had to say, I didn't get paid and Tia got into trouble.

And I needed to get paid, and I needed that badly.

But more, I couldn't get Tia into trouble.

All the men were standing, save one.

One was sitting at a stool at the bar, slightly twisted to the side, but his head was bowed to it, looking at a bottle of beer in his hands.

I only saw his profile and not much of it since he had a very full beard.

He had a lot of tattoos on his arms which were exposed by a short-sleeved T-shirt. He had very muscular arms. And from what I could see from the tight T-shirt he was wearing that stretched along his broad back, a very muscular everything.

He had dark hair that was too long. Not *long*, long, as in, he could put it in a ponytail like some of the men had, but it curled around his neck and swept back from his face and looked kind of greasy-wet, but in a cool way, and I wondered inanely if he used product.

Then again, you couldn't blame him if he did. I suspected even bikers used product. Since it was so long in the front, if he didn't do something to keep it back, it would fall over his forehead into his eyes and that would be annoying.

If he wasn't so rough-looking, I could tell, even in profile, he'd be immensely attractive.

He just wasn't my type.

Not that anyone was.

Not anymore.

I also knew he was West Hardy, president of the Aces High Motorcycle Club.

I knew this only because, though he was sitting, staring at his beer, he had something about him—a charisma, a magnetism. He exuded the gravitas of a chief.

He was not one of the boys.

He was the leader of the pack.

I started toward him and a big man with long, dirty-blond hair not pulled into a ponytail (but it could have been) stepped in front of me.

I stopped, sucked in a breath and looked up at him.

“Get...your ass...outta here,” he growled.

“I have a message to deliver to Mr. Hardy,” I replied.

“Bitch, get...” He leaned into me and it took everything I had, but I stood firm because, it must be said, this man was big, but he was also seriously scary. “*Outta here*,” he finished.

“Ink,” a deep, rough voice said quietly, and the man in front of me glared at me, straightened, then twisted his neck to look over his shoulder.

“*What?*” he barked.

“Tequila,” the deep, rough voice replied strangely.

The entire room changed then.

It was odd.

The atmosphere was heavy and dangerous one second, but the minute that voice said “tequila,” a lightness flowed through, the tenseness immediately evaporated, and chancing a glance around, I saw some of the men actually smiling.

What on earth?

The man in front of me, who I suspected was called “Ink,” stepped aside, his mouth moving like he was fighting back a smile, and the way was cleared to the man at the bar.

He was still cradling his beer with both hands and his head was still bowed, but now his neck was twisted, and his eyes were on me.

Okay.

Um.

Wow.

I had no type, but when I did have a type, he was *not* my type.

That said, if he was charismatic, magnetic and attractive in profile, those dark eyes with the laugh lines emanating from the sides, his thick beard with hints of gray in it, his strong bone structure (specifically his cheekbones, they were magnificent) and his intensity aimed at me, I had to admit, was beyond charismatic, magnetic and attractive straight to downright electrifying.

“Have a seat, Toots,” he ordered, his head tipping to the stool beside him as the men around me moved away.

I pulled in a short, calming breath, thrilled beyond belief the scary portion of my task was over, and I walked up to the bar but didn't take a seat.

"This shouldn't take long," I told him.

"Have a seat," he repeated in his gravelly voice.

"I just came to say—"

"Babe," he cut me off, his voice going lower. He hadn't lifted his head, but his dark brown eyes changed in a way that both scared me and enthralled me, but not in a way I could describe, they just did. "I said, have... a... seat."

I decided it was judicious to have a seat.

So I pulled my purse off my shoulder and slid as best I could in my tight skirt up onto the barstool. Once situated, I put my purse on the bar and turned to him to see he'd lifted his head and was also lifting his chin.

A young man, as rough as the rest, but definitely younger (early twenties at most), came forward with two shot glasses and a bottle. I watched as he filled both shot glasses then stepped away.

The man seated beside me straightened and reached out to the glasses. He picked one up and extended it to me.

"Um...I haven't had lunch," I demurred, my gaze going from the shot glass to his eyes.

"Take it," he ordered. "Drink."

"I drove here. It would be irresponsible to drink straight alcohol on an empty stomach and then—"

He cut me off.

"Toots, I said, take it."

Oh dear.

I took it, and the instant I did, he reached out and nabbed the other one, put it to his lips and threw his head back and the shot back. I watched his throat work and was vaguely intrigued through my what-on-earth-is-happening-now feelings to see his neck was as well-muscled as the rest of him.

He slammed the glass down, his head turned to me and then tipped to my glass.

"Shoot it," he demanded.

"Are you Mr. Hardy?" I asked.

“Buck,” he replied.

I felt my brows knit. “You’re Mr. Buck?”

“No, darlin’, I’m called Buck.”

“Oh,” I muttered then asked, “Is the name on your birth certificate West Hardy?”

He grinned at me, all strong white teeth in a dark beard, and for some reason that made my heart skip a beat.

“Affirmative,” he stated.

There it was.

Good.

I scooted my bottom on the chair, ready to get down to business, and stated, “Okay, then, Esposito says—”

He interrupted me again. “Shoot it.”

“Pardon?” I asked.

“Babe, shoot the tequila.”

“What I have to say won’t take long,” I told him. “And I appreciate your offer of refreshments, but—”

He grinned again, looking like something was immensely entertaining, and I stopped speaking because West “Buck” Hardy’s entertained look went so far beyond attractive it was not funny.

“You appreciate my offer of refreshments?” he asked.

“Um, yes, it’s very nice, but it’s just past noon and—”

“Toots, quit jackin’ around and drink the shot.”

I stared into his eyes.

Then I decided to drink the shot.

One shot of tequila wasn’t going to incapacitate me enough where I couldn’t drive my car.

And perhaps, if I took it, he’d let me say what I had to say, and I could get out of there. I needed to go back to Esposito, get my money and pay my rent before they kicked me out of my apartment.

My apartment was a dump, but it *was* an apartment, and without it I’d have nowhere to sleep but my car.

That was, if I managed to avoid my car getting repossessed.

So I put the glass to my lips and took the shot.

I liked tequila, if it was cut with margarita mix, but I wasn't a shot kind of girl. Therefore, even though I wanted to be ballsy and put myself out there as a cool customer, I couldn't help but flinch then make a face when I took the glass from my lips. I looked back at West Hardy and saw he was tipping his chin up at the young biker again. Then I turned my head and saw the young biker move forward quickly and refill both Hardy's glass and mine.

Oh no.

"Mr. Hardy—" I started, and he turned his head to me.

"Buck," he declared.

"Okay, Buck, um—"

"You play pool?" he asked.

My head jerked.

I then looked over my shoulder at the pool tables and back at him.

"Pool?"

"Cues, balls, felt table, babe. Pool," he stated. "You play?"

"No," I replied.

"Shoot that." He dipped his head to my glass then went on, "And I'll teach you."

I was getting the distinct impression this wasn't good.

"Mr. Hardy—" I began, and something happened to his body. It tensed in a way that made me quickly say, "Buck, sorry, um...I have nothing against pool, but I really don't have occasion to play it very often and—"

"Toots, shoot the tequila and slide your ass off that stool. You're gonna learn to play pool."

I stared at him.

I then decided to try to bargain.

"If I let you teach me how to play pool, will you let me deliver my message and go?"

"Depends," he answered.

"On what?" I asked.

"On how you do with twenty questions," he replied, and my head jerked again.

"Pardon?"

"We're gonna drink, you're gonna learn how to play pool, and I'm gonna ask you twenty questions. Depending on your answers, I'll let you deliver your message." Once he'd stated this,

he turned his head back to the young biker and ordered, “Give me the bottle and get Toots a Miller.”

“Oh no,” I stated quickly. “Beer is highly caloric, and I shouldn’t mix alcoholic beverages. That isn’t smart while driving.”

Or, say, *ever*.

Buck shifted his focus again to me, and his eyes moved down my torso then back to the young biker who was placing the bottle of tequila on the bar. “Miller Lite,” he amended his order.

“Buck,” I started again, and regained his attention.

“Shoot it,” he replied.

“But—”

“Darlin’, not gonna say it again.”

I stared at him.

I did this before I started to get angry.

“Maybe I should leave,” I said to him.

“You leave, what do you tell Esposito?”

I had to admit, he had a point there.

Enrique Esposito wouldn’t like that I didn’t deliver his message.

“Toots, listen to me,” Buck said softly, and my eyes focused on him to see he’d leaned toward me. “My guess is, you’re new to this so I’m gonna give you a free lesson. You entered this game, you gotta play it.”

“I’m trying to,” I pointed out.

“Right, so, right now, the game is tequila, beer, pool and twenty questions. Now be smart, drink that shot and slide your ass off that stool because we’re gonna play pool.”

I studied him a moment.

Right before I tried bargaining again.

“Just so I have this straight, I drink with you, let you teach me how to play pool and answer your questions?”

“Easy,” he replied.

“Do I get twenty questions?” I returned, and his brows shot up.

“You want ‘em?”

“You ask me something then I should get something in return, so I ask you something. You like my answers, I get to deliver my message and go. That’s the deal.”

“Why do you want twenty questions?” he inquired.

I didn’t know the answer to that, so I said, “I just do.”

“All right, Toots,” he stated then lifted his shot glass toward me. “Let’s do this.”

I nodded my head, lifted my own shot glass, and keeping my eyes on him while he downed his, I downed mine. I repeated my flinch and making a face, and when I focused on him, he was looking at me and again grinning.

He twisted his neck and ordered over his shoulder, “Rack ’em up.”

The young biker had put a bottle of Miller Lite in front of me and Buck got off his stool.

I followed him, getting off mine.

He grabbed the bottle of beer and handed it to me.

I took it, he nabbed the tequila and shot glasses in one hand, his bottle of beer in the other, and he moved to the pool table.

I moved behind him, sipping at my beer and trying to ignore the gazes I felt following me.

I found this was easier than expected since I did this by watching Buck’s behind in his jeans, and the visual was so good, it automatically assumed control of all my concentration.

This concentration was broken only when a man shifted away from the pool table and I saw the balls in their triangle at the end.

Buck left the shot glasses, tequila and beer on the side of the table and went to the wall where he selected a cue.

I stopped by the table and wished I was wearing something else. Jeans, maybe. Gym shoes. Not a tight, buff-colored pencil skirt, a fitted white blouse with cap sleeves and ballet-pink, stiletto-heeled pumps.

I’d wanted to look professional and feminine.

Professional, so that the men I delivered the messages to would take me seriously.

Feminine, so they would think twice before hurting me.

Now, I was thinking this might have been a mistake.

Buck moved back to me, handed me the cue and looked at me.

“You wanna start or you want me to start?” he asked.

“Start?”

“Twenty questions.”

I tried to decide which was the best strategy.

“You start,” I told him because I wanted a sense of where this was going.

He didn’t delay and he didn’t shield his hand.

“You work since they fired your ass after your man went down?”

As I stared up at him, I felt my lips part and my stomach clench, and it didn’t feel good.

He knew me. He knew all about me.

Oh God.

“Pardon?” I whispered as my legs started to shake.

He again didn’t delay. “Your man was found guilty and handed a ten-year sentence. One month later, you were fired from the Hunter Institute. You work since then?”

Yes, he knew.

He knew all about me.

He knew more than just what he could read in the articles about all that Rogan did.

He’d looked into me. He knew I was coming. He knew Esposito was going to send me, slap him in the face by not coming himself or sending one of his lieutenants. He knew Esposito was the kind of man who had no respect, not for anyone, not even for the charismatic, magnetic leader of a biker gang.

He knew.

He knew and he’d prepared.

Oh God.

“He wasn’t my man,” I said softly.

“You were married to him, Toots,” he replied.

I shook my head. “No, the divorce was final before then.”

Something about him changed and it was almost like the very air around him gentled before he spoke again quietly.

“I know, darlin’, but you aren’t answering my question.”

“No,” I answered just as quietly.

He nodded, moved closer to me, and I was too out of it to step away.

“Your turn,” he whispered.

I stared up at him.

“Have you investigated me?” I asked, and he shook his head.

“I’ll let that one slide, babe, not smart,” he said softly.

My heart skipped.

“Pardon?”

“Don’t ask a question you already know the answer to,” he advised.

“But you are,” I pointed out.

“Yeah, but I have my reasons, you don’t,” he replied.

“Okay,” I whispered.

“Go again,” he prompted.

I didn’t know what to ask.

Something was happening here. Something that had nothing to do with Esposito.

Or maybe it did. Maybe it was a power play and I was stuck in the middle.

Or maybe it was all about me.

Either way, I was on dangerous ground.

Far more dangerous than the ground I’d walked on when I entered this building and that ground was already pretty darned shaky.

My attention shifted, and for some reason, focused on one of the plethora of tattoos on his arm. Before I could stop myself, I lifted my gaze and asked my question.

“What’s the snake mean?”

He tilted his head to the side as his brows knit. “Come again?”

I pointed at the snake slithering up his arm, starting low, curling around, the design opening larger at his biceps.

The snake was not thin, it was beefy.

It was also curled around a skull at the bulge of his biceps, head flared, eyes focused, mouth open, fangs exposed, ready to strike.

“The snake tattoo, what’s it mean?”

I dropped my hand as he dropped his head and looked at the tattoo. Then he looked at me.

His expression was blank, but his eyes were alert, assessing, intense, drilling deep into mine, and if it could be believed I was even more uncomfortable than I was before.

“Kristy,” he stated.

“Pardon?” I asked.

“Kristy, my ex-wife. She had occasion in our marriage to piss me off and do it a lot. She said, when I got pissed, I was not all bark and no bite. I wasn’t even just bite. I was a strike. Like a snake.”

“Oh,” I whispered, my gaze slid away, and I took another sip of my beer thinking he didn’t seem the kind of man to get angry enough to strike. He seemed totally in control.

Therefore, I found this fascinating.

“Line it up,” he ordered.

I looked back to him.

“Sorry?”

“We’re gonna break,” he told me, tipping his head toward the table. “Line up your cue.”

I looked at the table then to him. I did as he asked, set my beer aside, bent over the table, acutely aware that he was close, we were being watched, and my skirt was very tight, and I lined my cue up to the ball.

My body froze as his warmth curved around me, his hand on mine on the cue, his other arm stretching out so his hand could cover mine resting on the table with the cue over it. His back was pressed to mine, his hips pressed to my bottom.

Oh God.

“What are you doing?” I whispered.

“Only way to learn,” his deep, rough voice said in my ear, but somehow I felt it on every inch of my skin, “is by feel.”

Then he drew both our hands back on the cue and struck it forward. The cue hit the white ball and it accelerated, cracking soundly against the triangle at the other end, sending the balls scattering as his hand went flat to my midriff and he pulled us both up.

I watched the balls.

Two went into pockets, both solid colors, and Buck moved from me to the tequila.

He poured our shots and handed me a glass.

This time, I didn’t hesitate.

I was not one for liquid courage, but at that moment, I was going to take anything I could get. Therefore, I threw it back and then watched as Buck threw his back.

He took the glass from me, set both on the side of the table, grabbed my bottle of beer, handed it to me, caught my free hand and moved me down the table.

He stopped, upended the cue he was carrying so its nub was to the floor and got in my space.

Again, I didn't retreat. The tequila was hitting me, I could feel it. I didn't remember the last time I'd had a drink and now I'd had three shots of tequila and sipped at a beer.

Drunk was going to come fast.

He knew this too.

I was definitely on dangerous ground.

"He leave you with anything?" Buck asked.

I blinked up at him.

"Who?"

"Your ex," he answered, my heart skipped again then he went on, "They didn't find all the money. They seized your house, the contents, your cars, your accounts. Did he leave you with anything? Cover your ass at all?"

"No," I told him and took another sip of beer. And it was at that moment I decided to fight fire with fire. "Why did you and Kristy get divorced?"

He looked down at me and answered without hesitation, "She didn't share my vision of what our lives would be. That being copasetic most off the time, not up in each other's shit nearly all the time. She married me with expectations of where our lives would lead, but she didn't share those expectations with me. If she did, I'd never have married the bitch in the first place."

"What were her expectations?" I asked.

"My turn, Toots," he didn't answer.

"Sorry," I whispered and took another sip of my beer because I had nothing better to do.

"You didn't know?" he asked

I studied at him, off balance again.

He asked questions I kind of understood, but they were questions that forced me to clarify in a way that I suspected he was trying to make me off balance.

"I didn't know what?" I asked back to clarify.

"About the whores," he clarified.

My middle moved back like he punched me, and I twisted my neck, looking away to hide the pain his words caused.

In doing this, I had no idea I missed the gentling of the air around him again, but even if I was looking at him, I wouldn't have caught it.

I wasn't numb to this.

Even after eighteen months.

Even after having my husband arrested in a middle-of-the-night raid of our house.

Even after having my photo, his photo, all those women's photos (okay, there were only three, but three was a lot) on the covers of newspapers, and even some magazines, for months on end.

Even after the hideous questions the journalists would shout at me whenever they had their chance.

Even after having everything I owned taken from me.

Even after losing my job.

Even after walking into multitudes of stores and restaurants and seeing people's faces change when they recognized me.

And even after hearing some of the things they said, either straight to my face or under their breath.

Truthfully, it wasn't that big of a story. We were just another in a never-ending cycle of greed, ugliness and negativity the public at large consumed with wild abandon like the news was a daily Bacchanal.

But Rogan was young, handsome, a fallen golden boy, and some of the details were salacious, and those kinds of descents from grace lived a life much longer than anyone's fifteen minutes.

As for me, I was forced into the role of the chump. The putz. I was so stupid I didn't know that my husband was living large from stealing people's pensions. Sleeping with high-class call girls in New York City, Chicago, Las Vegas. Squirting them around, drinking champagne, eating at the finest restaurants, giving them presents as well as paying them for sex.

I didn't know, but some people believed I couldn't be that stupid. Some people thought I put up with it for my fancy house and my fancy car and my fancy clothes (and I did have all that, but it wasn't *that* fancy). Some people thought I enjoyed my beautiful life living off other people's misfortune as handed to them by my thieving, cheating husband, and I'd turned a blind eye so I could keep that life.

Either way, everyone—and that was pretty much everyone nationwide, but definitely in Phoenix—felt I got what I deserved.

I got what I deserved for being stupid enough to fall in love.

I squared my shoulders and buried the pain before I looked back at Buck, locked eyes and replied, “No. I didn’t know about the whores.”

“Toots—” he whispered.

I cut him off. “What did she expect?”

“Darlin’—”

I turned away and walked back to the tequila.

It was me who poured two new shots, grabbed both in one hand and walked back to him. I lifted the shots and watched his hand take one, but I didn’t watch him shoot it. I just shot mine, flinched, belted back a gulp of beer and put the shot glass on the side of the table.

I looked at him again.

“What did she expect?” I repeated.

Buck studied my face a moment before answering, “She expected me to keep our lives as they were and not make any waves.”

“And those waves you apparently were making?” I prompted.

“Sorry, Toots,” he said gently. “That’s another question.”

“Right,” I stated. “Fine, then ask one of me.”

“I’m thinkin’ we should focus on pool for a while,” he told me.

I nodded instantly and turned to the table.

“Great. Perfect,” I declared, examining the table. “What do I do now?”

“You’re solids, babe. You see your shot?” he asked.

I stared at the table, focusing on what would possibly be my shot. I found it, set my beer aside and pointed.

“Good girl,” he murmured, and I felt his body move into me. Forcing mine down, he situated the cue on the table. “Hands on mine,” he instructed.

I did as I was told.

He moved my hands to where he wanted them and said in my ear, “See how this is lined up?” I didn’t. I wasn’t paying attention to much except his heat at my back, his power surrounding me, the fact that I was careening toward drunk and the hollow feeling of despair that had a permanent hold of my stomach but was now sharpened to the point I wondered why I was still standing.

“Yes,” I lied.

He again drew the cue back and then jabbed it forward in a controlled way, hitting the ball. The white ball cracked into the other ball at an angle and it shot straight into the side pocket.

“Finesse,” he whispered into my ear.

“Right,” I replied, pushing back against his body to straighten.

He allowed this and I walked away from him and grabbed my beer.

I sucked some back as I heard Buck call out, “Driver, another Lite and another Bud.”

“Gotcha,” the young biker called back.

I dropped my hand, looked at Buck and informed him honestly, “You should know, I’m already drunk, and if I have much more, I’ll be very drunk and unable to operate my vehicle legally. You should also know I have exactly twelve cents in my purse and one dollar and fifty-seven cents in my bank account, and therefore I will be unable not only to order a taxi, but also to buy a bus ticket. And lastly you should know that, even if I wasn’t wearing four-inch heels, I live too far away to walk home.”

Buck studied me another long moment before he got close.

So close I could feel his warmth and his hand came up and curled around the side of my neck, sliding to the back.

I was shocked by this even after the pool lesson touching. He was so close I had to tip my head far back to catch his eyes and find he was actually so close that, if I lifted half an inch up on my toes, my mouth would be on his.

Oh dear.

“And you should know, Clara,” he murmured, using my real name for the first time in his gravelly, deep voice, making it sound like another name altogether. Another name that belonged to another woman, that woman not me, but that woman being a woman I wished I could be.

“That I know exactly what’s in your account and I know you haven’t had lunch and I know you haven’t had breakfast, and I know it’s because you can’t afford either. I know you’ve got a master’s in library science and I know no one will hire you because his mud stuck to you. I know Tia Esposito is the only thing you got, which means that put you in the path of her husband. And I know Enrique Esposito is the kind of cockroach that’s able to sniff out vulnerability and manipulate it purely for shits and grins. And last, I know that you’re tryin’ to do your best with the hand you got dealt, but even so, babe, you are totally fuckin’ this shit up by makin’ all the wrong plays.”

Something about that angered me, and with that, my heightened emotion and the tequila in my system, I didn't guard my reply.

“Okay, West,” I stated. “You may know all that, and I suspect you know more. What you do not know is what it means to be me. There are a fair few people, thank God, who know what it means to be me. So, what *I* know is *you* don't know that first thing about how to play the hand I've been dealt. No one can know that unless they spend time in my shoes. So don't you stand there and make judgments about me. You have no clue, no *clue*, what it is to be me. And I not only know that because you're *not* me, but because, earlier, you said I entered this game. You were wrong. I didn't enter it. I was shoved into it. So you don't know everything, West Hardy. You know a lot, but you don't know anything that's important. So you cannot tell me I'm making the wrong plays because you don't get what it means when every breath is an effort at survival. I'm breathing so my take on this is, I'm doing all right.”

He stared down at me and I held his stare.

Then, apropos of absolutely nothing, he asked, “Are you a vegetarian?”

I felt my head jolt and my brows shoot together before I answered, “No, why?”

Without taking his eyes or hand from me he shouted, “Driver! Order Toots and me the works!”

And it was then when I realized I'd read the situation very wrong.

I wasn't on shaky ground.

I was in the middle of an earthquake.

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