

Chapter One

Idiots.

The word kept going around in Ivy Dune's mind while watching the five men sitting on velvet couches in the rounded window area of this Vegas hotel suite.

Seven women danced and drank with the idiots. Either the females were strippers who were hookers, or hookers who stripped. They had to be one of the two because there had already been some fondling and some oral, on top of the floor show.

When Ivy had taken on the role of private attendant at the GoldSpring Hotel she had expected glamour. Her illusions about that were quickly shattered. The role was physically demanding, there was lots of running around required, she was up and down stairs, and heavy lifting every day. Anything the customer wanted, they got, and it was her job to ensure that they did.

She had ended up attending more idiots like these than glamorous starlets or millionaire businessmen, but this gang took the cake. They snorted cocaine from the fake breasts of the hired escorts and took shots from their cleavages; leaving chaos and carpet stains in their wake without a care or consideration in the world.

Everything that happened here stayed here, and the rule was that so long as no one was brandishing a weapon anything went. She stayed at her post, inside the suite, as the guest had requested her to do. But as she stood at the door observing events unfold, the men drank more and more, getting gradually more intoxicated.

All except one of them. The black-haired male who sat closest to the window held a heavy crystal tumbler on the high arm of the couch with his fingertips. The Scotch in that tumbler had barely been touched, none of the others noticed his disinterest or cared that the man wasn't indulging like they were.

Ivy stayed here, in her position, hoping that she'd be excused very soon. Her shift ended in less than an hour and right now she was counting the minutes. The black-haired male had kept looking at her and now he was openly staring. Ivy tried to keep her focus straight ahead and just ignore him. Except her eyes would insist on sliding back to his, and every time they did she caught him watching her with his electric blue eyes, that were so crisp and clear she could absorb their intense colour from away over here on the other side of the room. Something about those eyes was fascinating, but she couldn't figure out what their fascination was with her.

'You! Maid!' The sandy-haired man, next to the black-haired man, snapped his fingers at her so Ivy crossed the room to attend him.

'Yes, sir?'

'Have a drink,' he said, raising a bottle of tequila and sloshing it on her shoes.

'No, sir, thank you.'

'Coke then, come and take a line.'

'No,' she said, maintaining her neutrality. 'I'm still working.'

'What time do you finish?' he asked, then waved a hand. 'Doesn't matter, I'm the guest, I'm always right. Take off your shirt.'

'No, sir.'

'Don't be a party pooper. I've always wanted a naked maid,' he said, grabbing her arm and hauling her onto the couch.

She stumbled forward and landed on top of the sandy-haired man, with her face in the lap of the black-haired man. The sandman smacked her ass, then grabbed the hem of her skirt, but Ivy scrambled away before he could pull it up.

Back on her feet, she began to retreat. 'That's unacceptable behaviour,' Ivy said. The other men and women laughed.

'Do you know who I am? I'm Trystan Stark. I have more money in my wallet than you'll make in a lifetime!'

An angry, disrespected man high on drugs and with an audience was a volatile thing. 'Just take your shirt off,' one of the girls chirped as if it were no big deal, though at the moment all that female wore was a trail of playboy jerk drool over each of her nipples. The other girls began to jeer along.

Trystan turned to the black-haired man. 'Can you believe her?' he said.

The black-haired man elevated his arm to look at the watch on his wrist under his cuff-linked shirt. 'Her shift ends in thirty-eight minutes. If you want me to do something about her attitude it will have to wait until her colleagues think she's gone home.'

Making a threat without using a single negative word was quite a feat, but he'd just achieved it, and without even bothering to look at her.

'No,' Trystan said. 'No, Dax, I don't need you to do fucking anything. I'll do it myself.'

Launching up, he grabbed hold of her before she could flee and threw her onto the couch. Flailing around, she tried to free herself, but Trystan was on top of her so she was trapped. He forced his mouth onto hers to kiss her, but she wailed and turned her head to avoid him, except this gave him access to give her a hickey.

His friend, at the end of the couch, must have moved because someone pinned her ankles, then sat on her feet, rendering her legs immobile.

'You're going to like me,' Trystan said. 'Oh, yes, you are. No one says no to me and gets away with it.' Snatching the tequila bottle he poured alcohol on her mouth, soaking her in the potent liquid that burned when it ran up her nose. 'You want a drink, don't you?'

He held her nose, forcing her to open her mouth, and he poured the searing alcohol down her gullet until she choked, spraying it over both of them.

All other parties in the room, according to what she could hear, thought that this was hilarious, and goaded him on.

'Now you're in the party mood,' Trystan said.

Blinking the alcohol diluted mascara mix from her eyes, she missed his action of switching both her wrists into one of his after it was too late. Her shirt was ripped open and at the same time she screamed he grabbed a bag of white powder from the table and scattered it across her breasts. Burying his face in them he snorted up the dispersed powder and laughed, looking to his friends on the opposite couch for approval.

Her screaming was ignored, she still couldn't move her legs and everyone else laughed.

'You want some?' Trystan asked, rubbing a moist finger over her breasts then forcing up a lip to smear the grit over her gums. 'Yeah, see, you like that. We're going to be up all night you and me. Yeah, you're in for a real treat. Tonight is your lucky night. It's time for some real fun. You want me to fuck you now?'

'No!' she spat out.

'Yeah?' he said. 'You asking me to fuck you? All you guys heard that, right?' His troupe chorused in agreement.

'No!' Ivy tried again.

'Open those legs for me, Lucky,' he said, lifting his hips to undo his belt.

Against her will, her legs parted to accommodate his pelvis and he ground down onto her. His buddy, Dax, who'd been sitting on her feet until now held her ankles apart for Trystan to settle between her thighs. Her struggling seemed to make no difference to the strength that forced her to do its bidding.

'Got some roofies, want 'em?' someone called.

'No,' Trystan said, licking her face then digging his teeth into the back corner of her jaw until a stabbing pain fired through her. 'I don't need 'em, she wants it. Oh, she's going to want me bad.'

'No,' Ivy said, trying to shove him off, but bucking up to move him away made him whoop.

'Oh, yeah!' Trystan shouted. 'She's riding.'

More shouting ensued, but everyone wanted him to push on. Ivy wouldn't give up fighting, she wouldn't let him take what she didn't want to give. Except he managed to get her skirt up, his friend still held her legs, and she feared her fight would be futile.

When Trystan turned to laugh with his friends she jolted her head up and dug her teeth into his cheekbone, biting until she tasted blood. Skin came loose on her tongue, and he roared out and released her.

Not hesitating for a heartbeat, Ivy scrambled away and ran at full speed for the door.

'You bitch! I'll fucking kill you!'

But she'd rather be dead than violated by him. With no thought for her loose shirt, she ran out of the suite, got to the employee elevator, and headed straight for her manager's office.

Her manager listened to her story and then left her alone, without calling the cops, to talk to the people in the suite. When he came back down he was frowning, and she knew that couldn't be a good sign. Still alone in his office, Ivy watched him come to sit at her side on the couch, without meeting her eye at all.

'Are the cops on their way?' she asked.

'Ivy,' he said. 'I saw what you did to him.'

'In defence of myself. I don't care about him, I was assaulted!'

'They say nothing happened that you didn't want to, and that it was you who got rough with him.'

'That's crazy! That's a lie!'

'That may be, or not, but he says he's going to the police.'

'He's not going to the police, did you see all the drugs up there? Guys like him don't go to the police for retribution.'

'All the more reason you shouldn't visit that upon yourself,' her manager said, examining her and the way she held a concealing towel over her chest. 'You partook of those drugs yourself, and you're stinking of alcohol. Who would you believe, Ivy? He's a good customer, who comes back a couple of times a year and spends a fortune here. We all answer to someone, and my supervisor wouldn't—'

'What? Who cares about money? I wasn't partying, he did this to me! I demand that you call the cops!'

'He insists that he'll press charges against you, and sue the hotel, unless...'

'Unless what?'

'I'm sorry, Ivy. But you're fired.'

'What?'

She couldn't believe he was taking that pervert's side instead of hers. 'It's his word against yours, and I'm sorry but a man with that kind of influence and charisma... You've only been here for a month. Take my advice, don't pursue this, go home and forget about it.'

'Forget?'

'No one will believe—'

'Not after my boss fires me and takes the perpetrators side,' Ivy said, standing up and tossing the towel at him. 'You're as bad as him!'

Marching away, she went to clear out her small locker of her jacket and purse. She had the night from hell and now she'd struggle to make rent, unless she got another job pronto. She couldn't imagine how things could get much worse.

All she wanted to do was get out of here as quickly as possible. Shoving out of the staff exit, which led into a dark alleyway, Ivy was already making a mental list of locations she could visit on tomorrow's job hunt.

'You should learn to be more careful.'

The disembodied voice came from the other side of the alley and it brought her up short. Pausing to peer through the darkness, a figure emerged from the shadows and she identified the black-haired man from the suite upstairs, whom Trystan had referred to as Dax.

'You should take your own advice, stranger. Loitering in dark alleys to rough up single women could get you into trouble.'

'If I was here to rough you up, you wouldn't have seen me coming, and I wouldn't have announced myself.'

'Said the voice of experience,' she said. 'Are you proud of what happened tonight?'

'Heard you got yourself fired.'

'No, your buddy did that. He's a bully with an overinflated sense of entitlement. One day he'll get what's coming to him.'

'Not while I'm around to stand in the way,' he said. 'You better watch yourself. You pissed off a very influential guy tonight.'

'So I've already been told,' she muttered. Getting away from this place and this person was appealing, but in truth she had nowhere better to be.

‘Mr Stark does not like to be disrespected and he’s been known to hold a grudge.’

‘Doesn’t he have anything better to do?’

‘You better hope that he finds something, because if he gets tonight’s events stuck in his teeth you’re gonna be a very sorry little girl.’

‘I’m twenty-nine, and I can take care of myself.’

She moved to leave, but he blocked her path. ‘Not against the likes of me. You’d have no defence if I had you in my sights.’

‘I see that gratuitous ego syndrome is contagious, or at least common in your circle of friends. Just how close are you and your buddy? Does someone have a little crush?’ she pouted.

His intimidating height came closer and although she had a wall at her back, she didn’t recoil in the shadow he cast over her.

‘Do you think you’re a tough girl?’ he asked. ‘You have no idea what you did tonight, no idea what I’m capable of. You should never piss off a man who has no conscience.’

‘If you’re like that, then I guess that’s why your buddy Trystan keeps you around,’ she said. ‘I don’t know who you are, or your connection to each other. But threatening me won’t win you any favour with him. So if you’re hoping that this little intervention will get you between his sheets—’

‘You don’t know when to quit,’ he sneered, bearing down upon her. ‘You couldn’t keep your eyes off me tonight, is that why you’re obsessing about my bedroom?’

‘Obsessing—’

Urging her back to the wall, he blocked her in, placing his forearms on the wall on either side of her. ‘Is that why you fought Tryst so hard? Were you disappointed that I wasn’t the man above you?’

With what little space she had, she managed to bring her hand across his face in a half-force slap and his lip curled to display a perverted satisfaction. Then jerking forward he snatched her hands and slammed them to the concrete that they leaned on.

‘You want to get physical with me, you minx, then you better be damn sure about it.’

‘Get off of me,’ she protested, trying to wrench herself free, but to no avail.

‘Mr Stark likes a show,’ he said, her feeble struggling meant nothing to him. ‘Should I take you back upstairs and show him how compliant you can be when you’re getting what you want?’

‘What I want is for you to let me go and get lost.’

‘You’re lucky that you’re not my type.’

‘Oh yeah? And who is? I imagine that the only women you get near are the unconscious ones your buddy is through with after about thirty-five seconds.’

‘Women like you deserve every damn thing that they get,’ he said, squashing her body deeper against the wall, making no disguise of his arousal that imprinted itself on her belly.

The disgust she’d felt at Trystan’s violation was absent here. This man should repulse her in the same amount, and yet this verbal sparring coupled with the occasional lingering stares they’d shared upstairs sent her curious hormones into overdrive. She was angry and intimidated by this unknown human variable, but she wasn’t afraid.

Long ago she had learned how to quash ineffectual fear and channel the useful adrenaline into fight rather than flight. Bullies only won if victims lost their wits, and she would never do that, not again.

‘And men like you eventually lose their power. When your physical strength fades you’ll be left with nothing, and that vulnerability will ruin you, you’ll self-destruct.’

‘Said the voice of experience,’ he said, then shoved away. ‘Think twice before you insult those who are more important than you are.’

‘Thanks for the advice,’ she said without concealing her disdain.

‘You better hope you never hear of the Stark’s again. If Trystan decides to come after you, to punish you, then you’ll have no hope of escape.’

‘Like I said, I can take care of myself.’

‘You better hope so, because on my side of the fence, there’s no mercy.’

‘I’m shaking with fear,’ she said with no sincerity.

‘You will be.’

The liquid ocean in his eyes coated her figure, then he turned and stalked toward the opposite end of the alley. A few seconds later, he was out of sight.

Men rarely intrigued her anymore, not in the way that one had. But the fantasy of mystery surrounding him would never live up to the reality, because nothing ever did. Just the company he kept

was evidence enough that the mysterious stranger wasn't sane or reliable and she was too old for adventures of the heart with bad boy types, she'd gotten over that adolescent illusion a long time ago.

Facing her roommate wasn't something that Ivy wanted to deal with now, but unfortunately it was unavoidable. Their one bedroom apartment was in a rough area not too far from The Strip. It smelled of mold and sweat, and the windows were covered with lengths of material pinned to the wall that had been there since she moved in with Trudi. The rent was cheap and the neighbours kept to themselves. Though the streets were filled with gangs, and hookers, and drugs, these were all things that Ivy was accustomed to.

The tension of the day expelled from her lungs and she sank onto the couch. Trudi bounced out of the bedroom, which didn't have a door on it, hooking one of her shoes onto her feet.

'That was quick,' Trudi said. 'How did you get home so fast?'

'I got fired,' Ivy said, spreading her hands and her head dropped onto the back of the couch.

'Oh, shit,' Trudi said. 'You want to take a shower and come out with me?'

'No,' Ivy said.

'I know a guy who'll look after you.'

'How many times have I told you not to tie yourself to a pimp?' Ivy said.

'You don't know what it's like out there on the streets. It's dangerous nowadays.'

'I know it's dangerous,' Ivy said. 'But you don't need anyone taking your money away from you.'

'Not now that my roommate has lost her job. You think you can go straight, but you can't. It's no way as easy as that. You held onto that job for a month, the one before that was two weeks. You've lived here for nine months and you've never had a job for more than two months.'

'Not your problem,' Ivy said. 'I've never missed rent, have I?'

'We're in Vegas, girls like us, from the streets, we make money one way. You're no better than the rest of us, Ivy. I know you try to stay legit, but...'

'I am not walking the street, Trud, things haven't got that bad.'

'Maybe not yet,' Trudi said, scooping condoms out of the drawer under the coffee table. 'You know where I'll be if you change your mind.'

Trudi was a pretty girl who'd made some bad decisions in her life. Her drug habit was moderated by the various men who came and went from her life, but Ivy knew she never stayed stable for long. In her own life she'd travelled from city to city and done just about every job there was, but streetwalking was a last resort that she'd managed to avoid so far, though she'd done just about everything else.

Just once she'd like to catch a break, and her private concierge job at the GoldSpring had been the best job she'd had so far, except now she'd lost it. So she was back to square one. Trudi wasn't too disheartened and was already singing as she headed out the door. How she could be so happy when she was going out to sell her body was a mystery to Ivy. She had never been content with her lot in life, she didn't want money and riches; she just wanted to belong, to know that she would be ok and that she wasn't alone. That dream seemed to be getting more distant every day.