

CHAPTER ONE

It had obviously been one hell of a night if I couldn't recall why I was waking up in a Dumpster.

I blinked a few times, staring at the sky overhead. A *Dumpster*? Surely not. But between the flies, the stench, and the garbage bags surrounding me, I didn't know what else it could be. My left hand rested on something clammy and wet, and I hoped that it was an old newspaper and not something more sinister. I didn't even want to think about what was tickling my bare toes.

I sat up, cradling my throbbing head and trying to think. What the hell had happened? I didn't normally find myself comatose and drooling amid piles of garbage.

Shit. My boss was going to be sooo totally pissed at me.

Something itched against my breast and I reached up to scratch, finding a hard plastic card shoved into the side of my bra.

A room key for a hotel. The Grand National here in New City, Wyoming.

My mind regurgitated a series of drunken memories from my bender last night. I'd met a man at the bar of the swanky hotel just as the sun was cresting into dawn

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and I was polishing off my latest martini. He'd walked into the bar and, since the place was deserted, headed straight for me and bought me another drink. I'd let him. I mean, hell, free alcohol.

He was even hot to boot, which was a nice change from the creeps that normally tried to pick me up. I vaguely remembered an amazing body, a voice that could stop traffic, and the bluest eyes I'd ever seen.

That wasn't the only thing I remembered. My brain flashed another image into my head, of a rather large part of my date's anatomy. Which I'd seen in close detail.

"Ohmigod. I'm a slut," I moaned, burying my face in my hands.

I'd never had a one-night stand before, but by the time I'd met my Blue-Eyed Casanova, I was eight or twelve martinis into an all-nighter and three sheets to the wind. I couldn't remember a darn thing except those eyes and that smile. And his dick.

That bothered me on levels I didn't even want to think about. I sighed and brushed a wet wad of trash off my hand and straightened my thick, smudged glasses on my face. At least they hadn't been wrecked in my night in the garbage.

"Who's there?" a warbling voice called, and I clambered through the trash to the edge of the Dumpster, peering over the metal side.

A bearded older man—homeless, if the stocking cap and reek of whiskey were any indication—stared up at me in surprise. A familiar cute black-and-pink handbag was tucked under his left arm.

“Hey, that’s mine.” I pointed a grimy finger at the purse. “Give it back.”

Much to my surprise, he handed it up to me with a wide-eyed expression. “I thought you were dead. Sorry.”

What an odd statement. I frowned down at him. “Sorry, no. Do you have anything else of mine I might be needing?” My legs were devoid of pantyhose, and my bare toes wiggled between the garbage. My shoes were nowhere to be seen, and I wasn’t even sure I still had panties on—all of which was making me extremely nervous. Resisting the urge to cry, I swallowed hard.

“I didn’t take them. I didn’t take anything else.” The bum sounded rather miffed that I had the gall to accuse him of stealing.

I ignored him and began to dig through the garbage, trying not to think too hard about what I was touching. Sure enough, my favorite pink-and-black Steve Madden pumps were there underneath a pizza box. I shook them out to be safe.

With my belongings in hand, I swung a leg over the side of the Dumpster and began to climb out. I’d probably given the bum a flash of panties (if I still had them), but I didn’t care.

He took a swig from his brown-bag-covered bottle. “You were dead, you know,” he pointed out. “You weren’t breathing.”

I slid down onto the pavement with a thump, losing a few strands of chow mein that had stuck to my skirt. “Um, what exactly makes you say that?” I asked as I put on my shoes.

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"I'm serious," he protested. "I checked. You weren't breathing. I even saw your boyfriend dump you here. I wouldn't take a purse from a live girl."

I looked up from picking a noodle off my shoe. "You did? Blond guy? Blue eyes?" *Big package?*

The bum shook his head and took another swig of alcohol. "Naw. Black-haired. Real tall. Nice coat. He kissed your cheek and dumped you in there."

I didn't recall Bachelor No. 2. Good lord, what *had* I done last night? My date had definitely been blond. An image flashed through my mind—a memory?—of us in the shower, my arms twined around his neck while he lifted my bare leg to fit around his hips . . .

I wanted to cry. I didn't know if I was upset that I'd slept with a stranger, or that he was hot and I couldn't remember very much. I sighed and rubbed my neck. A sharp pain shot through my skin, like I'd rubbed it raw during my sleep. I touched the spot with careful fingers and found it sticky. Yet another gift from the garbage. Ugh. I looked over at my drunken companion. "What time is it?"

The bum checked his plastic wristwatch. "It's eleven a.m. Tuesday," he announced.

"No, it's not. Today's Monday." I remembered it, because we were scheduled to be short a docent at the museum today. Monday.

"It's Tuesday," he repeated. "You've been in that garbage since yesterday. Dead."

His story was getting pretty tiresome. I decided to change the subject. "Say, do you have any napkins, old

man? Clean ones?” I touched the sore spot on my neck again and winced.

“I do. Cost ya five dollars.”

I glared at him. “How about you give me the napkins and I don’t call the police?”

He shrugged. “They give me three square meals a day and a bed to sleep in. Go ahead and call ’em.”

Obviously I wasn’t going to win this one. I sighed and pulled my wallet out of my purse. All the money was in place, crumpled dollars sandwiched between a few receipts, my ID intact. That was a good sign, and my spirits perked up a little. I held a five-dollar bill out to him. “Here. Trade you.”

He held out a stack of Burger King napkins in return and took the money. “Thank you kindly, miss.”

“Don’t mention it,” I said, swabbing at my neck and sizing up the alley as I tried to discern my location. It looked to be downtown New City, still outside the bar I’d found. The alley was strewn with garbage, murky puddles splotted the pavement, and mine was but one of many Dumpsters. Still, it looked like the entertainment district that I remembered being in before my memory blanked out, so that was comforting. I tossed down the napkin and stopped short when I saw the smear of dark red.

Blood?

I ran my hands along my neck in alarm. Nothing but smooth skin met my fingers—no cuts, no scratches, nothing. Maybe someone had spilled a daiquiri on me—I gave my neck another quick touch just to make sure there were no open wounds. Nothing.

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“Well, it’s been fun, but I should be running along,” I announced to the bum, wiggling my fingers at him in farewell. “Thanks for the napkins.”

“Anytime, dead girl.” He took another swig, eyeing me as if I’d bite him.

I stumbled away, wobbling in my high heels. First, coffee. Then a bus home and a hot shower.

I turned the corner and saw two unexpected things: First, my alley wasn’t behind the bar at all, but behind the rather large, sumptuous hotel that I sure as heck couldn’t afford on a museum salary (but had a key to in my bra). And second, I ran smack-dab into Blue Eyes, dressed in a suit, a cup of Starbucks in his hand.

He stopped and stared at me in shock.

I did the same.

He broke the silence first. “Jackie?”

“Yes?” I felt stupid for responding with that, but my memory was full of holes. All I could remember were random, naked parts of his body. My eyes flicked down to his crotch. Yep, he was my guy.

“You’re still here?”

I wasn’t sure whether to laugh at his comment or cry. Boy, talk about uncomfortable moments. “Am I not supposed to be?”

He smiled, and my legs turned to Jell-O. Lord, he was gorgeous. “It’s just a surprise to see you again. You left in quite a hurry.” He stared at my hair with a look of surprise.

My date seemed . . . different somehow. I studied him, trying to decide what it was. It wasn’t just the clothing—I seemed to recall a lot of his bare, tanned chest pressed

against my pale, fleshy one. It was his eyes. They weren't the same beautiful shade of blue as I remembered from last night—or yesterday, whatever—but more of a washed-out silver. It was disappointing to see him in the daylight and realize that he'd had beer beauty. Sure, he was still a gorgeous hunk, but there'd been something utterly . . . carnal about him that my drunken self had been unable to resist. My brain flashed other images—his fingers digging into my waist, my breasts bouncing in the air. I straddled him, rocking my hips atop his as he drove his hard cock deep inside me . . .

I buried my face in my hands, trying to stop the onslaught of memories.

"You have noodles in your curls." He reached out to touch a filthy hank of my hair.

"I do?" I felt around the mess myself. Sure enough, a long spaghetti noodle had entangled itself in my reddish-brown hair. "I think I fell asleep in someone's dinner. You know, when you left me in the *Dumpster*?"

"When I awoke, you were gone." He touched my cheek in a tender gesture, his fingertips brushing against my thick glasses. "I thought you were mad at me. That you regretted what happened between us."

At the smile, my heart thudded in my breast and my nipples tightened. I remembered that slow, sweet grin. He'd flashed it at me just before he'd lowered me to the hotel bed. He'd sucked on my nipples through my plain white bra, teasing them through the cheap fabric. The tips of my breasts hardened with the memory and I crossed my arms over my chest.

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Oh my God, I *was* a slut. He was hot as hell, but I never slept with a guy on the first date. Never. *It wasn't even a date*, I reminded myself with horror. *He picked you up in the bar. Drunk. Easy.*

I scowled at him and batted his hand away. "I don't know why you get your kicks from leaving girls in the garbage, but getting me a cab and saying that you'd call me would have done the trick if you didn't want to see me again."

He gave me another heart-meltingly puzzled look. "What are you talking about? I woke up and you weren't there." He pulled my hand into his free one, rubbing his thumb across my dirty skin. "I wanted to find out your full name, Jackie."

We were only on a first-name basis? Talk about a slam to the ego. "Jackie Brighton," I blurted out.

He smiled at me as if I were delicious, and a low heat started throbbing between my legs. "Nice to meet you, Ms. Brighton. I'm glad we got to see each other again."

I pulled my hand out of his before I could jump his bones again. Wild sluts like me were capable of anything, after all. "What's today?"

The smile became puzzled. "It's the seventeenth. Tuesday."

Either he was in cahoots with the homeless guy or something really weird was going on. I frowned and pulled my cell phone out of my purse, staring at the date on the screen. Sure enough, the seventeenth. My phone had been on for so long that one lonely power bar remained at the top corner. "I seem to have lost a day somehow."

"You look exhausted." He touched my cheek again, and that awful, wonderful melting feeling started in my belly again. "Would you like to grab a bite to eat? It's about lunchtime. We can catch up on things."

"Lunchtime?" My stomach rumbled in response, reminding me that I hadn't had much to eat before my martini bender. Which, according to everyone but me, was *two* nights ago. "I hadn't really given it much thought."

"Come on," he said, taking my hand in his. "You look like you're having a rough day. I'll buy."

As soon as his warm hand closed over mine, the world rocked and desire exploded through me. My clothes itched and I suddenly yearned to throw them off and drag him into the nearest alley and ride him.

I settled for snatching my hand out of his. "Don't touch me."

He seemed nonplussed by my standoffish attitude. "I'm buying you lunch."

"Fine." As soon as I said it, I regretted it. Why was this guy so hard to resist? The lure of coffee was tempting, but not quite so much as the urge to find out what exactly happened the other night. And somehow, I just couldn't say no to him. "Coffee is fine, but no funny business, mister."

His mouth slid up in a gorgeous smile, and a pulse of attraction shot straight through me. Definitely the same guy, blue eyes or not. How embarrassing that I was still attracted to him.

How embarrassing that I didn't remember his name.

“Noah,” he offered. “Noah Gideon.”

“Fine,” I repeated, trying not to think of his package or the wonderful things he’d done to me with it. “Coffee, and you can fill me in on the details, Noah.”

“I would love for you to have coffee with me,” he said, lifting my hand and kissing the knuckles, garbage smell and all.

Dumpster, I reminded myself. *He left you in a Dumpster!*

Now someone tell my throbbing loins that.