

CHAPTER ONE

If fortune favored the bold, I had a lot of catching up to do. Whether I was being reckless or merely determined, only time would tell. Either way, I had an important choice to make.

“I’m just going to do it,” I said, making the declaration as I turned from my office window, a tenth-floor view of downtown Los Angeles sparkling below. It sounded fancy, having a view like that, but it was nothing more spectacular than concrete high-rise buildings with mirrored windows, lined by neat rows of palm trees. Not a glimpse of the Pacific Ocean in sight. Only a freeway congested with smog and eight lanes of traffic. I could be anywhere, really, but at thirty-four, I was on the tenth floor of Wallace and Reed Consultants, Forensics Division. A career destination I never would have dreamed possible had I chosen to settle for the monotony of answering phones and fetching coffee at my father’s small town investment office.

“Are you sure this is such a good idea?” Grace, my assistant, lifted a wary, manicured brow, though the look of veiled amusement on her face told me she knew we hadn’t gotten to the corner office by playing it safe.

Kate Abbott, fraud examiner and numbers expert, was never one to avoid a challenge. Never one to quit. Never one to back down. And I had no intention of starting now. My promotion to Junior Forensic Associate happened on Friday, now it was Monday, and Grace and I had been whisked away to a new office over the course of a single weekend. While I

appreciated the new title, and the new view, it was really my boss's way of making me a glorified research assistant with an over-inflated paycheck so some other firm wouldn't steal me away. At least both of us knew I was worth the money.

But it wasn't money I was after. It was numbers. When I was buried deep in evidence, working on discovery for an investigation, scanning pages and pages of financial records, analyzing a crime from all angles, the numbers just magically clicked into place for me. My mind recognized the patterns and hidden clues in between all the decimal points and wire transfers. The numbers told me all of their secrets. I couldn't explain why I had this gift or where the talent had come from. I didn't understand it myself, except to say that numbers spoke to me.

Yeah, try sharing that little tidbit at the office Christmas party. My therapist prescribed a high dose of anti-anxiety meds with a disapproving frown. Apparently the good doctor wasn't in line with the theory that numbers could speak to anyone. From then on, I tended to keep my gift a secret. It was sort of like having a superpower, and even Clark Kent chose to hide in plain sight.

"The meeting is getting ready to start," Grace said. "And you're on a plane out of here in..." She checked her silver Coach wristwatch. Practical and dependable, just like she was. "Four hours and sixteen minutes."

"Exactly why I can't waste any more time." I gathered up the files on my desk for the case I'd been working on over the last several weeks.

One Mr. Alex Jones was the head accountant at a tech start-up firm and the board of directors suspected he'd been embezzling funds over the last year, which was eating away at their profits. Over the weekend, I'd finally found the fake work order accounts and deposits he

made to an off-shore bank account in the Caymans, essentially solving the mystery of how a crooked accountant had managed to steal a bunch of money.

“Aren’t you going to tell Mr. Reed about your discovery first?” Grace asked, ever the voice of reason.

“Not this time.” I walked to the full-length mirror behind the door to re-tuck my white silk blouse into the waist of my gray pencil skirt. I turned from side to side to assess my reflection. My brown hair was still neatly swept behind my head in a loose bun and my long-lasting makeup was doing its job. “Brandon and his team have had this case for longer than I have, and they didn’t find the obvious. Why should I point it out to them?”

I’d proven myself more than capable on several of the firm’s forensic accounting investigations, hence my most recent promotion. However, when it came to taking credit for the work done on the cases, that went to the men at the firm. Once again proving my father right.

Numbers are a man’s world.

He didn’t believe a woman belonged in the upper ranks of the investment world. I intended to change that notion. If I had to do it one case at a time, so be it. The Alex Jones case would be my first major victory. I was tired of getting stuck with the research while my male colleagues patted each other on the back over a job well done. This time, I wanted the pat on the back. I was the one who’d discovered the fake work orders, and I intended to take the credit for my research.

“I suppose you’ll need this.” Grace handed me the black leather portfolio my boss had gifted me years ago that I never used. “You’re in the big leagues now. You can’t go waltzing in there with an armload of file folders. If you want to be taken seriously, you have to dress the part.”

“What would I do without you?” I stuffed my files into the portfolio, then pulled the zipper closed and tucked it under my arm. “How do I look?” I threw back my shoulders and kicked up my chin, channeling my inner superhero.

“Like a woman about to make the biggest mistake of her career.”

I frowned. “You’re my assistant, you’re supposed to be helping me, not making me feel worse.”

“I’ll be helping myself to that assistant job over in investments if you don’t pull this off.”

“Have a little faith.” I took Grace’s free hand and gave it a tight squeeze. “We made it this far, didn’t we?”

She fixed me with her girl-be-for-real look, then said, “And who do you think helped you get here?”

“You did,” I said, and I meant it. Grace was the best administrator at Wallace and Reed. That’s why she worked for me.

“You’d better get going.” She shooed me toward the door.

“I’m working up my nerve,” I said, quickly checking my watch. I still had twelve minutes before the meeting started and wanted to catch the clients making small talk until the meeting officially got under way. That didn’t leave me much time.

“What should I say if Mr. Reed comes looking for you?”

She could tell him I was on the Moon for all I cared. “Tell him I’m in the bathroom.”

Grace’s perfectly arched brows shot up to her hairline. “You’re lucky you have me. I could think of a thousand better excuses than that one.”

“Then tell him whatever you want. I don’t plan on this taking very long. I’m going to get in, get the board president’s ear, and tell him what I found. It’s as simple as that.”

“I’m sure that’s exactly what Kim thought before she married Kanye.”

“Don’t worry, nothing will go wrong,” I assured her. “The last thing I want is you going over to investments. I speak from experience when I say you’ll be bored to death.”

My father had owned an investment company back in my hometown in Minnesota, and I’d worked in his office all through high school. It’s how I’d learned I have a gift for numbers. At seventeen, I was designing high-performance portfolios for his clients, and making him a pretty penny in the process, not at all interested in the receptionist position he thought I deserved. When I got involved in a mock trial for my high school honors program, my team investigated a money laundering scheme, and a whole new world of numbers opened up for me, much to my father’s disappointment.

Get the skills that will get you a dependable job.

He didn’t believe a woman belonged in the business world. If I’d chosen to follow his dreams for my future, I’d be working as someone’s assistant rather than gunning for the eventual title of Senior Forensic Partner. I was on my way to the top floor. If only he could see me now. Would my success have changed things between us?

“Should I even bother to keep unpacking?” Grace lifted the flap of one of the boxes stacked against the wall. “Or should I wait until you get back?”

I swiped my cell phone from the desk. “We’re not leaving this office unless it’s to move up.”

“Good, because I’m getting used to the Starbuck’s kiosk in the lobby.”

“So am I.” It was definitely an improvement over sharing research on the fourth floor with the mailroom. “Wish me luck.”

“Oh, I’ll be praying for you.”

I didn't need Grace's prayers when it came to Mr. Reed. My boss I could handle. What I needed was for the client to take me—a woman—seriously. I knew what I was doing and I had the numbers on my side. For this case, I'd found 22 deposits made to 2 fake accounts, broken down further into 11 equal deposits to one account, and then the other, before they were later sent to their final destination off-shore. I loved when the patterns were easy.

The rest of the office was quiet with that post-lunch slump as I scurried down the hallway towards the board room. Voices drifted out, and I slowed my pace, trying to get a feel for the room as I inched closer to my destination. This was my big chance. Time to take destiny into my own hands.

“Abbott!” The male voice startled me and I jumped.

Drawing up short, I whipped my head around to see Brandon Cole right on my tail. Literally the epitome of tall, dark, and handsome in a charcoal gray designer suit, I'd secretly been dating him for the past two years. Brandon had long, slender sideburns, a neatly-trimmed goatee, and a tribal tattoo on his left shoulder. His body was solid muscle, and his stamina never ran out. I'd never had such a perfect boyfriend, and right now, he was last person I wanted to see.

“Where are you off to in such a hurry?” His perfect mouth spread into a playful smile as he came around and stood in front of the door to the board room, essentially blocking my path.

“I'm about to be late for a meeting.” I glanced over his shoulder into the board room. So close, and still so far.

“I thought you were heading home to Minnesota for your father's funeral.”

An unwelcome reminder. My father and I hadn't spoken in over ten years, and it was too late to fix any of that now. “My flight doesn't leave for a few hours.”

“Working up to the last minute,” Brandon said, loud enough to be heard by the entire accounting department. “I admire your dedication to the job.”

“Is there something you need?” I didn’t try to hide the annoyance in my tone, but I had a very short window of opportunity, and he was standing in my way.

He leaned close and whispered a wickedly erotic scenario in my ear.

“There’s no way you’re getting that here,” I told him, trying to hide my embarrassment as heat rushed to my cheeks.

If I could say one thing about Brandon, it’s that he was an exciting lover, when he could manage to find time for me. We’d kept our so-called relationship a secret for two years, at Brandon’s request, because he thought people wouldn’t take me seriously if they knew I was sleeping with the head of forensics. He wanted to see me advance at the company on my own. In a way, the plan had backfired on him, because I’d spent many lonely nights working on caseloads, and had now surpassed him and his entire team when it came to streamlining my forensic analytical skills. Along with my gift for numbers, I could run circles around the rest of the associates.

“Maybe you could come by my place later,” he suggested, a wicked gleam in his dark eyes.

“I can’t blow off going home for the funeral,” I said. “My mother and sister are expecting me. I have to be there.”

“It doesn’t mean I won’t miss you.” Brandon reached up, his long finger gently tracing my cheekbone before he tucked a stray lock of hair behind my ear. “We didn’t get a chance to finish what we started at the quarterly social.”

I remembered that night all too well. Brandon cornered me in the coat closet at the cigar lounge and had me up against the wall, dress pushed past my hips, before a poor old gentleman walked in on us, looking for his wife's coat. Mortified beyond belief, I'd cut the rendezvous short and hailed a cab back to my apartment, then briefly contemplated quitting my job.

"You can see me when I get back." The raspy quality of my voice surprised me, and I knew I was still blushing, my cheeks growing hotter. I slid a sideways glance at accounting to see if anyone was watching us over their gray cubicle walls.

"I don't know how much time I'll have," Brandon said. "I'm still stuck on the Jones case. My team has been at it for weeks and still can't find any evidence." He took a step back and shoved his hands into his pants pockets. "I know it's there, we just can't see it."

A wave of guilt washed over me as I clutched the portfolio tighter in my hand. I had all the evidence he needed. Words like *teamwork* and *cooperation* swirled around in my brain. I tilted my wrist to check my watch. Five minutes left. I needed him to leave before I changed my mind. The right thing to do would be to give Brandon my research, but I was afraid he'd turn around and do what was right for him, completely leaving me out of the equation. And I didn't want to give him a chance to show me that side of his character. This time, I figured it was my turn to shine.

"You look busy," he observed. "Will you come by my office before you leave?"

"Yes." I nodded emphatically. "Of course."

"I've got a meeting in five minutes." He walked past me, headed back to his office.

My way clear, I took a quick assessment of the people in the board room. Only the clients were there: the CEO, board president, and another member of their board. My mind told me to wait, to fully think it through one more time, but my legs were already carrying me into the

room. The board president, Donald Wilson, was the first to see me. Short and round, with a shiny bald patch in the middle of his head, he watched me approach.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Wilson.” I walked straight up to him, calling on a confidence I didn’t quite feel. “I’m Kate Abbott, part of the forensics team assigned to your case.”

We exchanged a polite handshake, while the CEO now turned his attention to me as well. “I think this meeting is about to get started,” Mr. Wilson said. “Is there any particular place you’d like for us to sit?”

“I actually have something to show you first,” I said. “I found a discrepancy while going over the company records.”

That got his attention and he zeroed his focus in on me. “What have you got?”

“Kate, what is this?” Mr. Reed scuttled up to our group, placing himself in front of the client to scold me with a look. “Don’t you like your new office?”

“I love it.”

“Then why aren’t you in it?” He forced the words out through clenched teeth and a tight smile. I sometimes found it hard to take him seriously because I was always thinking how badly he needed to groom his thick eyebrows.

“I was just showing Mr. Wilson how I found some fake work orders and traced those transfers from the business account through several shell accounts to get to an off-shore account opened by Alex Jones. I found the pattern, which was really quite obvious. He did the transfers in the same order for the same amounts each time.”

Mr. Reed’s nervous smile faltered. I knew my boss hated being put on the spot, because it usually required quick-thinking, which he tended to lack most of the time.

“Will you be joining us today?” Mr. Wilson looked hopeful and relieved to be making some sort of headway on the case.

“Kate is on her way out of town for a funeral,” Mr. Reed said, sending me a warning look. “She was just leaving.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” Mr. Wilson said.

“Thank you, but—”

“Brandon, will you come and get Kate’s presentation before the meeting starts?” Mr. Reed waved his hand over my head.

Great. Crash and burn, with Brandon here to witness the wreckage. It seemed fitting considering my next appointment was a funeral.

Mr. Reed gave me a stern look. “We’ll talk about this later.”

“Yes, Sir.” I knew my chance was gone, and wasn’t sure I’d ever get another one.

“What’s this presentation?” Brandon stood beside me, hands in his pants pockets, rocking back on his heels. Totally clueless.

“It’s nothing,” I said, not sure if I wanted to cry, or hit something. I looked over at Brandon. It might feel good to hit him just for being a man. Born the right sex so everything just always worked out for him. All he had to do was show up and look good.

I stormed off in a mild huff while the clients began taking their seats around the large mahogany conference table. Grace was going to give me an earful when I made it back to my office. One I probably deserved.

“Wait, where are you going?” Brandon followed me out into the hallway.

“I’m going home for a funeral, remember?”

“But what about the presentation for the meeting?”

Something inside of me snapped. I don't know if the outburst was spontaneous, or if it had been a long time in the making, but I let Brandon have the blunt end of my ire. "I'm not your secretary! Put a few brain cells together and do your own presentation. After all, isn't that why they pay you the big bucks?"

"Whoa, hold on." He put his hands up in surrender. "I'm just following orders."

As soon as the words had left my mouth, I regretted them. None of this was Brandon's fault. "I don't have anything to present. I still have to sort out my research."

"Are you going to tell me what's going on?"

I noticed a few interested glances from the accounting department. Apparently we were going to fuel the drama for the day. "I solved the Jones case."

Brandon looked somewhat put off by my accomplishment. "How can that be possible? I've had my entire team working overtime to find even a scrap of evidence. You couldn't have done it alone."

"It wasn't all that hard. Once I found the pattern, it all fell into place."

"What pattern?" Brandon twitched with nervous energy. "Give me your research."

I should have been prepared for his reaction, but his cavalier attitude only made me angry. "Not this time."

His brows dipped in confusion. "Did I miss something?"

"I'm not giving you my research." I annunciated the words clearly for him in case his giant male ego had gotten in the way of his hearing.

"Any research you have is proprietary, it belongs to the firm. As lead on the case, you're required to turn all evidence over to me." He held out an expectant hand.

I frowned, not sure why I imagined he'd be proud of me. Maybe because he was my boyfriend. Although he'd never referred to himself as such. "I want to present it."

"That's not going to happen," Brandon declared. "Not the way you dropped it on Reed. You know he doesn't like surprises, and frankly, neither do I."

"Why are you so upset?"

Brandon narrowed his gaze, his dark eyes brimming with impatience. "I'm not upset. Just disappointed."

"Disappointed?" It was my turn to give him an annoyed stare. "I thought you'd be happy for me."

Brandon took a step closer. "You know I'm proud of your work. It's why I want us to finish the research together. There's still room for you on my team."

I bristled at the mention of joining his team. Of working under him. A part of me didn't know whether he wanted me to work on his team because he genuinely wanted to assist in my research, or because he wanted me to be convenient.

How could he make me feel so desired yet so insecure at the same time?

"I don't want to join your team. I want to make it here on my own. You know that."

Brandon retreated back a step. "Why do you have to be so damn independent? Can't you ever let people help you?"

"I thought you wanted to see me advance here without your help." I recognized the turbulent fire brewing behind his eyes but I didn't regret throwing his words back at him. I wasn't going to play small so he wouldn't feel insecure. "Let's not argue about this."

"Fine." Brandon shoved his hands in his pockets. "They're waiting for me in there. Tell me what you have, and my team can do an official report later."

Something inside me didn't want to budge. Not one inch. "It'll be easier if I explain it."

"Easier for who?" Brandon didn't want to budge either.

"This is my research and I want the credit for it."

"What does it matter who presents the research? You might work alone, but at the end of the day we're all on the same team."

I knew he was right. The desire to be an equal member of the team almost had me handing my findings over to him, but remembering all of the times they'd left me out kept my hands clasped on the leather portfolio. "If we're all a team here, why don't I ever get to take credit for solving a case? I help out just as much as anyone else, but I always end up fetching the coffee and putting in the lunch orders."

"Wow." Brandon shook his head back and forth. "I never realized how selfish you are."

Those words did it. They stung me, pricking my eyes with tears. How many times had I selflessly given my talents to the team, only to be overlooked in favor of a man? A thousand replies came to rise, but I wisely turned on my heel and walked away as fast as I could. If I said what I was thinking, I'd be a single woman.

"Wait, I'm sorry you're upset." Brandon hurried to keep up with me. "Would you just wait?"

I abruptly came to a halt and spun to face him. "Was that your idea of an apology?"

"What do you want me to say?" he asked, a sheepish look on his face. "You're the one who wants to take all the credit."

"Do your own research," I snapped. "I have a plane to catch."

"Don't leave like this," he pleaded. "Let me try to smooth things over with Reed, meanwhile you can get a report together. We can make this work."

His offer felt sincere, or maybe I simply wanted it to be. In any case, I didn't want to leave angry. "I'll put something together on the flight and send it to you later."

"That's my girl." He gave me a strong pat on the back. "I knew you'd do the right thing."

Watching him retreat and head into the board room left me questioning where this relationship was headed. Why did Brandon want me on his team? Why did he need my research? And what made me feel I needed to give it to him in order to make him happy? Shouldn't I be enough?

A wave of homesickness overwhelmed me, and I was suddenly glad I'd be getting on a plane in a few hours. I might be going home to bury a father I hadn't spoken to in ten years, but I'd also be returning to the friends and family I'd been away from for so long. To the people who thought I was enough. The life I'd been so eager to leave behind was now the one calling me home.

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