
Chapter 1

"**Y**ou're late, Piper!" yelled the short, pudgy man in a navy-blue suit as he stood at the bar tapping his watch. "You know I don't like it when my girls are late."

"I know, Al, so get off my back. I'm not in the mood today," the blonde shouted back, hurriedly making her way past the bar. "I told you a month ago that I might be late on Fridays due to med school."

Stepping in front of Piper, Al shot out a hand and gripped her upper arm. "Give me one good reason why I shouldn't fire your pretty ass, sweetheart."

"Go ahead and fire me!" she shot back hotly, her clear blue eyes shooting daggers at him. She hated the sleazy bastard and couldn't wait to be done with the club scene. "Next month, I'm out of this hell hole anyway. Now take your hands off me! I've got to change so I can start my shift."

"We have a full club this evening, Williamson. There are even a couple of guys who specifically requested to see you in the VIP lounge."

"Great," she said sarcastically, rolling her eyes. "They're probably real perverts then."

"Well, whatever they are, you know I get a cut of the VIP profit, kid. The foreign guy assured me that they just want to watch you dance. They are paying triple the fee, so there was no turning it down. Brian will be outside the room the whole time if things should go south. There is no way I'd let my number one money maker get hurt."

"You're such a repulsive pig," Piper replied tightly in disgust as she jerked her arm from the man's grip. As she walked past the club owner and toward the dressing room, she felt unshed tears burning her eyes as she flipped the man off before disappearing behind the purple curtain. Once on the other side of the thick, linen door, Piper Williamson closed her eyes a moment and took a deep, cleansing breath. *One more month, and you will never have to degrade yourself for money again*, she told herself. Opening her eyes, she walked to her make-up table and dropped her heavy backpack beside the chair. Plopping down, the blonde stuck out her tongue as she looked at herself in the mirror. She couldn't believe how tired she looked today. Between her job at the club, the hospital, and her first year of medical school, she was swamped. Thankfully, she had the weekend off and hopefully could catch up on some much-needed rest and relaxation.

Undoing the clip in her thick, curly hair, she watched it fall midway down her back. Eyes the color of the deepest ocean stared back as she thought about the events of today. Not only had she been late for class this morning, but one of the senior doctors had recognized her from the club. He, of course, had made a pass at her and when she told him to go to hell, he failed her skills assessment. Although she had reported the incident to the ethics supervisor, she knew nothing would be done. She had gone to great lengths to hide her identity at the club but sometimes the wigs she wore just didn't work. Piper

was not proud to be dancing for money, but men liked the way she looked. The problem was they never took time to look beyond the physical. In the short twenty-three years of her existence, she had yet to meet a man who wasn't a complete and utter asshole. Every man she had encountered throughout her life had wanted something from her and when she wouldn't give it to them, they would simply try to take it. Piper, however, had learned several tricks along the way and knew how to safeguard not only her body, but her mind and heart.

With another loud sigh, she began prepping for an evening of work. She hated working as a dancer in the strip club but at this point in life, she really needed the money. Not only was medical school ridiculously expensive, but she had no one else to rely on financially. Every penny she made, she saved toward school and basic bills. She almost had enough to quit the club and had just started a job at the hospital as a lab tech. She might dress provocatively at the club, but she never removed her clothing during a performance. Due to her choice of temporary professions, men frequently offered her a relationship as well as wealth beyond her wildest dreams. She had lost count of the numbers of offers she had received from them, but there was no way in hell Piper was going to acquire anything on her back. Because of the way men treated her, Piper had zero respect for them and that unfortunately resulted in her having an overall low opinion of the opposite sex. That low opinion was not a recent one but had started with a man named Maury Brennan.

Thinking of her dead stepfather had the tall blonde's skin crawling in absolute disgust. Growing up with the bastard in east Texas, had been extremely scary and a literal hell on earth. Not only had she grown up in abject poverty and squalor, but Maury had been physically and mentally abusive to all those living in the household. His "love" had unfortunately killed her mother, Lynn, when Piper was seven. With

her mother dead and her stepfather locked up for murder, she had immediately been sent to foster care and spent the next eleven years in the system, bouncing from home to home. He had attempted to reach out to her when she turned eighteen, but she had shut that down quickly. Maury had passed away sick and lonely, in a state prison, just a couple of years ago and Piper was glad to see him go. The only thing he had left that was of any value was a biological daughter named Andy Brennan, who was the only family Piper had. Although they were not biologically related, the two of them had grown up in the trenches. Unfortunately for Andy, her life had been even worse than her own.

Piper had been four years of age when eleven-year-old Andy had come into her life. She was Maury's only child and moved in with them when he had married her mother. The two were close as children and her stepsister had gone to great lengths to protect her from Maury's drunken, physical abuse. Unfortunately for Piper, Andy had been forced to live with her real mother when Maury had killed Lynn. At that point, the two girls lost contact and had only been able to reconnect when she turned eighteen and left foster care. Andy found her about a month after that and invited her to move to Las Vegas so the younger woman could start over and enroll in college. Now the two shared a condo together and Piper had just graduated with a bachelor's in premed from UNLV and was starting her first year of med school. Although Andy would never take it, Piper had every intention of repaying her for all the kindness and assistance she had given her the last five years. They were both poor economically but rich with their love for one another.

Sitting down in the makeup chair, she pulled on her black, spiky boots before applying her make-up and short, brown wig. Looking at herself in the mirror again, Piper thought about her personal life. She hated the overwhelming loneliness

she felt sometimes. If only she could be as beautiful and outgoing as Andy. Yeah, men found her physically attractive, but she had a hard time seeing what they saw. Piper didn't consider herself difficult to get along with per se, but she trusted no one and felt as though she had too much emotional baggage for any man to love. Deep down, she was a sucker for romance and had been involved with a handful of men, but each of those relationships had ended horribly. One had been married, one had tried to beat her up, and the others were total failures. There had been one decent guy in the sea of losers, but she had ruined it by unintentionally sabotaging the relationship. She was just someone who was better off being alone. Although she desperately wanted a man who would talk and cuddle and explore her body sexually, she didn't know if she would ever find him.

Putting the final touches on her make-up, Piper walked over to her closet and pulled out a black two-piece outfit that consisted of booty shorts and a black, vest style top. Sliding them on, she again admired her appearance in the mirror. She looked the part of an exotic dancer and could commit to the role; however, it was just that, an act. She often got put in the VIP lounge because of her physical appearance. They frequently requested sexual favors, but Piper was simply not interested. Not once had a man ever treated her like a human being. No one outside of Andy knew the intimate details of her life but then again, no one had asked. Maybe men only wanted her sexually because they innately knew that she was an emotional mess. Piper had a bad habit of ending relationships with men before they even began. If she did that, then she didn't have to worry about getting hurt.

Seeing the large security guard step into the room, had her sighing loudly and rolling her neck. She then followed Brian through the club and up to the VIP area. When she exited the elevator, Piper was surprised to see two giant men staring

openly at her. They said something in a foreign language before they opened the curtain and allowed her to step in. She motioned with her hand for Brian to follow but was thrown off when the two men blocked his movements with their massive bodies.

"Nyet. Stays here," the taller man said with a sneer.

"No!" Piper returned forcibly. "Either Brian goes in with me or I walk."

The man's response was to roughly push her through the linen door. She heard Brian shouting at the two men before everything went eerily quiet. Hearing someone clear his throat, she turned around and focused on the two men sitting on the leather, camel brown sofa. The shorter man had dark blond hair that was graying on the sides and blue eyes. There was something cold and indifferent about the way he was looking at her. The taller man with black hair was downright scary. She hated the way his green eyes moved over her body like a vulture eyeing its next meal.

"So, you're the entertainment?" the shorter man asked from where he stood. "We have been waiting for you. My name is Paul Morrison, and this is my friend Grecoff Chechen. Please have a seat."

"Like I told your guards, I'm not going anywhere unless Brian is allowed in," Piper replied sternly, refusing to move. Why did she have a sense of dread and unease building in her stomach?

"We have no intention of hurting you so there is no reason why he would need to stay. We actually don't even need to be entertained, but we would like to talk to Piper Williamson."

"How the hell do you..." she began in utter shock but stopped herself before confirming her identity. "I'm sorry, but I don't know who this Piper person is. Why don't I just get you guys a drink?"

"Come closer, Piper," Paul said, motioning her toward

them with his hand. "We don't want to force you, but we will. We only want to ask you some questions."

She reluctantly walked toward the men but refused to sit as she watched the two men lean forward on the sofa. "What is all of this about? Who are you?"

"We already told you who we are, now we just need a little information about you," Paul replied, pulling out a cigarette to smoke. "Think you can help us?"

Letting out a shaky sigh, Piper wanted to run. However, something told her that she was not dealing with average, ordinary men. These men, by the cut of their clothes, clearly had money and that often meant that they had access to unlimited power. There was also something about their demeanor that told her these men were tied to some type of international crime ring. Maybe if she just did as they asked, they would leave. "I don't know," she heard herself say in a calm voice. "What are you wanting to know exactly?"

"First, let's talk about where you're from and who your parents are," Paul said as he leaned back on the sofa and crossed his legs.

She was surprised by the first question that came out of the smaller man's mouth. Why the hell would they need to know that? Was she in some sort of trouble? Piper knew little about her family history because her mother had been a drug addict before being murdered. "I'm originally from Texas and my mom's name was Lynn Williamson. I don't know who my father was. I don't even know if my mom did."

"How old were you when Lynn died?" he asked, watching her intently.

"I was seven when she was murdered," Piper replied, wringing her hands together nervously. She hated the way the two men, especially the dark-haired one, looked at her.

"Did she ever tell you about her parents?"

"Mom never really talked about her family. I think I might

have met my grandfather once, but he was dying of cancer in the hospital."

"Do you remember his name or anything about him?"

"No. We saw him in the hospital and were there about an hour. He seemed kind and talked to me. He told me I looked exactly like his dead wife. Other than that, I don't remember what he said to me."

"Did your mother have any other children?"

"She told me once that I have a half-brother who is older than I am, but I never met the guy. I don't know his name or even if he's alive." Piper shrugged as she watched the two men look at each other and say something in a foreign language. She, however, was growing increasingly agitated with their line of questioning. "Look, I don't know why you are asking these kinds of questions, but I'm not going to answer anything further unless you tell me why you need the information."

Paul did not appreciate the attitude he heard in the woman's voice. If he could, he would kill the bitch right where she stood, but unfortunately, he couldn't. Little did the blonde know, but he was the half-brother she mentioned and was asking the questions because Piper was the key to his inheriting millions of dollars. The only problem was he had no idea where the money was, exactly, but he did know that he had to have Piper alive to get it. Looking at the man who sat beside him, Paul said, "I have no doubts it's her, Grecoff. Do you think she's lying?"

"No, I don't, but I think we need to check out her apartment just in case," Grecoff replied.

"I agree. I doubt she has anything, though. In her records, it says she was placed in foster care when she was seven. There was no way she would have remembered anything specific about inheriting money, but we need to be sure. I say we take a trip to Texas and see what we can find out relating to the old man's will and where the money might be."

"Are we taking this little beauty with us?" Grecoff asked, rubbing his hands together eagerly. The woman was gorgeous and just his type.

"No. Somehow, I don't think she would go quietly, and that's attention we don't need. She's not going anywhere, and the Volkovs have no idea that we're here. We'll just come back and get her when we need to. We have too much at stake right now and it's going to be important to follow the plan, especially if we want to destroy Aleksandr and Nikolai."

"Fucking Volkovs!" Grecoff growled as he spat on the floor. "I'll be glad when both of those fuckers are dead and rotting in the ground."

Piper watched the interaction between the two men and knew they were talking about her although she didn't understand their words. When she cleared her throat uncomfortably, both men looked at her. "If you guys don't have any more questions, I'm going to leave."

"We're done with our questions, but I don't think I'm done with you." The Russian bratva leader smiled as he stood up and walked toward her.

"Yeah, well, I am," Piper countered nervously, but as she turned to leave, Grecoff grabbed her arm and roughly jerked her around. As his hands slid down her body, Piper screamed, "Get your damn hands off me!" To prove her point, she stomped on Grecoff's foot and kned him in the crotch.

The dark-haired man yelled out before the back of his hand came down painfully across Piper's face. Grabbing his throbbing member through his suit, Grecoff watched in shock and dismay as she looked up at him with eyes full of rage and fury. To try to break her, he slapped her face again, but she did not cower. Before he could hit her a third time, Grecoff felt Paul grab his arm and hold it. In his ear, he heard the man snarl, "We don't need this kind of attention right now! Be patient, my friend. When we get back to Vegas, you can do

whatever you want with her. By then, the Volkovs will be dead and the underworld will be ours."

Grecoff grabbed the front of Piper's dress and pulled her toward him. "You're lucky my friend is here, little one, because I would fuck you where you stand and then slit that lovely, delicate neck." He watched her gasp in fear and then felt her body begin to uncontrollably shake. "I knew there was a submissive under that tough exterior. I look forward to breaking your spirit the next time we meet." He then slammed his mouth down on hers as she struggled and pushed violently against his chest. He cried out and dropped her on the floor when she bit his bottom lip and scratched his face. Feeling the blood, he watched her quickly jump to her feet and head toward the exit. Yelling out an order in Russian, the doors opened, and Piper left.

"That one is a real wildcat. I think I'll take her home with me."

"Do whatever you want with her. I only care about the money," Paul countered as the guards closed the gap between them.

"Just got a call," a guard said as he looked at Grecoff. "Viktor and Kira are dead. The police are picking up Volkov as we speak."

Both men burst out laughing. "And so it begins, my friend," Grecoff said with a smile as he put his arm around Paul. "Let's celebrate our victory with a drink. Feels good to have the world at your fingertips, da?"

"You don't know how good," Paul responded as they stood to leave.