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## Chapter 1

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OWEN HAYES STARED across the expanse of polished walnut that separated him from this morning's client. He never personally took cases anymore but this one was far too intriguing not to handle personally. That was one of the many perks of being the founder and owner of the biggest and most successful private investigation firm in the country, he never had to be involved with anything he didn't want to be involved with. It wasn't that he didn't enjoy his job, because he loved it. Veritas Investigation had made him a very wealthy man and it had given his life purpose, but he was done observing and mingling with the human trash his company was hired to investigate. He happily left that part to his team. But he had to take the case, if only to see Georgia Crutchfield again. Seeing her now, almost made what would come next

worth it—the days on end interacting with the worst society had to offer, the liars, the cheats, the child abusers. Everything he hated. If someone were hiding, Owen would find them. If they ran, he caught them. If they had secrets, he exposed them. He was good at his job—he did not become number one by accident—but each case took a little more of his soul and there was precious little left. He already thought the worst of everyone, questioned everyone’s motives, always saw the dark when others saw the light. He couldn’t just blame that on his job, he was hardly an optimist before he opened Veritas, but this company had taken away the little faith in humanity that his childhood hadn’t.

“Good to see you again, Owen,” Georgia drawled in her saccharin sweet voice.

She was still an attractive woman. She had always been beautiful, at least on the outside, the inside was probably as selfish and elitist as ever. That is why he took the meeting, to see if she had changed, because Owen certainly had. Owen wasn’t the same fresh-faced boy pining after the debutant. He was no longer the maid’s son. God, Owen had wanted her then, and he had had her, at least her body but he was never good enough to be seen with in public. He was good enough to fuck her until she screamed, but Hell would freeze over before she let anyone know she was screwing the help.

Owen couldn't help but smile, my had the tables turned. Georgia needed him now. Now she would be more than happy to be seen with him, because he was rich and successful. He was the one people wanted on the invite list now. Not that he gave a shit about any of it. Inside he was still the kid from the wrong side of the tracks, but that kid now had what people wanted and it felt good.

He didn't need to point out to Georgia that he was richer than her husband, she knew. He could end the conversation now and be a happy man because Georgia had seen exactly what she had given up. She played the safe bet with Travis and lost.

"How is your mama?" Owen asked. Mavis Crutchfield was a good woman and the best part of his childhood. Unlike her vacuous cold-hearted daughter, Mavis was compassionate and kind. She always had time for Owen, never made him feel like her generosity was done out of anything less than friendship. Mavis always took an interest in him when everyone else saw him as just another throw-away kid. Mavis had persuaded her late husband to give him his first job on the oil rigs. That job had saved him. Owen would always be grateful to her. He glanced out the window to the Houston Skyline. His firm was on the top floor of some of the most expensive real estate in Texas. From this

vantage point you could see for miles, past the skyscrapers to the pink sunset.

His life was good and in large part that was due to Mavis Crutchfield.

Georgia shifted in her seat. “Mama is fine, but she hasn’t gone out in years. That is how we know the story this silly girl is peddling is BS. Pardon my harsh language.”

Owen smiled. Georgia liked to pretend she was above swearing or anything that made her appear like common folk, but Owen knew her better than that. He had made her swear every profanity under the sun as he slowly took her, making her wait for her release, and when she finally came, it was his name she shouted. He wondered if she was still a screamer.

A sudden realization hit him. He didn’t care about Georgia or the way she had ended it anymore. He had done the right thing; the rest was on her. He had manned up when the stick turned blue. He bought her a ring, a tacky thing that would have turned her finger green within hours, and promised to someday replace it with the real thing. He swore to love her and look after her and the baby for the rest of his life.

She laughed in his face and told him there was a world of difference between sleeping with the help and marrying them. And then she had had an abortion. He

begged her not to, but she had. He wasn't ready to be a dad then and it would have never worked between them. Eventually when the constant erection of adolescence wore off, he would have realized he didn't love Georgia; he didn't even like her.

"Tell me what you know about this woman. The one that befriended your mama."

Georgia let out an exasperated puff of air that sent her bangs up. "Her name is Nine Massey. Her name is a number. Can you believe that? I know these people in trailer parks are a different sort, but can you imagine not even giving your child a proper name? It is hardly any wonder she has turned to a life of crime. These people should not breed. It is just not fair to the children."

Owen painted a tight smile on his face and didn't let it slip. He was one of those trailer park folks she was talking about. They both knew it, but they chose to ignore it because he was now one of the richest men in Houston. But they didn't need to pretend on his account. He was not ashamed of where he came from. His 10,000 square foot house in River Oaks did not change the man he was, or the boy he had been.

"Do you have her address? Telephone number? Social security number? Any way I can locate her?"

Georgia pursed her lips together as she considered the question. "No, all I know is her name. Mama let it

slip. Oh, and she is a waitress at Red Lobster of all things. Mama has never set foot in one of their establishments but now the highlight of her week is this Nine woman bringing her these blasted cheese biscuits she steals from work. Can you imagine? Mama thinks they have this special bond because she steals her biscuits.”

“Or she thinks they have a special bond because she spends time with her. How often do you or your sisters and brother visit her?” Owen asked pointedly. A lonely woman was easy prey.

Georgia’s eyes widened. If the muscles in her face were not frozen, it would probably have been indignation she was trying to convey. “We all have families of our own to look after and my brother’s campaign takes up all his time.”

Owen nodded. “Ah, yes, your families. I’m sure organizing nanny schedules must be time consuming.”

“I don’t like what you’re implying.”

Owen shook his head. “Darlin’, if you think I was implying, I was being far too subtle. I am out and out saying it. You would not be sitting here in my office today if you or your siblings had taken any interest in your mama past the inheritance she is set to leave you.”

“How dare you!”

“How dare I what? Tell the truth? Darlin’, I am a lot

of things, but I'm no liar. You want sunshine blown up your ass, you've come to the wrong man."

Owen waited to see if Georgia would stomp out. She would have when he knew her before, in a storm of righteous indignation, but she didn't have that luxury anymore. She needed him.

"Owen don't be like that. You were such a sweet boy."

Owen gave a terse laugh. "Was I? That was a long time ago. I'm not sweet anymore and I'm not interested in placating you or your brother and sisters. You have let your mama down. She was taken advantage of because you weren't there for her and now you want me to come in and clean up your mess. On the phone you mentioned a painting. Tell me why you think this Nine Massey stole it. Your mama has a lot of people coming in and out of that house. How can you rule all of them out?"

Georgia's face contorted in contempt. "My mama does not have any old sort in her home. All her employees are trustworthy; they have been with her for years. Lupe has been with us since your mama—"

"There are more employees than just the maid," Owen interrupted. He was not going to be lured into a conversation about his mother with anyone, but especially not Georgia. "They will all need to be ruled out."

Georgia sighed in exasperation. The corners of her

mouth flattened; the frustration clear. She had always been easy to read; he had just chosen to ignore it.

“Nothing has ever gone missing from our home, not so much as a box of matches. Then this woman comes on the scene and immediately it starts, nothing big at first, just a brooch and petty cash. She was testing the waters. There is no question about it, Owen; she stole it. We need to get it back, but more importantly we need to protect my mother, so this con artist does not rob her blind.”

Owen sat back in his chair. She had chosen her words carefully, because Georgia knew Owen would do anything to protect Mavis. He was being manipulated. They both knew he would take the case. But this wasn't a charity; this was his livelihood. Georgia had come to the best and she would pay for the best. “I can do it, but it will cost you. I want \$100,000 upfront and 5% of the estimated value of the painting when it is recovered.”

Georgia's mouth dropped open to form a perfect O, but she quickly righted herself. “That would be \$250,000.”

“I'm well aware of the amount. This poor boy has always been good at math. That is my price. You can accept it, or you can walk out of here and leave it to the police and FBI to track down the painting. We both know I will get it back faster, and more importantly we know I



will be discrete. Your brother does not need this in the papers, not with the election so close. The people of Texas are already having a hard time accepting Logan as a man of the people, being a rich oil baron's son, born with a silver spoon so far up his ass he shits sterling. What will they say when they know his mama has paintings worth millions just lying around for any schmuck to come and pluck off the wall? Y'all need to keep this quiet and this poor boy is the only one who can do it."

Georgia gave him a hard look. "Why do you keep calling yourself poor? You're worth millions now too."

Owen shrugged. "I do all right."

"You're not poor anymore," she pressed.

"Darlin, I'm the same man I was then, I just go home to a nicer house, in a nicer part of town. Now, do you want me to take the case or not? I don't got time for negotiating and your bargaining position is shit poor. I got what you want."

Georgia's nostrils flared as she took in a sharp breath. "Fine."

Owen smiled. "I would say it is a pleasure doing business with you, but I still respect you enough not to bullshit you. Only just."

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Owen stared down at the photo Georgia had given him and then back up at the waitress carrying a tray across the restaurant. She maneuvered gracefully around the discarded shells and lobster carcasses that had fallen or been tossed to the floor, scooping them into a napkin before they could be ground into the scuffed wooden floorboards. The whole restaurant smelled of cheese and fish, even his coffee had not escaped the pungent curse.

She smiled at each table as she walked by. She looked weary, more weathered than she should for twenty-five. She was small, slight even with long thin limbs. She had dark brown hair and pale almost translucent white skin that did not quite fit with the brunette braid that hung halfway down her back. It was dyed. She was altering her appearance. Smart. Probably had a record, might even be wanted. Owen would get the painting back and then tip off the relevant authorities.

He was too far away to see, but he suspected her eyes were light, most likely blue. Her lips were thinner than Georgia's but soft and natural. She was pretty, maybe even beautiful under her thick layer of make-up. Her lipstick was too dark, and her thick winged eyeliner overpowered her fine features.

Owen sat in the corner and nursed his cup of coffee. He pulled his baseball cap lower. He made sure never to make eye contact so he would not draw attention to

himself. He was a big man, but he had the ability to blend in seamlessly to any environment. It was a survival skill he had picked up in his childhood, but it served him well now in his job.

He wasn't in her section so Nine never had reason to speak to him. Susie, a plump redhead, kept his coffee topped up and the silence filled. Even through her incessant chatter, Owen could make out the bones of most of Nine's conversations with her customers. Nine's accent was thick and sickly sweet. Her voice would have been pleasant if it weren't for the exaggerated Texan pronunciation.

Nine always said hello first, but she didn't initiate deeper conversation with her patrons, she held back, listening, gathering information and then adapting her story to suit. She told the minister and his wife that her husband was a long-haul trucker. They had two kids, apparently boys. She told the police officers her boyfriend was a Marine serving overseas. She was hoping he would propose at Christmas but was worried because she didn't have a passport, how would she cope being overseas. She had a story for everyone, tailored just for them: personalized lies. She smiled and she laughed, but her smile never reached her eyes. And somehow, she even managed to look sad when she was laughing. That was a skill. He had never seen that before and he had seen a lot. Nine

Massey had nailed the sympathetic predator which was no small feat.

Irritation rose in him as he imagined Mavis falling prey to it. Mavis was a soft touch at the best of times; she was no match for cunning of this level. He had seen enough. Owen put down a twenty dollar bill to cover his coffee. He would enjoy bringing this woman down.

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Owen knelt down and gave Buffalo a rub behind his black ears. "That's a good boy." His dog was ready to finish their run. They had already run eight miles, but Buffalo would happily run another eight more. He whined and pulled on his leash. Nine was running late. He knew her schedule. In the four days he watched her she had never deviated. She worked the lunch shift. In at 10:45, out at 6:00, always parked in the back near the dumpsters. She drove a silver 95 Dodge Neon with a dent in the passenger side door. The car was either stolen or borrowed, registered to a Johnny Griner in Katy. Griner was a Marine serving overseas, a boyfriend maybe though he had not lived in Texas for at least three years.

Finally, Nine emerged from the back door, a Styro-foam container was wedged under her arm, her dark hair was gathered in a loose bun at the top of her head. Nine

tossed her bag onto the passenger seat and slid the keys into the ignition. Owen waited until Nine pounded the steering wheel.

“Showtime.” Owen rubbed the German Shepard under his chin. “Good boy.” He tossed a bone-shaped biscuit into the air. Buffalo jumped to catch it, snatching it up before it had a chance to hit the ground. Owen made a show of stopping at the dumpster to toss in a plastic bag. For the last six miles he ran with a bag of dog shit. Even though he had tied it off, the odor still managed to find a way out. Owen smiled at Nine through her open window. It was July in Texas, even at 6 p.m. it was oppressively hot, perspiration had molded his shirt over the flat plane of his belly.

“You all right?” he asked and gestured to her hands clenched around the steering wheel.

Nine blinked rapidly. “Yeah, I’m fine.” She glanced from him to the locks on her door to her rear-view mirror and back again. A shade between blue and green he noted when her eyes locked on him, like the color of sea glass. She really was pretty. That was something he had learned in his job, sometimes the ugliest souls were hidden in attractive bodies. That made them even more dangerous because no one expects the clean-shaven businessman to molest a child or the sweet young waitress to rob a woman blind. Owen gave her a nod. She was

scared of him. At least she was smart enough to be afraid. Point for her.

“All right, night then.” Owen bent over and pretended to tie his shoes. Don’t rush it. Easy does it. He righted himself and opened his water bottle, took a swig and then poured some directly into the dog’s mouth. Buffalo lapped it up with quick darts of his tongue. Nine tried to start the car again and nothing. Owen reached into his pocket. “Ma’am, would you like to use my phone to call roadside assistance?” He offered her his cellphone.

Nine took in a ragged breath. “No. Thank you. It wouldn’t matter. I-I don’t have coverage.”

Of course she didn’t. That was the first thing Owen had checked. He was nothing if not thorough. “Oh,” Owen replied, pausing as if he was considering her response. “Um... sorry. My car is back at River Oaks or I’d offer you a ride.”

Nine’s lip trembled but she stopped it with a bite of white teeth into the soft flesh of her mouth. Her eyes were glossy. Quickly she turned away and cleared her throat. She scrubbed at her face with her hands. She was trying not to cry. Owen’s eyes narrowed. He was immune to tears. They were the most over used tool in a woman’s arsenal. But she was trying not to cry, at least not to let him see.

“I’m going to be late,” Nine mumbled under her

breath.

“Ma’am, I’m not a mechanic, but I would be happy to have a look.” He gave her his best awe shucks look. “I’m Owen by the way, and this old boy is Buffalo. He is completely harmless but go ahead and lock your doors. You can never be too safe.” When Buffalo heard his name, he edged closer to the car. He nudged his head over the window ledge begging to be petted. Nine complied by stroking him behind his ears and he rewarded her by making a noise somewhere between a whine and a contented sigh.

Nine did not make a move to roll up the windows. She was too focused on the rear-view mirror, even as she petted the dog, she never stopped looking for someone behind her. “Um... I can’t pay you.”

“Ma’am, I would not dream of charging a lady. Go ahead and pop the hood.”

Nine turned and looked over her shoulder. Her brows were knit together. Her breath was coming in shallow pants. She was scared, not of him. Owen filed the information away. He had seen this before. She was most likely working the scam with someone, a boyfriend or lover and gotten greedy. That never ended well. She was pretty, but she was stupid if she didn’t know that.

Owen bent over and inspected the engine. He waited a few minutes, enough to seem plausible, before he

popped his head up and slammed the hood closed. Identifying and fixing a mechanical problem was surprisingly easy when you had tampered with the car yourself. “Ah, I see the problem. Looks like someone disconnected the battery. That wasn’t an accident. Maybe someone is playing a prank on you. Not very funny, if you ask me.” Owen wiped the grease on his gray running shorts.

Nine’s eyes widened. Small beads of perspiration formed above her lip. Her eyes darted from wing mirror to the rearview, never settling. Frantically she rubbed her neck with her small fingers. She wasn’t just scared; she was terrified.

Owen forced himself to look away, not be drawn in. His first instinct was to help her, protect her even. That was because she was a master manipulator. Just like she had a story for every patron, she had a persona for every situation. She was good, he would give her that. But he had seen it all and he would not be taken in.

This was the first step in the long game: make the target vulnerable. Someone had already done that for him. Step two was going to be easy. Nine Massey would invite him into her life. She would learn to trust him, and he would use it against her. He would bring her down, and he might just enjoy himself in the process.

This time when he smiled it was genuine. “Give it a try now.”



Nine turned over the engine and this time it started. Relief washed over the delicate features of her face. She really was pretty beneath all the makeup. “Thank you. Thank you so much,” she gushed. “I don’t know what I would have done without you. Thank you.”

Owen shook his head. “Don’t mention it. Lovely meeting you.” Owen reached his hand through the open window.

Nine stared at his hand suspiciously. She quickly reached her hand out to his. “I’m Nine. It was nice meeting you. And thank you again.” Her skin was soft, almost impossibly so.

“Don’t mention it. I’m just glad I was here. I hate to think of someone else finding you. It is pretty secluded back here.” He was slowly turning the knife. He would use her fear against her.

“Thank you,” she said again, but this time her voice was a breathless whisper.

This part of Houston was like a graveyard where mass-market box sized stores and fast food chain restaurants came to die. What once had hoped to be a flourishing area was now run down and desolate in appearance. Not the greatest of places to work and definitely not an environment to eat. Owen watched her car until the red taillights were lost on the horizon. The play was in motion and this was a game she was going to lose.