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## Chapter 1

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I have zero patience for entitled jerks, no matter how good looking they might be.

I didn't expect to have a good shift, because those were rare, but I had hoped to make it through the evening with no big hassles. After all, it was a Monday. Mondays were usually slow because everyone was still hungover from the weekend, broke and trying to catch up with classes. Few people came by Pete's Pit in the university common on Mondays when there wasn't a game on TV, except for the really committed crowd who drank their way through college.

We had the little cluster of disenchanted artists, writers and painters and musicians, who liked to hold the corner booth hostage for hours. They talked all kinds of nonsense about the meaning of life and the value of art, while drinking pitchers of beer and eating turkey sandwiches. They all liked turkey. Pete made very good subs, and the toasted turkey Swiss was delicious, but they could have tried something different for a change. It goes to show that even the most committed non-conformists can fall into a rut.

My feet were killing me after finishing my shift working the register at the University bookstore and I was looking forward to having some time to myself sitting at the bar to go over my own class notes. Pete was cool about me doing that. He knew I'd take care of the customers, and he didn't mind if I took care of myself while I was at it. He was a good guy, like the father I might have had, for all I knew, except Mom couldn't remember.

I had just delivered two fresh pitchers to the Bohemian-wanna-be corner, and taken away their empty sandwich baskets, then sat down to review my biology notes, when a cluster of Zeta Iota Pis showed up to celebrate Antonio Prince's birthday. Loudly. They took up the big round table in the center of the Pit and shouted out to me to take their orders.

They were a six-pack of over-confident, over-indulged, hormone-fueled jerks, wearing the same overpriced clothes made to look cheap so that they could pass for street without ever having to cross one. Antonio Prince was their king. Everyone on campus knew him. The men wanted to be him. The women wanted to sleep with him. I wanted to trip him on his way down the stairs of the student union. He was the sort of man who had heard once too often how smart and handsome and special he was and he believed it every time because his mirror confirmed it. Antonio was, undeniably, very good looking. But he was also, objectively, an asshole.

I went over to the table, pulling my little pad out of my black apron pocket, and asked them what they wanted.

Two guys made some rude remarks about my figure before ordering nachos, a large pepperoni pizza, and three pitchers of beer.

Antonio looked at me as if he had X-ray eyes. I walked away from his penetrating stare to give John, the bartender, their order, ignoring the catcalls behind me. None from Antonio. He was too cool to speak.

“Do you want me to toss them out?” John asked. He was a big guy who doubled as a bouncer when things got ugly.

“No, I just ignore it,” I said. “If they get touchy, that’s something else, but sticks and stones, you know?”

“You’re too nice, Josie,” John said.

“I’m not really,” I said, smiling. It was absolutely true. I don’t have a nice bone in my body. I didn’t know my father, but I knew my grandfather, the infamous con-artist, card shark and prankster Thomas Whitty. He taught me not to put up with any bullshit.

“You won’t always get fair, but you can always get even,” Pop-Pop used to say.

I got even with the frat brats by sprinkling their nachos with extra salt and their pizza with pepper flakes and extra parmesan so they’d be thirstier, spend more on beer, and boost my tip. Pete didn’t take any chances that students would forget to tip his staff, so he included fifteen percent gratuity in the check. Anything extra customers left on the table I got to keep, too.

They were obnoxious and really ruined my concentration as I tried to catch up with homework between trips back and forth to their table and the corner booth. A few other customers popped in and out for a quick beer and sandwich, but they all behaved. I did my best to block out the hyena laughs and rude chatter from the frat brats, which was louder than the music blasting through the speakers. Mostly I succeeded, but by the end of my shift I was bone tired and on my last nerve.

Pete’s Pit closed at midnight, but I had to stay until one in the morning to clean-up. Fortunately, I didn’t live far. My mother had inherited my grandfather’s duplex in Sweetwater, just across the road and over the canal from campus. It was a quick bike ride to get there, and it wasn’t storming in February so I’d have no problem getting home dry.

When midnight came, the guild of disenchanting artists made their bumbling way up the stairs, which led to the common.

They built the Pit on a downslope. You couldn't really call it a hill, because this is South Florida where the biggest hills are piles of trash. The people who originally designed Tamiami University wanted to give it the feel of a northern college, though, with plenty of trees, winding walkways and a rolling landscape. They'd created artificial mounds and knolls all over campus and built the student union on one of the taller mounds. If you came into the Pit from the main floor of the student union, which held the cafeteria, the bookstore and a small gathering space for protests and concerts, you had to walk downstairs. The back door of the Pit was at the base of the slope, facing a paved utility area for trash and deliveries. Behind that was one of many small ponds and lakes the architects had scattered around campus to take in the run-off water from heavy rains.

The frat brats hung around long after John rang the bell for last call. I had cleaned up the rest of the bar and was working around them, but the clock was ticking on my patience. John had his fill of the rowdy guys, too.

"Time to go," John boomed from behind the bar, pulling on the brass bell one more time.

"Just one more pitcher!" one of Antonio's entourage called out. "It's not every day we celebrate something this big."

"No more pitchers," John said. "No more anything. If you guys don't get out, I'll knock you out."

I had passed them the check earlier, but it was still unpaid. I thought I'd come by the table to get the money before John tossed each of them out the back door with the trash, into the tall grass by the pond, on their ass.

"Relax, beautiful," one of Antonio's buddies said, wrapping his large hand around my hip. "You know we're good for it." I slapped his hand away and glared at Antonio. He usually paid the bill, which was one reason he had so many friends, I figured.

"You guys go," Antonio said. "I'll settle up here and catch you later."

The guys laughed about Antonio ‘settling the bill’, as if there was something lewd about exchanging money, but they did what he asked. I thought they were all mindless leeches, every one of them, and easily led by the puffed-up peacock to whom they all attached themselves.

“Cash or credit card?” I asked Antonio after they left.

“You don’t remember me, do you?” Antonio asked.

“Of course I do,” I said. “You guys come here all the time.”

“No, but you don’t really remember me,” he said.

I knew what he meant, and I would not admit it. There had been a time, many years ago, when Antonio wasn’t the worst person on the planet and he and I had been best friends. That ended way back in the sixth grade, though, so it didn’t count.

“Cash or credit card?” I repeated.

He grinned at me and pulled out his wallet, handing over a one-hundred-dollar bill. “Keep the change,” he said.

“Nope,” I said, pulling cash out of my apron to give him his forty-two dollars in change. “That’s too much. Go home.”

“I can help you clear the table and put up the chairs,” he said, rising from his chair to stack the mostly empty cups of beer and take the two remaining pitchers back to John.

“I’m fine,” I said when he came back to turn the chairs up on the tables. “This is what I do.”

“Are you going home after this?” he asked.

“That’s none of your beeswax,” I said, which made him chuckle.

“I can’t believe you still say that,” Antonio said.

“I also still say, fuck you and fuck off and go take a fucking long walk off a fucking short pier,” I said.

“You’re mad at me,” he said. “You shouldn’t be. I have done nothing but try to be nice. I only asked because it’s late and a lady shouldn’t have to ride her bicycle back home at this hour.”

I gave him a hard look and put my hands on my hips.

“A—I’m not a lady. B—How do you know I ride a bicycle to school? C—Seriously, fuck right off, Tony.”

“Ah, you remember,” he grinned. “I’ll just help and then I’ll give you a ride.”

“No thank you,” I said, walking away to deal with a different table.

Still, Antonio hung around, up-ending the rest of the chairs. He even beat me to the bucket and mop and started mopping the floors.

“What the hell are you doing?” I asked.

“Helping,” he said. “We made a mess. I want to clean it up.”

“You can’t,” I said. “Just go be with your friends, Tony.”

“They’re not my friends,” he said. “They’re just people I know.”

“Okay, so go be with people you know and leave the rest of us alone,” I said.

Antonio didn’t listen. He just shrugged it off and kept swabbing the deck as if he were trying to prove something to me, or to himself.

I went back to the bar to check in with John and to put all my books back in my bag. “Do you need any help back here?”

“No, I’m all set,” John said. “I’ll lock up. Go home and I’ll monitor the lunatic.”

“Thanks,” I said, giving him a big smile as I folded my apron into my bag and slung my backpack over my shoulders before heading to the back door. “See you on Friday.”

I left my bike by the back entrance while I worked, chained to the big green trash bin, because it was more secure than in the student parking lot and much closer. I could bike out and take a short-cut home through the campus. When I walked out, though, all I found was my bike lock, cracked open.

“Motherfuckers,” I cursed, then stormed back inside to confront Antonio. “You knew, you asshole!”

“Knew what?” he asked, acting all innocent.

“You knew they were going to steal my bike!”

Antonio shook his head. “It’s just all part of this stupid treasure hunt they’re on.”

“Oh, is that it? Well, I guess that’s okay,” I said, dripping sarcasm like a cut lemon. “Fuck you, Antonio Prince, and the horse you rode in on. Give me that forty bucks! You and your friends owe me for the bike.”

Antonio opened his wallet and offered me three-hundred dollars. “I know bikes are expensive,” he said. “They’ll probably give it back to you as soon as they’re done with it.”

It was enough money for me to get a new cruiser from Wal Mart that would be better than the one I owned, but I liked my bike. We had a history together. I should have taken his money, but it was too fucking easy for Antonio to dish out cash like a Pez dispenser. I had my pride.

“You know what, keep it,” I said, turning away the money, though it hurt me to do it. “I want nothing from you or from your friends. John, can you talk to Pete about having them barred?”

“You bet, sweetie,” John said, then he turned to Antonio with a menacing glare. “And you’d better get out of here right now.”

“I’ll give you a ride home, Josie,” Antonio said.

“No fucking way am I getting in your car,” I said. “You’ve been drinking all night.”

“Actually, I haven’t been drinking,” he said. “I’ve been buying drinks.”

“I don’t care,” I said. “I’d rather walk.”

“It’s one in the morning,” he said. “That’s not safe.”

“Well, your friends didn’t give a fuck, did they? They were happy to leave me stranded on campus so they could complete whatever stupid quest they’re on, just for giggles.”

“Look, you’d better go,” John said to Antonio, and his tone clarified that Antonio would have to walk out on broken legs if he didn’t hurry. “Josie, I’ll get you home.”

“Thanks, John,” I said.

I hated to bother John because I knew he needed to get home to his wife and new baby, but I really didn’t want to have to walk through the campus park at night alone. The university was usually really safe, but a night walk is never a good idea. I kept pepper spray in my bag, and I knew how to fight. But that would only get you so far if the other person was big enough, had a knife or a gun, or had the element of surprise working in their favor. A bike wasn’t that much safer, but I couldn’t afford a car. Besides, I had sturdy legs and could really haul ass.

“Seriously, Josie,” Antonio said, sounding humbled. “I’m happy to take you home.”

“I never want to see you, or your friends again, Antonio,” I said. “Do you understand? I know you’re all over the place, but make sure your place is far from my path.”

Antonio nodded and walked out. John locked up the bar, and we walked together through the parking lot to his car.

“It’s really fucked up about your bike,” John said. “You should report them to campus security.”

“Why bother,” I said. “Those guys get away with everything. I’ll get my pound of flesh.”

“Okay.” John laughed. “How do you know that guy, anyway?”

“I don’t,” I said. “Back when we were kids, we were neighbors, but his life changed and mine didn’t. I haven’t seen him since I was twelve.”

That wasn’t the whole truth, but I didn’t want to bore John with the entire story. I had seen Antonio lots of times since on campus, but he hadn’t seen me until tonight. That he even acknowledged me made me suspicious. Maybe the guys wouldn’t limit their hijinks to stealing my bike. Maybe they had something else planned, and Antonio was only playing his part of the campus Casanova. If so, I was going to make them regret ever



crossing Josie Whitty. Whittys don't take abuse lying down. Whittys get even.

Most Whittys, anyway. My mother was the exception that proved the value of the rule. Mom hadn't inherited the Whitty fighting gene. She was a gentle soul, romantic, sometimes a little flaky, and life had ground her down to dust. My grandfather always said she was an angel, like her mother. That wasn't necessarily a good thing. My grandmother had died much too young. I wanted to keep my mother alive, so when Pop-Pop passed, I took over, fighting for both of us.

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Mom was asleep on the couch with the television on when I walked in. It looked like she had had a bad day. Sometimes, she got worn down by life, and she could not do basic things like groom herself and feed herself and clean up. I knew she couldn't help it, but I wished she'd take her medication. She complained the pills made her fat, and that was a bigger concern for my mother than her mental health. She had been a model, and a real beauty. When she got herself together, she still was.

I left Mom sleeping through the late-night comedians and got busy clearing up and washing the dishes in the sink. Then I heated a can of chicken and stars soup as a pick me up. I can't say why, but the sensation of slurping up the little pasta stars through my tongue was always soothing to me. Maybe my inner goddess was a destroyer of worlds.

After that, I took out my notebooks again and finished my assignments on the dining room table, then woke Mom just enough to tuck her into bed before dawn, took a shower, put on my worn Marvin the Martian t-shirt and slipped under the covers of my bed where I quickly drifted off to sleep.

I dreamt of Antonio. The bastard. I was going to get him good.