

Chapter 1

He didn't care if she'd leaked information about his clients to every casino owner in the city. He didn't care if she'd been lying to him and manipulating him since the day they'd met.

He just wanted her to be okay.

Antonio DelMario, Tony to his friends, shoved his way through the emergency room doors and pushed past the people in the lobby, rushing the front desk so quickly he made the middle-aged receptionist's eyes widen. It was to be expected. At 6'4" and 200 pounds of pure muscle, Tony looked as thuggish as his name implied. He was a handsome man, but roughly so, and when he was in a mood, he was also an intimidating man.

"Celeste Lambert," he barked at the woman behind the desk. "What room is she in?"

The woman swallowed and cleared her throat. "Are you a family member?"

He wanted to choke the answer out of her. Instead, he took a deep breath and calmed down. "Not yet. I'm her fiancé and her emergency contact. Now where the hell is she?"

"One minute." The nurse pulled something up on her computer screen. "You'll need to speak with the doctor first. She's in the ICU."

His stomach lurched. Intensive care unit. He knew what that meant. It was bad, it was really bad.

It was funny, but not in a very amusing way. One accident and he was ready to take back everything he'd said to her before. He was ready to forgive anything. The things he'd said, the threats he'd made, how quickly and callously he'd thrown her out of his home. None of that mattered anymore.

After a few moments, a doctor who was far too young to be caring for someone as grievously injured as Celeste led him back behind the desk. He reached out his hand to shake, and Tony ignored it.

"How is she?"

The doctor put his hand back down, realizing Tony wasn't going to take it, and got right back to business. "Considering what happened, she's lucky." He pushed his way through a set of

double doors with Tony trailing behind him. "Her left wrist is sprained, her ribs are bruised, but our biggest concern right now is the head injury."

His heart lurched. "Head injury?"

"She has periorbital ecchymosis. You might know it as 'Raccoon eyes.' A head injury can cause blood to pool in the eye socket, making it look like the patient has two black eyes," the doctor explained. "It can be a sign of closed skull fracture. Nothing is showing up on the x-ray, and her cognitive functions seem to be intact, but I'd like to have her consult with a neurologist just to be sure."

He nodded as the doctor pushed open the door to her room. "Anything she needs." He froze when he saw her. Her beautiful green eyes were surrounded by dark, scary looking circles. She was as white as a sheet and her arm was in a sling. She looked terrible, but at the same time, she'd never looked more beautiful.

He didn't understand how someone could be so callous as to hit a woman with their car and then just leave her in the street to die. He was going to find out who'd done it and he was going to make sure they paid, but that was later. For now, he needed to take care of her.

"How are you feeling, Celeste?" He approached the bed gently and she gave him a dazed, slightly vacant smile. He nearly chuckled. They must have had her drugged to the gills.

"Okay, I guess," she finally managed in her low soprano voice. "My head hurts a lot. Is that normal?" She tilted her head at him as he took a seat next to the bed.

"I'd say so. You had a pretty bad head injury."

"Oh." She frowned as she studied him. "Are you going to look at my chart?"

He returned her frown. "It's all medical mumbo jumbo to me, babe. I'm a lawyer, not a doctor."

"A lawyer?" She straightened in her bed. "Wow, you ambulance chasers sure like to get an early start." His frown deepened at her flippant tone and she smiled apologetically. "I'm not interested in suing anyone. It was my fault that I fell off the stage. I should have never auditioned for a musical."

"What?" He looked from her to her doctor. The doctor was also frowning, consulting the chart. "You didn't fall off a stage. You were hit by a car."

"I think you have the wrong room, mister." She turned her attention to her doctor. "Why do you even let these guys in?"

"If this is about earlier..." He stood up, looming over her.

"Earlier? We just met like 30 seconds ago." She was still focused on her doctor. "Is the neurologist going to be very expensive? I don't have insurance."

His heart was hammering in his chest. There was something very wrong with Celeste.

"Celeste." The doctor pulled out a penlight and approached the bed. "Can you look at me?" He studied her eyes to make sure they were dilating. "What day is it?"

"Wednesday."

He let out a breath he was holding. It was Wednesday. Maybe the pretending not to know him was some kind of twisted punishment.

The doctor checked her other eye. "I meant the specific date."

She blinked as the doctor pulled away. "November 7, 2012."

The panic returned. November 7, 2012 was nearly a year before she'd met him.

"Possible retrograde amnesia," the doctor muttered as he made yet another note on her chart. He pointed at Tony. "Do you know who this is?"

Celeste was starting to look a little panicky herself. "Well, I thought he was the neurologist, but I guess he's a lawyer?"

"Celeste, I'm your fiancé." He leaned forward to grasp her hand, but Celeste yanked it away in a panic. "We've been together for more than a year. We're getting married next month." He ignored the fact that just a few hours ago, he'd kicked her out of his house after demanding the ring back. It had been an impulsive decision.

Her face went pale as she started to shake her head. "There's been some kind of mistake." She shook her head again, wincing from the pain the motion must have caused. "I'm not engaged. I'm not even seeing anyone!"

"Okay, just keep calm." The doctor looked a bit nervous as well. "It's possible you might have suffered a bit of memory loss because of the head injury. It's rare, but it happens, especially if you have a physical injury coupled with an emotionally traumatic event." He turned his attention to Tony. "Has anything particularly traumatic happened to her recently?"

There was a lump in his throat. This was his fault. He remembered her pretty face, flush with tears, as she'd begged him to believe her only a few hours before. He'd threatened her, told her it was in her best interest to disappear. She must have been terrified. "Nothing I can think of," he lied quickly.

"We'll discuss this with the neurologist when he arrives. Sometimes, something like this is temporary, but we'll know more after the doctor checks her out."

He nodded, looking a lot more calm than he felt. Retrograde amnesia was a scary diagnosis, but the doctor was right. It could be temporary.

On the bright side, if her memory was gone, then she wouldn't remember how cruel he'd been that morning. She wouldn't remember all the horrible things he said that he couldn't take back.

She wouldn't remember that she'd never really loved him.

* * *

She waited until the door was closed before she slumped back on the pillows, exhausted from the emotional turmoil of the day. The son of a bitch had tried to kill her! She didn't know how she could still love a man after he had tried to kill her, but she did.

Going to the police over what he'd done hadn't been an option. It would only make things worse. Tony was a powerful man. Turning him in would be dangerous. She flinched at the memory. His sleek, custom made jaguar squealing down the street, coming right at her. The car he never let anyone else drive. The day before, she would have never believed he was capable of something like that.

Now she knew different. After all, she'd found out just that morning that she was just a lay that he'd agreed to marry in order to shut her up. She didn't know why she was surprised. His friends hated her. His family hated her and he was right, she didn't fit into his life.

But she had never betrayed him. She would have never sold his secrets to his rivals, or anyone else. She'd begged him to believe her, but he hadn't. Then she realized, as he went down the list of everything that was wrong with her, he'd just been looking for an excuse, an out.

She'd left the house heartbroken, unsure where to go. She'd never thought he'd try to kill her.

"Get your ass out of here, whore. If you're smart, you'll just disappear. I can't guarantee your safety after what you've done."

She would have disappeared, too. Even with no money, no resources and no where to go, she would have never betrayed him. She loved him too much.

Even after he'd run her down with his car and left her to die in the middle of the road.

She had to admit, he was putting on a good act, pretending to be concerned. She was sure he'd come to the hospital to finish the job, maybe smother her with a pillow when no one was looking. She knew she had to make it clear that she wasn't a threat to him, so he'd at least let her live. She couldn't just tell him. He wouldn't listen, despite his 'concerned fiancé' act. He hadn't listened earlier and he wouldn't listen now.

Then, she'd remembered CeCe. When she'd met Tony, she'd been acting on a soap opera. Her character had been killed off after a year, but before that, CeCe had taken on a standard trope in soap operas. Amnesia.

She'd played an amnesiac before. She could do it again. It was the perfect option. After all, why go to the trouble of killing her if she couldn't remember any of the incriminating information he thought she'd sold? Why go to the trouble of killing her if, not only didn't she remember who hit her, but she didn't even remember meeting him at all?

She just had to pull it off long enough to run. She could hardly fake amnesia forever. She would slip up eventually and when she did, he would know. Then, he'd finish the job.

She took a deep breath, praying that she was half as good an actress as she always thought she was. This time, her life literally depended on her ability to play the part.

* * *

"I don't want to live with you! I don't even know you!" Celeste crossed her arms over her chest, her eyes filling with tears.

He took a deep breath, trying to stay patient and calm. It wasn't her fault she didn't remember and her fear was real. She'd pretty much just been told she was being sent home to the care of a stranger.

"Celeste, you need to be reasonable. You're still hurt and you can't take care of yourself right now."

She sniffled. "Why can't I stay in the hospital?"

"The doctor thinks it's best if you recover in familiar surroundings. There's nothing they can do for you here anyway." He calmly zipped her suitcase and dropped it on the floor.

They'd kept her in the hospital for two weeks, running every test under the sun to see what was wrong with her. Despite getting the best neurologist he could find, her condition remained a mystery. Her injuries were well on the way to healing, but the last two years of her life remained blank.

"I'm not going." Her face was mutinous, her mouth set in a stubborn line.

He sat next to her on the bed. "Then where exactly are you planning on going? You don't have anyone to take you in."

Her eyes filled with tears, and he knew she was thinking about her mother. Her mother had passed away 18 months before, the victim of a sudden aneurysm. Yesterday, they'd had to tell her that again and the pain in her eyes, on her face, had nearly broken him. It was like she was hearing about it for the first time. If he'd had any doubts before as to the validity of her amnesia, they'd disappeared when she'd dissolved into sobs over the news of her mother's passing.

She blinked away the tears and stared at her lap. "I can stay in a hotel."

"No."

She glared at him before trying again. "You can't make me."

He was sorely tempted to swat her on the butt over the defiance in her voice, but didn't. He imagined she'd be pretty surprised to find out they practiced domestic discipline as well and he'd decided on limiting the amount of bombs dropped on her to one a week. She'd been through enough.

Instead, he did what lawyers did best. He lied. "You're my registered domestic partner, which means I'm legally entitled to make decisions for you when you're incapacitated." He leaned forward and pressed his hand to her knee, trying to ignore her flinch. "I know this is scary, but you need to believe me. I'm only interested in doing what's best for you."

"Yeah, right." She glared at his hand until he moved it. She didn't trust him, not even remotely. Every time he touched her, she acted like he was about to hit her. That was one thing that didn't jive with the memory of the girl he knew. When he first met Celeste, she had been one of the warmest, most open people he knew. The Celeste on the bed in front of him seemed to be made of equal parts skepticism and stubbornness.

They sat in stony silence until one of the orderlies came with the wheelchair to bring her out to his car. When she looked like she was about to protest yet again, he gently picked her up and settled her into the chair without waiting for her to move.

"Relax," he whispered in her ear before pressing a kiss on her forehead. "Remember what the doctor said about familiar surroundings."

She stayed quiet and compliant, right up until they got her to the curb and she saw his car. It was his pride and joy. A custom made jaguar, designed to be both roomy and performance oriented. He'd told himself that he might as well use it. He hadn't driven it for at least a month. In reality, he'd wanted to impress her.

She didn't look impressed. She looked terrified.

"Are you okay?"

She shook her head and gave him another pleading look. "I don't want to go."

He sighed and pulled open the passenger door, his patience wearing thin. "We're not having this conversation again." He pointed to the seat. "In." He used his most dominant voice, the one that told her she was about to get her butt smacked. It usually made her get right back in line.

The defiant look stayed on her face, but she did as he said, slowly climbing into the car, like if she stalled long enough, he'd change his mind. He tried not to be insulted. He was trying to be understanding, but getting her to trust him after her injury was proving a hell of a lot harder than getting her to trust him when they'd first met.

It was almost like she thought he was going to hurt her.

* * *

He was on to her. She was sure of it. Of all cars to pick her up from the hospital in, he'd chosen the very same vehicle that had put her in the hospital in the first place. She hoped she'd recovered from her shock quickly enough to continue playing dumb. She was sure he knew. The only reason he'd brought the car was so he could see her reaction.

Clever bastard. She nearly smirked, but instead, kept her face passive and just a little apprehensive. It wouldn't be unreasonable for her to look nervous about being taken home by a man she allegedly didn't know. She had to restrain another smirk as she realized how technically

correct her statement was. She didn't really know Tony. Sure, she knew he got mixed up with some shady people as part of his job as an attorney. Some of those people were even dangerous.

She'd thought it was him warning her about them, about what they might do to her. In reality, it was him she should have feared.

She needed a plan. Just walking out of Tony's life wasn't enough anymore, not now that he'd tried to run her down. She needed to disappear entirely. She needed a new name, a new identity, and she needed to get money to make all that happen. She also needed to do it in a hurry. She thought she was doing an admirable job so far, but there was no guarantee that she'd be able to pull this act off for long.

It was amazing how much her life had changed in two years, how much she'd changed. She needed to be the girl she was two years ago, the optimistic 24 year old with her whole life ahead of her, who was going to be a famous actress. It was why she'd chosen to set her life in the past. November 24, 2012 was the day she'd been given the offer to star on Coral Street, as the resident bad girl, CeCe Stockton.

Her character had been killed off by the evil criminal mastermind, Vincent Delong after only a year. That was after she hadn't renewed the initial contract, at Tony's insistence. Now, she was dealing with her own evil criminal mastermind, Tony himself. She hoped she'd last a little longer this time around.

There were so many things she needed to remember in order to convince everyone else she'd forgotten them.

"I found a day nurse for you, to take care of you when I'm working," Tony interrupted her train of thought, putting his hand on her knee. She yanked her leg away, ignoring the fission of excitement. Men who tried to kill her didn't get to touch her.

"I don't need a nurse," she muttered, pressing her head to the cool glass of the window. A nurse would definitely put a wrench into her plans. There were so many things she needed. Fake IDs, money to run, a place to go... She couldn't do that if some nurse was trying to take her temperature every five minutes. She doubted he did it out of concern for her.

He was just trying to catch her in a lie.

She was already exhausted. Over the past week, she'd asked all the right questions to convince him that she didn't remember anything. The hardest part had been the part about her

mom. Her tears had been genuine, but they'd been tears of guilt. Using the memory of her dead mother to further her subterfuge had made her feel like a monster.

She tuned back in to whatever he was talking about, which was mainly a listing of all the reasons a day nurse was a good idea. In reality, she knew why he wanted one. He wanted a spy. She simply nodded as though she was coming around to his way of thinking. As usual, he bowled over every single one of her arguments anyway. That was Tony, always needing to be in charge. In the past, she'd enjoyed it.

Right now, it was just plain irritating.

* * *

Their second battle started almost as soon as he got her home. They lived together in a penthouse above one of the casinos he handled. It was a huge apartment, with more than enough room. When he'd led her to the master bedroom and thrown her suitcase on the bed, she'd frozen in the doorway.

"Is this your room?"

He turned back towards her. "It's our room," he corrected gently.

"I..." she studied her hands as though she was nervous. "I'd like to sleep in another room, if that's okay."

He went back to the standard argument. "The doctor said familiar surroundings..."

"But none of this is familiar to me!" She teared up for the third time that day and he felt like a monster. "I don't know you. I don't know this place. I know you know me, but to me, you're a stranger."

He gave a terse nod. "We can compromise, okay?" He took a step towards her, catching her by the hands and holding on tight when she tried to wriggle free. "You can take the room next door for now, but once you settle in, you should move back in here. Is that okay?"

She sniffled and nodded while wiping away tears. "Thank you."

He tugged her back for an impulsive hug, squeezing her gently. For once, she settled into his grip and relaxed. He held on for as long as he could, until they were interrupted by the buzzing of his cell phone.

"That's probably Tom." He caught her confused look. "He's my head of security," he explained, even though she'd met him hundreds of times. "He's working on something for me and he's been calling me all week about it."

"Is it okay if I take a nap?"

"Of course. You go ahead, I'll bring some of your things in later." She nodded and turned away, stepping to the right and out of view. As soon as she was gone, he pulled out his cell phone and dialed Tom back.

The thing Tom had been working on had been directly related to the woman in the next room. He was trying to straighten out the events of that horrible day, three weeks before.

* * *

Three weeks earlier

It couldn't possibly be her in the photo, but it was undeniable. There was Celeste, handing off plans for Carmine Marina's newest Casino to his biggest competitor, Marcus Sander. For nearly a year, a leak in Marina's office had been handing information directly to Marcus Sander. Marcus had been using the info to drive up land prices, steal designs and pretty much put Carmine out of business.

Now, he was looking at a photograph, taken by a PI he'd hired to look into the matter on Carmine's behalf. Sure enough, the woman in the photo was his fiancé, Celeste. She was meeting with one of Marcus's guys, handing over dummy plans for a building that Carmine had no intention of creating.

It had all been a ploy to catch the real perpetrator.

Celeste had never even been a suspect. She claimed his job was over her head and she'd rarely asked him about work. Not to mention, she'd had no reason to steal from him. She was well provided for, with a generous allowance and pretty much anything she needed only a phone call away. He spoiled her rotten because he loved her.

The evidence was mounting. The photo was only the tip of the iceberg. Jack McNally, the PI his assistant had hired, had everything. Recordings of Celeste making phone calls to her

contact with Marcus Sander's office. They'd been short, but incriminating and he'd felt sick as he listened.

"Did you get the plans?"

"Yeah, but it wasn't easy. I'm almost sure he suspects something," Celeste's treacherous voice poured through the line, making him nauseated. "He nearly caught me in his office earlier."

"Can you meet me to hand them over tomorrow?"

"Sure thing."

A short, sweet and utterly incriminating phone call. He'd felt like an idiot. Celeste had been fooling him for a year. She had him completely wrapped around her little finger. He'd never suspected a single thing.

The betrayal had hit him in the pit of his stomach and he'd sat there numbly as Jack had pulled out piece after piece of evidence incriminating Celeste. On top of the photos of her handing off plans and the phone call, there had also been bank accounts in Celeste's name, where regular monthly payments went in, dating back nearly to the month he'd started dating her.

He'd raced home that afternoon to find her painting her toenails in the living room, her pretty face completely innocent of treachery. She'd gone pale when she'd seen the thunderous look in his eyes.

"Tony, what are you doing home so..."

He tossed the envelope at her feet, one of the photos spilling out. She lifted it, her forehead knotting in confusion. "I don't understand."

He leaned down and glared at her. "Then let me explain. You're the one who's been selling information to my client's competitors."

"Tony, I'd never do that!" She stood up, attempting to reach for him and he slapped her hand away.

"Explain the photos, explain the phone calls." He turned away, his voice shaking with rage. "Explain the bank accounts, Celeste. The ones where you put the money you were given, to sell me out." He raked a hand through his hair.

"I can't explain them, Tony, because they're not real." She approached him, trying again to reach for him, her treacherous eyes filling with crocodile tears. The fact that she was still lying, even when she knew she'd been caught, made him explode with rage.

"Get out."

"What?" She'd frozen at his order, as if she couldn't comprehend that he'd actually kick her out of the home they shared. "Tony, you have to calm down. We're getting married in a month."

He let out a laugh that held no humor. "Getting married?" He turned on her. "Why the hell would I marry someone like you? You're tacky trash with high ambitions. Every single person we know thinks so. Do you have any idea how many of our friends laugh at you behind your back?"

"Why are you saying this?" Her voice had broken and the tears had spilled over, but he knew they were fake. He knew she was lying.

"Because it's true! Did you really think I was going to go through with that farce of a wedding? I know you're not the brightest bulb, but why do you think we've already postponed twice?" In reality, it had been for business reasons, but she didn't need to know that.

Tears were streaming down her cheeks. "Why did you ask me then? If you were never going to go through with it."

"To shut you up," he hissed at her, putting all the hatred in his voice he could. "Because I liked screwing you and I hadn't had my fill yet." He lifted her purse off the table and tossed it at her, hands shaking. "Now I have, and you can get the hell out."

She jumped as the purse hit her, but didn't catch it. "Tony, please listen to me!"

"Get out!" He turned his back on her. "Get your ass out of here, whore. If you're smart, you'll just disappear. I can't guarantee my clients, or even I, won't come after you for what you've done. If I were you, I'd leave the city entirely."

With one final sob, she'd spun on her heel and raced for the door, slamming it behind her as she ran. Afterwards, he'd slumped on the couch, deflated and heartbroken. He'd considered that fact that he might have been too harsh, tossing her out with no money and no connections. He'd even called Tom to hunt her down.

Four hours later, he'd gotten the call from the emergency room and his anger had disappeared at the threat to her safety. Now, with a bit more clarity, and considering Celeste's condition, he decided he needed to get to the bottom of what really happened. Celeste couldn't help him, but maybe Tom, his head of security, could.