

One

A tall, dark and bulky figure moves easily through the dimly lit bar, his Oxfords announcing his arrival with audible clicks on the wood floors of *Prime*, our favorite gathering place. His goatee is neatly trimmed, his hair sports the markings of a fresh cut, and his smile is bright as he approaches our table. He must have come straight from work; he's always in a great mood after a day of destroying people's lives.

What the hell is he doing here? Maybe he's not really here. Maybe this is a nightmare. Maybe I'll wake up any second... nope.

His hands dwarf my shoulders as he gives me a squeeze and bends over me to brush his lips across my cheek. I angle away from the woody scent of cologne and the hint of minty breath wafting over me.

"Hello, Evangeline. You look tired."

"I haven't gone by that name in thirty years, Preston. Smart guy like you should be able to pick up on that."

Much to my chagrin, he pulls out the chair next to me and plops himself into it. I shoot a pained look across the table at Morgan, the bestest friend I have in the world and the only reason I would put up with Preston Reid, but she doesn't see it.

Or she sees it, but as usual she ignores it. Next to her is Nate, the love of her life, and the two of them are so gaga over each other tonight, it's sickening.

An hour ago, my evening was perfect—the usual Monday night date with Morgan at our usual table at the usual place. When she called earlier to ask if Nate could drop by for a few minutes, I thought nothing of it. I've known him as long as I've known Morgan, so I'm always happy to see him. Plus, he always buys a round of drinks.

But Nate is still *dropping by* and I'm irritated. Now Preston is here and I'm seething with anger. They both know I hate him.

"What's goin' on man?" Preston's oversized hands envelope Nate's grasp.

"It's all good," Nate replies, actually taking his eyes off of Morgan. "Grab the waitress. Order up."

Before Preston can summon her, the waitress drops by to take orders. And flirt. Preston gives off a vibe that women respond to like Pavlov's Dog. She's young, perky and curvy, her tawny skin on display in a crop top and super short skirt. Her huge rack and long blonde weave make her exactly his type. I can't stop my eyes from rolling at her fake laughter at his lame jokes.

"I'll take another one of these," I say, pointing toward my empty glass.

"If you're trying to get drunk, you'll need something a lot stronger than Chardonnay."

I sigh and roll my eyes, twisting my body in the chair so I angle away from him. "Good advice. Maybe I can drink enough to tune out the sound of your voice."

He laughs like he always does, like it's the most hilarious joke he's ever heard. He orders a fancy craft beer from cute busty waitress and she bounces away, looking over her shoulder to make sure Preston is watching her ass. He is.

"Pig," I mutter, then turn my attention to the beaming couple. "Date night has been hijacked and I am not happy about it."

"Well, you're both here because we... have an announcement." Morgan hesitates, shifts her gaze to Nate and then back to the two of us. She practically explodes when she lays the news on us: "Nathan and I have decided to get married!"

Morgan was literally a drama queen in high school, majored in Theater Arts at University of Central Florida, and is Casting Director at Universal Studios. Theatrics is in her blood, but it's not like this news is a grand reveal. Nate and Morgan have been attached at the hip since the third grade.

There are eight of us in our group of friends. Some of us met in college, some of us worked together, but Nate, Morgan, Preston and I are the core group. We grew up on the same street in a quiet Orlando suburb. We all went to the same elementary, junior high and high school. Our parents are all friends.

I went to UCF, then went on to Barry School of Law. Preston floundered at Rollins College for a year and then decided to join Morgan, Nate and I at UCF where, for no apparent reason—because he was never interested in law before— he earned a degree in Legal Studies and joined me at Barry.

He was in nearly every one of my classes at Barry and made sure to sit behind or beside me every day. Probably to copy off of my exams. He chose to work for a firm that directly competes with mine, which I'm positive he did to spite me. His office is across town but we're often in the courtroom, arguing opposite sides of the same case. He has delighted in kicking my ass on every one.

Did I mention I can't *stand* Preston Reid?

If I'm being honest, we *do* make a cute couple. At 5'7", I'm the perfect height for him, even in heels. We both have toasted caramel skin and brown eyes, though mine are more a deep espresso and his have flecks of gold. He's always maintained a short, suave hairstyle and I keep my pixie cut on point. We are both well into professional careers with rewarding personal lives.

So yeah, Preston and I make a really cute couple.

Unfortunately, we make a really cute couple that fights *all the time*. We tried it. It didn't work.

I sip my wine and wait for the happy couple to stop making eyes at each other. Preston takes a long drag off of his beer, his eyes dancing around the semi dark bar. Probably picking out victims.

"I mean, congrats and everything. That's really awesome but... what does this news have to do with Preston and me? I get one night a week to spend with Morgan without having to hang out with the guys."

Morgan sits up, her freshly twisted locs falling forward. She's glowing as she clasps her hands together in what I can only guess is glee. Inwardly, I groan. There's no telling what she's about to say.

"So we were thinking...and let us know what you think...but we were thinking..." She pauses and turns to Nate for support. Nate softly laughs at her and lays an arm across the back of her chair. Leaning forward, he rests his forearm on the table.

"We're thinking of going away for the wedding."

"Like eloping?" I squeak, choking on my drink. "Like I don't get to see you get married?"

"Oh no, no, sweetheart," Morgan says. "I mean all of us. Our friends, our family, we all go away for a few days. It'll be like a combination vacation—wedding—reception trip. Nate and I would cover the hotel stay. Everyone would just have to get themselves to...wherever. What do you think?"

She stares at me with this look in her eyes that's hopeful and beautiful. She wants me to not only love her idea but *fall in love* with it. She's the dreamer, the one that wishes up things. I'm the bubble buster, the realist, the one who brings her down to earth.

I can't find a thing to complain about, though. It's not like I couldn't use a vacation. Even thinking about time away makes my mouth water. Nate is part owner of a private Pediatrics clinic. He and Morgan live in Vizcaya, a gated community full of NBA players and famous musicians. He's loaded. If he's paying, I'm in.

But...I have a *really* bad feeling about why Preston and I, and none of the other friends, are here tonight.

"It sounds like a great idea, actually. Do you have any ideas about where and when?"

Nate gives Preston a look that turns my blood cold. "We thought we'd leave that bit of research and planning up to our Best Man..." He winks at Preston. "And Maid of Honor," he finishes, grinning at me.

No. Nope. No, no, no. I open my mouth to lodge a loud complaint, but Nate cuts me off. "Look, there's a lot of ways we could do this and Morgan could be Bridezilla and I could be the hands-off groom, but we thought it would be fun if our best friends planned our wedding getaway. You know us better than anyone and you'll come up with some stuff that we wouldn't have even thought of. So we thought we'd present the idea tonight and see if you're up to it."

"I'm in," says Preston. "We could do Hawaii on the cheap. Like a luau and a pig roast would probably be—"

"Oh, hell the *fuck*, no!" I say...well, more like shriek, and much louder than I intended. Half of Prime's finely dressed patrons turn to stare at the screaming girl. I'm sure my caramel complexion has a nice undertone of beet red and I feel like I'm overheating.

"My best friend is not getting married in a cheap grass skirt while a roast pig with a fucking apple stuck in its mouth is the centerpiece. You're out of your mind if you think I'm helping you pull that off."

"It's an idea, Evangel-"

"Stop calling me that!" I glare at Preston. My hackles are up and he knows it. This is our dance. This has been our dance for the last twenty years. "My name is Angie. You're the only person that calls me Evangeline and I'm sick of it!"

Morgan reaches across the table and lays a hand on mine. I grab my drink and guzzle the rest of it. It barely splashes down my throat before I slam the glass back onto the table and shoot my arm into the air, waving at the waitress from across the room.

"There's obviously a lot to decide and talk about. Morgan and I will let you know what we're looking for. I won't say money's no object, but—" Nate looks at Preston while he says this last part. "Hawaii's played. We want everyone to have a great time and celebrate with us. That's rule number one."

"I know this is a lot to put on you, but..." Morgan sighs. "If you help us with this, after the wedding we'll never ask you to hang out with each other again."

"Promise?" Preston and I ask at the same time. I cut my eyes at him; he glares at me.

The waitress drops by with another drink for me and Morgan and a fresh beer for Preston. Nate doesn't drink when he's on call so she refills his water glass.

I slurp a mouthful of wine. It's warm going down. I feel a little loose and think maybe this third glass wasn't such a good idea.

Preston flirts with the waitress some more, pulling a gem from his collection of unfunny jokes. She laughs... loud, long and obnoxiously. Odds on getting her number for a booty call, then avoiding her after that? One hundred to one.

Pig. Not that I care. I hate him.

I don't know why I let Preston Reid get under my skin.

Two

"Then Preston threw out that bullshit Hawaiian wedding idea. Mom, it was *sooo* corny. He actually suggested a pig roast! Gross. Nate said no, though. Thank God." My mother laughs on the other end of the phone line. We live fifteen minutes from each other, but I talk to her every day on my way to work.

On top of the drinks I had last night, when Nate came off duty, he bought a round of shots to celebrate the engagement, so I'm dragging ass today. Unfortunately, I have to be in the office. The partners will be assigning new cases and I'm praying for some easy ones. I'm overloaded.

I make the firm sound like an important, prestigious place, and while I'm happy to have a job that makes ends meet, it's not all that. Through a grant from the state of Florida, we help residents fight evictions, utility shut offs, discrimination cases, landlord disputes— basically a step above Legal Aid. Every so often, we land an actual case, a car accident or a lawsuit (one that will incur a settlement for damages), but those usually go to the partners. First and second year associates like Troy—recent Barry graduate, a new hire and Preston's brother—get to do the grunt work I give them. It's really the only perk of being a Senior Associate.

Preston and I graduated in the same class, but in law school it's all about the percentages. I was in the top ten percent, something to be proud of. Preston graduated in the top fifty percent. Still a feat, but he got there by taking my study guides, where I'd written all of the answers. He worked his family contacts— his uncle is some big shot New York lawyer, and clerked with a large firm every summer. I didn't have any contacts, so I clerked with Flanning & Rourke, the firm I work for now. After he passed the Bar Exam, Preston went to work for the Perry Law Group, a downtown boutique law firm. I heard they offered him a nice hourly rate, plus bonuses and a secretary.

A secretary! I have Troy, but only when they're not making him snake the drain in the kitchen or lug boxes from storage.

When a landlord wants to evict a tenant, the case goes through Perry. That's the kind of law they practice. The tenant usually comes to us and if we can't mediate, we go to court. Perry's top pick to go against cases assigned to me?

Their star, Preston Reid.

I'm still ranting to my mother as I pull into the parking lot. A maroon Honda parks next to me and Troy bounces out of his car and waves a greeting. I sign off with my mom and toss the phone into my bag, grab my heels from the backseat and walk toward the building with him.

"Heard you hung with my brother last night."

"It wasn't one of the finer points of my evening. Did he tell you about the wedding we're supposed to plan together? Is that the craziest thing you ever heard?"

Troy laughs, his head bobbing a nod. At the rear door, he pulls a tattered badge from his pocket, swipes it across the reader and pulls the door open after it beeps. I walk in and he follows me down the hall into the kitchen.

"You heard about the stupid Hawaii idea?"

I sit in one of the chairs around a table covered in sweet treats—cinnamon rolls, cookies and the like. The receptionist is an older woman that loves to bake. I kick off my sneakers and slip on my heels.

"He mentioned that you weren't into it." I snort and he adds, "Okay, he said you *really* weren't into it. But he also said Nate was the one that nixed the idea."

"Because Nate has class. A pig roast? Really?"

I join him at the coffee pot with a paper cup. He fills my cup, leaving room for cream and sugar, which I add generously. If I'm not going to eat that crap on the table, I'm going to drink some sugary sweet coffee.

"I'm not looking forward to this, Troy. He's going to fight every idea I have, even though I know Morgan the best, because it's my idea. He's going to plan the most..." I shudder. "The most gauche and déclassé bachelor party for Nate, and—"

"Bachelor parties are pretty déclassé. Only women do that fancy, law abiding, upstanding shit."

"And when is the last time you went to a Bachelorette party?" I laugh, thinking of the last party I planned. I hired a deliciously hunky, dark skinned cowboy. I distinctly remember his rippling muscles, his sexy deep voice, how he grabbed me and spun me into his arms while he ground his...

I snap back to find Troy staring, one eyebrow lifted in mild curiosity. I wipe what must be an odd expression from my face. "Anyway, I know he'll get a kick out of messing with me and he will not pass up an opportunity to piss me off."

"See, that's it. Stop letting him know you're pissed off. Any reaction makes him work harder to get to you."

"I can't help it. He just..." My hands clench, almost crushing the cup in my fingers. I loosen my grip. "I don't know why he's so invested in driving me crazy."

Troy's chuckle is deep in his throat as he stirs sugar into his black coffee. He turns, grabbing his black attaché case that is already scuffed. "You know why. You don't want to accept it, but you know exactly why."

"Oh, shut up." I roll my eyes, grabbing my own scuffed case and stomp toward my tiny, cramped office, where I don't have a secretary or a view of downtown Orlando, just my old shitty car parked in a gravel parking lot.

"You're wrong," I toss over my shoulder, watching Troy dip into his miniscule cubicle. "That man is not in love with me."

At the Case Assignment meeting, I'm assigned to a nasty discrimination dispute between a tenant and a slumlord. There's good documentation and the case could bring a hefty settlement for our client. Greg hands me the file but doesn't let go when I grab it.

My eyes meet his and I already know what he's about to tell me. "The landlord is with Perry. The case is assigned to Reid. I'd give it to someone else but you know these cases like the back of your hand. We need a win here, Angie. Can you do this?"

I swallow hard and nod with confidence but my heart is at my knees. Preston is good at his job and I honestly don't think I can beat him.

But I just promised that I would.

Fair Housing Law is my bread and butter and I'm flattered that my bosses recognize that. I win cases day in and day out, more than any other attorney at this firm. I excel at turning up shreds of evidence and getting a settlement for my clients. Most other attorneys play fair. They follow the letter and the spirit of the law. We both present good cases and either let the mediator or the judge decide the fate.

Preston seems to only care about money. He bends the law so far, it nearly breaks. He doesn't have a soft, compassionate bone in his body, and that's what makes him good at what he does, in his world. He'll go for the jugular if he has to. And he has had to.

And maybe that's what scares me so badly about getting into a courtroom with him. I'm so afraid he's going to bring up that time I peed my pants in the third grade that I freeze up.

I get back to my desk, hauling documents and paperwork, already mentally shuffling around my workload. On top of this new case and my current cases, I also have to plan a romantic destination wedding with him. I groan as I drop an armful of work onto my already cluttered desk.

My life just became *All Preston Reid, All the Time*. Seriously. *Fuck My Life*.

