

CHAPTER ONE

They say a picture is worth a thousand words, but as Merrit Callahan peered at the photo blinking back at her from the website of *The Chicago Tribune's* society section, she could only come up with one word: liar. Okay, maybe jerk-faced, lying bastard would be more appropriate, but unlike her more verbose family members, Merrit believed in an economy of words—along with everything else. Besides, she'd rather not have to think of Grant Hillier's rejection again. She was over his deceit. The callous words he'd thrown at her when he'd broken their engagement no longer stung, and the embarrassment she'd suffered was dead and buried. Well, at least during daylight hours.

“It's scandalous what that man did to our family.”

Merrit barely caught her mother's words as she pushed the phone away from her ear so she could slide on her fitted suit jacket. Unfortunately, even muffled, the comment left a sour taste in her mouth. It was always about family, about the Callahan name and the reputation of the advertising agency her father and brother owned. In the two months since the break-up, her parents and siblings had acted as if Grant's defection was a personal attack against the Callahan clan rather than a rejection of the misfit among them. While she appreciated her tight-knit family rallying around her, their indignation over the broken engagement was suffocating her. They blamed Grant for not loving her enough, when no one wanted to admit the truth: Perhaps she wasn't the easiest person to love.

The humiliation of the events of the past few months sent Merrit scrambling seven hundred miles from Chicago to Baltimore where she was supervising a financial audit of a professional football team, the Baltimore Blaze. Apparently, it wasn't far enough away.

Clutching her cell phone between her shoulder and her ear, she fastened on a slim, silver watch, tucking it neatly beneath the cuff of her silk blouse.

“I’m sorry you didn’t get your society wedding, Mom. I’m sure Addison will pick out someone more reliable.” Merrit’s younger sister, the Callahan Agency’s talented art director, already had a swath of devoted men trailing in her wake. Surely none of them would find her glamorous sister lacking.

“Merrit, that’s not fair. It was never about the wedding. It was about you. And Grant. He was a part of our family—of the agency—for over three years. You were such a wonderful couple. I thought you were both happy together. Until...until...” Her mother’s voice broke and Merrit felt her disappointment sizzle through the phone like an electric shock.

“Until he married someone else,” Merrit whispered as she glanced once more at the picture of her former lover smiling at his new bride. She clicked off her iPad and stuffed it into her leather computer bag, but the image still burned the back of her retinas.

“Oh, Merrit, how could he do that? He was supposed to marry *you* at the end of the summer.”

Merrit swallowed around the lump in throat. “In case it wasn’t obvious from the picture, Mom, she’s having his baby.”

Even that hadn’t been a surprise to Merrit. Things in the bedroom had cooled down months before their breakup, but she’d done what she’d always done, buried herself in her work so as not to have to confront what would turn out to be a very messy reality. Merrit didn’t do messy; she left that for the rest of her family of creative glad-handlers and mad men. It was one of the reasons she’d become a partner in a C.P.A. firm, because working with numbers was neat, orderly and, most of all, they didn’t lie.

“Honestly, Mom, it all worked out for the best. It’s better to find out he’s unfaithful before we got to the altar, right?” It was easier to dismiss the unpleasant incident rather than rip the Band-Aid off and rehash everything. With luck, her mother would drop the topic and Merrit could get to work. She shoved her feet into her Jimmy Choo pumps, the added height of the three inch heels making her feel less vulnerable in her five-foot-four inch body.

“I’ll say!” Her mother’s anguish had morphed into barely contained fury. “He was using you! He wanted access to our family and to the agency so he could start up his own firm. While he was doing his assistant, Kylee—on company time, no less—he was busy poaching clients from your father. Your brother has vowed to ruin him, he’s so angry.”

“More likely Blake’s mad that he didn’t get his own shot at Kylee.” Her brother believed that all women worshipped him. To the utter amazement of his two sisters, most women actually did.

“Merrit! Stop making excuses for Grant. He hurt you. He lied to all of us. I’m positive the whole relationship was just a ruse.”

Ouch. Of course, it wouldn’t be the first time a man had duped her into thinking he was in love with her. Not that her family knew anything about that crushing event.

Grabbing her insulated lunch bag and a bottle of water from the fridge, Merrit headed for the door of the condo her accounting firm had rented from the Blaze for the duration of the audit. It was better to let her family think what they wanted. She knew the truth. In hindsight, she believed she’d known subconsciously that Grant had used her to get a leg up at work, to gain greater access to her father and brother. But the situation had been mutually beneficial. With a man by her side, her interfering family accepted her for who she was, no longer trying to mold her into becoming one of them. Her error had been not learning from a previous mistake and

actually believing Grant loved her. Instead, his brutal words still haunted her when she closed her eyes at night, reinforcing her inner doubts.

“At first I thought you were shy, more reserved than the rest of your crazy family. You’re attractive and you have a mind like a steel trap, but that’s it. Scratch the surface and you’re nothing more,” he’d lashed out at her. *“I need more, Merrit. I need a woman who actually possesses a heart and knows how to use it, and that’s not you. You’re like a cold, boring, automated doll. Hell, even sex with you is routine!”*

Merrit had been too numb to respond which had only served to make him angrier. The fact of the matter was, she’d been vivacious and passionate once, back when she let her heart rule her actions. Back when she’d had a heart to shatter.

“Merrit, are you listening to me?” Her mother’s voice jerked her back to her morning routine. She pulled the front door closed, carefully locking the deadbolt. “Yes, Mom,” she lied, hoping her mother had changed subjects by now.

“I sent the midnight blue Marc Jacobs dress for you to wear tonight. The one that shows off your back. And carry the silver Kate Spade purse. I packed it with the matching shoes. Hopefully, your brother will remember to hang the dress up as soon as he arrives at the hotel later today or it will be horribly wrinkled from the flight.” Her mother was predictable if nothing else. When the real world overwhelmed Claire Callahan, she channeled her anxiety into micro-managing the lives of her children. “Your brother is wearing his Hugo Boss tux with the blue tie. You’ll look perfect together.”

“Jeez, Mom, we’re not going to the prom. I don’t understand why I have to go to this event with Blake, anyway. He’s only flying in because he’s best friends with the Blaze’s future

owner which gives him greater access to schmoozing with potential clients. He doesn't need me there. Besides, I'm pretty sure it's a conflict of interest for me to be at a team charity event."

"The gala isn't organized by the team. It's a fundraiser for a charity the head coach's wife spearheads. And you're not representing your accounting firm, you're representing the agency. The one everyone in your family works for, but you."

"Please don't start on this again, Mom. Anyway, I'm sure Blake can easily find some arm candy. This city is nicknamed Charm City. It's as if the founding fathers knew he was coming."

"He doesn't need arm candy when he has a perfectly beautiful little sister he can escort. Think of it as a public service to all the women of Baltimore. You're saving at least one broken heart this weekend."

Merrit chuckled in spite of her mother's heavy handedness. Blake was being sent to check up on her and there was no way of getting around it. Her heels tapped along the concrete sidewalk as she promised to call home the next day with details of the gala. Clicking the button on her key fob to unlock the doors to her Sebring convertible, she tossed her cell phone into her purse.

"Son of a bitch!"

The sound of a male voice piercing the early quiet of the neighborhood startled Merrit, making her stumble on her high heels before she caught herself against her car. Glancing over her shoulder, she spied a man jiggling the knob on the front door next to hers. Merrit quickly righted herself, reaching for her car door. This particular section of condos was owned by the Blaze to be used for players whose families lived out of town. But it was two weeks before training camp and few of the players were around. Whoever was peering in the front windows of

the adjacent condo probably wasn't supposed to be there. She needed to be securely in her car before he realized he had company.

“Damn it,” he swore again.

Unconsciously, Merrit turned her head for another peek. The man slid his hands over his shorts, apparently looking for something in his pocket. He didn't resemble the run of the mill burglar. In fact, he looked like one of the ripped models her sister used to advertise men's underwear. He had on a pair of Brooks running shoes, a brand she knew to be expensive because they were one of her brother's clients. The rest of him was dressed in black nylon running shorts and nothing else except a sprinkling of sweat. A head of thick, sandy brown hair—mussed from his run or his fingers, she wasn't sure—sat atop broad shoulders and a sculpted back. Merrit took a moment to commit the man's well muscled physique to memory—just in case she needed to report it to the police, she told herself. Her erratic breathing must have alerted him to her presence because he turned around slowly, an *'aw shucks'* expression briefly flickering over his face before he headed toward her.

A feeling of light-headedness nearly brought Merrit to her knees. Her eyes roamed over the well muscled arms and beautiful chest to his trim waist, honing in on the small green shamrock tattoo peeking out above the waistband of his shorts. One that exactly matched the shamrock she'd had tattooed above her own hip bone. She didn't bother looking up at his face because she already knew it by heart. Just as she knew the feel of his firm lips on her own, the taste of his skin, the brush of his unshaved face and his musky scent. Worse, she knew firsthand the mockery that would be reflected in his coffee eyes. Mockery she'd once mistaken for something else.

“This isn’t what it looks like,” he was saying, but his words sounded to Merrit as if they were echoing out of the end of a pipe. “I picked up the wrong keys when I went out for my run and I left my cell phone inside on the charger. Would you mind if I borrowed yours to make a quick—”

He stopped mid-sentence and mid-stride holding both hands up, palms out. Merrit realized she was mirroring his pose, her hands at the ready to push him away. The gasping sound she heard was coming from her own throat as her ribs continued to squeeze tightly around her lungs. She saw the moment recognition dawned on his face; his lips beginning to form a word. As if the angels sensed her panic, a surge of adrenalin washed away the cement-like feeling in Merrit’s limbs. Heart racing, she jumped into her car, jammed the key in the ignition and drove off before things really got messy and she passed out.