

Pros & Cons

Chapter 1

EDITED

“What do you say we head out?”

This was a bold statement coming from a man who wore a wedding ring on his finger. Carl McKinsey was an arrogant multi-millionaire with major stocks in nearly every Fortune 500 company. He also underpaid his staff, and on nights like tonight, liked to cheat on his wife with whoever would give him the time of day.

“I don’t know.” I bit my lip and looked down, playing at being coy. His old-fashioned was still half full, and I knew I had to stall until he finished it. The bar was crowded enough that our bar stools were touching, and I kept my voice low so that he had to lean in forward to hear me.

He tried his best to seduce me, buying me drinks and bragging about his achievements, not noticing that my eyes glazed over as he spoke. His gaze was so focused on my exposed cleavage that I could have grown a second head in the past thirty minutes, and he wouldn’t have noticed. In fact, he didn’t notice the little pill I slipped in his drink when he leaned forward to cop a feel of my ass. If he’d attempted to buy anyone else at the bar a drink, they would’ve laughed off his sleazy attempts and left. Unfortunately for him, he’d approached me.

I must have paused for too long because he followed it up with, “Come on, baby. I’ll make it worth your while. I’m sure you’ve never had it as good as I’m about to give it to you.”

I ignored the urge to sneer at his unfounded confidence. Instead, I plastered the closest semblance of a smile I could muster on my face and mentally prepared myself for what came after. Hopefully, I’d be in my bed underneath my blue fuzzy blanket in no longer than two hours, tops. I tapped my fingers against the table and hummed, still pretending to contemplate his offer. He shot me a wink before tipping his head back and downing his drink, along with the rest of the Rohypnol with it.

“Lead the way.” I leaned forward and whispered in his ear, grimacing internally at his alcohol breath and his hazy eyes. He took my hand and helped me down from the bar stool, tossing the bartender a couple hundred dollar bills. I walked ahead of him, making sure my dress was hiked up high whilst wiggling my hips unnecessarily.

He slurred his words and stumbled his footsteps as we walked out but to anyone looking, he would only appear heavily drunk. I would be worried if he was driving, but his chauffeur stood outside the private entrance of the bar, ready to usher us into the back seat of his Rolls Royce. I happened to know he owned a couple of limousines, but he must have thought the Rolls Royce would be a more inconspicuous choice.

Twenty minutes and a car ride with his hand steadily creeping higher and higher up my thighs later, we made it to a hotel lobby. A B-class hotel, where no one was likely to recognize him. He didn’t stop at the front desk, heading straight to the elevator. That along with the fact that he didn’t communicate with his chauffeur strengthened my

resolve for what I was about to do. This wasn't a drunken mistake for him, it was pre-mediated.

I took a deep breath as he herded me inside. I inwardly cringed at our reflection in the mirror, always surprised to see myself in these situations. My usual understated look was replaced with red lips, red hair, and red stiletto heels, with a dress so tight it would make my mother faint if she saw me. She probably wouldn't recognize me if she saw me like this, which was just as well. It meant no one else would either.

The second the elevator door closed, he all but pounced at me. I swallowed past the sick feeling in my throat and tried to remain pliant against the wall. As he licked all over my neck, I struggled to focus on anything else. Almost a year of doing this made it easier to dissociate and just go through the motions. They never cared much about reciprocation, so I just kept my arms by my sides and tried to steady my breathing.

I closed my eyes and pictured a wave crashing into the shore. Constant and rhythmic. I matched my breath to the ebb and flow of the tide. In and out. The sick feeling in my chest slowly faded and I felt more at ease. This was just a practiced game that I just had to go through the steps of to reach my reward. I could already feel his movements getting more and more sluggish, which meant this would be over sooner than I expected.

The elevator doors opened with a chime, and I gave him a smile as he slipped his hand into mine and led me down the hallway. He managed to tap the card on the electronic reader and pull me inside before he stumbled and fell forward, caging me against the wall.

He slurred incoherently with his head buried against my neck, trying and failing to stand up straight. Kicking the door closed behind me, I pushed him down onto the bed and straddled him. Even in his intoxicated state, he smiled up at me lazily.

“You’re feisty, huh? I’m going to…” he trailed off as he struggled to keep his eyes open. At this stage, there was no way he would remember anything tomorrow. I climbed off him and watched as he rolled over and buried his head in a pillow.

Reaching into his pocket, I grabbed his wallet and a few loose notes. When I started, I wouldn’t touch the cash, worried they’d notice it’d gone missing and remember who they were with. I learned very fast that these types of men wouldn’t notice a couple of thousand dollars missing, let alone a couple of hundred dollars. I slipped the notes into my purse, before randomly picking out a card from his wallet.

Looking over the card, I slowly enunciated each number in my head, memorizing the melody. Having number-sound synesthesia turned any number sequence I saw into musical notes. That coupled with an absurd inability to forget a melody I’ve heard makes it near impossible for me to forget numbers if I try. A useless trick to have, but I learned a long time ago to turn lemons into lemonade.

When I was sure it had stuck, I placed the wallet back in his pocket and slipped out.

Thirty minutes and a quick stop for some late-night gyros later, I was finally nestled on my couch. I held the gyro in one hand while browsing the web with the other. My Amazon seller account already had a few orders I would have to place and send through to the clients. I never would have guessed how easy it was to steal. It only took an Amazon account that re-sold luxury items under a fake name and I was set. I'd purchase the items from the retailer using the stolen credit cards and send them directly to my clients, then pocket the money they sent me through Amazon. I still had the information from a couple of credit cards that I had collected last week and have not used yet. I found it smarter to wait for a while before using the accounts, just to decrease the likelihood of anyone tracing it back to me.

I closed my Amazon account and focused instead on researching who I could target next. Last week was a busy week for me, but even then money was a little tight. It didn't help that news of scandals had been surprisingly low for the past week, which narrowed my pool of suspects. If push came to shove, I could always just go old-fashioned and take my pick from an upscale bar, but it was harder to determine whether or not they deserved it that way.

When I picked up my phone, three missed call notifications stared up at me from the locked screen. I ignored the pang in my chest when I recognized the first number. I had deleted their number a while ago, but I still had their digits memorized by heart. The urge to call back to see what they wanted was almost impossible to ignore, but I picked up the takeout carton and shoveled more halloumi fries into my mouth instead.

I went for the easy option instead and called back my second missed call. It rang for less than three seconds before she picked up.

The ruckus down the line oddly comforted me. Orphanages and foster homes often get a bad rep, but Clementine's foster home was the warmest part of my childhood. "Give me a second," she yelled before I heard the opening and closing of a door which meant that she had escaped the bustle of the kitchen to the porch. "Amaia, baby, how are you? It's about time you answered my call."

"I'm good, Auntie Clem. How are you? How's everyone?" I deflected. I felt bad lying to the only mother figure I had left, but I didn't know how to begin explaining how not good I was.

"I'm good, Maia. Can you believe we have fifteen kiddos living with us right now?" She went off on a tangent on the new kids' names, which I promptly forget, and on who from the kids needed what, which I make a mental note of. I felt the urge to get up and pace as she talked, but I could barely stand up straight in my micro apartment without bumping my head. The most I could do was spin around in circles while slightly hunched over, and even then I'd probably knock into everything I own.

Fifteen minutes and a dozen pictures sent through Messages later, I managed to steer the conversation to what I had called for. "I just wanted to make sure that you aren't having any trouble with accessing money from the bank account."

"Oh, it's perfect. I can't thank you enough for setting it up, baby. I don't know how we'd cope without you," she said. Handling Clementine's foster home's financial accounts was initially a purely selfless act, but that didn't last for long. That changed when it became the account I used as the deposit for my amazon account, just to make sure that nothing could be traced back to me. The fact that I was padding the account with most of the money from my scams did nothing to elevate the guilt. Neither did the fact

that thanks to Clementine's partner, Clara, we had a social media page dedicated to raising funds for the foster home, and my scams could be passed off as donations.

“You should come to visit soon. I'm sure Alex will be fine staying alone for a while.” This time, the guilt hit right in the throat. I knew, realistically, that I needed to come clean sooner rather than later, but the thought of adding another burden on Clem's never-ending list of responsibilities was unfathomable. Instead, I promised her I would and ended the call.

Once upon a time, Clementine was my sounding board. I shared anything and everything with her, ever since she took me in when I was eight years old up till my impulse decision to move across the country to follow someone. Even for my first few months in New York City, before everything imploded around me, I still called her every night, checking up on things back home and telling her everything about the big city.

I stood up and crab-walked up the stairs to my loft bed, well aware that if I started on a train of self-pity it would swallow me whole. I couldn't fool myself that what I was doing was ideal, but it made ends meet. That was more than I could wish for.

BEFORE EDITING

“What do you say we head out?”

That was a bold statement coming from a man who wore a ring on his finger. Carl McKinsey was an arrogant multi-millionaire with major stocks in nearly every Fortune 500 company. He also underpaid his staff and, on nights like tonight, liked to cheat on his wife with whoever would give him the time of day.

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"Oh, it's perfect. I can't thank you enough for setting it up, baby. I don't know how we'd cope without you," she said. The guilt punched me right in the throat. Handling Clementine's foster home's financial accounts was initially a purely selfless act, but that didn't last for long. Now I used the account as the deposit for the amazon store I ran, just to make sure that nothing could be traced back to me. The fact that I was padding the account with most of the money from my scams did nothing to elevate the guilt.

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