

# The Gangster's Game

Jodie Leigh Murray



Jodie Leigh Murray Books

The Gangster series is best enjoyed in order:

The Gangster's Daughter

The Gangster's Mistake

The Gangster's Game

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# Chapter One

*Cassie*

The waves of the Atlantic Ocean crashed against the sandy beach almost violently, before retreating with a gentle pull. It captured my attention as I stood with my bare feet buried in the wet sand, the water brushing against my shins each time it surged. Even living on the upper west coast, I rarely went to the beach. Maybe I would if the weather compared to this.

As soon as Naomi, Hannah, and I got off the plane in Myrtle Beach, I knew Cape Haven had significance. More so when the ferry let us off on the island.

The balmy September day on the secluded island, off the coast of South Carolina, was unmatched by any weather I had experienced even while growing up in southern California. If I knew what heaven felt like, this had to be it.

I was glad I'd worn a pair of cutoffs, though I was in no immediate danger of getting wet. The weather here was perfect. An ideal opportunity to wear a bikini, I mused. I had thrown a loose-fitting knit top over it, but it barely concealed anything. I hadn't been able to wear this type of clothing since my last visit with my dad two years ago, which filled me with a touch of sadness. Too long.

The beach had grown increasingly crowded during the few minutes I had been standing there.

When I called Riley to tell her we'd landed in Myrtle Beach and were catching the ferry, she shrieked in my ear with excitement. For the island to be crowded with visitors after Labor Day was

rare, especially nearly two weeks after the holiday. With the weather being unseasonably warm, people were eager to squeeze in last-minute vacations. Looking around, I saw lots of children playing in the waves and others building sandcastles. People lined the beach, sunbathing in chairs or on colorful beach towels. Others played games like frisbee and volleyball, and I couldn't blame them. I breathed deeply, the smell of sunscreen and suntan lotion mixed with briny sea air and it tickled my nose.

The only difference was me.

I could have stood there staring out at the ocean all day, but I had flown across the country for a reason. My best friend had found the love of her life and would marry him tomorrow. Of all the people I knew, she deserved this the most. I sucked in happy tears just as my phone vibrated in my back pocket.

It took less than a minute for me to read through the text from Evan. I would have laughed at the absurdity of him calling it quits after only seven months of casual dating if it hadn't been delivered via text. Fury surged through me. Half a year wasted on a man who couldn't even be bothered to break up with me in person or, at the very least, pick up the phone to call me. I wished I could be upset about the fact that he'd dumped me, but the manner in which he did it infuriated me.

Retreating a step, I drew back my arm as though I would throw my phone as far out into the water as I could. No. He wasn't worth it. I growled and pulled back, before shoving it into the back pocket of my cutoffs with enough silent curses to make myself feel better. As I did, I caught sight of a trio of men walking by, the one closest to me immediately capturing my attention.

Trapped by the intensity of his eyes, my breath hitched and held. I couldn't tell if it was the electric blue or the way they pierced through me, but I had never seen such a vivid color before. His gaze met mine as he neared, almost as if he slowed down while passing. He had dark brown hair with a slight curl, hanging nearly to his shoulders. The dark slashes of his eyebrows

were raised.

Exactly the type of man I would have pounced on in my younger years. While his eyes lingered on me, the upward curve of his lips screamed danger. If I wasn't mistaken, my heartbeat had quickened. It had been a long time since a man had made my pulse race like this. True, he wore only a pair of athletic shorts, exposing his sculpted chest to my roaming eyes, but there were plenty of men on this beach dressed the same way. I caught a brief glimpse of the dark swirling tattoos covering part of his chest and arm before I heard Hannah yelling and waving from halfway to the beach house.

As soon as I broke my gaze away from him, I felt a sense of loss. What the heck is wrong with me? I got dumped less than a minute ago. I shouldn't be ogling other men. But as soon as the thought slipped into my head, my eyes glided back to him while I walked toward the row of houses along the beach. He seemed to have the same idea, turning his head to watch me as he continued down the beach. Now, all three of them were looking at me.

I've never been the type of woman to blush and shy away from attentive men, but having all of them looking at me suddenly made me self-conscious, especially since there were so many other women on this beach, most of them dressed in less clothing than I was. I needed to focus on where I was walking before I accidentally stomped on someone sunbathing, smiling to myself as I turned back to Hannah.

She wore her light brown hair in a careless bun atop her head, much like mine. Riley always teased us for having the same sense of fashion. I couldn't help that, even though *they* were sisters, they were exact opposites. I only hoped Ty would rub off on Riley with her messy, distracted ways. I'd tried for years to get her to eat healthy and take better care of herself, but with no luck.

She'd been working as a junior private investigator when she met Ty while investigating the kidnapping of a famous pop singer's little dog. Naturally, Riley took it further than she should

have, since it involved a dog. Ty, a detective working undercover to bust a gang, caught her sneaking around. All hell broke loose after that, despite Riley and Ty's efforts to prevent it. Ty's partner saved them both. If Jack hadn't been cunning enough to know there was more to the case than either of them realized, Ty and Riley would be dead. Riley escaped with a gunshot wound to her arm, while Ty took a pretty severe beating. And tomorrow, they would be married, with a baby arriving in just seven short months.

I met Hannah halfway to Regan's beach house. Other than Riley, I'd never met a stronger woman in my life than Regan. Smart and resilient, she didn't stand for any nonsense from anyone. Only her husband, Cameron, could get away with it, and that was only sometimes.

The way they looked at each other struck me with a longing I still didn't understand. They lived about a mile up the beach but kept her beach house, Regan proclaiming she couldn't part with it. I couldn't blame her. The house was gorgeous and in the center of all the beach activity.

Riley and Ty would stay in Regan's beach house for a few days after the wedding, while Naomi, Hannah, and I would be there just for the weekend. Hannah needed to get back to school on Monday. Since it was her senior year, she couldn't miss more than a couple of days, even though her grades were superb.

"Aren't you going to check out the house?" Hannah asked, breathless from her jaunt to meet me.

Her eyes sparkled with excitement. Oh, to be seventeen again.

"I did when we got here," I replied with a calm smile.

Naomi had known my dad since he became best friends with her son, Ricky, over twenty-five years ago. After my mom died, Naomi brought Hannah and Riley to live with me, since my dad had been on tour. As a drummer in a rock band, Lex Edwards simply couldn't leave. I know it hit my dad hard when she died, but I remember talking to him on the phone after her funeral.

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Even at a young age, I understood. He needed to stay on tour to keep his mind off her passing. Now that I'm a therapist, I realize he needed that time to heal.

Hannah was only seven, and Riley was fifteen. Ten years ago, I mused. They were my sisters, despite not being blood related. Riley and I bonded over her troubled past, which led me into a career in therapeutic services. I enjoyed helping people. At least, I thought I did. I'd gone to school for it, but lately, it seemed monotonous. Still, it kept money coming, which helped even though I didn't have to pay a mortgage while I lived at my dad's house.

"I might have died and gone to heaven," she said, linking her arm with mine and pulling me toward the gated house.

From the beach, the house appeared to be one level, but it had a partial second level that Gavriel De Luca had remodeled into a dance studio when Regan was young.

Vibrant bushes and tropical flowers flanked the house, creating the illusion of a tropical oasis, even though winters here could be chilly. The black iron gate, at least a foot taller than us, loomed as we approached. It wasn't locked, allowing Hannah to open it easily. Three steps led us to the deck, where a large sparkling pool awaited. I'd crossed the deck when we arrived, but the private oasis still stunned me.

An inviting hot tub nestled between the pool and the house, surrounded by lush greenery, looked serene even without the jets on. A few lounge chairs flanked the pool, and a patio table sat near a second set of French doors that led to the master bedroom suite.

"Isn't this just like paradise?" Hannah squeaked, tugging my arm as she pulled me around the pool. "God, I could live here forever."

"You'd have to take that up with Regan and Cameron. You could probably pull off online schooling. But I don't think it's like this year-round, Hannah."

I allowed her to pull me into the house, which was equally



impressive. The open concept living room, kitchen, and dining room shared a spacious interior, separated by a breakfast bar.

We passed a glass dining room table on our way to the kitchen, which was divided from the massive living room by the breakfast bar. I couldn't say a single word before Riley screeched and launched herself at me.

"Easy," I said, my mouth quickly smothered by her thin shoulder. Her petite figure had always evoked a little envy in me, as I had to work to stay slim. "Riles, you're squishing me."

Lord, she was strong, despite being a couple months pregnant. She laughed, waiting a full minute before pulling away and wiping her eyes. "I'm so happy you came. I couldn't do this without you."

I shrugged. "I needed a vacation."

"Naomi is lying down. She's tired after the flight."

Holding her by her arms, admiration flooded me as I thought of how far she'd come in just the last six months. My thumb swept over the black semicolon inked on the inside of her wrist, and I smiled when I met her gaze.

"Seems this symbol is right on target," I murmured. "Your story is far from over. About to get married to the man of your dreams, a baby on the way, and two wound-up dogs who are likely to drive me nuts when I get home in a few days."

As if on cue, Ty strolled out of the bathroom, absently scratching behind his ear while eyeing me warily. That was the detective in him. Always suspicious. When his arm slid comfortably around Riley's waist, I smiled despite my jealousy. I loved Riley as though she were my true sister.

Masking my envy, I looked around. "This place is magnificent."

Riley scoffed. "You've lived in big houses your whole life, Cass."

"True, but that doesn't mean I can't admire them." I walked the perimeter of the living room, glancing into the master bedroom. "Plus, I've lived in Seattle for a long time. Been a while since I've been anywhere remotely warm."

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"Seattle gets warm." Even as Riley said it, she laughed. "Warm-ish."

I turned toward them. "I'm going to get settled into my room. Assuming I have one?"

"You do!" she said. "There are three bedrooms behind the kitchen, and another two upstairs, but they aren't finished. Not even close, Regan said."

"My parents and brothers are at the hotel." Ty reluctantly released Riley and headed into the kitchen for a bottle of water, then grabbed two. "Cassie, Hannah, water?"

Hannah reached out for one, but I shook my head. It seemed like there was more he wanted to say. I walked across the room toward him with a raised eyebrow. "I can understand why it would be crowded here, but . . ."

He took a chug from his water before lowering it slowly, eyeballing me. I got the feeling he was putting his detective skills to work on me. I should be suspicious, so I glanced over at Riley. I hadn't seen much of her in the last few months. They'd been tucked away in Ty's house in the woods during that time, and I couldn't blame them after their ordeal.

"Ty's friend Jack is staying here," she blurted. "I hope that's okay."

"Why wouldn't that be okay?"

"Well, you know," she said. "He insisted on staying on the couch."

I shrugged, knowing exactly where she was going with this. She'd told me about him and his reputation for never settling down with anyone. I assumed he and Ty were around the same age, nearing thirty, since they'd grown up together. Riley mentioned that he'd even hit on her the night she spent with Ty, even though she was only pretending to be Ty's girlfriend.

"I'm an adult, Riles. If I can't handle myself, you have permission to slap me. If Ty's friend wants to stay on the couch instead of in a hotel room, he can." I gave her a reassuring smile.

“In fact, I don’t blame him. I hate staying in hotels.”

I didn’t miss the low chuckle from Ty, but I ignored it. Whatever the reason Jack had for staying here, I was certain he would mind his manners with Hannah since she was underage. Plus, I was sure that if Ty didn’t warn him away from her, Riley would. No one messed with her little sister. Naomi wouldn’t allow anyone to get close to Hannah, either. Both Naomi and Riley knew I could handle myself, always keeping everyone at a distance.

Curiously, my bedroom faced the beach. I had a feeling Naomi told Riley she didn’t care and that I could have the room with the better view. I’d grown up spoiled with two famous parents, but I didn’t need to be. I would have taken any room.

Everyone knew me as Cassidy Nichols, daughter of rockstar Lex Edwards and actress Jenna Nichols. Jenna Nichols had been at the height of her fame when she’d overdosed, leaving behind her only daughter. During her life, she gained massive popularity on the big screen, but she had a problem. And it killed her. No one knew that I’d been the one to push her over the edge. I would take that secret to my grave.

Lex Edwards had equal fame with his rock band, followed by his marriage to Jenna Nichols. Their divorce only propelled them further into the spotlight. Following the divorce, the drugs pulled my mom in deeper. And when she confessed that she’d been lying to me all my life, that my dad wasn’t my real dad, it blew my entire world apart. I never asked him. I didn’t want it to be true. I would always consider him my dad.

Most people recognized me as Jenna’s daughter because I looked so much like her and I shared her last name since they weren’t married when I was born. My dad had been in the picture, but they hadn’t decided on marriage until the following year, and with my mom’s acting career, the timing hadn’t been right.

I lived in my dad’s house in Seattle because he never used it. Not even when they were in town on the tour. Why not live there since it was empty all the time? I told myself that once I

established my career, I'd buy a house of my own. But I'd grown so accustomed to living with Naomi and Hannah that I never did.

My dad would help anyone in need. The apple hadn't fallen far from the tree. I turned out the same way, to a fault. He would never consider selling the Seattle house and putting any of us out. He wouldn't do it. Little did he know, we would survive if he sold the house and we had to move.

I glided through the bedroom, boasting a decent-sized window with a slight view of the beach through the greenery, but it didn't match the massive size of the master bedroom. The master suite occupied the entire opposite side of the house and included a private bathroom. This room featured a simple queen-sized bed, a side table, and a tall dresser. There was no walk-in closet, but it had one of those barn-door closets.

I wouldn't be here long enough to unpack my small bag, I thought sadly. Riley and Ty would take part of next week for their honeymoon before heading off to Las Vegas for some quality time with Riley's dad, Reno. They needed this solitude after the stress of the last few months. I would never intrude on that. Besides, I had clients to see next week, and someone would need to pick up Riley's two-year-old Labrador retrievers, Gus and Gatsby, from the doggie hotel.

Just as I was about to flop down on the bed, I heard another male voice in the house. My eyebrows raised, wondering if that was Jack. Curiosity would eventually get the better of me, although I knew better than to get involved with someone who would undoubtedly walk away. It was getting old, being dumped. But at least I'd had relationships. From what I'd heard, Jack didn't waste his precious time on relationships.

I couldn't think of a single one-night stand I'd had, or even a friends-with-benefits situation. I had plenty of short-lived relationships, especially when I discovered they were only with me because of ties to fame. That had happened more times than I cared to admit. The rest left because I struggled to let anyone into

my life, trusting them with knowing the real me. Cold, that's how Evan had described me in his breakup text.

Sighing, I decided I shouldn't dwell on those memories, so I left my bag untouched and went back into the kitchen. I hoped that Regan and Cameron would be around. When they had stayed at my house several months ago, I had the best time. Another pair who were most definitely suited for each other.

As I rounded the corner, I slowed my steps at the sight of the man standing next to Ty between the living room and the breakfast bar. The same intense blue eyes from the beach turned my way, followed by that devious smile. My heart wavered in my chest.

"Cassie." Riley wound her way around Ty to meet me in the middle. "This is—"

"Jack," I blurted.

She shot me a sideways glare. "Jack, *this* is Cassie."

From the way she said that, I could only assume she had told him about me. Trying to keep my deep breath inconspicuous, I stepped closer and reached out to shake his hand. His warm, surprisingly powerful hand slid into mine and held it longer than necessary while he dipped his head ever so slightly.

"Meeting you has been long overdue."

God, the way he purposely drew out his words had to be against the law. No wonder women fell at his feet. With his sinfully deep tone and his unrushed way of speaking, it felt like just the two of us were in the room. His eyes were locked on mine, my hand in his. A rush of warmth flooded me from head to toe.

He wouldn't release my hand. It felt rude to tug, but I couldn't understand why he still held it. My eyes widened when he pulled my knuckles up to meet his lips, and my mouth popped open. Oh, for the love of God, what did he think he was doing? His warm lips against my skin made me tingle, lingering longer than necessary. I didn't dare look at Riley because I knew her mouth was probably hanging open.

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Finally, he released me, and I caught my breath. I could have blurted out that I had a boyfriend, but I had to remind myself that I didn't anymore. Of all the guys I'd met over the last few years, none compared to how dangerous this man could be to my well-built wall. The gleam in his eyes convinced me it would be a colossal mistake to let him close.

"I hope my staying here won't bother you," he said.

With a voice that was low and sultry, sliding over me like the finest silk, I wondered if it came naturally to him or if he needed to work at it. Damn, I cursed silently. This would be trouble.

"Unless you sleep naked, it's no bother. I'm an early riser, so I'll try not to wake you."

I could swear I heard a quiet gasp from Riley, but her rolled eyes told me I'd surprised her yet again.

"Don't sleep naked," Riley warned him. "But she is an early riser. She'll go for a run, maybe do her yoga, have her tea, and look perfect before anyone even thinks of rolling out of bed."

I gave her a gentle shove. "Not perfect, just taking care of myself."

I couldn't help but notice the sparkle remaining in Jack's eyes, but I turned away before he could do something even more disgustingly noticeable, like sweep them over my body. Even as a therapist, I had my own issues to work through. Yoga and tea helped me with that, but running really helped. No one needed to know, though.

# Chapter Two

*Cassie*

Judging by the muffled laughter coming from behind my closed door, guests were arriving for tonight's pre-wedding gathering. Everyone who had come to the island for the wedding was heading to Regan's beach house tonight for dinner and to visit with each other, along with Riley and Ty, since we were all here for such a short time.

One last time, I checked my appearance in the full-length mirror on the wall. I didn't know why I was nervous. Who was I kidding? I knew exactly why nerves had crept in. It had been years since I'd attended any type of social gathering outside of Reno, Cameron, and Regan visiting my house earlier this year. I sometimes went out to the bar with my co-worker Tish after work, but I had a feeling tonight would be far different. This setting couldn't be more intimate. Ty's family was here, and Riley's family was here, including some of her extended family.

Before I could take another minute to ensure this was the outfit I wanted to wear, the door burst open, and Hannah breezed in wearing a yellow sundress that complemented her dark blonde hair, which she'd left loose for the occasion. She would break hearts when she grew up, I thought. I hoped she was smarter than I was, and wouldn't get duped by men like I seemed to do.

"You look amazing, Cass!" she said. "I never get to see you wear anything other than your business attire, workout clothes, and regular colorless outfits. This has at least a bit of color."

I smiled. "Gee, thanks."

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It was a simple blue dress with tiny straps over each shoulder and strings resembling the ties of a bikini on the bottom of each side of the skirt, which reached just about to my knees. I twirled to show Hannah the back of the dress, where matching straps crisscrossed to my lower back, leaving it mostly exposed.

Her mouth dropped open. "I'm not sure I've ever seen you look like this," she whispered. "Come on, before you change your mind."

I laughed as she linked her arm with mine, dragging me out of the bedroom and into the hallway. "Pretty sure Riley would barge into my room like you just did to drag me out."

We were still laughing when we joined the others in the living room. My laughter died when I caught Jack's eyes across the room and noticed the unmistakable darkening of them as he took in my attire. I could say the same about him dressed in a pair of tan dress pants and a blue dress shirt rolled up to his elbows. The shade of his shirt made his eyes seem even lighter. I tore my gaze away and looked at Regan, who had Nicco tucked in her arms.

"Ooooh," I whispered, looking down at the sleeping baby. "Regan. Cameron. He's beautiful."

Cameron grinned beside her. "If you want to hold him, now is the best time. When he wakes up, he's going to scream this house down to be fed."

I let out a breathy laugh as Regan handed the tiny one-week-old bundle to me, cradling him in my arms and running the pad of my finger over his rosy cheek. "He's absolutely perfect."

"Not when he's screaming in the middle of the night, he's not," Cameron said, slipping his arm around Regan's waist.

When she looked up at him with a smile, that pang of jealousy hit me like it always did. Quickly, I looked back down at Nicco with his tuft of dark hair and puckered mouth. I was sure I would never become a mother myself, so I would enjoy Nicco while I could.

"The rest of your siblings couldn't make it?" I asked Cameron.

"Not all of them have come to terms with having a half-sister



yet, but they'll come around. Zoey would have, but she has school. She and Hannah got along so great when she visited last summer, they exchanged numbers. Peter and Emma, and my handful of a nephew, are staying with her to make sure she stays out of trouble while my parents are here."

I laughed softly. "Isn't she a senior in high school like Hannah? How much trouble can she possibly get into?"

Cameron's dark brows raised. "You'd be surprised at how much my little sister can get into when no one is around. I like to think she's calming down, but I don't think that will happen until she's college-bound next year."

"Georgetown, right?" I asked, recalling Hannah mention it. "Isn't that where she decided to go to college?"

"I'm impressed that you remembered that." Cameron grinned just as Nicco's eyes fluttered open.

"That's my cue," Regan laughed, scooping him back out of my arms as he yawned, before he could let out a wail for food.

I watched her whisk him away for privacy and looked back at Cameron, shaking my head. They had to be the most perfect family. "I am so happy for you," I said.

Cameron reached out to touch my arm. "Thanks. We can't thank you enough for your hospitality earlier this year and for everything you've done for Riley. Anytime you need anything, even if it's coming here for a getaway, just say the word."

How did he know I needed a longer vacation than this? He must see the weariness on my face, even though I'd tried my hardest to hide the dark circles beneath my eyes. Regan called him and he excused himself, moving away from me. A scrumptious-looking array of food and drinks in coolers sat on the table and deck, so I wandered out to grab a drink.

"Are you Cassie?"

Just as I was reaching into the cooler for a bottle of water, I heard a voice behind me. Straightening, I saw the two guys Jack had been walking on the beach with when I'd first seen him. They

had to be Ty's brothers. They shared his blond hair and blue eyes though they were clearly younger than him, but not by much.

"I am. And you are?"

The taller of the two reached out. "Marc." He jerked his thumb at the other one. "This is August."

"Auggie," he growled, shoving his brother. "I can talk to her, too, you know."

"It's nice to meet Ty's brothers," I said, laughing at the playful shoving and thinking how nice it must be to have siblings.

"We love your dad's band," Auggie said.

"Thanks." My stomach sank. I couldn't go anywhere without someone mentioning my dad or my mom. But they were close enough to family. I liked Ty, suspicion and all. I needed to suck it up. "Have you been listening to his music for long?"

They both lit up. "Ever since we could get away with it. They just got back from tour, didn't they?"

I thought about it for a minute. "Last week, I think."

"Do you get to see the band a lot?"

When I moved toward the edge of the deck, away from the coolers to give others access to the drinks, they followed me. "I haven't seen them for a few years, but I suppose I used to see them a lot. I used to go with them during summer tours."

Auggie's mouth dropped open. "Shut up!"

Maybe talking about this with them wasn't so bad. They seemed to have such a good time discussing it, and I didn't mind the memories. It had been a few years since I visited my dad, though I talked to him often. As often as I could.

I nodded. "When I was a kid until just before my senior year. Then I went to college and stopped going." I didn't add that I'd had a fling with their roadie that year, and it kind of ruined it for me to go back after my senior year.

My relationship that summer with Watts Campbell ended in heartbreak, although I'd seen him many times since that tour, the shock of seeing him locking lips with another girl devastated me.

As the band manager's son, he knew my family's entire history, and while it seemed our relationship had been encouraged, he still did it.

"That is so bad ass!" Auggie exclaimed, eyes still bright. "Does he ever come up to Seattle?"

"Not unless they play a show there, but they stay on the tour bus or in a hotel. Next time they're in town, I'll hook you up to meet them. How about that?"

They exchanged high-fives like teenagers, even though I swore Ty had told me his brothers were in their early twenties. It was that easy to please them. My dad and the rest of the band would give me backstage passes for anyone. All I had to do was ask. That might be the issue I had with people trying to get close to me, I thought.

"Marc! Auggie! Leave the poor woman alone!"

My gaze snapped to a woman in the doorway, dressed in a sundress like Hannah's, except in a light pink color. Blonde hair, like theirs, was swept up stylishly. She made a pretty picture. I had to assume this was Suzie Cavanaugh, Ty's mom. She stepped onto the deck and marched over to them. I almost expected her to take them by the ears.

"What did Ty tell you about cornering her?"

"Sorry, Mom," Marc said, hanging his head.

"Sorry, Mom," Auggie grinned at me, showing no remorse whatsoever.

"Don't say sorry to me. Say sorry to Cassie."

They looked at me, both smiling as if they had a secret. "We're sorry," they said in unison.

"Will you still hook us up?" Auggie asked.

"I promise."

Suzie shooed them away, leaving me alone for a minute. I shuffled to the edge of the deck, leaning over to peek through the shrubs at the ocean as the sun began to set. It was probably the worst idea ever, but I pulled out my phone and called Evan.

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When more people from inside came out, I moved down to the beach while the phone continued to ring. I should have known he wouldn't answer, the coward.

As soon as his voicemail picked up, I smiled bitterly. "The least you could do is pick up your phone and talk to me, you coward. Breaking it off with someone by text is the worst thing you can do, especially after seven months. I deserved to at least be told to my face when I came back, Evan. But I would hate for you to have to endure my coldness any longer, so have a nice life. Prick."

I hung up, blowing out a breath and taking a quick glance behind me to see if anyone at the house might have heard that. Sure enough, Jack leaned against the deck next to Ty's brothers, his eyes on me. Then he smiled. Damn. Reaching down, I slipped off my heels and walked toward the water, hoping he wouldn't follow me. I needed a moment, and sitting by the water was my favorite place to think.

A while later, Riley came and plopped down next to me. She slung her arm over my shoulder and pulled me slightly toward her. I rested my head on her shoulder.

"I'm so glad you came," she whispered. "I can't get married without you here."

"Of course you can't. I'm your witness."

Laughter erupted from her. "That's not it, but okay. All the same, you have been my rock when I needed someone the most, Cass. Naomi saved me and Hannah, but you . . . you saved *me*."

I heard a snuffle. "Are you crying?"

"I'm so emotional these days. It's because I'm pregnant. I can't help it."

I threw my arms around her. "You'll be alright, Riles. You have Ty now. He's probably the one who really saved you, if you think about it. Now you'll be like Regan and Cameron. When I look at you, I see such profound happiness that I get jealous."

She sat up, wiping away the wetness from her cheek. "You're jealous? Of me?"

I nodded.

"But you've got it all together. I'm a mess and you are always orderly, fit, and so dang healthy." She shook her head. "Perfect."

"Stop saying that. I'm not perfect. Maybe I look that way on the outside, but I'm a mess on the inside."

Bringing up the fact that Evan broke up with me earlier wasn't an option, otherwise she would make everything about me, and I didn't want that. This entire weekend was about her, and I'd make sure it stayed that way. She deserved this.

"Reno thinks so much of you, Cassie."

That shocked me. So much so that I pulled away from her, my mouth hanging open. Riley had only known of her dad for a few months. Reno was a powerful person, much like Regan's dad. He and I had shared many deep discussions while he stayed with us after Riley's ordeal. Still, he hadn't scratched the surface of the real Cassidy Nichols.

"He talks highly of you anytime you're mentioned. I think you made a big impression on him when you let him stay at your house last summer."

My eyebrows drew together. "I'd have done that for anyone. You know that."

She shook her head. "No. You don't let just anyone in, and you let him in a smidge. He admires you."

I couldn't understand why, but I didn't need to. We'd all be going our separate ways on Sunday, and I didn't know when I would see him again. "The feeling is mutual. I like your dad. He's a great person to talk to. Very intelligent."

"Sneaking off without me?" Regan shouted from behind us, plopping down on the other side of me. "Abandoning me in there, brats."

"Cameron never leaves your side," Riley said, but she smiled as she said it.

Regan sighed. "I know. He's overprotective. Especially now with Nicco."

## **The Gangster's Game**

"You're so lucky," I said, shocking myself for having said it. "Married, in love, cute little baby. Lucky."

"You'll get your turn someday, Cassie," Regan said, pushing her shoulder into mine.

"I'm not counting on it. I don't think I'm wife material."

Tossing her head back, Regan laughed. "I didn't think I was, either. And look where that got me! Good luck with that. I bet within a year, you'll be married."

She extended her hand, and I stared at it.

"A thousand bucks."

I don't gamble. I limit how much alcohol I drink, and I rarely curse, but I grabbed her hand, determined not to lose this bet. "You're on," I said. "And you're going to lose, Regan Moretti."

"Not on your life."

# Chapter Three

*Jace*

"I can't believe you're getting married tomorrow."

I stretched my legs out and leaned back as Ty glanced at me. We sat on the sandy beach in front of Regan's beach house, watching the waves roll in while we could. Everyone else had long since left or gone to bed, leaving the house quiet and dark. Tomorrow would be busy with the wedding, and I didn't know when I'd see my best friend again. It might be a long time with what I had to deal with back home.

"I can't believe you're wearing shirts on a normal basis," Ty teased. "Especially since you're ditching Seattle and heading to L.A. You can't tell me you won't go down to the pier and maybe do some surfing."

"Guess it's time for a change."

"Bullshit," Ty coughed into his fist.

I grinned. "I'll be working while I'm there. Maybe not all the time, but I am looking forward to doing a little surfing while I'm there. The perks of having a brother who works in a surf shop."

"Are you sure you want to do this? I mean, Working for that bastard . . ."

Ty shook his head when I glanced over at him. I knew he meant well, that he was concerned I was putting my life in danger, just like when we were undercover—maybe worse. There was no doubt in my mind about the decision I'd made. I had packed up my apartment in Seattle, sold my car, and shipped everything down to a house I rented in Santa Monica for my brother, Ezra,

and me to share. I would take care of him. I always did.

"If one of your brothers was in trouble, would you ignore it?" I asked, trying not to sound defensive. He knew Ezra's troubled history.

"Absolutely not. That's not how either of us operates. I'd do what I needed to do for Auggie or Marc. But you've been rescuing Ezra for so many years, Jace, and he keeps at it. When is enough gonna be enough?"

I sighed, looking up at the dark sky, littered with twinkling stars. Ty was right. I'd been Ezra's shield for his entire life, and nothing had ever changed. I had to be his shield. It was partially my fault. The youngest child, "the dumb one" as our old man called him, he didn't fit the mold Fred Taylor wanted for his boys. We were expected to serve in the military. I wouldn't do it, although becoming a cop was close enough. Ezra was nothing but trouble, and it only got worse as we grew up.

"They would have killed him if I hadn't taken this deal," I murmured.

Ty stared me down. "For a long time, I always wondered why you had rules when it comes to women. Now, I understand why."

"You don't know shit. And why'd you tell Riley that I'd do anything to get a woman into bed? I told her enough lies while we were undercover. Did you really have to go and tell her that?"

He laughed. "It wouldn't have mattered. She was mine from the start, and you knew it. She isn't your type anyway." Seriousness returned to his pale blue eyes. "But seriously, you're going to be very lonely when you get older if you don't ease up on your rules and let someone into your life, buddy."

"What's Cassie's story?" I asked slowly, wondering if he was going to jump to conclusions as soon as her name came out of my mouth. "Is she shy or what?"

I'd tried my hardest not to make it obvious every time I looked at her earlier that night. The blue dress molded perfectly to her figure. Even Auggie and Marc had something to say about it. They



wouldn't stop talking about her. But those two boneheads would drool over just about any woman. The fact that her dad was a drummer in one of their favorite bands only made them pant after her more.

I had to remind myself she was just a woman. But something in her eyes when I first saw her on the beach, standing in the water as if she were about to vault her phone into the surf, caught me off guard. The gentle slope of her neck, with wisps of windblown blonde hair framing her face when she turned and met my gaze. Pouty lips and big blue eyes—it heated my blood just remembering the vision.

Every time I headed in her direction, she'd catch me and traipse off to talk with someone else, like it wasn't obvious she was doing her best to avoid me. I couldn't recall a time when a woman had point blank avoided me like that. Cassie Nichols wouldn't be easily caught.

"You're kidding me," Ty said, yanking me out of my thoughts. "She would never let you close enough. Both of her parents are famous. Her mother was Jenna Nichols."

I frowned. "Should I know who that is?"

"Think back about ten to fifteen years ago and all those action movies we watched that starred Stirling Montgomery as the hero—she was the hot blonde in them. Hot to two young punks like us, anyway."

My mouth dropped open. "That was her mother? Holy shit."

Ty grinned. "Yup. And her dad is the drummer for a heavy metal band that both of my brothers listen to, which is why they got yelled at for cornering her tonight. Now you understand why she keeps her distance. People only want to get close to her for the fame."

"Damn, her mom doesn't hold a candle to her."

Ty shrugged. "She doesn't, not that I'm looking."

"She should have gone into acting like her mom."

"Cassie doesn't like that attention. There's a reason she's up in

Seattle and not living in LA.”

I pushed him over. “So, she hides herself up there in Seattle, away from the spotlights of LA. What a damn shame. She’s gorgeous.”

“Damn, dude. I don’t think I ever remember you getting wound up over a woman before. Remember your rules!”

Exactly why I had rules. No woman would fit into my life as it was. It was too risky, and that was assuming any of them would stick around—not to mention I’d never met a woman worth having stick around. In a way, I was like Cassie, holding everyone at a distance.

“Doesn’t matter anyway. She’ll be going back to Seattle, and I’m heading to LA.”

“She visits her dad from time to time and has friends down there. Don’t rule that out, Jace. Plus, Cassie and Riley are best friends. There might come a day after this weekend when you see her again.”

Staring out at the ocean waves washing onto the shore, I thought about Cassie. She had gone to bed hours ago, and the house felt empty as soon as she did. But with Ty’s words, a thrill of anticipation shot through me of laying eyes on her again in the morning.

# Chapter Four

*Cassie*

I could count on one hand how many weddings I'd attended, and I hadn't cried at any of them.

Yet, as Riley walked out of the house on the arm of Reno, my eyes instantly welled up. The dress, the flimsiest thing I'd ever seen her wear, made her look classically beautiful. It was her bare feet that nearly did me in. This was my friend, one of my *best* friends, and the look in her eyes, her gaze solely on Ty, was the unmistakable stare of someone utterly, deeply in love.

When my eyes darted to Ty, the breath caught in my throat. The look in his eyes matched hers, unwavering in his feelings. Happiness swelled in my heart for them, so much that it ached to witness. Envy aside, I couldn't be happier for them.

My thoughts drifted to my most recent disaster of a relationship, and I wondered if I would ever walk down the aisle. When I said I wasn't wife material, I meant it. When I'd made that bet with Regan last night, I knew I wouldn't lose, and in a year, I'd be a thousand bucks richer. My lack of love for Evan, and my indifference over the breakup confirmed my belief that I wouldn't get married. I couldn't let anyone in enough for them to want to marry me. The breakup stung, but I was far from crushed.

The wedding ceremony itself didn't last long. It was simple and sweet, just as Riley wanted. She'd never been one to prolong anything. When she told me the news of her upcoming nuptials and invited me to the island under complete secrecy, I was surprised that she didn't elope.

## The Gangster's Game

I looked around at the crowd gathered on the beach in front of Regan and Cameron's house, their sailboat bobbing up and down with the waves at the end of the long dock behind the makeshift altar. The people here were all important to Riley and Ty, and we all loved the two of them.

When Ty pulled Riley into his arms as her husband, I tried not to sigh at the hunger in their kiss. I couldn't imagine what it would be like to have someone love me or to love someone like that.

People moved around as Riley and Ty chatted with those rushing up to them to offer congratulations. I had a feeling it would be some time before I could get to them, but I knew I would. I would need to sign the marriage certificate as a witness. Regan and Cameron quickly commandeered their time, followed by Riley's mom, Simone, and Ty's two brothers. As much as I wanted to stand at the water's edge with my thoughts, it would be rude, so I joined the small throng of people.

Unlike Regan's beach house, massive trees surrounded this two-story house on all sides except the beachside. The windows on that side of the house reflected the beach from top to bottom. What a view, I thought.

I spotted Jack standing off to the side, talking with Naomi. By the dreamy look in her sixty-seven-year-old eyes as she stared at him, I knew without a doubt that his charm had reeled her in. I had avoided him last night, but I hadn't escaped his gaze. Every once in a while, I'd feel his eyes on me, and sure enough, he had been watching.

Instead, I strolled toward the low, multi-tiered deck at the back of the house, where I spotted Reno near Ty's parents, William and Suzie. He was listening to them, but he wasn't talking. I stepped up next to him.

"Riley told me last night that you've taken a particular liking to me," I said.

It couldn't have been my sparkling personality. No one except a few close friends knew me well enough to feel that way. To be

honest, I didn't understand why Reno had told her that.

Reno turned away from the group, smiling down at me with his warm brown eyes from his imposing height. He was handsome, even with dark hair tinged with gray at his temples. "Did she now?"

Taking me lightly by the elbow, he led me toward a table with refreshments and handed me a glass of lemonade. Because Ty and Simone had issues with alcohol in their past, they chose not to serve it at their wedding. That mattered very little to me, as I wasn't a big drinker myself. I accepted the glass and took a tentative sip.

"You know I would open my home to anyone Riley cares about. Especially her dad."

His brown eyes sparkled. "That's not it, sweetheart."

He moved closer, as if about to share a dark secret that no one else should overhear. Startled, I wasn't sure if I should step away. There were reasons I didn't let people get close to me, both physically and emotionally, and Reno would be no exception.

"You want everyone to think you're all sweet and innocent. But we both know deep down that isn't true. Don't we?"

That stunned me. After a pause, I barked out a laugh so loud that it caught the attention of several people around us. Did he just insult me? It only made me more curious about what had led him to think I could be anything but innocent.

"You may fool many people, but I see a woman with a lust for life. And if you ask me, you're ruining it by hiding up there in Washington."

He had guts. I'd give him that. It made it easier to understand what had shaped him into the man he was today. Reno Moretti didn't take shit from anyone, and anyone could tell that just by looking at him. The apple didn't fall far from the tree with Cameron, and I was sure it was the same with his two other sons, Stefan and Peter. Even Riley, despite not being raised by him. It must be in their blood, I mused. Cameron got lucky when he found

a wife like Regan.

"Am I?"

"Without a doubt. If you ever feel like cutting loose, Las Vegas is the perfect town for it. Give me a call. I know people who can make your stay there an experience you won't soon forget. They don't call it Sin City for nothing." He flipped me his business card, edged in expensive gold. I studied it, wondering if it was made of actual gold, running my finger along the edge. "And please don't take this as a man twice your age hitting on you, sweetheart. This is me trying to help you."

With a nod, I turned to walk away, tucking his card into my clutch.

"Cassie?" he called softly after me.

I turned halfway around and met his eyes.

"I'm here if you ever need my help."

Wondering what on earth I would ever need his help for, I could only stare at him. I'd put in too much work constructing my own defenses. Ever the gentleman, he touched my arm lightly and excused himself, brushing past Jack as he went. Dressed in a loose-fitting pair of pants and a thin, almost translucent shirt, Jack's hair blew in the breeze as he eyed me.

"Cassie," he said, reaching around me to grab a glass of lemonade. "There wasn't much opportunity for us to talk last night."

I sipped slowly. "Lots of people around."

He purposely looked around, and I knew why. The same people who were there last night were here now. He thought he could one-up me by casually pointing out my bullshit excuse. "Are you avoiding me?"

"Should I be?"

"I can't think of a single reason why."

"Not a one?" I feigned shock.

God, I was a brat. And that was the problem. People thought I was some perfect girl, dressing flawlessly in the blandest colors,

with not a hair out of place and a picture-perfect life. They couldn't be more wrong, and I would never let them know that. I did it on purpose so I wouldn't stand out any more than I should.

His smile, slowly touching the corners of his lips, made my heart skip a beat. Or two. Holy smokes, he had a sexy smile. Mentally shaking myself, I doubled my efforts to keep this man at arm's length. I'd dated men like him in the past, and I'd had enough of those.

"You don't like me very much, do you?" he asked.

"To be fair, I don't know you. I only know that you hit on Riley when you first met her." His dark eyebrows raised. "Do you deny it?"

"No."

That was the quickest I'd ever heard him speak. I shook my head. It didn't count since it was only a one-word response. "Rather ballsy of you to do that when you knew she was with Ty, don't you think?"

"Rather shallow of you to judge me."

"I have reason to," I shot back.

His laugh, low and sultry, washed over me as he stepped closer. "So, you've made up your mind about me?"

I stared into his eyes. Hard. How could I explain that I didn't want to take a chance on getting hurt without sounding shallow like he said?

"Are you in a relationship right now?" I blurted.

"No. You?"

Trained in psychology, I surprised myself with the slip, but his admission wasn't shocking in the least. His reputation spoke for itself.

"Yes." The lie came easily.

"That's not what I overheard last night. Are you sure?"

Oh, he would be the death of me if I stayed around him any longer. I knew he'd overheard! I calmed myself before responding with a simple, "Yes."

## The Gangster's Game

He tilted his head to the side. "I saw you running earlier."

"I run every morning. It helps me."

"With?"

I sighed. He was going to pull everything out of me, or at least try, wasn't he? As a detective, I imagined he was just as used to peppering people with questions as I was as a therapist. I smiled at the uncanny commonality between us, shaking my head.

"Something funny?"

"It helps me cope. I have a lot of demons," I admitted, looking into his eyes.

As soon as our eyes met, I realized my mistake. I could drown in those eyes. As beguiling as they were, no wonder women fell at his feet—with his eyes, his voice, and his physique. I tore my gaze away.

"I'm sorry to hear that. If it helps, I have a lot of demons, too."

"Anything you want to share with me? I am licensed, which means it would be a violation if I were to share what you tell me with anyone else unless you give your approval."

The corner of his mouth lifted. "I'll book an appointment with you when I'm ready to talk about my demons. It would take a long while to unleash them all."

"I'm not taking new clients right now. Maybe you should try running. Pumping out all that sweat seems to help me, followed by calming yoga and a cup of herbal tea. It does wonders."

"I prefer lifting weights, although I'm not as dedicated to it as you are with your morning ritual. I appreciated the sight last night, though."

My face warmed at his reference to my dress. Was this his offhanded way of complementing me? I knew I'd captured his interest, as much as I'd tried to avoid him during the get together, but to point it out so blatantly made my heart thump uncontrollably.

I wasn't sure what to say to him after that remark, like I'd been robbed of forming coherent words. Flustered, I did the only thing



I could think of: I walked away. Walking away from him in the middle of a conversation had a distinct feeling to it. It felt like a statement.

Reno had been right. I had success, a decent house, and while I couldn't deny my high maintenance, it didn't have to be a relationship-breaker. I truly didn't know why men never stuck around. But Jack Taylor could be a disaster for me if I let him.