

Do Not Disturb

by

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CHAPTER ONE

We're paying that publicist big money to get you on the front page, and she damn well better do it!" Rick shook the latest issue of *People* in the air.

Greer sighed and grabbed the magazine from her manager's hand. "Rick, dear, have you looked at the cover? A full-on feature of the Brangelina twins." Greer pointed at the photo of Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie cradling their famous offspring for the camera. "I'm pretty sure they would trump a government-sponsored announcement about life on Mars." She shoved the magazine in the trash. "Besides, my only accomplishment this week was having my fifth album go double platinum. Nothing front-page about success."

Greer knew she sounded like a petulant child, but she didn't care. Her reputation hadn't seen the same upward trajectory as her rise on the charts. Even if she sold more records than the Beatles, she was sure her everyday mishaps would make bigger headlines. A simple comment to a waiter that her steak was overdone appeared in large print as: *GREER DAVIS STARTS FOOD FIGHT*. Photos of Greer with adoring female fans in various states of undress merited the keen observation: *SHE'S SEX CRAZED!*

So far this trip had gone better than usual, which translated into an absence of ripping headlines. Greer had arrived in Chicago yesterday morning for a well-choreographed press junket to promote her new album. Rick had planned every detail of the trip down to the minute, and the schedule didn't allow for anything off course. Greer was worn out after spending the day talking about her album

and her upcoming tour. She repeated the same details over and over in the dozen interviews Rick had lined up for the day. She hated the public relations side of stardom, but Rick insisted she remain in the public eye at all times.

Rick Seavers was all business, and his business was all Greer Davis. His sleek style, from his custom suits made in London to his slick coif, was carefully crafted to project an air of confidence, and he used it to make sure his star client stayed on top. He was constantly thinking of new ways to get her mentioned by the press. Now was no different.

“Let’s fix it,” he said. “I’ve arranged for a VIP party tonight in your suite at the hotel. Macy Rivers is in town and I’ve invited her to attend. The two of you can pose for the cameras. Show you’re Macy’s gal-pal. Her sweet rep is bound to rub off. Oh, and I’m firing the damn publicist for not thinking of this herself.”

Greer had long ago given up keeping track of who Rick hired and fired on her behalf. He had been the driving force behind her success for the past ten years. She didn’t question his decisions. His idea to put her in front of the cameras with Macy was spot on. Macy Rivers was the darling of the press. She experienced the same level of success in the country music arena as Greer did on the top forty charts, but she didn’t have as many bruises to show for it. Macy was pageant pretty with wholesome good looks and a smile worthy of toothpaste commercials. When Greer stood next to her, she felt like an outsider in high school. She knew she was attractive, but her spiky blond hair and edgy good looks didn’t represent traditional beauty. Macy could do no wrong, unlike Greer, who found herself on the defensive every time she spoke to the press. Despite their differences, Greer liked Macy and the two had become friends over the years, an anathema to all who knew them. She figured Macy found the image of the prom queen hanging out with the bad girl had a certain allure. Hell, maybe tonight she’d see if she could get Macy liquored up. It might do her good to let loose.

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“Smile, girls.”

Greer had told Rick to take the night off, but he couldn't resist directing the show, even if it was only from the sidelines. Greer supposed she should be grateful he took such a hands-on interest in her career, but sometimes she felt like she had a full-time babysitter. She paid Rick good money to take care of the details of her professional life, but the line between her professional and private life was blurred beyond recognition. Hell, she couldn't even throw a party without it being a publicity stunt. She felt a sudden desire to be bad.

“I should kiss you right here in front of all these flashing cameras.”

Macy didn't even flinch. She spoke through a big smile. “You're all talk, Davis. I am so not your type.”

“What? Straight and wholesome?” Greer answered. “You're absolutely right, but you sure make me look good.”

“Happy to help, Davis. Happy to help.”

Finally Rick eased the two away from the cameras, but not before they were blinded by dozens of flashing bulbs. “Why don't you girls head on upstairs? I'll let a couple of these photographers in to cover the party, but they'll stay out of your hair. Pictures only. Go, have fun.”

Thank God. If I have to talk to one more of these vultures, I'll scream. She planned to let loose tonight. She deserved it after the last two days of constant scrutiny. She grabbed Macy's hand and led her to the penthouse elevator.

The party was in full swing before they ever reached the suite. Greer always stayed at the Tinsley when she was in Chicago, and her parties were a hot ticket event for any other celebrities who were visiting the Windy City. Her penthouse would be full of famous people in various states of inebriation. They all counted on the wait staff, who were skilled in keeping the guests' glasses full and their own mouths shut about the antics they would see during the evening. The token table of hors d'oeuvres would barely be touched. Greer's guests were more interested in partaking of what they could either drink from a glass or snort up their noses. The pretty food was there

for decoration. By the end of the evening the food would look as wilted as the guests.

Greer grabbed two glasses of champagne from the tray of a passing waiter and handed one to Macy.

“Here. How about you let your hair down a little tonight?”

Macy tossed back the contents of the glass and handed it back to Greer. “How ’bout I let my hair down a lot?” She nodded at the empty glass. “Champagne was okay to start, but I’d like to try something a little more potent. Can you help me out?”

“Scotch, bourbon, vodka?” Greer asked.

“I was thinking of something, uh, not so liquid.”

Greer smiled. “Good girl wants to let out her inner bad girl for the night?”

“Can you blame me?” Macy frowned. “I spend my days singing PG lyrics, plugging wholesome products, and hanging out with people who think a few too many drinks will land me a spot in hell. I deserve to cut loose a little, don’t you think?”

“I do.” Greer grabbed her hand. “Follow me.” She took Macy’s hand and elbowed her way through the crowd. The suite had two bedrooms, two living areas, and a dining room. Greer led Macy to the guest bedroom, where she knew someone would have what Macy wanted. The room was dimly lit, not to hide anything, but because the occupants didn’t want bright lights to ruin their high. Greer shut the door behind them to keep out the light. The room was a vice cop’s dream. Piles of snowy white coke were heaped on mirrored surfaces all around the room and guests were helping themselves. “Is this what you had in mind?” Greer asked.

“Exactly.” Macy started toward the nearest table, but Greer held her back.

“Whoa there. Have you used this stuff before?”

“No.”

Greer felt a pang of regret. She didn’t mind getting Macy drunk, but she wasn’t sure she wanted to be the one to introduce her to putting things up her nose. “Are you sure you want to try this?”

“I’ve never been more sure about anything in my life.”

Greer heard the rebellious confidence in Macy’s voice and

decided it wasn't her job to police anyone else's morals. "All right then, but wait here." Greer strode over to the nearest table and palmed a stainless steel bullet loaded with the powdery substance. She figured she could at least limit Macy's first experience to small bumps of high. Returning, she said to Macy, "Come with me," and led her out of the room.

Macy braced against the door frame. "Wait a minute. Why are we leaving?"

Greer leaned in close and whispered in her ear. "Little Mary Sunshine, do you want everyone in the world to see you snorting coke?" She waited until the idea registered with Macy. Then she held up her hand, closed tightly around the bullet. "I have what you want. Come to my room and try it there." Macy nodded and followed Greer to the master bedroom across the way. Greer placed her hand on the doorknob, but felt herself pulled back as she started to open the door. She looked over her shoulder and was surprised by the kiss Macy planted on her cheek. She raised her eyebrows.

"Thanks for being so sweet," Macy said. "I have a feeling this is going to be a night to remember."

Greer blushed and drew Macy into the suite.

CHAPTER TWO

Ainsley Faraday hated being cornered first thing in the morning.

“Fluffy does not like the cedar bed you had delivered to her room. It is itchy. She prefers down. And not the synthetic rubbish people try to pass off as real, but mature goose down. It’s the warmest. Our room is intolerably cold and Fluffy hates to be cold.”

“Certainly, Mr. Withers. I apologize for any inconvenience to either you or Fluffy.” Ainsley managed to summon a bright smile for the Maltipoo and his doting owner. She held the smile until Sebastian Withers and his sole heir prissed their way out of the lobby. Once she was sure they were out of earshot, she stalked to the concierge desk, her laser stare daring the two well-suited attendants to run for cover.

“Who the hell has been dealing with Sebastian Withers?”

One of the young men shuffled his feet while the other made darted glances seeking escape. Ainsley could smell their fear. She cultivated her reputation as the high supreme bitch of the Hotel Steel because she deemed it to be the most effective way to achieve results. One of these lackeys would provide her with results now or lose his job. “Answer me now or you’re both fired.”

Feet shuffler raised his head just high enough to assess the seriousness of his situation. With a slight nod at his coworker, he rattled off what he probably thought was a sufficient explanation.

“Ms. Faraday, he is impossible. You know we only have cedar beds on hand. I provided him with a brand-new one. It had never

been used. I delivered it personally within seconds of his call. I've been waiting hand and foot on the hairball he calls a dog from the moment he checked in, but nothing I do is enough—"

Ainsley raised her hand and barked, "Stop!" He froze.

"I've heard enough." She looked at the coworker and began one of the quizzes she knew they had grown to despise. "We have no down beds, but a guest requests one. What do you do?"

Concierge number two shook in his shoes, obviously trying to discern what the mistake had been. Ainsley imagined he thought guests who could afford rates in excess of \$500 a night for a standard room were generally eccentric freaks who had been put on earth to terrify those who could only afford to stay in a Motel 6, if they could afford to vacation at all. She could almost hear the frantic beat of his anxious heart. He was probably thinking it was one thing to have to answer to the erratic, unreasonable demands of people with money to burn, but it was quite another to have to be treated like garbage by his boss, who acted as if these guests were perfectly sane. He winced as if concentrating hard on the question before stammering his reply. "I'll try to find a down bed."

"No! You do not 'try' to do anything. You do it, and you do it fast. Your job is to make the guests happy. Fix Mr. Withers's problem or get out. Now."

Ainsley didn't wait for a response, but stalked off to her office. Once there, she fell into a chair and laughed. She knew the two young men thought Mr. Withers was crazy. They were right, but as the operations manager of the hotel, she had to set an example to her employees, which meant catering to the whims of her capricious guests. She couldn't for a minute let her employees see her true feelings. If she had her way, she would show Mr. Withers and his canine companion the door. As it was, she maintained a front, faking genuine concern for the needs of her guests, and no one was the wiser. Ainsley kicked off her shoes and pulled her feet up under her. It was going to be a long day. She was tired, but she knew despite her fatigue, she still looked polished and pressed. She prided herself on her ability to project an unflappable image, which started with impeccable appearance. Custom suits, designer shoes, flawless

makeup, and a tight French braid painted a portrait of control. Only in the sanctuary of her office, with the door locked, would she ever let her hair down and curl up in comfort.

Her reverie was broken by the ringing of the telephone. She could tell by the ring that whoever it was had the number for her direct line. She glanced at the caller ID and noted the source of the call was the hotel's corporate office in New York. *Damn, did one of those brats out front already complain about my show of power?* She was used to fending off complaints by employees. Her ability to achieve results guaranteed her superiors would always side with her, but she would still have to explain away her displays of force. She sighed and picked up the phone.

"Faraday here."

"Ainsley," a big male voice boomed. "How the hell are you?"

"I'm good, Frank. Very good." She braced herself. "What can I do for you?"

"Cancel whatever dinner plans you have for tomorrow and send a car to the airport. I'll be landing at O'Hare at eight and I'd love to see you."

Ainsley caught her breath. Frank Evans didn't fly around the country. He summoned his minions to his plush offices on Park Avenue if he needed to talk to them in person. She wasn't fooled by his "I'd love to see you" comment. Ainsley knew she was his favorite location manager, but being favorite had never extended beyond professional accolades. She had no personal relationship with Frank. Dinner would be strictly business. Though she was dying of curiosity about the sudden visit, she knew better than to ask questions.

"I'll pick you up myself. Dinner at the hotel or somewhere else?"

"Let's check out the competition. Charlie Trotter's. Send a car and I'll meet you there for their nine o'clock seating." Frank clicked off the line.

Ainsley stared at the phone in her hand. Everything about Frank was a test, including his dinner suggestion. Charlie Trotter's was competition for no one. She was supposed to get dinner reservations

a day in advance at a restaurant traditionally booked months ahead. On a Friday night, no less. Luckily, she had better connections and more savvy than the two rookies working the concierge desk. She made a few quick phone calls, wondering all the while what had prompted Frank's sudden visit to the Windy City.



Greer silently cursed the hotel staff for not leaving the curtains drawn. She had stayed in the penthouse so often she didn't need to be reminded of the fabulous view of Lake Michigan. The blazing sunlight pouring through the window was a piercing reminder of how difficult it was to recover from her infamous parties. She knew it didn't matter how hard it became to keep up her playgirl lifestyle, she wouldn't let up. She barely knew half the people who attended her soirees, but at least they provided some sort of company in her otherwise solitary existence. Since she had taken the music business by storm at the age of twenty-one, she found herself surrounded by hordes of people—fans, staff, and paparazzi. The bigger the crowd, the lonelier she felt. Her rapid climb to success meant the crowds were huge, but with no friends in sight. She had learned the best she could hope for was an occasional close acquaintance, someone she could connect with once every six months or so when schedules and geography permitted their paths to cross. Macy was one of those people, but last night, after she'd tasted her first high, she became someone Greer no longer knew. Macy transformed from sweet girl next door to bigger-than-life prom queen, holding court for all her adoring subjects. Greer shrugged. She could hardly blame Macy for taking advantage of the freedom she found in the lines of coke. She was on top of the world the last time Greer had seen her and she'd probably left with one of the obsessed fans who'd wrangled their way into the party. Lord knows everyone there had been fascinated with the prom queen's animated personality.

Greer closed her eyes to block out the bright new day and climbed out of bed. Her only scheduled appearance for the day was an appearance on *Oprah*, which left her plenty of time to recover

from the wild night. *Bathroom first, then coffee.* Not yet ready to face the day, she scrunched her eyes shut as she made her way to the oversized bathroom, cursing when she stumbled and fell into a heap on the floor.

“Fuck!” Greer’s eyes flashed open. She was lying on the carpeted floor and she was now doubly pissed at the hotel staff since it was their fault she’d been walking with her eyes closed. Grunting, Greer rolled over and started to push herself, up but she stopped short. She wasn’t the only one lying on the floor.

Macy didn’t look like a prom queen anymore. A prom queen doesn’t lie, half dressed, on the floor of a hotel suite with dried saliva caked on her chin. Her wide-open eyes showed hints of fear she obviously couldn’t feel anymore, and her mouth was slack.

Greer’s hand flew to her mouth. She clamped it shut, resisting the simultaneous urges to scream and vomit. Even as she reached out to shake Macy’s shoulder, she felt the rest of her body recoil with fear. She shook Macy’s still form, at first softly, then with increasing pressure. After a few moments, she let her fingers slip away from the futile task. She knew she should lean forward, check to see if Macy was breathing, but she balked at the thought of placing herself in such close proximity to what she knew was disaster. Her thoughts raced, finally skidding into a memory of something she had seen on television. Her eyes darted around the room, finally landing on Macy’s purse lying nearby. She fished through the contents and pulled out a compact. She flipped it open and held the mirrored half near Macy’s mouth, careful not to touch her lips. Greer waited for what seemed like an eternity for fog to show her signs of life, but the mirror remained clear and bright. Greer’s hand began to shake with sharp, jerking motions, and the compact dropped to the floor. Greer’s stomach rolled and her thoughts raced. *This can’t be happening. What is she doing here, in my room? Is she dead? This can’t be happening.*

She had no idea how much time has passed, but she knew she had to do something, and she had to do it now. Macy was either dead or dying, smack in the middle of Greer’s suite, the likely victim of a drug overdose. Greer swallowed the lumps of fear rising up to choke

her and stumbled over to the nightstand. She picked up the phone and hesitated only a moment before dialing Rick's room.

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Greer was sitting on the balcony, but she could still hear the exchange taking place in her bedroom. She felt as if they must be talking about some other Ms. Davis. Surely she wasn't the subject of this heated conversation between Chicago homicide detectives and a small army of sharp-dressed lawyers, all standing in a room draped in crime scene tape. Rick was the only person in the room she knew. The suits were all lackeys for the record label—the most expensive, high-powered legal team money could buy. She didn't care to know their names. All she wanted was for all of them to clear out of her suite.

"I'm going to need to talk to Ms. Davis at the station."

"Ms. Davis will be happy to cooperate with your investigation, but she's not coming to the police station. Tell us what you'd like to know and we'll get you the information."

"Counselor, I think you're forgetting who's in charge here."

"We called you, Detective. Let's not forget our cooperation. Ms. Davis is traumatized by these events and the loss of a good friend. You will ask your questions through us or not at all."

Greer didn't engage in the battle of wills taking place in her suite. She knew Rick would make sure her interests were protected, but she hoped they all cleared out soon. She was scheduled to be at Harpo Studios in less than three hours.

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Ainsley leaned back in her chair, a satisfied smile on her face. She'd had to burn several favors, but she'd secured a table for Friday night. She had given up a comp suite for the following weekend, box seats to a Cubs game, and she had canceled a hot date with Francesca, a flight attendant who sometimes shared her bed on occasional layovers. Frank wouldn't appreciate the extent

of her efforts. He was a results-oriented individual, but she was still pleased with herself.

“Ms. Faraday?”

Apparently the few moments she’d spent making reservations for dinner with her boss were the only ones she was going to get to herself today. Ainsley looked up at her assistant. “Yes?”

“You might want to turn on the news.” The suggestion was delivered with an urgent tone. Ainsley reached for a remote and clicked to the local ABC affiliate.

“Reporters have been confined to the first floor of the Tinsley Hotel for the last hour, but sources report a representative from the police department will be making a statement before noon. For a summary of what we know so far, let’s turn to Becky Duncan, live on the scene. Becky, tell us what’s happening.”

“Thanks, Greg. Here’s what I can tell you so far.” She ticked the points off on each finger. *“Macy Rivers was found dead this morning in the penthouse of the hotel. She is not a registered guest. The penthouse was registered to Greer Davis. We don’t know anything else for sure at this point.”*

“Becky, is there any speculation as to what happened?”

“A source within the hotel, who preferred to remain anonymous, did tell us about a party last night in Greer Davis’s suite, and now the place is crawling with Chicago’s finest. Word is Ms. Davis is still in the hotel and she’s being held for questioning.”

“Isn’t she scheduled to appear on Oprah this afternoon?”

“Right, Greg. No word yet on whether the queen of daytime has heard the recent developments, but we’ll be on the scene till we have some answers. Reporting live from the Tinsley Hotel, I’m Becky Duncan.”

Ainsley clicked the power off and shook her head. “Better make sure we’re ready to deal with any spillover from the Tinsley. I imagine there will be plenty of people looking for rooms in a hotel not surrounded by crime scene tape. And tell the chief of security I want to meet with his crew before the night shift. I don’t want any parties with dead guests at a Steel Hotel.”