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LBRIS

We know
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Ugly Love

chapter one

TATE

“Somebody stabbed you in the neck, young lady.”

My eyes widen, and I slowly turn toward the elderly gentleman standing at my side. He presses the up button on the elevator and faces me. He smiles and points to my neck.

“Your birthmark,” he says.

My hand instinctively goes up to my neck, and I touch the dime-sized mark just below my ear.

“My grandfather used to say the placement of a birthmark was the story of how a person lost the battle in their past life. I guess you got stabbed in the neck. Bet it was a quick death, though.”

I smile, but I can't tell if I should be afraid or entertained. Despite his somewhat morbid opening conversation, he can't be that dangerous. His curved posture and shaky stance give away that he isn't a day less than eighty years old. He takes a few slow steps toward one of two velvet red chairs that are positioned

against the wall next to the elevator. He grunts as he sinks into the chair and then looks up at me again.

“You going up to floor eighteen?”

My eyes narrow as I process his question. He somehow knows what floor I’m going to, even though this is the first time I’ve ever set foot in this apartment complex, and it’s definitely the first time I’ve ever laid eyes on this man.

“Yes, sir,” I say cautiously. “Do you work here?”

“I do indeed.”

He nods his head toward the elevator, and my eyes move to the illuminated numbers overhead. Eleven floors to go before it arrives. I pray it gets here quickly.

“I push the button for the elevator,” he says. “I don’t think there’s an official title for my position, but I like to refer to myself as a flight captain, considering I do send people as high as twenty stories up in the air.”

I smile at his words, since my brother and father are both pilots. “How long have you been flight captain of this elevator?” I ask as I wait. I swear this is the slowest damn elevator I’ve ever encountered.

“Since I got too old to do maintenance on this building. Worked here thirty-two years before I became captain. Been sending people on flights now for more than fifteen years, I think. Owner gave me a pity job to keep me busy till I died.” He smiles to himself. “What he didn’t realize is that God gave me a lot of great things to accomplish in my life, and right now, I’m so far behind I ain’t *ever* gonna die.”

I find myself laughing when the elevator doors finally open. I reach down to grab the handle of my suitcase and turn to him one more time before I step inside. “What’s your name?”

“Samuel, but call me Cap,” he says. “Everybody else does.”

“You got any birthmarks, Cap?”

He grins. “As a matter of fact, I do. Seems in my past life, I was shot right in the ass. Must have bled out.”

I smile and bring my hand to my forehead, giving him a proper captain’s salute. I step into the elevator and turn around to face the open doors, admiring the extravagance of the lobby. This place seems more like a historic hotel than an apartment complex, with its expansive columns and marble floors.

When Corbin said I could stay with him until I found a job, I had no idea he lived like an actual adult. I thought it would be similar to the last time I visited him, right after I graduated from high school, back when he had first started working toward his pilot’s license. That was four years and a two-story sketchy complex ago. That’s kind of what I was expecting.

I certainly wasn’t anticipating a high-rise smack dab in the middle of downtown San Francisco.

I find the panel and press the button for the eighteenth floor, then look up at the mirrored wall of the elevator. I spent all day yesterday and most of this morning packing up everything I own from my apartment back in San Diego. Luckily, I don’t own much. But after making the solo five-hundred-mile drive today, my exhaustion is pretty evident in my reflection. My hair is in a loose knot on top of my head, secured with a pencil, since I couldn’t find a hair tie while I was driving. My eyes are usually as brown as my hazelnut hair, but right now, they look ten shades darker, thanks to the bags under them.

I reach into my purse to find a tube of ChapStick, hoping to salvage my lips before they end up as weary-looking as the rest of me. As soon as the elevator doors begin to close, they open again. A guy is rushing toward the elevators, preparing to walk on as he acknowledges the old man. “Thanks, Cap,” he says.

I can’t see Cap from inside the elevator, but I hear him grunt something in return. He doesn’t sound nearly as eager to make

small talk with this guy as he was with me. This man looks to be in his late twenties at most. He grins at me, and I know exactly what's going through his mind, considering he just slid his left hand into his pocket.

The hand with the wedding ring on it.

"Floor ten," he says without looking away from me. His eyes fall to what little cleavage is peeking out of my shirt, and then he looks at the suitcase by my side. I press the button for floor ten.

I should have worn a sweater.

"Moving in?" he asks, blatantly staring at my shirt again.

I nod, although I doubt he notices, considering his gaze isn't planted anywhere near my face.

"What floor?"

Oh, no, you don't. I reach beside me and cover all the buttons on the panel with my hands to hide the illuminated eighteenth-floor button, and then I press every single button between floors ten and eighteen. He glances at the panel, confused.

"None of your business," I say.

He laughs.

He thinks I'm kidding.

He arches his dark, thick eyebrow. It's a nice eyebrow. It's attached to a nice face, which is attached to a nice head, which is attached to a nice body.

A married body.

Asshole.

He grins seductively after seeing me check him out—only I wasn't checking him out the way he thinks I was. In my mind, I was wondering how many times that body has been pressed against a girl who wasn't his wife.

I feel sorry for his wife.

He's looking at my cleavage again when we reach floor ten. "I can help you with that," he says, nodding toward my suitcase.

His voice is nice. I wonder how many girls have fallen for that married voice. He walks toward me and reaches to the panel, bravely pressing the button that closes the doors.

I hold his stare and press the button to open the doors. "I've got it."

He nods as if he understands, but there's still a wicked gleam in his eyes that reaffirms my immediate dislike of him. He steps out of the elevator and turns to face me before walking away.

"Catch you later, Tate," he says, just as the doors close.

I frown, not comfortable with the fact that the only two people I've interacted with since walking into this apartment building already know who I am.

I remain alone on the elevator as it stops on every single floor until it reaches the eighteenth. I step off, pull my phone out of my pocket, and open up my messages to Corbin. I can't remember which apartment number he said was his. It's either 1816 or 1814.

Maybe it's 1826?

I come to a stop at 1814, because there's a guy passed out on the floor of the hallway, leaning against the door to 1816.

Please don't let it be 1816.

I find the message on my phone and cringe. It's 1816.

Of course it is.

I walk slowly to the door, hoping I don't wake up the guy. His legs are sprawled out in front of him, and he's leaning with his back propped up against Corbin's door. His chin is tucked to his chest, and he's snoring.

"Excuse me," I say, my voice just above a whisper.

He doesn't move.

I lift my leg and poke his shoulder with my foot. "I need to get into this apartment."

He rustles and then slowly opens his eyes and stares straight ahead at my legs.

His eyes meet my knees, and his eyebrows furrow as he slowly leans forward with a deep scowl on his face. He lifts a hand and pokes my knee with his finger, almost as if he's never seen a knee before. He drops his hand, closes his eyes, and falls back asleep against the door.

Great.

Corbin won't be back until tomorrow, so I dial his number to see if this guy is someone I should be concerned about.

"Tate?" he asks, answering his phone without a hello.

"Yep," I reply. "Made it safe, but I can't get in because there's a drunk guy passed out at your front door. Suggestions?"

"Eighteen sixteen?" he asks. "You sure you're at the right apartment?"

"Positive."

"Are you sure he's drunk?"

"Positive."

"Weird," he says. "What's he wearing?"

"Why do you want to know what he's wearing?"

"If he's wearing a pilot's uniform, he probably lives in the building. The complex contracts with our airline."

This guy isn't wearing any type of uniform, but I can't help but notice that his jeans and black T-shirt do fit him very nicely.

"No uniform," I say.

"Can you get past him without waking him up?"

"I'd have to move him. He'll fall inside if I open the door."

He's quiet for a few seconds while he thinks. "Go downstairs and ask for Cap," he says. "I told him you were coming tonight. He can wait with you until you're inside the apartment."

I sigh, because I've been driving for six hours, and going all the way back downstairs is not something I feel like doing right

now. I also sigh because Cap is the last person who could probably help in this situation.

"Just stay on the phone with me until I'm inside your apartment."

I like my plan a lot better. I balance my phone against my ear with my shoulder and dig inside my purse for the key Corbin sent me. I insert it into the lock and begin to open the door, but the drunk guy begins to fall backward with every inch the door opens. He groans, but his eyes don't open again.

"It's too bad he's wasted," I tell Corbin. "He's not bad-looking."

"Tate, just get your ass inside and lock the door so I can hang up."

I roll my eyes. He's still the same bossy brother he always was. I knew that moving in with him would not be good for our relationship, considering how fatherly he acted toward me when we were younger. However, I had no time to find a job, get my own apartment, and get settled before my new classes started, so it left me with little choice.

I'm hoping things will be different between us now, though. Corbin is twenty-five, and I'm twenty-three, so if we can't get along better than we did as kids, we've got a lot of growing up left to do.

I guess that mostly depends on Corbin and whether he's changed since we last lived together. He had an issue with anyone I dated, all of my friends, every choice I made—even what college I wanted to attend. Not that I ever paid any attention to his opinion, though. The distance and time apart has seemed to get him off my back for the last few years, but moving in with him will be the ultimate test of our patience.

I wrap my purse around my shoulder, but it gets caught on my suitcase handle, so I just let it fall to the floor. I keep my left

hand wrapped tightly around the doorknob and hold the door shut so the guy won't fall completely into the apartment. I take my foot and press it against his shoulder, pushing him from the center of the doorway.

He doesn't budge.

"Corbin, he's too heavy. I'm gonna have to hang up so I can use both hands."

"No, don't hang up. Just put the phone in your pocket, but don't hang up."

I look down at the oversized shirt and leggings I have on. "No pockets. You're going in the bra."

Corbin makes a gagging sound as I pull the phone from my ear and shove it inside my bra. I remove the key from the lock and drop it toward my purse, but it misses and falls to the floor. I reach down to grab the drunk guy so I can move him out of the way.

"All right, buddy," I say, struggling to pull him away from the center of the doorway. "Sorry to interrupt your nap, but I need inside this apartment."

I somehow manage to prop him up against the doorframe to prevent him from falling into the apartment, and then I push the door open farther and turn to get my things.

Something warm wraps around my ankle.

I freeze.

I look down.

"Let go of me!" I yell, kicking at the hand that's gripping my ankle so tightly I'm pretty sure it might bruise. The drunk guy is looking up at me now, and his grip sends me falling backward into the apartment when I try to pull away from him.

"I need to get in there," he mutters, just as my butt meets the floor. He makes an attempt to push the apartment door open with his other hand, and this immediately sends me into panic mode. I pull my legs the rest of the way inside, and his hand

comes with me. I use my free leg to kick the door shut, slamming it directly onto his wrist.

"Shit!" he yells. He's trying to pull his hand back into the hallway with him, but my foot is still pressing against the door. I release enough pressure for him to have his hand back, and then I immediately kick the door all the way shut. I pull myself up and lock the door, the dead bolt, and the chain lock as quickly as I can.

As soon as my heart rate begins to calm down, it starts to scream at me.

My heart is actually screaming at me.

In a deep male voice.

It sounds like it's yelling, "Tate! Tate!"

Corbin.

I immediately look down at my chest and pull my phone out of my bra, then bring it up to my ear.

"Tate! Answer me!"

I wince, then pull the phone several inches from my ear. "I'm fine," I say, out of breath. "I'm inside. I locked the door."

"Jesus Christ!" he says, relieved. "You scared me to death. What the hell happened?"

"He was trying to get inside. I locked the door, though." I flip on the living-room light and take no more than three steps inside before I come to a halt.

Good going, Tate.

I slowly turn back toward the door after realizing what I've done.

"Um. Corbin?" I pause. "I might have left a few things outside that I need. I would just grab them, but the drunk guy thinks he needs to get inside your apartment for some reason, so there's no way I'm opening that door again. Any suggestions?"

He's silent for a few seconds. "What did you leave in the hallway?"