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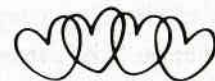
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PART 1

THE PACT



CHAPTER 1

LOGAN

"SHE'S TOTALLY CHECKING ME OUT."

"Suuuuuure, bro."

"She keeps looking over here! She wants me."

"There's no way a hot young thing like her is checking out an old man like you."

"I'm only twenty-eight!"

"Seriously? That's even more ancient than I thought."

I smother a laugh. I've been eavesdropping on this trio of stockbrokers for the past twenty minutes. Well, I don't know if they're actually stockbrokers, but they're wearing tailored suits and drinking expensive liquor in the city's financial district, so chances are they work in finance.

Me, I'm the lumbering jock in ripped jeans and an Under Armour sweater, nursing a bottle of beer at the end of the bar. I was lucky to find an empty seat; the place is packed tonight. With the holiday season in full swing, Boston bars are overflowing with patrons taking time off from work or school.

The three dudes I'm spying on barely glanced my way when I slid onto the neighboring stool, which makes it easier to listen in on their douchey conversation.

"So what's the final score for Baker?" one of the men asks.

He and his blond friend study their dark-haired friend—the ancient one. "Eight percent," the first guy says.

The blond is more generous. "Ten percent."

"Let's split the difference and give him a nine. That's nine-to-one odds."

Although, maybe they're not finance guys. I've been trying to figure out their calculation process, but it seems completely arbitrary and not based in any real mathematics.

"Fuck you both. I've got a way better chance than that," Baker protests. "Have you seen this watch?" He flicks up his left wrist to show off a shiny Rolex.

"Nine to one," the first guy maintains. "Take it or leave it."

Mr. Rolex grumbles in irritation as he slaps some money on the counter. The other two follow suit.

From what I've gleaned, their game goes something like this:

Step 1: One of them picks out a woman in the bar.

Step 2: The other two calculate (I use that word loosely) the odds of the first guy getting her number.

Step 3: They drop oodles of cash on the counter.

Step 4: The guy approaches the girl and inevitably gets rejected. He loses the money he bet, only to get it back in the next round when the next guy also gets rejected.

This entire game is both pointless and stupid.

I sip my beer, watching in amusement as Mr. Rolex saunters over to a stunning woman in a skintight designer dress.

Her nose wrinkles at his approach, which tells me that his buddies are about to win some cash. These guys might be wearing expensive suits, but they're still nowhere close to the same league as the women in this bar. And classy women tend to have no tolerance for immature jackasses, because they know they can do better.

Mr. Rolex's jaw is tight when he returns to the group. Empty-handed. His friends hoot and rake in their winnings.

Just as the blond guy is about to pick a new target, I set my pint glass on the sleek counter and drawl, "Can I play?"

Three heads swivel my way. Mr. Rolex takes in my casual clothes, then smirks. "Yeah, sorry, pal. You can't afford this game."

Rolling my eyes, I slide my wallet out of my pocket and riffle through it—giving them a clear view of all the cash inside. "Try me," I say graciously.

"You've just been sitting there this whole time listening to us?" the blond one demands.

"It's not like you were being quiet about it. And anyway, I like to gamble. Doesn't matter what we're gambling over—I'm there. With that said, what are my chances with..." My gaze conducts a slow sweep of the crowded room. "Her," I finish.

Rather than follow my gaze, three sets of eyes remain glued to me.

They appraise me for several long beats, as if trying to decide if I'm fucking with them. So I hop off the stool and ease closer to the trio. "Look at her. She's fire. Do you think a bum like me could get her number?"

Mr. Rolex is the first to relax his guard. "*Her?*" he says, nodding not so discreetly at the pretty girl who's ordering a drink with the bartender. "You mean Little Miss Innocent?"

He's not wrong. There's definitely an air of innocence to her. A delicate profile reveals a smattering of freckles on her nose, and her light-brown hair is loose around her shoulders rather than up in a complicated style like some of the other chicks in this place. Despite her tight black sweater and short skirt, she's more girl-next-door than sex kitten.

The dark-haired friend snorts. "Yeah, good luck with that."

I flick up my eyebrows. "What, you think I don't have a shot?"

"Dude, look at you. You're, like, a jock, right?"

"Either that or he's on 'roids," the blond guy cracks.

"I'm an athlete," I confirm, but I don't offer more details. Clearly

these guys aren't rabid hockey fans, otherwise they'd recognize me as Boston's latest rookie.

Or maybe they wouldn't. It's not like I've been seeing a crazy amount of ice time since I was called up from the farm team to the pros. I'm still trying to prove myself to my coach and teammates. Though I did get an assist last game, which was cool.

But a goal would've been cooler.

"Yeah, a sweet thing like that would be too intimidated," Mr. Rolex informs me. "Odds of you getting her number are...twenty to one."

His buddies agree. "That's a twenty-five percent chance," one says. Because again, their math is nonsensical.

"What if I want more than her number?" I challenge.

The blond snickers. "You want to know your odds of going home with her? A hundred to one."

I gaze at the brunette again. She's wearing black suede ankle boots with chunky heels, one leg crossed over the other as she daintily sips her drink. She's cute as hell.

"Two hundred bucks says I get her to stick her tongue down my throat in less than five minutes," I boast with an arrogant smirk.

My new friends bust out in incredulous laughter.

"Uh, sure, bro." Mr. Rolex chuckles. "In case you haven't noticed, the women in this joint are pure class. Not a single one would hook up with you in public."

I'm already dropping two hundreds on the counter. "Scared of my sexual prowess, huh?" I mock.

"Ha! Fine then. I'll bite," the blond guy says, placing two bills on top of mine. "Go ahead and get your ass rejected, Loverboy."

I pick up my glass and drain the rest of my beer. "Liquid courage," I tell the trio, and Mr. Rolex rolls his eyes. "Now watch and learn."

Winking, I amble off.

Instantly, her attention fixes on me. A hint of a smile, albeit soft

with shyness, tugs at her mouth. Fuck, she's got nice lips. Full and pink and glossy.

When our gazes lock, it's as if everyone else in the bar disappears. Her brown eyes are pretty and expressive, and right now they're expressing a sweet hunger that quickens my pulse. I'm trapped in her orbit, my legs speeding up of their own volition.

A second later I'm beside her, greeting her with a rough, "Hey."

"Hi," she replies.

She has to tilt her head to look at me, because she's seated and I'm towering over her. I was always a big guy, but I've bulked up even more since I started playing hockey at a higher level. Skating in the pros is physically demanding.

"Can I buy you a drink?" I offer.

She lifts her full glass. "No, thank you. I've already got one."

"Then I'll buy your next one."

"There won't be a next one. I don't trust myself."

"Why's that?"

"I'm a lightweight. One drink makes me tipsy." Her lips curve slightly. "Two drinks make me do bad things."

Damned if my dick doesn't twitch at that. "How bad?" I drawl.

Although she blushes, she doesn't shy away from the question. "Very bad."

I grin at her, then flag the bartender with a fast, exaggerated gesture. "Another drink for the lady," I call.

She laughs, and the melodic sound sends prickles of sensation through me. I'm insanely attracted to her.

Rather than take the empty stool beside her, I remain standing. But I do edge closer, and her knee lightly brushes my hip. I swear I hear her breath hitch at the slight contact.

I glance over and spot my new friends watching us with deep interest. Mr. Rolex taps his watch dramatically as if to remind me the clock is ticking.

"So, listen..." I bring my lips close to her ear so she can hear me.

This time I see her breath hitch. Her perky breasts rise as she sucks in air. "My buddies gave me a twenty-five percent chance of getting your number."

Her eyes dance devilishly. "Wow. They don't have much faith in you, huh? I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry. I've beaten greater odds than that. But...lemme tell you a secret..." My mouth brushes her earlobe as I whisper, "I don't want your number."

She jolts in surprise, her gaze snapping to mine. "You don't?"

"Nope."

"Then what do you want?" She picks up her drink and takes a hasty sip.

I think it over for a moment. "I want to kiss you."

A startled laugh now. "Uh-huh. You're just saying that because you hope I'll do it, and then you can prove to your friends you're not a loser."

I look over my shoulder again. Mr. Rolex wears a self-satisfied smirk. He taps his watch again. Tick-tock.

My five minutes are almost up. My own watch tells me I've only got two left.

"No," I tell her. "That's not why I want to kiss you."

"Oh really?"

"Really." I lick my bottom lip. "I want to kiss you because you're the hottest woman in this bar." I shrug. "And anyway, it's obvious you want the same thing."

"Says who?" she challenges.

"Says the fact that you haven't stopped staring at my mouth since I walked over here."

She narrows her eyes.

"See, here's the thing." I lightly drag my fingertips along her slender arm. I'm not touching bare skin, yet she visibly shivers. "My buddies think you're Little Miss Innocent. They warned me you'd be intimidated by someone like me. Someone rough and crude. But you know what I think?"

"What?" Her voice is breathy.

"I think you like rough and crude." Once again, I lean in closer. She's wearing a tiny diamond stud, and I can't help but flick the tip of my tongue over the little earring.

There's another sharp intake of breath, and I feel a tug of satisfaction.

"I don't think you're innocent at all," I continue. "I don't think you're a good girl. I think that right now you want nothing more than to shove your tongue in my mouth and rake your nails down my back and let me fuck you right here in front of everyone."

She moans out loud.

The cocky grin is just spreading across my face when she grabs the back of my head and yanks me down for a hard kiss.

"You're right," she murmurs against my lips. "I'm not a good girl at all."

My dick is hard before her tongue even enters my mouth. And when it does, sliding through my parted lips, it's my turn to moan. She tastes like gin and sex, and I kiss her back hungrily, all the while aware of the loud catcalls surrounding us. I'm sure some of those yells are coming from my stockbroker friends, but I'm too busy to bask in their amazement.

As my tongue slicks over hers, I gently nudge one leg between her soft thighs. Letting her feel how hard I am.

"Oh my God," she mumbles. She breaks the kiss, her eyes gleaming with pure lust. "Let's get out of here and finish this somewhere private?"

"No. I want you now." My voice sounds like gravel.

She blinks. "Now?"

"Mm-hmm." I rest one hand on her slim waist, moving my palm in a teasing caress. "I hear the ladies' room has real big, private stalls..."

She presses her own palm to the center of my chest. Not to push me away, though. She teases me too, while her hot gaze roams the

length of my body. Then she slants her head and asks, "What would your girlfriend say about that?"

I give her a dirty smile. "She'd say...*hurry, John, I need to come.*"

Grace moans again.

"That's what I thought," I mock, but my girl doesn't look fazed.

Sometimes it's hard to believe she was once that nervous, babbling freshman whose dorm I accidentally wound up in. That the sweet Grace Ivers I fell for is this fearless woman in front of me, the sexy vixen who's about to let me fuck her in the bathroom.

Granted, Grace picked this bar and researched the cleanliness situation of the bathrooms before agreeing to tonight's role-playing exercise. So, yes, she's still that weird girl I met years ago. She just also happens to be my hot, sex-starved girlfriend.

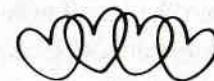
I take her hand and pull her off the stool. I'm still hard as a rock and in need of relief. Judging by her shallow breathing, she's as aroused as I am.

"So what do you say?" I ask, rubbing the inside of her palm with my thumb.

Grace stands on the tips of her high-heeled boots and presses her lips to my ear. "Hurry, John, I need to come."

I swallow a desperate laugh as I follow her toward the rear corridor. Before we pass the doorway, I toss a final glance over my shoulder. The stockbrokers are gaping at me as if I'm an alien from another planet. I gesture to the money on the bar and offer a gracious nod as if to say, *Keep it all.*

I don't need to win some stupid bet. I'm already the luckiest man in the bar.



CHAPTER 2

LOGAN

"YOU REALLY DIDN'T HAVE TO DO THIS," GRACE'S FATHER INSISTS as I drop the hood of his SUV back in place. "Not that I don't appreciate it, but I feel like a real goofhead for making you do manual labor on Christmas Eve."

Dragging a clean rag over my chin to wipe a streak of motor oil off, I try my hardest not to laugh. I like Tim Ivers a hell of a lot, but there's something very disconcerting about a grown man who uses words like "goofhead."

In the four years I've been dating his daughter, I can count on one hand the times I've heard the man curse, a drastic contrast to my own upbringing. I grew up with an alcoholic father whose every other word was an expletive. My poor mom once had to come in for a meeting with my kindergarten teacher because I'd called another kid a "fucking shit-face." Oh, those were the days... The very bad, unhappy days.

Luckily, everything's changed since then. My dad has been sober for nearly four years, and although we haven't completely mended fences, at least I don't hate him anymore.

If I'm being honest, these days I view Grace's dad as a father figure. He's a decent guy, if you overlook the fact that he prefers football to hockey. But nobody's perfect.