

Smoke and Steel

By Kristen Ashley

TEASER CHAPTERS

Chapter One

Cookies

Hellen

I heard my front door open.

My first thought was, *Maybe the cookies were over the top.*

“Babe!” he called. “Cookies! Awesome!”

Or perhaps the cookies were just cruel.

I’d put on his second-favorite blouse (it could be his third, he didn’t rank them, I just paid attention to him, unlike the other way around) and had my makeup two steps down from fuck-me-hard.

So I wasn’t being *totally* in his face.

But my hair was loose, and although he didn’t have the balls to claim it like he meant it (his tepid tugs were a bit of a turn off, and I’d learned to try to keep his hands out of my hair), still, he loved it down, mostly because I gave great hair.

And my ass in the jeans I was wearing sprung men on a glance.

He loved my cookies, all of them, no matter what variety I baked, because I’d perfected each version to the point most people told me to start my own shop.

Like I was going to waste my time on that.

Not a chance.

“What the...?” I heard him say.

He’d seen the box.

And here we go.

I turned to the doorway.

He wandered into my kitchen.

“Babe—” he began, wearing his remorseful face.

And I was glad.

Because that pissed me off.

And it did because, if he knew to be remorseful, he knew.

He knew.

I launched in.

“You don’t have HBO Max. I have HBO Max. You asked to come—”

“Hell—”

“—over with your buds so you could watch some boxing thing, and I said yes. I was going out with my girls, but I said yes. All you had to do was tidy up after they left. I didn’t ask you to vacuum and scrub the baseboards with a toothbrush. I asked you to tidy up. I came home to you passed out in my bed and beer bottles everywhere, leftover pizza congealing, a stain on my couch—”

“That’s why I’m here now. I was going to—”

I wasn’t listening, yet again, to what he was “going to” do.

“So when I left this morning, I asked you to take care of it before you left. You didn’t. I came home to it. By then, every inch of my apartment smelled like stale beer and pizza.”

“Like I was going to say,” he stated with forced patience. “I’m here now to do it. You just did it before I could get to it.”

I did a lot of things before he could get to them.

“It’s *my* house, Bryan. And when I say you can hang here, and all I ask is you throw away some fucking bottles and put away some pizza, shove some plates in the dishwasher, toss some napkins in the trash, it’s not a lot to ask. Hell, you’re a grown man. I shouldn’t *have* to ask. And I *wouldn’t* ask if it didn’t *mean something to me.*”

He was giving me the “whoa” sign with his hand.

“Okay, I fucked up, but—”

“I woke up in the middle of the night to go to the bathroom.”

He shut his mouth and tried not to let me see his smirk.

But I saw the smirk.

And, oh yeah.

Oh yeah.

Now I was *pissed.*

“Is something funny?” I asked quietly.

“No.” He sounded choked because he was trying not to laugh, which meant he was lying.

“What’s funny about me slamming my head into the cabinet door you left open over the toilet, even though I’ve asked you to close it probably thirty times, because last night wasn’t the first time I slammed my head into it? Which means, I don’t only want you to close it because cabinet doors should be closed. That’s the reason the cabinet *has* a fucking door, so you can close it and not see all the crap inside. But also, because, when I slam my head into it, it hurts like fuck.”

Me putting it that way, he looked remorseful again.

“Is it amusing to you to cause me pain?” I asked.

“Babe, I’m sorry. I’d had a few. I wasn’t paying attention.”

I let that go.

For now.

Instead, I pointed across the kitchen.

“Do you see that under-cupboard light that doesn’t work?”

Bryan turned his head that way and made an “oh shit” face.

“Yeah,” I agreed. “I mentioned it was out and I was going to email my apartment manager to fix it. You reminded me, if it isn’t an emergency, it takes them a while to do something. You then said you’d do it. I said I thought that was great, if you did it, you could show me how and I wouldn’t have to ask anyone again. That was a month ago. My apartment manager might not jump all over changing a lightbulb, but it’d be done in a few days. I’ve asked you five times. You keep telling me you’re on it. I emailed them today. They’re coming Monday.”

He took a step toward me.

“Don’t come closer,” I warned.

He grinned, because he was good-looking and had a great smile, so just doing that allowed him to get away with a lot in the past—not by me, but others—and he kept coming.

“Bryan!” I snapped. “Do not come a step closer.”

He was nearly to me.

“Dammit!” I shouted. “Do I need to call my brother-in-law to deal with your ass?”

He stopped, his face paling.

And I could not believe, while in the midst of this very conversation, I had to threaten him with Jagger in order for him to listen to me.

“That,” I said softly. “That right there. That’s why all your shit is in a box in the living room. Because you don’t listen to me, and you don’t respect me. You respect Jagger, because he’s in an MC and he’d fuck you up, but you won’t respect me, even though you’ve told me you love me.”

“Hellen, babe,” he cajoled. “None of this is a big deal. I’ll go out now. Grab a bulb, show you how to fix it.”

“No, I’ve waited on you to do that, and you didn’t, so I took care of it myself.”

“I’m good to do it now.”

“I needed you to do it a month ago.”

“It can be fixed in an hour.”

“That’s a month and an hour longer than I’m willing to wait for you to take care of it.”

He started to lose patience. “Jesus, Hellen, none of this shit *matters*.”

I crossed my arms on my chest.

“You see, this is the problem,” I informed him. “None of this shit matters *to you*. When you use my washer and dryer, I ask you to get it done and leave them empty. Half the time you come over here to do your laundry, you leave your clothes in my machines for days, and by the time I wanna do my own, I have to deal with yours first, so I can do mine. Have I told you about this more than once?”

“Okay, I see this is a thing for you, so I’ll be on it from now on.”

“Why do I have to box all your stuff and be done with you before you agree to be on it, Bryan? Why can’t words come out of my mouth, you take a second to listen, process, and if you have some issue, discuss, and if not, just be a decent partner?”

“Because it’s just...fucking...*laundry*,” he bit out.

“First, they’re *my* machines, and I let you use them. And second, do you ever have to wait for me to clear my clothes out when you want to use them?” I didn’t pause for him to answer. “No, because I get it done and clear them out even though they’re *my* machines. Still, it’s in my mind that you also use them. I’m doing you a favor, so maybe you could return that by not hanging up my machines.”

He looked to his trainers, mumbling, “My God, this is fucked-up petty.”

Okay.

Um...

No.

“Right. Just leave my key, grab your box and go.”

He lifted his head, and his eyes were narrow. “Hang on a second. We’re not over just because you’re throwing a fit about your washing machine.”

“Yes, Bryan.” I uncrossed my arms and put my hands to my hips. “Yes, we are. Because it’s become clear to me that you aren’t getting this in a way you never will. I’ve put up with it for too long as it is.”

“Put up with what?” He jerked his thumb at his chest. “Me?”

“Your disrespect for me.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” he blew out.

I stared at him.

Then I looked to the side, took a beat, and turned back to him.

“Hitting my head last night hurt a lot, Bryan.”

His handsome face went soft. “Baby, I’m so sorry. It won’t happen again.”

“That’s what you said the last time I hit my head.”

“Okay, but I mean it this time. Seriously.”

“I heard you laugh last night when I cried out. It woke you up, you called to ask if I was okay. I said I hit my head, and I heard you laugh.”

His lips tipped. “When you’re not being pissy, you gotta admit it *is* kinda funny. You’re using the toilet, you get up and—”

I cut him off.

“It’s not funny, Bryan.”

His head jerked, possibly at my tone, which was firm but wounded.

I wanted to scream because it took me this long and cost me this many words and this much frustration, and I had to expose my hurt to finally get him to pay attention.

“And please listen to me when I explain all the reasons why it’s not,” I went on. “First, if I’d done something, even inadvertently, that made you feel pain, it would make *me* feel pain. I would not want pain for you. I especially would not want to be the cause of that pain. I’m not a frat buddy you’re pulling a prank on. I’m your girlfriend, the woman you’re supposed to love. How my pain could ever, *ever* translate to amusement to you, I have no idea. That’s the first part.”

“You’re right, that was shitty,” he muttered.

“It was, but as I’ve mentioned, it’s happened before, even though I asked, not mean, not bitchy. Nicely. Courteously. Please keep that cabinet door shut, especially considering its position. You disregarded my request. More than once. What does that say about how you truly feel about me?”

“Baby, it’s just me being a guy.”

“No it isn’t. Not every man on this planet does whatever the fuck they want, thinking they’re...what? I don’t know. So hot a woman will put up with it?”

Which, truth be told, he was incredibly hot.

But not that hot (in my estimation).

No one was that hot.

I carried on.

“Hoping they’ll hook up with their mother who’ll take care of their ass until they die? It isn’t the cabinet. It’s that and the light and the laundry and having to clean up after you and your friends. It’s asking you to separate the cutlery when you put it in the dishwasher, that is, when you put anything in the dishwasher, because it’s easier to put away, but you never bother. And requesting you recycle, and I find recyclables in my garbage.”

His face was flushing.

“Okay, seriously, I know this is gonna make me sound like a dick, but I’m honestly not trying to be a dick when I say, if it means so much to you, and it doesn’t to me, then you can do it yourself and not give me hassle, because it’s not important to me.”

“No, Bryan. See, *this* is the thing,” I retorted. “I am not going to spend any more time, much less consider a long-term relationship, or I should say a *longer*-term one, and commit to a man who cannot perform minor considerations simply because he values the person he’s spending time with. I’m asking you to *close a cabinet*. I’m asking you to *put a bottle in a different bin that is right beside the garbage bin*. I’m asking you to shove a fork in a certain slot. I’m asking you not to make insignificant promises, that are still promises, that you’re not going to keep, and I have to deal with the consequences. That’s all I’m asking. And you’ve demonstrated repeatedly you can’t do these things. So we are done.”

He lifted his hands in front of him in an “I give up,” gesture.

“All right, baby, I get it. I see now how important this stuff is to you. I’ll get on it. I mean that.”

“And then what, Bryan? You’ll be”—I did air quotation marks—“*good* for a while, and then we have this conversation again? We’ve been there before. It doesn’t last. Or, because I made it clear your inaction has repercussions, you’ll note these things, and do better, but then something else will come up, I’ll share, you won’t pay it any heed, and I’ll have to get fed up to the point I need to do something extreme to get your attention, and only then I’ll get your attention? Is this the cycle you want to land on me? Is this how you want me to live?”

He was stuck, considering that was where he’d put himself, so to that, he just screwed up his mouth and remained silent.

I didn’t return that favor.

“Why do you get the girlfriend who folds your clothes when you leave them in my dryer, and rushes to court to bring you a new tie when you’ve spilled lunch on the one you were wearing? And looks after your dog when you’re in Vegas with your buds? And bakes cookies for your boss’s birthday to buy you points? Then I sit down to dinner with him and charm him when my family was having a get together and I wanted to be with them. But you were my guy, that was important to you, so I did my face and hair and put on an appropriate dress and sat at your side. And the man liked me so much, he told you to marry me and offered me a job. Why do you get that woman, and I get a man who doesn’t listen to me until I feel the need to shout, either literally or figuratively? The man who thinks he can decide for the both of us what’s important, and what’s not, deeming my wishes unimportant, then deigning to acquiesce to them, still thinking they’re petty, when they aren’t? They’re *my wishes*. So they *matter*.”

The cookie timer went off.

I moved to the oven, peered in, then opened the door, took them out and put the tray on a hot pad on the counter.

I returned my attention to Bryan.

He was staring at the cookies.

What he wasn’t doing was addressing my concerns in any real way.

“I’m sorry, Bryan, but I’m done talking, and I am because I’ve said all this before in one way or another, and you didn’t bother to hear me. If you don’t mind, I’d like to get on with my night. So if you could leave my key and then grab your box and go, I’d appreciate it.”

His gaze darted from the cookies to me.

“That’s it? We’re together over a year, you decide we’re done, you kick my ass out and we’re done?”

And again, I wanted to scream.

I also wanted to cry.

Because he spoke truth. We’d been together for over a year.

I went there with him at first because he was good-looking.

I stuck around because he was funny, smart, interesting, and at the time, attentive.

He was also a mover and shaker.

He was an attorney, and his goal was to make full partner by the time he was thirty-five. It was a huge firm, which had been around for sixty years. The youngest they’d made someone a partner was at forty-two. It seemed an impossible goal, but he was going for it.

I liked a man with drive, ambition, because I was that kind of woman.

A woman with drive.

A woman with ambition.

He was also in killer student loan debt, and even though he made good money, he was living on the cheap because he wanted them out of his life. He could sacrifice. He could save. He could be responsible.

I was a woman who could sacrifice, save, be responsible.

He dressed great, and because he worked hard, he played harder. He didn’t waste the small amount of downtime he had. He was busy and he was social, he had good taste in music and movies, and he made it a priority, being with me.

I had yet to have an excellent lover, and I knew that regardless of the fact I had yet to have one.

But he didn’t suck in bed. He cared that I orgasmed, and he put effort into it, so that was a plus.

In the beginning, even though I was young, too young (in my estimation) to commit, (I was twenty-three), I thought there might be a possibility I’d found my man.

So I might know my own mind, and that mind was made up we were over, but this wasn’t easy for me.

I just wasn’t going to cry and moan and whine and beg in front of him.

I’d deal with those feelings when he left.

And this was another indication that he didn't get it.

Any of it.

"This isn't easy for me, Bryan," I told him.

"Could have fooled me, babe," he returned.

Okay, this had to end.

"You know, unless you clue in, yes, I'm going to say it, unless you grow up and make changes, one day, you're going to find a woman. And you're going to be able to hold on to her because she will love you more than she loves herself. And that is not a good thing, Bryan."

He stared at me.

I kept talking.

"Then, somewhere down the line, you're going to look at her and see the light is out in her eyes. She might find things to bicker with you about that make no sense, because they're not what really matters. She'll just be bitter she didn't stand up for herself, she didn't stop it before it was too late, and she's going to find ways to take that out on you. But what really mattered was that every day, in little ways, you showed her she was not important to you, and she put up with it. You did what you liked, and she sucked it up, because she'd asked and asked, and you didn't care enough to make the effort."

The flush was coming back to his face.

I kept going.

"Eventually, you treating her like she's not important will drive home the fact that she's not. She'll start believing it. And because she's not important, she needs you. Because...who else would have her? She's not worthy. She's going to be a shell of her former self, striking out at random, making your life miserable, and you're going to wonder what happened to the lively, awesome chick you first met, not understanding you buried her under your own shit. And it's highly likely from there, you'll scrape her off and find someone else you can smother with your neglect and self-absorption."

I watched him swallow, but he still didn't speak.

I wasn't holding high hopes for his bid to make partner if he couldn't even state his own damn case to his girlfriend.

But that was beside the point.

And I wasn't done.

“Or maybe you’ll remember this conversation, and you’ll realize the person you spend time with deserves for you to listen when they speak and give a damn about what they say. For you to take it into consideration. For you to make minor adjustments in your behavior to be a good partner and prove to the person you’re sharing time with she means something to you. And I hope that happens for you, Bryan. But I’m not putting in any more work. Someone else is going to have to guide your way on that. I have my own life to live, and I’m not going to do it in clothes that smell like pizza and stale beer because the guy I like needs me to tutor him in how to give a shit about me.”

He didn’t say anything for long moments after I quit speaking, but I said no more since I’d stated my case.

Finally, he asserted, “I *can* do better, Hellen.”

“This is the sad part for us both, Bryan. Because you’ve conditioned me not to believe that.”

He dropped his head, tore his hand through his (very nice) hair (I’d miss pulling on that, and I did, like I meant it, and he’d loved it), lifted his head, and declared, “Shit, fuck, I’m in love with you. Honest to God, I can do better.”

“I’ve made up my mind.”

“Goddammit, Hellen!” he shouted.

That was when it happened, to my shame.

The tears hit my eyes.

Upon seeing my emotion, his expression warmed with hope.

“And even now, you’re not listening to me,” I whispered.

His face froze.

“This isn’t *easy*, Bryan. But *I’ve made up my mind*.”

“Okay, I’ll go,” he said quickly. “We’ll give it some time. Take a break. I’ll text you in a week.”

“Please remember to leave the key,” I replied.

His body jolted, and his face fell.

“Baby, you’re killing me,” he said raggedly.

I pressed my lips together and struggled to beat back the tears.

“I fucked up, I’m so fucking sorry,” he went on, pulling his keys out of his pocket. “I’ll give you some space. I’ll take my stuff.” He slid my key off his ring. “I’ll text. We’ll go out. Sit down and talk. I’ll listen, and I’ll hear. And we’ll work this out.” He set the key on the counter.

I didn’t say that wasn’t going to happen.

But that wasn’t going to happen.

“Can I have a hug before I go?” he requested.

Translation: *If you hug me, then I know there’s still a shot. I’ll give you some space. I’ll come back. Make a load of promises. Do better. Then backslide. But by then, I’ll have sucked more of your time and chipped away more of your confidence. I’ll have the chance to make you start wondering if you are being petty and then you’ll just fold my laundry and it’ll bug you, but you won’t mention it. And by the time you’ve realized you’ve subjugated all your needs to me, you’ll be menopausal and wondering what the fuck happened to your life.*

Fortunately for me, my translation of going to him and giving him a hug was different.

He held me close and tight. He was tall-ish, and I liked that. He felt good and smelled good. I liked that too.

He kissed my neck.

I liked that too, even though, under the circumstances, it was an asshole thing to do.

I pulled at his hold, and he let me go.

Then he looked me in the eyes and made a promise.

“I see a future for us, babe, and I’m going to make that happen. Whatever you need. You matter to me. I hate that I didn’t make that clear the way you need it. But I’ll prove it to you.”

I pitied the woman he trapped.

He gave me his cocky grin, which was a blow because I loved that grin, though I figured that wasn’t why he gave it to me.

It was just who he was.

“Can I have a couple of cookies?” he requested.

I stepped away so I was nowhere near the tray of cookies, or him, and he frowned. He didn’t like that.

But I flicked a hand at them, an indication he could help himself.

He took a handful, five stacked and cupped in his hand to be exact.

So not exactly “a couple.”

But...whatever.

“Love you, Hellen,” he said, putting a lot of feeling behind that, and it cut me because it was genuine.

“Bye,” I replied.

He didn’t like that either.

But he left.

When I heard the door close, I followed him.

I stood at the door and waited, and when he was sure to be away, I turned the deadbolt and put on the chain.

I then went into the kitchen, sorted the cookies, put a lid on the dough, stashed it in the fridge, wandered back to my bedroom, curled up on my bed...

And I cried.

* * * * *

Core

Core was kicked back in his chair, boots up on the windowsill, bag of nacho cheese Doritos on his abs, a beer and a set of binoculars close at hand, when Pretty Boy left her apartment.

Normally, Core wouldn’t register this too much, except to ignore the low-key way it annoyed him that the woman was with a dude like that.

Then again, it’d be more surprising she’d let a rough-trade biker into her bed.

Of course, Tack, Hop and High of the Chaos MC all had old ladies who wore tight skirts, stylin’ blouses, high heels and carried those expensive purses.

But Core wasn’t a high-maintenance-woman type of man.

That said, if the woman he was watching, Hellen Moynihan, Jagger’s sister-in-law wasn’t thirteen years younger than him, and if she gave him an opening, he wouldn’t hesitate to give her a pop.

The way she worked that ass and the attitude that slithered off her wrapped around your dick and gave it a tug, he’d give her more than one.

All of these thoughts flashed through his mind, and then he was taking his boots off the sill, straightening in his chair, setting aside the Doritos and reaching for the binoculars.

He trained them on Pretty Boy and let out a low whistle.

After that, he chuckled.

Enjoying the show, Core kept his binocs on a very unhappy PB who was shoving a box, which looked like it was filled to overflowing with his stuff, into the trunk of his shitty sedan.

Core didn't know the story of that guy. He only knew he was twenty-nine, an attorney at some bigshot firm downtown, and he wasn't the focus of why Core's ass was right there.

He had no idea why Pretty Boy, who had to make big bucks, drove such a shit car.

Core just knew that she'd scraped him off.

He could have called it (that said, it was about time).

Woman like that wouldn't put up with a man who had his head up his ass, seeing as she'd expect her man to spend all his time kissing hers.

Still, it amused him to watch his walk of shame.

When he motored off in his crappy car, Core trained his binocs on her pad.

Lights on, probably going about her business, doing shit to her face and nails, preparing to lay waste to another man who she'd lead around by his dick.

Core might enjoy the novelty of that, if he had the shot of seeing her bowed before him, ass in his hands, taking his cock.

But he reckoned it'd get old fast.

He set the binoculars aside, sat back, grabbed his chips and scanned the street.

There was no sign of her.

That being, no sign of the woman who he was sitting right there, keeping an eye out for her to slither into town and make trouble for Hellen, or her mom, stepdad and sister. Like there hadn't been any sign of her for two weeks, even though they got word she was heading up from Phoenix.

He was beginning to wonder if the bitch they were looking for was even in Denver.

Nevertheless, he munched and kept his eye out, not knowing, soon, they'd all find out she very much was.

Chapter Two

Lightning Bolt

Hellen

“You’re a man hater.”

“Oh my God,” Kyra muttered, her eyes going round.

Marcy pursed her lips in irritation.

I stared at Bree, who needed a reality check, and her girls, including me, were in the process of giving her one.

She just didn’t want it.

And for some reason, in order to share that, she homed in on me.

“It’s because your dad is such a jerk,” she went on. “Now you hate all men. And we all have to suffer for it.”

Okay, I’d been going softly-softly up to this point, we all had. Dancing around her feelings. Trying to get her to take a look at what was happening and come to the realization her boyfriend of only a few months was exhibiting signs he was a chronic user, because he was definitely using her.

It was important to note, my friend Bree wasn’t stupid. She was buying his shit because he was gorgeous and talked a good game (even I, in the beginning, though he was very charming and ridiculously pretty, had thought he might be the real deal because he seemed genuinely into her, and I could understand that because she was my friend—but now, I didn’t think that).

But her being bitchy because I loved her and was worried some guy was no good for her, I wasn’t feeling it.

I also wasn’t feeling like being singled out.

Which, of course, with me being me, meant it was time for me to lay it out.

“I don’t hate all men,” I replied. “I just hate predatory assholes like Christos.”

“And what if I said something like that about Bryan?” she retorted hotly. “Oh wait. There is no Bryan. He didn’t live up to your impossible standards so he’s out.”

I actually felt the tip of that arrow pierce my heart.

“Ouch,” I whispered.

“Oh my God,” Kyra repeated.

Marcy chimed in this time too. “You know that isn’t right.”

Bree looked contrite, but she didn’t back down.

“Did she dump Bryan?” she asked the group. “Yes, she did,” she answered before anyone could do it.

“And you were sitting right here a week ago with the rest of us, listening to her litany of woes about him, and agreeing, like we all did, that if he perpetuated some new thoughtless bullshit, he needed to sort his shit or take a hike,” Marcy fired back. “And three days ago, after his buds coming over meant *she* had to head to the store for upholstery cleaner, she asked him to take a hike.”

“Yeah, well if I had an issue with Christos...*which I don't*...then I'd expect you all to agree with me and take my back. But again, I don't have an issue with Christos. In fact, we're great.” She did the thing with her nose that she did when she was being rebellious, something that was a big thing for her since, for the most part, she was a people pleaser. “He told me he's falling in love with me, and I'm thrilled he did, because I'm falling in love with him too.”

Oh crap.

“Bree—” I started.

“No,” she snapped. “I think you've said enough.”

“Okay, seriously though, have you *not* seen *The Tinder Swindler*?” Kyra blurted.

Yikes.

She went right there.

Bree and Christos didn't meet on Tinder. They met on Bumble.

Kyra's delivery wasn't smooth, but it was a pertinent question.

Bree's face went red as a beet. “That's an awful thing to say!”

“It was all fun and games in the beginning,” Marcy pointed out. “Now how many times has he asked you to bail him out?”

“And you've only been seeing him a couple of months,” I reminded her.

“We're nearly to our three-month anniversary,” she sniffed. “And I don't *bail him out*. I've given him a few loans. He's going to pay me back.”

“And again, how many loans have you given him?” Marcy repeated.

Bree screwed up her face. “You all are ganging up on me.”

“We're not,” I said carefully. “We're just saying this is something to consider. In the beginning he's flashing cash, taking you to expensive restaurants, buying you things, and talking about Mediterranean cruises and flying you to see his homeland to meet his family. Now he's

been in a lurch, not just once, and needs you to cover him, and you've only known the guy what amounts to a matter of weeks."

"We're not all freaks about our money like you. And we're not all uptight and controlling of our boyfriends...*like you*," Bree shot back.

The money part, she was right, in a way.

I could see how other people would think I was a freak about money.

Though, my opinion was, if they could, everyone should handle money like I did. They'd be a lot less stressed out.

You see, I'd gotten my first job at age fifteen, and from my very first paycheck, I'd religiously done what I still did today (with some minor tweaks).

Twenty-five percent saved for future use.

By "future use" I meant, if my stepdad Andy hadn't stepped up and paid for my education, I would have used it for that.

Since I didn't have to do that, it sat untouched until I needed to invest in myself (unless I had to move it around into higher interest-bearing accounts). Be that investment in the business I knew I was going to start one day (though I didn't know what that business was, until I did), or setting up my first apartment, or whatever.

Now that twenty-five percent went back into my business, my wardrobe or my home (like buying the kickass couch that Bryan or one of his friends stained with pizza sauce).

The next twenty-five percent was saved for a rainy day.

I'd since cut that back to ten percent because I had to feed myself, and, you know, do other grownup things like pay rent.

The next twenty-five (now ten) was untouchable, no excuses.

Unless I was about to starve or become homeless, that money was to sit until it was time for me to quit working so I could spend my days in Italy, eating and wandering on my Eat Tour (I just wanted to do that part, I didn't have a lot of interest in the pray part, and if love happened, great, if it didn't, I wasn't going to look for it) or whatever struck my fancy.

What didn't strike my fancy, when I finally allowed myself to chill out and just be (I was aiming at age sixty, but I kinda hoped it'd be fifty-five), was hurting for money when it happened.

The last twenty-five (now fifty-five) percent was for current use, rent, groceries, utilities, etc.

I had not been unemployed a single day since I was fifteen, including working when I was in university. And Mom and Andy refused to allow me to use my money for anything that had to do with college.

This meant I was sitting on some serious cash when I started my business while I was a junior at the University of Colorado. And even more cash when I graduated a year later and struck out on my own.

It was good I started early. Now I had more clients than I knew what to do with and had the happy problem of trying to decide if I wanted to work eighty hours a week rather than the sixty to seventy I was currently working, or hire someone.

I was leaning toward hiring someone.

So yes.

I could see Bree, who earned her money, paid her bills, then blew it on Gucci bags she bought retail (which was a crime, with so many resale websites out there—those were where I got my steals) would think I was a freak about money.

It was her comment about me being uptight and controlling about Bryan that was another shot to the heart.

“So you lied last week, and instead, you think I should have continued to put up with his shit?” I asked.

“I’m just saying your expectations are high,” she replied. “They’re *guys*. Guys are dufuses. He’s not even thirty yet. He can be trained.”

“And how much time do I invest in training him before it’s time to give up. Another year? Two? Ten?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” she retorted. “I just know he’s a catch and you didn’t let him slip away, you unhooked him and threw him back, which is kinda crazy.”

“I’m not looking for a fish,” I stated. “If I spend time with someone, I expect to get some respect, or at the very least common courtesy.”

Marcy butted in.

“I’m feeling a bit ill we’re going through this again when we’ve known for a while that Bryan was oblivious the best of times, thoughtless the worst, and that was not okay.”

“Well, I guess Hell bitching incessantly about Bryan,” (Ugh! I didn’t bitch incessantly!) “then he’s gone, and now she’s bitching about Christos, I...I...”

Bree trailed off and her attention did the same, wandering slowly across Fortnum's, a used bookstore on Broadway where we hung most Sunday afternoons, gabbed and drank coffee.

Marcy, Kyra and I turned to see what caught her gaze, and for the first time in my life, it happened.

You know that lightning bolt all the books said hit a woman when she saw a man she knew in an instant she wanted to jump?

That lightning bolt just hit me.

Dear God, he was fine.

Faded jeans. Black T-shirt. Biker boots. One of those wallets that was chained to his beltloop, the chain hanging down his hip and then looping up to his ass like the dip in a roller coaster you really wanted to ride.

He had dark, messy, overlong hair that had a lot of curl in it and a face you wanted to wake up to.

Tying the bow on the package that was him: he was tall, his shoulders were broad, and his ass was awe-inspiring.

I knew this because I was awed speechless and immobile, the only thoughts in my brain being how hot getting razor burn from his stubble would feel and how full my hands could get with that tush.

He was rough and I was ready.

As if he felt us staring at him, he turned our way.

When he did, I couldn't hold back letting out a small gasp, because I could see the striking light blue of his eyes from where we were sitting in the huddle of furniture by the window.

I was so engrossed by how amazing he was, I didn't realize until too late that he might have turned our way, but he'd done it to look right at me.

Ohmigod.

"Ugh, you just broke up with Bryan, did you not give a shit about him at all?" Bree asked loudly.

I watched the guy's lips twitch (and Lord have mercy, *what lips*), and he turned back to the line.

I turned back to our group in order to give squinty eyes to Bree.

"Oh my God," Kyra said in a whisper. "You just cock-blocked a sister."

“Uh, have you heard of a rebound?” Marcy was also whispering. “And that tall drink of water practically has ‘rebound’ tattooed on his forehead.”

“Did you care about Bryan at all?” Bree ignored them and asked me.

“I looked at a guy, I didn’t ask him to marry me,” I replied. “But to answer your question, yes. I did. After I packed his box and put him out, when he was gone, I curled up in bed and cried until I was useless. I not only didn’t finish baking the cookies I was making, I didn’t eat them. Not a one.”

Kyra gasped, such was the power of this revelation.

Yes, my cookies were that good.

But I hadn’t shared the worst of it.

“I miss him. I pick up my phone half a dozen times a day to text something to him. I don’t want to clean my sheets because they still kind of smell like him. And he’s going to get in touch in a few days after giving me space, and he’s going to ask to talk, to work it out, and it’s going to gut me all over again because I know he isn’t right for me. He isn’t good for me. He won’t make me happy, which means I won’t make him happy. So I might ghost him, though that’s unlikely, because what we had means he doesn’t deserve that. So I’ll call him to set a time to sit down and share what he wants is not what I want. This will be nearly impossible to do. So then I’ll probably cry myself useless again.”

“I didn’t know you cried like that,” Marcy said quietly.

“I broke up with my boyfriend,” I pointed out.

“You should have called,” she returned.

I shrugged.

Marcy was still speaking quietly when she noted, “You know, you’re allowed to be human and lean on people when the occasion merits it. We can be there for you like you’re there for us when we need you. You don’t have to be strong for everybody all the time, like you had to be when your mom left your dad.”

That meant a lot, and I hoped the look on my face shared that it did.

Marcy’s answering smile, which was full of sympathy, said I succeeded.

“Never go through a breakup alone is my motto,” Kyra put in, her gaze kind and worried and resting on me.

“You’re not a cynical loner like Hellen,” Bree stated.

Everyone's eyes cut to her.

"There's a girlfriend line," Marcy snapped. "And, sister, you just jumped over it like you're Carl fucking Lewis."

Bree stood, picking up the Dior saddle bag she paid five thousand dollars for, when she just had to wait a season and she could buy it for twelve hundred dollars less.

She tossed it over her shoulder, tossed her strawberry blonde hair, then declared. "I'm in a bad mood and being bitchy. I need to go home to Ben and Jerry's." She settled her gaze on me. "I'll think about what you said. But really, Christos is very sweet. I mean a lot to him. You can't imagine how embarrassed he was to ask for my help. He's Greek. They're macho. I could see how upset it made him. But it's a temporary situation. He's cash poor. He promised me, it'll turn around. Still, it didn't feel good to watch a guy I'm falling in love with grovel like that, then you guys piling on didn't help."

We'd hardly "piled on." Not until she got bitchy.

I didn't get a chance to refute it, she kept talking.

"It'd also be good you think on what I said, not the bitchy way I said it. I got mad because you all don't really know Christos, but it also doesn't feel good you kinda think I'm an idiot."

"We don't think you're an idiot," Kyra cut in.

"It feels that way."

Well...

Shit.

"That wasn't what was intended," I said.

"And I didn't intend to be bitchy, but I was, and I'm sorry. Now I need some Phish Food."

Pure Bree, when she was done, she was done.

She did an air kiss and took off.

The bell over the door rang. When we first started coming there, Fortnum's was so popular, it rang all the time and drove me batty.

I didn't even hear it anymore.

She waved to us through the window.

We waved back.

When we lost sight of her, I asked, "Either of you know how much he's into her for?"

She'd shared she gave him another loan, she just hadn't shared how much.

“First time, she gave him five hundred,” Kyra gave it up immediately. “This time, it was seventeen.”

Whoa.

“Seventeen hundred dollars?” Marcy asked, her neat, black, arched brows nearly hitting her tall, soft Afro.

Kyra nodded glumly.

A short, sharp whistle rent the air.

We turned toward the door.

Tall, Dark, Rough and Ready was there, carrying a to-go coffee in his long-fingered hand.

The minute he caught my eye, he winked at me, his white teeth showing in a brash, sexy-as-hell Hollywood smile.

Then he slid his mirrored aviators on his nose, the bell over the door chimed, and he strolled out.

“I don’t know whether to think that was completely gross, or a total turn on,” Kyra said.

I knew.

It was door number two, thank you.

“A man whistles at me like a dog, he immediately occupies another universe, one that I’m not in,” Marcy put her vote in.

The whistle was cocky AF.

But it was also hot AF.

And he was gone, so it wasn’t like I was ever going to see him again. Thus, I could think that.

If he hadn’t taken off, and instead he approached and presented a pickup line, *that* would be gross.

The way it went down, fortunately, I had someone else to think about, since I’d be using my vibrator a lot more considering Bryan was out of the picture.

I wondered if Tall, Dark, Rough and Ready knew how to pull hair.

“We probably didn’t handle it all that well with Bree, but still, I’m not certain about Christos,” Marcy declared.

“Me either,” I agreed. “Three months and twenty-two hundred dollars do not add up.”

“How do you get cash poor?” Kyra asked. “If you need cash, don’t spend the cash you have.”

“Yup.” Marcy ended that with a pop.

We could just say, Kyra and Marcy shopped on the resale sites, like me. They also had moving and shaking to do, like me.

We'd all met at college. Bree and I were roommates our freshman year. We'd hooked up with Marcy, who was a year ahead of us, then Kyra, who was a year behind. Starting my sophomore year, we'd all lived together when we could, and now Kyra and Marcy were roommates again.

This meant I'd spent four years living with Bree, studying with Bree, partying with Bree, taking road trips with Bree, grocery shopping and cooking with Bree.

And she was still a huge part of my life because I loved Bree.

That said, if someone put a gun to my head, I'd have to admit I'd migrated my bestest best friend to Marcy because we were the same person, except she was Black and I was white.

I still loved Bree like crazy.

So that whole scene didn't feel great.

Kyra took off next because she had a date she needed to get ready for, and Marcy and I ordered fresh coffees and tucked ourselves back into the couch in front of the window.

"Are you feeling it?" she asked.

I didn't have to request she explain.

"I'm feeling it," I told her.

"Okay then, how would you feel about some recon?"

Now I was lost.

"What?"

"Follow Christos around. Get the goods on him. Evidence. Show Bree before she talks her parents into remortgaging their house because some diamond mafia is after him or something."

We'd all watched *The Tinder Swindler*, and clearly, we'd all taken mental notes.

"That's extreme, Marce."

"He's a scam artist, Hell. She works as a PA in a marketing firm, she's been with him three months, and she's handed over two months' rent. This is a situation."

She was right.

This was a situation.

Because we both knew Bree. And she might have a nest egg, but it probably wasn't that much.

Seventeen hundred dollars was a weird number. Which meant it was likely all she had left in her savings.

“You brought this up after Kyra took off because...?” I prompted.

“Because Kyra still buys stuffed animals...for herself. We have two cats, but if I let her, we’d have eleven. She’s got more friends than anyone I know because she collects strays of all kinds. She’s a sweetheart. Made of gold. But she is not street smart. It scares the hell out of me, but she’s even worse than Bree. She’d be a nightmare on an operation like this.”

An operation?

“Maybe you should tell me what you’re thinking,” I suggested.

“I’m thinking of following him and seeing what he’s up to,” she repeated.

Hmm.

“Do you know where he lives or works?” I asked, skeptical of this plan, but not entirely against it.

“I know where he lives, I dropped Bree off there once. I don’t know what he does for a living, and that says something, don’t you think?”

I did think.

Oh boy.

“You know what would stop the Tinder swindler?” she asked.

I knew.

“Marce—”

“A friend or a favorite auntie or someone saying, ‘stop giving that jerk your money.’ Someone doing a deep dive into his shit and finding out he’s full of it. I know that Tinder guy on the documentary had a real racket going, but...come on.”

I didn’t want to judge a sister, especially not those who’d fallen for that man’s shit. Truth, he had the con down to an art.

But yeah, someone injecting a little common sense or doing a little leg work, and maybe a lot of heartbreak and debt would have been saved.

Or better, that guy would have been caught a lot earlier.

Good news: part of what she said, I could do.

“Right, I’ll do a deep dive,” I told her. “We’ll reconvene to share what I find and decide from there.”

“I think we should tail him because, my guess, Bree’s small potatoes. He’s gotta have other bitches he’s fleecing. She says he works a lot. At what, she’s vague about, but I’ll press. And she and Kyra are tight. Maybe Kyra knows. Another guess, he’s working and taking other women’s money.”

I would have that same guess.

“Let’s start with the online stuff first. Okay?” I suggested.

She seemed disappointed, sucked down some of her cold brew and plopped back on the couch.

But she nodded.

I thought about Bree. I thought about Christos. I thought about Tall, Dark, Rough and Ready.

And I thought about Bryan.

I thought about him because he’d failed me, but he was smart and sharp and knew the law. I could have told him about Christos, and he’d have good advice. He would also help look after Bree.

But Bryan was out.

So someone had to save Bree.

And she was ours.

So that was going to be Marcy and me.

Smoke and Steel will be unleashed December 6, 2022

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