

AMERICAN ASSHOLE

BACHELOR INTERNATIONAL, BOOK ONE



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PROLOGUE



*H*e groaned my name as he pressed deeper inside me and I fisted the white sheets so tightly my knuckles almost matched their color.

We shouldn't be doing this, but more importantly *I* shouldn't be doing this. I should have never let it get this far. I knew better.

I should have never said yes to dinner. I should have never said yes to this trip. I should have never said yes to the contract.

But damn it all I had, even knowing what it would cost us both.

His weight pressed me into the mattress and his breath was hot in my ear. "Are you still with me?" Then for good measure he shifted his hips so his next

thrust hit a new spot inside me and I moaned in pleasure.

It seemed I was unable to say no to the man. Nor did I want to. My body moved with his, desperate to draw him deeper.

“Are you?” he asked again, his lips brushing my nape and sending shivers down my spine.

“Yes. Oh, God, yes.”

CHAPTER ONE



MIA

I was walking down a sidewalk one day years ago, not really paying attention. My best friend, Wren, was with me and if I had to guess, we were probably talking about boys. It's an assumption we all have that the sidewalk will just be there when we step down. Unknowingly, I made that same assumption, and when my foot came down and met air instead of sidewalk, I sucked in a breath as I tripped into the unseen hole and fell to my knees.

The horrible knowledge that had twisted my stomach upon realizing that what I had counted on to always be there for me and was not, was the same thing I experienced the day my mother died.

She had not been sick. She didn't have anything wrong with her. One minute she and a friend, Opa,

were headed to lunch and the next, her car flew into the median as a perfect stranger ran into her at a high speed in his attempt to get away from the pursuing police cruisers. Mom and Opa were killed instantly. The man who hit them had just robbed a gas station. For my entire life, my mother had been my sidewalk and then suddenly, she wasn't there anymore.

Two weeks after her funeral, I had a feeling the sidewalk was going to be ripped out from under me again. I sat in our lawyer's office and I knew it wasn't going to be good news based on the way everyone in the office looked at me when I walked in, eyes filled with something that looked like pity. I hated that. I didn't want their pity.

I also didn't want to be here. Lawyer meetings were about on par with doctor's appointments and they both always had the most uncomfortable waiting areas. It must be a periodical they all subscribe to: *Waiting Rooms to Lose Your Mind In*.

"Clayton," I said, when he finally sat down after his admin gave him some papers he'd asked for. He'd been acting edgy and odd since I walked in. "I promise I'm strong enough to handle whatever it is you're hesitant to tell me."

What worried me more than anything at that moment wasn't my suspicion that he was hiding

something, but that whatever he had to tell me was going to be much worse than I had originally thought. I had asked a week ago for this meeting and he'd kept postponing with the excuse he didn't have all the paperwork.

"Mia," he said and then stopped as he read something in the folder he'd just received. He looked horrible. He'd always been on the pale side, but he appeared even more so today. Not to mention, his much-too-thin frame didn't help matters out.

"Spit it out, Clayton."

He took his glasses off and though I thought I'd prepared myself for whatever he was going to tell me, I hadn't. Not by a long shot. "You know it's been a rough year for the business," he said.

My mom and I were co-owners of Cross My Heart, a boutique dating agency in downtown Boston. She dealt with the numbers side and the money, while I worked my magic with the people side of the business. We didn't plan to get rich from our venture, but it paid the bills and we were two of the lucky ones who could say we loved our jobs.

Granted, the last year had been more difficult than others, simply because one of our well-known clients had been accused of inappropriately touching a female co-worker. Technically speaking, it

shouldn't have affected us at all, but right before the allegations came out, he'd done some promo and advertising for us, so we were seen as guilty by association.

It had unquestionably been a rough time, but mom and I had put our heads together and worked through it. I blinked back a tear. God, I missed her. Who would I weather the next storm with?

"Yes," I told Clayton. I could not fall apart. Not right now. "Mama had told me, but she didn't make it out like it was anything major. In fact, I seem to remember her saying things were looking up recently."

"Yes, well," he said, shuffling through the papers. "The thing is, your mother took a loan and put the business up for collateral."

"What?" I asked, because there was no way he'd just said what I thought he did. "That can't be. There's no way she'd have done something like that and not tell me."

"I'm afraid she did. In fact, I helped with the terms of the deal. I told her when we were doing it that I thought she should bring you in." He shook his head, but refused to look at me. "She didn't want to and I didn't push it the way I should have because

she thought she'd be able to repay it without you ever knowing. Obviously, we never expected this."

"How much was the loan for?" My body starting shaking, ever so slightly and I willed myself to stop.

Was that *guilt* I saw reflected in his expression?

"It's not only the matter of the amount, you see," he said. "It's also who the loan was made with."

I was starting to get the feeling that I wasn't *seeing* anything at all. I glared at him. "I think you better explain to me what it is you're so hesitant to talk about."

"Your mother got the loan from Tenor Butler."

He might as well have punched me in the stomach. My mouth opened and closed, but nothing came out. It was several long seconds before I managed to get out two words. "Tenor Butler?"

Oh, my God. Anyone other than him.

Clayton winced. "Yes. She went to a few banks first, but none of them were willing to loan her anything. Tenor was her last hope."

I still couldn't wrap my head around the fact that the business found itself in that much trouble, much less that my mother had to make a deal with the likes of Tenor Butler. But, whatever. I had a bit of money left over from her life insurance. It wasn't a lot, but

hopefully it'd be enough to pay Tenor back. "How much did he loan her?"

Yes, there was definitely guilt now, written all over his face. *Shit.*

"I'm so sorry, Mia."

"How much, Clayton?" My heart felt as if it would pound through my chest, because somehow I knew it would be too much for the life insurance to cover. And yet, I still wasn't prepared for his next words.

"Two hundred fifty thousand."

My vision grew blurry and saliva filled my mouth. *God, please don't let me vomit in my lawyer's office.* I placed a hand on my belly in an attempt to stop whatever it was getting ready to do. "A quarter of a million dollars?"

Why? What for the love of God would she need that much money for?

He nodded his confirmation.

There was only one thing that kept me from passing out right there in the chair across from his desk, and that was the knowledge there was no way Mama could have gone through all that money.

"How much of that is available in the business account?" I was an idiot to have to ask. What sort of business owner didn't know how much money they

had in the bank? I should have known what our balance was, but Mama was the money person and since her funeral, I'd been purposely putting it off. The thought of seeing her handwriting again and knowing she'd never write anything else...it had been too much. It still felt like too much.

“Umm.” He started flipping through the papers on his desk. “Looks like there’s about ten thousand as of yesterday morning.”

Holy fuck! “You mean to tell me that my mother somehow spent almost a quarter of a million dollars on our business and I didn’t have any idea?”

How was that possible? Was I that blind or was she that good at hiding? Following those two questions was the uncomfortable feeling that I didn’t know her at all.

“It appears that way.”

I stood up even though my legs felt like Jell-O. I placed both of my hands on Clayton’s desk and then shoved them in my pockets when I saw how they were shaking, “I can’t believe you knew all this and didn’t tell me until now.” I should be mad at mama, too, but she wasn’t here and he was.

“Mia, your mother—”

“Don’t give me that bullshit. There was no reason for my mother to get a loan for that much.

Especially from *him*. I don't know what's going on here, but I'll get to the bottom of it eventually and when I do, I plan to find a new attorney."

Unable to be in the same room with him anymore and knowing there was nothing either of us could do to make the situation any better, I spun on my heels and stormed out of his office. I'm sure I received a good number of stares as I made my way out of the office building, but I honestly don't remember.

I'd walked to Clayton's office because it wasn't too far from Cross My Heart and I'd thought the physical activity would be beneficial for me. I supposed in some warped way, it turned out to be just that. Or, if nothing else, it allowed me an acceptable way to work out my anger toward Clayton.

Not that I could actually blame him for everything. Oh, no. That honor belonged to no one other than Tenor Butler himself. Some part of my brain tried to tell the rest of me that logically, the majority of the blame belonged to my mother. But I told that part of my brain to sit down and shut up.

Tenor Butler owned and operated the most successful dating agency in Boston, hell, probably the entire East Coast—Bachelor International. Of course, that wasn't why I didn't like him. Seriously,

I'm not petty enough to be angry because someone is more successful than me.

I didn't like him because I didn't like his entire approach to dating. I'd heard about some of his practices and I thought they were cookie cutter and impersonal. To me, matchmaking was an art. Or at least a skill to master. To Tenor it wasn't anything more than a ten-page questionnaire with multiple choice answers. *Multiple choice.*

Are you kidding me with this?

But he wasn't and obviously, his way worked, because like I said, most successful agency in Boston. And yet, I didn't feel like what he did was real. Anyone could gather statics based on multiple choice answers, but they wouldn't tell you about your client's deep down wants and needs and fears.

Maybe that was it. Maybe I felt as if Tenor was getting ahead by cheating in a way. He'd somehow managed to be successful by circumventing the upfront work needed in order to properly make a match. I let that stew as I walked back.

I thought I'd actually calmed down quite a bit by the time I reached my office. Obviously, though, my countenance left something to be desired because Wren, who'd agreed to sit and watch over the office while I was gone, looked up as soon as I

walked in and said, “What the hell happened to you?”

I shook my head. I wasn’t really ready to talk about it, wasn’t actually sure I’d ever be able to talk about it. But Wren would be the best person to initially talk to because she knew me better than anyone.

I decided to lay it on her all at once. “Mama took a loan out for a quarter of a million dollars.”

Wren’s jaw dropped open.

“And that’s not the worst part,” I said.

“No way.”

“Yes, way. *Tenor Butler* gave her the loan.” It didn’t make me sick to my stomach to say it anymore, but my insides still fluttered a little.

Wren’s face went unnaturally pale and her eyelashes fluttered for a few seconds. I actually thought she was going to pass out or something, but her color returned and she simply muttered, “Holy shit.”

“Right?” I flopped into a nearby chair. Another reason to tell Wren. She knew exactly who *Tenor* was, so I didn’t have to spend time explaining why this was such a horrible thing.

I also truly appreciated that Wren didn’t ask me questions I had no answers for, like why Mama

needed that much money and where it had all gone. Why the hell Tenor Butler of all people? I'd have to ask those same questions soon enough, but I wasn't ready just yet.

"Tenor Butler," Wren mumbled and then her head shot up and she looked at me with determination in her eyes. "We need to come up with a plan on how you're going to deal with him."

I nodded. A plan was exactly what I needed. "He has to know she passed away."

Of course he would. Any good business person would know such details about someone who owed them money. Especially that much money. He more than likely knew I was her only living relative. I dug my nails into the palm of my hands, not wanting to think about being alone right now.

I couldn't help but wonder if he had any idea at all about what I thought of him and his multiple choice, cookie cutter business. Probably not.

"Yes, and my guess is he's giving you time to grieve before he approaches you," Wren added.

"I'm sure." For some reason that irritated me and I couldn't figure out why. If he'd come by and tried to talk to me the day after her funeral or something, I'd have been justified in my anger toward him. So why was I mad he was giving me space?

“I’ll tell you what I’m *not* going to do,” I said. “I’m not going to sit here and wait for Mr. High and Mighty Butler to summon me to his chrome and stainless steel high-rise office in the sky.”

“What *are* you going to do?”

I smiled. “On Monday morning, bright and early, I’m going to beat him to it. I’m going to show up at his office and insist on seeing him.” Today was Friday. That gave me the entire weekend to come up with a plan on what to do once I made it into his office. Surely I could think of something between now and then. Otherwise, I’d be handing all the control over to Tenor and that was not going to happen.