Lovereading.co.uk

The Good Girl's Guide to Bad Men

Jessica Brody

Published by Ebury Press

Extract

All text is copyright © 2009 by Jessica Brody

Published in 2009 by Ebury Press, an Imprint of Ebury Publishing
A Random House Group Company

This opening extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

The Good Girl's Guide to BAD Men

Jessica Brody



EBURY
PRESS

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Published in 2009 by Ebury Press, an imprint of Ebury Publishing
A Random House Group Company
First Published in USA as *Love Under Cover* by St Martin's Press in 2009.

Copyright © 2009 by Jessica Brody

Jessica Brody has asserted her right to be identified as the author of this work in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988

This novel is a work of fiction. Names and characters are the product of the author's imagination and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner

The Random House Group Limited Reg. No. 954009

Addresses for companies within the Random House Group can be found at www.randomhouse.co.uk

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

The Random House Group Limited supports The Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), the leading international forest certification organisation. All our titles that are printed on Greenpeace approved FSC certified paper carry the FSC logo. Our paper procurement policy can be found at www.rbooks.co.uk/environment

Printed in the UK by
Cox & Wyman Reading, RG1 8EX

ISBN 9780091928469

To buy books by your favourite authors and register for offers visit
www.rbooks.co.uk

1

bare witness

The girl in the slinky black dress and matching stiletto heels was perched on the edge of a high-backed bar stool at the far end of the bar. She was trying hard to blend in with the rest of the Thursday night crowd. Unfortunately, God had given her certain features that made blending inherently difficult.

Of course, the dress didn't help either.

She fidgeted anxiously with the metal strap of her black designer clutch with one hand while the other fingered the ends of her lusciously long blond hair, twirling them around the tips of her fingers as if she were skillfully performing some type of lesser-known crocheting technique. It was the nervous habit of a girl who had blossomed late in life, never being able to fully develop the confidence of those who had always been beautiful.

Whether or not she was really *that* girl was irrelevant. She played the part flawlessly.

With a despondent sigh, she reached into her bag and pulled out a small silver cell phone. Her fingers wrapped tightly around the helpless device, suffocating it mercilessly as she mustered enough courage to glance at the screen. The thought that a tiny envelope-shaped icon was her last and only hope for salvation struck her as ridiculous and sad, but at this point, she was clearly beyond naïve expectations.

The screen was blank.

Just as it had been five minutes ago and five minutes before that. The tiny icon that had promised to save her from the conclusion she feared most was defiantly absent.

After one final hopeful glance around the hotel bar, the girl in the black dress tossed the cell phone on top of the bar and reluctantly resigned herself to the idea that whoever was supposed to occupy the bar stool next to her was not going to show. She sighed and took a sip of her Pinot Noir, which until this moment of defeat had remained untouched.

It was becoming clearer with each passing moment that tonight she would be drinking alone. But certainly not by choice.

The man who had been watching this entire spectacle from across the hotel bar suddenly felt a surging rush of confidence. The girl in the black dress had intrigued him immensely. Not only because she was so strikingly beautiful . . . and blond (he had always had a secret thing for blondes), but because she seemed so lost. So fragile and endearingly powerless. It had been such a long time since he'd encountered someone of such beauty displaying such vulnerability out in the open.

It was, in all honesty . . . *refreshing.*

He eyed the empty bar stool next to her. Marveling at how an inanimate object could suddenly appear so welcoming. So inviting.

It was practically begging him to take it.

Everyone in the room was waiting for me to speak.

It was the only reason I had been brought here in the first place. A messenger of words. A linguistic savior.

It was a title I had become familiar with in recent months.

The air was hot and sticky. An unusually muggy day for New York in late October, and the air-conditioning had seemingly given up trying to keep up hours ago. But truth be told, I wasn't sure if the tiny beads of sweat on my forehead were due to the humidity in the room or the burden of my purpose here.

It would have been easier if I were completely impartial. Prepared

to accept the inevitable outcome regardless of which side it landed on. But I couldn't do that. As much as I wanted to, I couldn't *not* care.

The uniformed guard standing to my left finally spoke. "Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?"

"I do," I stated, keeping my gaze locked on a white marble statue situated in the back of the room. It was the only neutral thing here. Half of the people staring at me wanted nothing more than to see me fail. Watch me break apart and stumble for words. The other half were looking to me for salvation.

Neither was a comforting expectation.

But then again, it wasn't *their* expectations I was worried about.

"You may be seated," the bailiff informed me.

I sat down, trying to ignore the hard, splintery surface of the wooden chair beneath me.

There was a brief silence in the room, and I refused to make eye contact with anyone. Especially not him. The man in the light gray suit sitting diagonally to my left. The one with invisible laser beams shooting out of his eyeballs.

For the most part, I was used to it. It wasn't the first time I'd found myself the direct target of a glare like that. Especially from someone occupying his seat.

The tall, redheaded woman in a knee-length pencil skirt and silk blouse stood up from the opposing table and made her way toward me. In her hand she held a yellow legal pad, which she referred to briefly before addressing me. "Can you please state for the record what it is you do?"

I nodded with practiced confidence and spoke in smooth, even tones, keeping my sentences brief, limited to no more than ten words. After doing this four or five times, brevity starts to become second nature. "I run an agency."

"And what does this agency specialize in?"

I cleared my throat. "We offer a service called a 'fidelity inspection.'"

I heard a groan from the other side of the courtroom, and out of the corner of my eye, I saw the man in the gray suit roll his eyes. His lawyer quickly shot him a subtle yet warning glance.

"A fidelity inspection," the female lawyer repeated. "Can you explain to the court what that is?"

I took a deep breath and spoke the same words that I repeated nearly every day. To anyone who entered my office in search of answers. "It's an undercover test to determine whether or not the subject in question is capable of infidelity."

"So," the woman said, holding on to her legal pad with one hand and using the other to animate her words with large circular motions. "Basically you send out a decoy, or *bait,* in the form of a beautiful woman to see if a man will cheat on his wife?"

"Basically," I replied.

She nodded, as if she were digesting this information for the first time, even though I had already explained it to her numerous times over the past week. "I see," she continued. "And can you tell me, was my client, Mrs. Langley"—she paused and pointed to the thin, harsh-looking woman sitting behind her—"one of your agency's clients?"

I stole a quick glance in the direction of her finger. Mrs. Langley sat stony faced, her tightly pulled skin and high-arched eyebrows refusing to give up any emotion. She had the kind of unforgiving face that you expect to see on a headmistress at a strict boarding school, and I wondered if the plastic surgery had been intended that way. Maybe her job as the CEO of a Fortune 500 corporation demanded nothing less than severity. Maybe she had found that a cruel, harsher beauty went further in this male-dominated world than the softer variety.

Her dark, serious eyes focused back on me with only a fleeting hint of expectation. She wasn't the kind of woman who willingly relied on others. Or if she did, she wasn't the kind of woman who wanted people to know that. A spitting image of the person who had entered my office with poise and confidence only a few short months ago.

"Yes," I replied, opening a glossy crimson folder on my lap and checking the notes inside. "Joy Langley hired contracted the agency

to test her husband, Todd Langley, on June twenty-fourth of this year."

"Why?" the lawyer asked simply.

I looked down again. "According to my notes from our initial meeting, Mrs. Langley was concerned about her husband's ability to cope with the success of her rising career and feared that his feelings of inadequacy would lead him to stray."

Mr. Langley snorted his disapproval and mumbled something that sounded like "Conceited bitch," but I wasn't close enough to confirm.

Mrs. Langley's lawyer continued as if she had either failed to hear the underhanded comment or simply chosen to ignore it. "So you sent out one of your *associates* to either prove or disprove her suspicions?"

I continued to sit tall in my seat, trying to keep movement to a minimum. I knew that the opposing counsel would be studying my body language for any signs of uncertainty. Any reason whatsoever to poke holes in my testimony or question my credibility. And I refused to allow an innocent slouch to sway the outcome of this case.

"Yes," I replied.

The girl in the black cocktail dress downed the last of her red wine with one smooth gulp. The man who had just casually slid into the empty seat beside her watched out of the corner of his eye as she brought her glass down against the top of the bar with a purposeful clank.

"Thirsty?" he asked as a rush of adrenaline coursed through his veins.

He had never been as smooth as he would have liked in these kinds of situations. The James Bond–esque superhero who had championed similar scenarios in his head was nowhere to be seen now. And the real-life version of himself was decidedly less impressive.

She turned her head toward the stranger and flashed a disheartened grin. "Yeah, I guess."

"Can I get you another?"

Her head fell into a grateful nod. "Yes, please. It's an Estancia Pinot."

At the mention of these words, the man's face brightened. "Estancia? That's my favorite vineyard."

The girl nodded her enthusiastic agreement, or as enthusiastic as her self-pity party would allow her to get. "It's all I drink."

"Two glasses of the Estancia," he announced to the bartender, pleased that this conversation seemed to be off to a smooth start. Then he turned back to the girl in the black dress, silently taking in the way her long golden hair seemed to fall in perfect waves around her shoulders. Almost as if it had been styled *especially* to his taste.

She immediately noticed him looking, and her mouth twisted into a blushing smile.

It melted him.

The wine arrived and they clinked glasses, toasting to something generic like health or good fortune or new acquaintances.

Silence quickly fell between them after the initial sip, a heavy silence filled with anticipation and the fear of rejection. But that's the way it had to be. She could probably think of two dozen conversation starters that would easily put his fears to rest, but she wasn't there to start conversations. She was there to follow them. Sometimes the hardest part is the *not* speaking. The quiet before the storm. The *waiting.* But she knew the process was designed that way for a reason.

And she also knew that it would probably only take another seven seconds before—

"Are you waiting for someone?" he asked. His head bobbed back and forth, surveying the bar with only semi-genuine curiosity.

The girl sighed and fingered the stem of her wineglass as her eyes narrowed and her face sank into a practiced display of defeat. "I *was* waiting for someone, yes. My boyfriend. But I guess he's not going to show up . . . ever again."

"I'm sorry," the man offered with a weak attempt at sincerity. "I didn't mean to—"

"No, no, you're fine," she rushed to interrupt. "It's probably better this way. He wasn't right for me anyway." She tossed in a sigh. "Or at least that's what I'll try to tell myself."

"Were you together long?"

The girl in the black dress seemed to find unusual humor in this question, and she laughed quietly to herself. "Not really. Almost a month. Which is fairly typical of all my relationships. I mean, I guess it's probably not even long enough to call him my 'boyfriend.' At least that's what my friends tried to tell me. Lesson learned, right?" She pulled her wineglass toward her lips and sucked down another long gulp.

Never had there been a better opportunity for an introduction. And never had he been so eager to make one. "I'm Todd," he said, reaching his hand out toward her. "Todd Langley."

She shook it with a kind smile. "Keira Summers. It's a pleasure to meet you."

"So the entire evening is a setup?" The lawyer in the pencil skirt and silk blouse was all over the room now. Pacing back and forth in front of me as she spoke, as if she were running some sort of courtroom lap-a-thon to raise money for cancer research. "Nothing is real. The story she tells, the way she tells it, not even her name."

I nodded, feeling somewhat accosted by the question but hiding it well. This was how it worked. How all of them worked. She interrogates my methods in an attempt to discredit my testimony, then when she fails to do so, the opposing counsel isn't left with much else to do.

But even though I was familiar with the strategy, it still made me cringe slightly on the inside.

"Yes," I asserted, dabbing at the moisture on my forehead with the tip of my finger. "The associate gives the subject a fake name and a pre-scripted story or background about herself based on what he is likely to respond to. It's designed to facilitate conversation."

"So you have multiple associates working for you at your agency?" she asked, stopping in front of me.

It was more of a statement than a question, as had been most of her inquiries, but I answered it anyway. "Yes," I replied again. "Both women and men."

"*And* men?" she repeated, slightly amused by my response.

I nodded. The truth was there was only *one* man who worked for me. As of right now, anyway. If demand increased, I would certainly hire more. But I preferred not to divulge any specifics about the inner workings of my business. After all, it was supposed to be an undercover establishment. Which was why the lawyer pacing in front of me had agreed not to divulge the name of the agency.

"Really?" she confirmed. "So husbands come to you requesting fidelity inspections as well?"

The opposing counsel flashed an aggravated look and raised his hand in the air. "Objection. What's the relevance of this?"

Mrs. Langley's lawyer addressed the gray-haired female judge who sat directly to my right. "I'm only trying to establish the witness as a nonbiased party whose company offers support to both genders equally."

The judge nodded in reply. "Overruled. You may continue."

"Thank you, Your Honor." She turned back to me, not bothering to repeat the question, just waiting for me to respond.

"Yes," I stated. "I've had several husbands hire us to test their wives."

"And you've also testified at some of the resulting divorce proceedings as well, am I right?"

I didn't approve of her use of the words *resulting divorce proceedings*. As if my agency alone were responsible for the divorce rate in this country. It's true most of these couples would still be together had their husbands or wives not failed the fidelity inspection, but I liked to think of it more as "awakening" people to the truth rather than "inspiring" divorce.

Of course, I didn't voice my opinion on her word choice. I simply responded, "Yes."

"And what is your role in these inspections?"

"I meet with the client, gather all the details, then I assign the case to the associate I feel is best equipped to handle it."

Mrs. Langley's lawyer set her legal pad on the table so that she could now use both hands to animate the intricacy of her next statement/

question. "So in other words, you *match* each subject, in this case Mr. Langley, with his *ideal* . . . fantasy."

I shrugged. "I guess you could put it that way."

"Yes or no," she prompted me in return.

I paused, looking fleetingly around the courtroom, my eyes falling upon the empty jury box. I immediately wondered what twelve of my so-called peers would have thought about what I was about to say. Would they have judged me for it? Or would they have respected me because I was genuinely trying to help people? The same way I was trying to help Mrs. Langley today, in this humid, air-conditioning-forsaken courtroom in Westchester County.

"Yes."

"Uh-huh." Mrs. Langley's lawyer picked up her ballpoint pen and began using it as a prop to enumerate the points in her next sentences. "So, Mrs. Langley comes into your office, tells you that she's worried about her husband's *behavior* on business trips, you choose the associate that you feel best fits his ideal woman, then she meets him in a hotel bar in Seattle, tells him her name is something that it's not, strikes up a conversation with him based on made-up facts that he is likely to respond to, and waits to see if he'll cheat on his wife with her."

"It's actually an *intention* to cheat that we test for, not . . ."

The woman flashed me a look that urged me to just say yes so that we could move on.

"Sorry, yes."

She contorted her face into a disgusted expression and let out a small snort. "But isn't that entrapment?"

"Objection, Your Honor," Mr. Langley's lawyer cut in again. "Leading the witness. She's trying to discredit my argument."

"I'm just asking the question that I think *everyone* in this courtroom is dying to know the answer to," Mrs. Langley's lawyer argued calmly.

I looked anxiously to the judge sitting next to me. She appeared completely immersed in this interrogation. "Overruled," she decided after a moment of deliberation. Then she turned to me. "You may answer the question."

I exhaled quietly, relieved that this particular question would not be left hanging in judicial limbo. "It's not entrapment," I stated in an unwavering tone. This was an issue I took very seriously. There's a fine line between inspecting someone and entrapping, and I took all precautions to make sure my business remained on the right side of it. "My employees are given explicit instructions to follow, not lead," I continued. "As was the case with Mr. Langley, the associate was not allowed to initiate anything. Any and all suggestions of further intimacy were left solely to his discretion." By the end of my sentence, I realized that my voice had started to sound somewhat defensive.

I paused and took a deep breath, reminding myself not to get too worked up. I had a tendency to do that when someone brought up the E-word. Let's just say it was a sore spot. "In other words," I began, calmer and more in control, "Mr. Langley made a conscious *choice* to cheat on his wife. He did not fall victim to a trap."

Two hours had passed since Todd Langley first sat on the bar stool next to the beautiful and delicate Keira Summers. They had covered every topic from religion to politics to pop icons. He now sat close enough to touch the bare skin of her arm or shoulder with just the slightest reach. And he *had* touched it. Numerous times. Nearly every sixty seconds for the past hour, in fact. Every joke, every shared opinion, every seemingly genuine connection, had, in his mind, been grounds for another fleeting contact with her soft, flawless skin. He simply couldn't get enough of it.

And the fact that Keira hadn't seemed to mind in the least only fueled his resolve to touch her again.

Todd motioned toward the bartender and ordered another two glasses of Pinot Noir, but Keira quickly interrupted him with a slightly intoxicated giggle and said, "Actually, I think I've had enough." She checked her watch. "Plus, it's getting kinda late."

In reality, she could have easily drunk twice as much as she had and still managed to successfully convince a police officer that she'd

been drinking soda water all night. A high tolerance to alcohol was a standard prerequisite for this job. The girl who got tipsy and giggly and uninhibited after two glasses of wine was only an illusion. A physical embodiment of everything his wife was not.

"Why? What time is it?" Todd asked.

"Eleven forty-five," she replied, gathering her things and pushing herself off the bar stool. "I should really head home. And didn't you say you had an early flight back to New York tomorrow?"

But he didn't answer. He had a hard time forming a coherent sentence at this point. Even if it just consisted of the word *yes.* Because his brain was focusing on only one question: *Could he really let a woman like this walk out of here?*

The answer appeared evident immediately. Even though the fading photographs of his wife and children seemed to burn a hole right through the leather of his wallet and the cloth of his pant leg, threatening to scorch his skin. If anything, those burning photographs only made him act faster. Before they could leave any permanent scar tissue.

"Maybe you could come upstairs?" he blurted out, abandoning any and all attempts at sounding suave or urbane.

Keira giggled bashfully at the invitation. It was the perfect reaction. Awkwardness could not be met with complete confidence. Particularly with a man like Todd Langley, who was all too used to encountering nothing but overbearing confidence at home. No. Awkwardness had to be met with mutual awkwardness.

The most endearing kind.

"Sorry," he began, stumbling to find his next words. "I didn't mean that the way it sounded, it's just that—"

"Okay," Keira replied, looking at the floor.

"Okay?"

She nodded timidly, tucking a strand of her hair behind her ear. "I could probably use the distraction tonight."

Todd let out a sigh of relief as a huge smile beamed across his face. "Okay."

He put his hand gently on the small of her back and guided her

out of the hotel bar, through the lobby, and into a waiting elevator that had nowhere to go but up.

A sly smile had just appeared across the face of Mrs. Langley's lawyer. "Are you saying that Mr. Langley *failed* his fidelity inspection?"

I looked back down at my notes. It was a superfluous move at this point. I had been preparing for this afternoon for the past two weeks. But something compelled me to do it. Perhaps the notes made me feel more credible. Better prepared. Or perhaps it was because this single, one-word answer was really all I was here to give.

"Yes."

"I have no further questions, Your Honor," she stated confidently before taking her seat next to Mrs. Langley and pulling her legal pad in front of her. She held her pen in her left hand, poised and ready. As if that one writing instrument were all it was going to take to defeat the enemy sitting on the other side of the room.

I glanced off to the left and saw Mr. Langley's lawyer begin to rise from his seat. He reached down and fastened the single button on his suit jacket before making a long, slow approach to my little wooden box.

My intuition warned me that he would be nothing but ruthless. I could read it on his face, in his thoughts, and in the way he sauntered toward me. Intimidation was the way he lived his life. The way he raised his kids, spoke to his secretaries, sent back food at a restaurant. Above all else, it was the way he cross-examined his witnesses. I knew it shouldn't have bothered me. I'd dealt with intimidating men plenty of times. And lived to tell about it. But I couldn't help feeling anxious . . . nervous, even. It was that damn partiality rearing its ugly head again. If only I didn't care. If only I didn't feel as though I needed this victory just as much as Mrs. Langley did.

If only . . .

"What did you say your name was?" he asked once he had arrived in front of me.

"Ashlyn," I stated simply.

He flashed a condescending smile. "I mean, what is your *real* name?"

Before I even had time to react, Mrs. Langley's lawyer shot out of her seat like a rocket. "Objection, Your Honor. The witness has agreed to testify anonymously, as confidentiality is an integral part of her business, not to mention the safety of her associates." She tapped at a stack of paperwork on the table. "I have five precedent cases here that document the court allowing the witness to give an anonymous testimony under similar conditions. She should not be pressured to divulge any personal details about herself, as they are irrelevant to this case."

Mr. Langley's lawyer threw up his hands in frustration. "I'm just trying to establish witness credibility! If she won't give us her *real* name, how can we even trust that she's giving us *real* facts?"

"Objection sustained," the judge decided. "The witness's real name has no bearing on her testimony. Next question."

Mrs. Langley's lawyer settled back into her seat, seemingly satisfied. She gave me an encouraging nod of her head.

"Fine, *Ashlyn*," the man in front of me began, doing little to hide his mocking tone. "Were you present during my client's 'fidelity whatever you call it'?"

"Fidelity *inspection*," I clarified, struggling to mask my annoyance. "And no, I don't attend most of the inspections."

"And why is that?"

"Because I trust my employees wholeheartedly, and therefore I find no reason to fly halfway across the country for each one. Plus, there are far too many for me to be present at all of them. I would have to be cloned . . . many times over."

Mr. Langley's lawyer nodded, pursing his lips in deep thought. "Hmm. Lots of distrustful people out there, huh?"

I replied with a noncommittal shrug.

"So how do you even know what goes on during these assignments?"

I folded my hands in my lap. "My associates are required to provide me with detailed accounts in the form of notes and post-assignment reports. In addition, we have weekly staff meetings where all associates

verbally recap the results of their assignments. I have no doubt that I can effectively recount, in comprehensive detail, the events of Mr. Langley's case."

"So let me get this straight," he began, drumming his finger contemplatively against his bottom lip. "Basically you're implying that we should base the division of Mr. and Mrs. Langley's life assets on *your* word, which is in turn based on someone *else's* word?"

"Objection!" Mrs. Langley's lawyer shot up again. "Do I even need to object to that?"

The judge nodded. "Rephrase your question, Counselor."

Mr. Langley's lawyer turned to the judge with fabricated aggravation in his eyes. "I'm sorry, Your Honor, it's just that we're here to decide whether or not my client, a loving and devoted husband and father, is entitled to half of his wife's earnings. A sum not short of three point five *million* dollars. And all we have to go by is this woman's *notes*? I'm honestly not even sure why we're still here."

"I appreciate your opinion, Counselor," the judge replied calmly, "but I will decide whether or not her testimony is useful. I think you should just continue to question your witness."

The man bowed his head slightly in submission. "Of course, Your Honor. But based on my strong *opinion* that this witness bears no credibility, I have no further questions."

The judge nodded and then turned to me. "You may step down."

That wasn't so bad, I thought, surprised, as I tucked my notes into my briefcase and snapped the top flap closed. I had expected a much more valiant display from this guy. And from the confusion on Todd Langley's face, I'm guessing so did he.

I felt good about my testimony. Confident. *Hopeful.* It was an emotion I wasn't used to attaching to aspects of my job. I had always made a point of avoiding "hope" when it came to the lives and relationships of others. Because there are just too many factors outside of your control. But recently, somehow "hope" had managed to sneak post the radar. And by the time I realized it was there, it was too difficult not to cling to.

Bottom line: I wanted this win.

The backs of my legs rejoiced as I stood up from the uncomfort-

able wooden chair, and I heard a small pop come from the middle of my lower back. But as I took my first step down the stairs toward freedom, I heard Mr. Langley's lawyer say, "Actually, I do have one more question."

The judge nodded, and I stifled a groan and sat back down.

Mr. Langley's lawyer leaned against the table and feigned deep contemplation. The palms of his hands pressed together, and the tips of his fingers rested on his chin. "You mentioned earlier in your testimony something about an 'intention' to cheat. What exactly does that mean?"

The pressure of Todd's lips on hers was intense.

He paused momentarily and took a moment to admire the woman who now lay on his hotel bed before leaning in to kiss her again. She tasted like heaven mixed with Estancia Pinot Noir.

She moaned slightly, and this gave him the courage to press further. His hand began to reposition itself under her dress.

But it never quite got there.

"Wait—" Keira pushed lightly against his arm. "Are you sure you want to do this?"

Todd let out a deep, lustful sigh. "More than you could ever imagine."

Then she placed a single finger on his lips and whispered, "Then, I'll be right back."

She sat up and scooted to the edge of the bed. Her movement was so fluid, so *practiced,* it almost alarmed him. But not quite. His blinding anticipation was strong enough to block out any alarming thoughts. The light from the bathroom flickered on and splashed a murky shadow across the room. He heard the sound of water running from the faucet, and he rolled onto his back and stared up at the ceiling, a silly, boyish grin spreading across his face as he waited impatiently for Keira Summers to return.

Or more important, for the promise of what was to come when she did.

Little did he know . . . she was already gone.

The light in the bathroom remained illuminated and the water continued to run for at least five minutes before he decided to check on her. But by then, the girl in the black dress and all traces of what she represented had vanished. Even her lingering smell had begun to fade. And after shutting off the faucet and standing perplexedly in the middle of the bathroom, staring at the cold white tiles on the floor, he even started to wonder if she'd ever been there to begin with. Maybe she'd been a figment of his imagination. A drunk and desperate apparition.

And even though he wouldn't fully understand the true implications of her sudden absence until a few days later, when he came home to find that his key wouldn't turn in the lock, a faint buzzing sound was already sounding in his ears. A warning bell signaling that something was not as it should be. That beautiful blondes in slinky black dresses didn't just simply appear and disappear without reason.

"So in the end, you have no *physical* proof whatsoever that my client, Mr. Langley, would have actually gone through with sexual intercourse?"

I could feel the defensiveness seeping back into my voice. "The fidelity inspection is designed to make absolutely sure that the intention of infidelity is—"

"Yes or no is fine," Mr. Langley's lawyer interrupted, a smug grin plastered on his face.

I sighed, my shoulders slouching slightly. "No. I don't."

"So theoretically, had your associate not left before the deed was done, Mr. Langley could have easily stopped it himself."

"In theory, yes, but—"

"Thank you," he interrupted again, clearly not overly concerned with common courtesies at this point. "So I guess the only question I have left is why the witness thinks an *intention* to cheat is the same thing as cheating. An unfaithful *tendency* is not an act of adultery. It's simply one person's judgment of character. And probably not even an accurate one."

I took a deep breath and spoke with as much conviction as I could muster. "My associates don't engage in any sexual activity. Otherwise it would be prostitution. I run a legitimate business. And that's why my employees test the subjects for an *intention* to cheat only. But I am fully confident that had my associate not left Todd Langley's hotel room that night, he would have had sex with her."

"Well, thank you for that," Mr. Langley's lawyer offered condescendingly after a short pause. "But if the witness has no *physical* proof of infidelity to share with us, then I have no further questions, Your Honor."

The judge nodded. "You may step down," she informed me for the second time, and then turned her focus to the rest of the courtroom. "We'll reconvene tomorrow morning, and I'll have a decision by then." She gathered her paperwork and pushed her chair back from her desk.

"Actually," I interrupted, raising my hand tentatively. "Can I just say one more thing?"

Mrs. Langley's lawyer shot me a "What do you think you're doing?" look, but I ignored it and spoke directly to the judge. Because she was the only audience I cared about at this point. The one who had control over all those outside factors that used to keep me at an emotional arm's length from situations like this.

"Go ahead," she allowed.

I didn't know if what I was about to say would help at all. But I was fairly sure that it probably wouldn't hurt. So I decided it was worth a shot. "I've learned in the course of my life that cheating is a subjective term. Sex often has nothing to do with it. Mr. Langley may not have *physically* cheated on his wife—at least not with my associate—but the betrayal was there long before she ever walked into his hotel room."

A long silence followed. And it was only now that I dared look into the eyes of Todd Langley. The man who had seduced one of my associates, invited her up to his hotel room, touched her skin, kissed her mouth, and showed every intention of doing exactly what he had promised to never do. His thoughts spoke to me as clear as day. He felt justified in the choices he had made with Keira Summers.

Entitled. The faint smirk on his face told me that he was not sorry for what happened—only sorry that he had gotten caught.

Then I looked at Mrs. Langley. Her hardened features hadn't revealed anything throughout this entire testimony. And they certainly weren't revealing anything now. Here was a woman who had fought her way to the top despite all the odds stacked against her. Despite all the tension her superior salary had caused at home. And now her soon-to-be ex-husband was trying to claim half of everything she had worked for. Even though it had been *his* actions that had put them in this courtroom in the first place. I didn't need to see pain scrawled across her face to know it was there. The woman who never breaks on the outside always feels it twice as hard on the inside.

The judge finally responded to my declaration with a vague nod of her head. The kind that indicated only that she had heard me, not necessarily that she had listened. I searched her face for any sign of persuasion, but I might as well have been staring at an abstract painting hanging on the living room wall of some well-off art collector. A red canvas with a single black dot slightly off center. It was anyone's guess what that dot represented.

Apparently, I would have to wait until tomorrow to find out if my emotional wager was on the right side of the table. Just like everyone else in this room. All I could do now was step off this witness stand, walk out that door, and hope that I had done enough.

So I did.