

Chapter 1

Because of her nine a.m. appointment with Kate Mercer, Anita Spencer desperately tried to hide the restless anxiety brewing through her body. She stilled her fidgeting hands, scowled at the liver spots on them and reflected on the moment. The day before, Anita had eaten breakfast with her granddaughter, Jade Spencer, at the local IHOP. Anita ignored her pancakes after Jade had dropped a bombshell on her: Jade was pregnant, and she was keeping the baby. After Anita had expressed her dismay, Jade had simply walked out of the restaurant. Now Anita was poised inside the office of the woman who could make her granddaughter's life better.

"Please have a seat," said Kate smiling and indicating a black, soft-leather armchair. She was maybe five four with a small waist and dangerous curves under a form fitting black skirt with a sheer white blouse. Her hair was a wild tangle of dark curls with streaks of blond that reflected in the light. High cheekbones and bee-stung lips added to Kate's beauty. So this was her granddaughter's competition. "Can I get you something to drink, Mrs. Spencer? We have coffee, tea, milk, water."

Anita shook her head. "No thanks. I'd like to get on with it." Indeed she would, for she knew that Kate's secretary would be in soon, and she intended to be gone by then.

"Of course. I have the app right here." She plucked an application out of the inbox and set it before Anita. "All I need are your signatures at the X's, and you'll be covered immediately." She smiled, displaying pretty white teeth polished to an unbelievable shine.

Anita wondered how old she was. She certainly looked as if she was in her mid-twenties, but judging by her demeanor, Anita doubted that was the case. She applied her signatures to the app then made an observation. "You look happy, Ms. Mercer."

As Kate separated the app, her smile broadened, and she handed Anita a copy and said, "That's because of my loving husband and my beautiful daughter. And my name's now Mercer-Burton."

Not for long. Not after what I have to tell you. Anita snapped her fingers. "That's right. You're married to that tight-end-turned-cop-turned mayor of this town, Lamar Burton. Aren't you?"

Kate nodded. "That's right."

"So that makes you first lady of Kingston Park, Ohio." She tucked her copy of the app inside her purse and sat back with a satisfied grin on her face. "It's a shame it won't last that long."

Kate's smile vanished. "I'm sorry. What was that?"

Scooting up in her seat, Anita placed her hands on the desk and said, "It won't last. Not your husband's political career and certainly not your marriage. You see, I'm here on behalf of my granddaughter, Jade. The twenty-year-old who's fucking your husband."

Chapter 2

It was like someone had drenched her with cold water in the dead of winter. If Mrs. Spencer had slapped her, Kate might not have felt it because she was so numb. The pain hadn't set in yet, but she knew it would for she always dreaded this day, feared it would come—but not this soon. Not when she was still a newlywed. But, as they say: what goes around, comes around.

Kate had been married to Lamar for two short years, and in that span of time, she'd enjoyed—no cherished—the partnership. Now a stranger was sitting in her office threatening to wreak havoc. Well Kate wasn't having any of it. "I think you should leave, Mrs. Spencer."

"Is that all you think, Kate?" The woman's eyes were dancing with mischief.

Kate couldn't believe this. She couldn't believe she was verbally sparring with someone's grandmother. Kate regarded the woman. Obviously the woman had her granddaughter's best interest at heart. Mrs. Spencer was wearing a dark-colored wig against pale skin—she could definitely use some sun. Her wattle-neck was shaking involuntarily, and the whites of her eyes were sallow. The woman was a mess, plain and simply. "Yes, Mrs. Spencer, I think you should leave. You're out of line, and furthermore, I don't believe you."

"Then believe this: my granddaughter has a rendezvous with your husband tonight at eight. I'm not happy about it. She's too young to be kept by that man."

As pain seared through her heart, Kate wondered if she was having a heart attack. She clutched her chest and wondered if her old nemesis, Elizabeth Grant, wife of her ex-lover, Carrington Grant, had felt this way when Kate had been kept by Carrington. Shaking off the shame, she focused on Anita Spencer. "Kept? I thought you said they were rendezvousing. Now she's being kept? Says who?"

"Says my granddaughter. I didn't have the money to pay for off-campus housing. Hudson College has a beautiful campus. I wanted her to live on campus. Suddenly she has the money to live off campus. Suddenly she doesn't need her granny anymore."

"Sure she does. You just took out a quarter million dollar policy on yourself and named her the beneficiary. You obviously think she needs you. But please don't bring your problems to my doorstep. I'm not in the mood." Kate stared at the woman pointedly, neither one of them blinking.

"There's one more thing. Jade's pregnant."

Kate shook her head in disbelief. She was stunned by the woman's boldness. "Are you going to leave? Or shall I call the police?" As Anita Spencer rose from her seat, she grimaced, and Kate asked, "Are you alright?"

Anita Spencer nodded. "It's nothing. I got a little light headed. That's all." She stumbled and sat back in the chair.

Kate's heart lurched. What if the woman dropped dead in her office? She picked up the phone. "Mrs. Spencer, shall I call a life squad? You don't look well."

"No, no ambulance. I'm fine. Besides, I can't afford it. I'm just an old lady who didn't get enough rest last night. That's all. Can I have a cool drink of water?"

After hanging up the phone, Kate scurried inside the break room that her office shared with the barber next door. As she reached inside the refrigerator for a bottle of water, she could hear snatches of conversation about women. And she heard bustling going on next door. Good, the barber was busy. The last thing she wanted to do was bump into the handsome guy with the killer smile for he always made her feel uneasy, and she was uncertain why. When she returned to Mrs. Spencer, the old woman was drained of color. "I'm calling the life squad," Kate said, picking up the phone for a second time. She ignored the old woman's protests and punched in 911.

Minutes later the squad screamed to a stop and double parked outside the office. Two paramedics rolled in a clattering gurney, asked some questions of Mrs. Spencer, then placed her on the gurney and snapped it in place. The entire time the old woman begged the paramedics not to trouble themselves, but they insisted she needed medical attention and rolled her into the back of the squad and squealed off, sirens blaring.

"Lord, Kate what happened?" A breathless Sharon Singleton asked. She was tall, lean, and frantic-looking. Her natural hair was shaped into a short afro. A patina of sweat covered her forehead. "I ran the two blocks from my parking space to find the life squad here. Who was that?"

Kate lowered herself into Sharon's comfortable chair. "That was my nine o'clock. She got sick after verbally assaulting me."

Sharon frowned and took the chair that Mrs. Spencer just occupied. "What happened, sweetie? She didn't like the rate you gave her?"

"The rate wasn't the problem, but her coming here was." Kate took in Sharon's deepening frown. "It was a set up. Plain and simple."

"A setup?"

"Yes. The woman was here on her granddaughter's behalf. The same granddaughter who's allegedly sleeping with my husband." As Sharon's eyes grew wide, Kate nodded.

“Yep, according to Mrs. Spencer, it’s not just an affair. But Lamar has been playing house with Jade Spencer. She’s his kept woman.”

“Oh my, that’s just silly, Katrina—I mean Kate. Sorry. I forgot what that has-been boyfriend of yours had done to your given name. It’s gonna take me some time to get used to ‘Kate’ after referring to you as Katrina all that time. That old woman probably wanted to extort money from you and Lamar.”

Kate took a deep breath and blew through her cheeks. “It’s just that Carrington made the name ‘Katrina’ seem so . . . dirty.” She shuddered, remembering her ex-lover’s hands all over her the last time they were together. It was when she’d told him she was having his baby. Carrington was shocked that he’d not only planted his seed, but that Kate had had the nerve to stand up to him and tell him she was having the baby as a single mother. Carrington’s silence had been deadly. It ended up costing Kate her friendships with C.C. and Wendy, the woman who tried to kill Kate on Carrington’s behalf. Now both women were dead, C.C. at perhaps Wendy’s hand, and Wendy at Kate’s own hand. Shuddering, Kate hoped the thoughts didn’t morph into day mares, which turned out to be worse than nightmares.

“. . . and Lamar appears to be so in love with you, hon. Don’t let that old woman shake the foundation of your marriage. Be strong. I’ve gotten to know Lamar.”

“Wanna know what tops it all off, Sharon? The girl’s pregnant—according to her grandmother.”

Sharon was more flustered than Kate. “I-I d-don’t believe it. That woman was probably trying to extort money from you and Lamar. He’s a good man. Talk to him about this. That man adores you and Sydney. Do you think that man would accept another man’s daughter as his own, if he didn’t love you to pieces? Think about it.”

Kate thought about this a moment, envisioning a buff Lamar reading Dr. Seuss books to Sydney, envisioning him tossing her squealing toddler in the air, and a comforting warmth settled over her. No, she had nothing to worry about.