

The way Birdie Kaminsky saw it, paradise lasted three months, three weeks and five days.

Shimmying into her jeans, she peered at the clothing flung across the floor by the cyclone of her temper. Nothing made her fiancé and the co-owner of the recently opened *Liberty Post* crazier than a disordered living space, which probably explained why she felt inclined to treat their new digs like a patch of Oklahoma's tornado alley.

She'd grown tired of his pithy comments about how neatness counts, and the work schedule he insisted they keep was a killer. Who in their right mind rose at dawn for anything but sex or a light snack before heading back to the Land of Nod? Or played interior decorator after a grueling day of work? Last night Hugh had painted their bedroom until well after midnight, ensuring they both stayed up too late.

If this was how the honest half lived, she should've read the fine print.

Morning light covered the floor in a blinding pattern. She stumbled through the glare, kicking a heap of clothing out of the way and sending the lighter lingerie aloft. One of her *Victoria's Secret* bras skimmed the wall, collecting a spatter of eggshell blue paint. The destruction of cherished lingerie combined with the early hour sent her temper into the stratosphere.

"Hugh!" she bellowed in the general direction of the living room. "Get moving. We have the stupid interview you scheduled for this morning."

"Interviews, as in plural." Hugh Schaeffer followed his irritable response into the bedroom. "The second one is this afternoon."

His deliciously dark eyes scanned the mess flung across the floor. Clothes, a notepad, the Chinese takeout boxes Birdie had taken to bed when he'd chosen to sleep on the couch for the fourth night running—the floor was an obstacle course of debris.

She offered a smile as sweet as a poisoned apple. "Now, don't say it. I'll clean after we get home tonight. Right now I'm busy prying my eyes open."

“That’s what you said yesterday and the day before. Face it, Birdie. You have the domestic skills of a toddler.”

“Can I at least grab some coffee before you start badgering me?” It seemed best to enter the fray caffeinated.

Hugh leaned against the doorjamb. “There’s no brew. I couldn’t find the coffee pot beneath the crap you left in the kitchen.”

It didn’t take a genius to know what he was thinking—their new digs deserved TLC.

Together they’d purchased the barn on the outskirts of town right after Christmas. They’d renovated the main floor for the new *Liberty Post* daily newspaper and added a love den upstairs that he now undoubtedly viewed as a house of horrors.

They’d rebuilt the massive second floor to include a gourmet kitchen for the domestically inclined Hugh, a living room with gorgeous skylights in the vaulted ceiling, and a spacious bedroom meant to become a lover’s paradise but which was more accurately described as a demon’s roost, Birdie being the demon.

She snatched up her paint-spattered bra. “I’m not going to the second interview.” She held the lingerie out for his inspection. “Look what you’ve done. My favorite bra is ruined.”

“You have twenty favorite bras. Since you’ve come into your inheritance you’ve done nothing but shop. Keep it up and Saks will open a store in backwoods Liberty, Ohio.”

Finding a comeback proved impossible, probably because he was correct.

The windfall *had* gone to her head. Last December she’d inherited a bag of rubies appraised at just shy of one million dollars. The gems were tucked away at the bank, but she’d used a handful for collateral to open the newspaper with Hugh and embark on a clothing feeding frenzy that would do a piranha proud.

True, the women at The Second Chance Grill had warned her, sometimes subtly but often bluntly, that money could change a woman in unbecoming ways. Listening to their advice wasn’t the same as acting on it.

Besides, Birdie wasn't ready to put an end to the shopping extravaganza, not after spending all of her thirty-two years living by her wits and going without the creature comforts other people took for granted. Well, other *rich* people. Most of her friends in town were rich in character but didn't have much in the way of cash.

"We'll drive to Bell Corners after we get the mayor's comments on the new zoning committee," Hugh was saying. "You're not ditching this afternoon's interview with the women's group."

"I'll pretend to care about the mayor's zoning laws but I'm not interviewing those women afterward. Remember the skinny chick with the dark hair? Last weekend at The Second Chance Grill, I heard her muttering about me. *Ella está ávida de fama*. I looked it up on Google—she thinks I'm greedy for fame."

"Maybe she's envious of your Gucci handbag. Most women in town could put their kids through private school on what you pay for glitz."

"So I've bought some new stuff."

"What about the Corvette? It doesn't exactly blend in with the beaters rattling around Liberty Square. This isn't Palm Beach. People think you're showing off."

"I bought a new car. Big deal." She'd never before owned wheels, but the banana yellow Vette hadn't worked out as planned. All winter she'd hydroplaned through snow, scaring pedestrians off sidewalks and doing unintended wheelies on Highway 6. Thank God spring had arrived. "It's not a crime to own a nice car."

"That's the problem. You miss crime, picking pockets and living on the fly. You haven't exactly turned over a new leaf, Birdie."

The comment landed a bull's eye on her heart. "I don't miss my former life. Who would? I now own half of a local newspaper. I live with a permanent roof over my head and don't have to dash out of a store if the cops walk in. Being legal suits me fine." She paused by the wall and sniffed. The blue paint was still tacky, sending fumes across the bedroom in nauseating waves. "Why did you pick this color? It's infantile."

Hugh dragged his hand through his ebony hair. "I thought light blue would be calming. You know—for a bedroom. *Our* bedroom. If I'd been a psychic, I would've chosen fire engine red."

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“All we do is fight about the *Liberty Post* or who should handle the more boring interviews,” he replied. The regret in his voice dug the arrow deeper into her emotions. “We bicker about how to decorate our new home, or squabble over new hires for the newspaper’s staff. Mostly we fight our way around the problems in our relationship.”

She didn’t like when Hugh’s voice went soft around the edges to work its way beneath the armor she’d spent years layering over her heart. The truth he spoke roused her conscience from its preferred slumber, making her consider how her actions affected others—affected him mostly because she needed him like she’d never needed anyone before. The thought intimidated her as much as the early morning hour.

“Lighten up, will you? There’s nothing wrong with our relationship.” She grabbed mascara and blush, and did quick work on her face. When Hugh crossed his arms, unconvinced, she added, “Okay, so we’ve hit a few speed bumps. Couples don’t always get along.”

“That’s true, but you’re not even trying. You’re temperamental, moody—you should be on top of the world. Most people never come into money. Those who do are usually happy about it. Good fortune isn’t supposed to bring out the worst in people.”

“Meaning it has with me?”

Hugh tossed over the hairbrush and she ran it through her hair. Suffering beneath his frigid inspection wasn’t easy, the warmth gone from his eyes, the affection. Had he fallen out of love with her? The possibility sent anxiety snapping through her.

Setting down the brush, she faced him. “Here’s the thing,” she said, trying for a casual note that belied the worry stalking her. “I’m waiting for the axe to fall.”

“What axe?”

“Come on. You know what I mean.”

He released a sigh of frustration. “Birdie, I don’t,” he said. “Why don’t you clue me in?”

She did, hating the way it made her feel small—maybe worthless. “I was born under an unlucky star,” she admitted. “Look at my mother. She’s conned decent people across the U.S. She’s racked up misery from Maine to California.”

Hugh digested the explanation with commendable calm. “Just because you were raised by a criminal doesn’t mean you’re destined for failure. Forget the past and create something better.”

“I was raised in a family of con men and grifters. All I know is how to live by my wits.”

“So you’re scared. Who isn’t? If you’re waiting for a happiness guarantee, guess what? Life doesn’t work that way.”

“You aren’t listening.” The waver in her voice made her unaccountably angry. “Deep down, I can’t shake the feeling that none of this will last. Why not live it up while I can? Sure, it seems like my life is perfect now, settled—it’s an illusion. Somehow, it’ll all fall apart.”

“Like you’re destined for disaster? By fate or . . . whatever?”

“Exactly.”

Hugh’s brows lifted. Pity worked across his face or maybe it was sadness. It was hard to tell behind the tears blurring her vision. He sat heavily on the side of the bed and dropped his elbows on his knees, weaving his fingers together as if in prayer. Only she should be the one praying because she sensed something entering the room, a haunting regret. It threatened the bond they’d forged during the last months.

“Birdie.” He hesitated. When he tried again, she knew the words came at a cost. “Ever since I fell in love with you, I’ve wanted to believe I could help you find a better way to live. You’ve found real family here in Liberty, relatives who’ll stand by you no matter what. You have every reason to believe the world offers more than the suffering you’ve known. But the way you’ve been acting toward me—toward all of us—it’s like you’re trying to drive everyone away. If it seems like your luck can’t last, maybe *you’re* the one destroying it.”

“But I want to be happy.”

“A closetful of clothes won’t make you happy. A new car won’t either.”

“You mean I’m superficial.” Another direct jab. She tried to take it with grace. If she refused to hear him out, how could she pretend they had a future together? A tart comment hovered on her lips but she bit it back.

Evidently he wasn’t finished laying it on. “You’re trying to fill a hole in your heart with expensive baubles and trips to the mall. Maybe you can’t feel contentment because it’s outside your emotional repertoire.” Hugh cut off, his mouth twitching and his eyes gleaming with the kind of heartache she didn’t want him to feel. “Maybe it’s too late for you to learn.”

Drumming up a suitable retort proved impossible.

No, she didn’t understand contentment or how people nested together in families and close relationships, and let the love they cherished see them through good times and bad. It seemed like blind optimism, an unnatural order in a chaotic world.

Didn’t half of all couples end up divorced? Didn’t parents sacrifice to raise kids who then moved three states away? People in Liberty seemed different and she wanted to believe they were; some families housed three generations under one roof. There were people like Theodora Hendricks with cherished relatives strung across Jeffordsville County in a tapestry of love. Birdie was now part of Theodora’s family and a law-abiding resident of town. Yet it was impossible to shake the cynicism knit deep in her bones.

Rising, Hugh stuffed his hands into the pockets of his jeans. “You’re going with me to *both* interviews today. We’re on a tight deadline.” When she began to protest, he added, “We’re business partners. You aren’t bailing out. After we finish, I’ll drop you off.”

“You’re not coming home with me?” She wondered if he’d lined up a third interview today, something she’d forgotten.

For a moment he stared at her before turning on his heel. She followed him down the hall.

In the living room, the pillows on the taupe leather couch were neatly arranged. The sheaf of papers she’d littered across the glass coffee table was stacked

beside her iPad and the fashion magazines that had become an addiction. Outside the bank of windows, April sunshine washed the green rolling hills.

By the door, Hugh's luggage waited.

He picked it up. "I'm moving in with the Perini's."

The announcement hovered between them for a terrible moment. "You're staying with Mary and Anthony?" Her knees turned rubbery and she leaned against the wall.

"And Blossom, yes. They said I'm welcome to one of their spare bedrooms for as long as I want. They won't tell anyone, Birdie." He released a brittle laugh. "If that's what you're worried about."

Disbelief whirled through her. "You're leaving me?"

He yanked open the door. From over his shoulder he said, "I've made a commitment to build the *Liberty Post* with you, and I will. The rest of it? I'm not sure anymore."

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