



EMBER
LEIGH

UNFADED

B&P

Jaded

Ember Leigh

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Jaded
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CHAPTER ONE

Isabella snapped awake. The heavy *thud-thud-thud* on the front door was just in her dream, she thought, until she cracked open an eye and found it existed in her reality as well. She swung her legs out of bed, groaning as her tongue met the sick taste of stale alcohol. She cleared away a small pile of used tissues that had made a nest in the pits of her comforter. She'd been single and man-free for over nine months, since her last love had found himself partaking in a lunch break with his secretary—definitely not permissible on company property—and she was all the better for it, but it also meant that some nights required alcohol and sappy movies.

The pounding was growing more frantic. She thought she heard male shouts out front; this was getting serious. She threw on a robe over her nightie and staggered out of her room and down the stairway, gripping the rail to keep from tumbling down. The last thing she could remember from last night was drunk-

enly lamenting the downside of her decision to stay single; once her movie marathon had ended, she found herself wishing for a warm body and some bedtime shenanigans.

Sunlight crept in from all available spaces in the house, and she kept her eyes as pinched shut as possible to avoid the headache the light might bring on. Her hand made contact with the doorknob and she pulled open the door, bracing herself for the early Florida sunlight.

"Morning, miss." An incredibly blond and handsome man stood in front of her, surrounded by men in construction hats. The crew appraised her cautiously. A few waved. "We're here to start."

"H—hi." She tightened her robe. "Good morning. Uh...start what?"

The lead man watched her for a moment, as though trying to make sure she was serious, and then consulted a paper in his hand. "You're Isabella Moreno, right?"

"Of course. Yeah. Yeah, I am." She leaned against the doorframe, wondering what percentage of alcohol was still pumping through her veins. The moment felt surreal. Surely she was still dreaming. Maybe this was one of those robbery scams.

"Well, we're here to start work on the renovation project." He said it matter-of-factly, as though it would clear any remaining doubt. Isabella furrowed her brow. So many things didn't make sense. The only thing she was really sure about was this guy standing in front of her—tall, tan, and built.

"Um...*what* renovation project? I'm...I'm sorry, I'm just really confused."

The foreman sighed softly, looked at his papers again, and then looked back at his team for verification. "We were hired by you to renovate the house." He turned to a man at his right and held out his hand. The assistant placed a folder into it, which he shuffled through until he found a specific document. "It's all here, ma'am. We've been hired to reconstruct a large majority of the house, including replacing windows, doors, and skylights. A three-month project, paid in advance. In fact, I have the check here..." He rustled through the papers until he found it and studied it closely. "Actually, the name on the check is Angela Moreno."

Isabella felt the information creep slowly through the air between her and the construction worker until it wound its way

deep into her ear drums and, eventually, into her brain. She sighed, resting her head against the doorframe. The world spun black and bright behind her eyelids. This was no scam, yet somehow worse. "Okay. You're right. Come on in."

There was a moment of hesitation from the lead and then the men began shuffling in, single-file, like trained schoolboys. A few tipped their hats at her. She watched them through one slit eye, but all she could think about was the warmth of her bed and how bad an idea that cheap rum had been.

Once all the workers were safely inside, she swung the door shut and followed them into the kitchen. The foreman was spreading papers over her breakfast table. He looked up when she entered.

"I'm sorry, ma'am, I didn't even introduce myself. My name is Luke." He extended his hand. "I'm the project leader for the renovation."

"Nice to meet you. I'm Isabella." She placed a limp hand in his, scared to meet his gaze. He oozed a dominating, manly energy; it was palpable even more now that they were closed in the house together.

"And who is Angela?" he asked.

"That's uh...my mother, actually." She sighed and rubbed her eyes, trying desperately to clear the fog that wouldn't lift from her brain. "She must have paid for this. I apologize again for the confusion; she just...didn't mention it to me."

Luke looked surprised. "Wow. That's a first."

"Yeah, I'm sure most of your customers are aware of the fact that a team of burly men will be arriving at their house."

Luke laughed. "Nice way of putting it. Just so you know, we work five days a week, Monday through Friday, 8am to 5pm."

"Full-time," Isabella said, watching as the men dispersed throughout her living quarters. It still didn't seem quite real. "Awesome."

"We normally leave some things here between shifts. Will that be a problem?"

She looked around, noticing now that the majority of the men toted toolboxes. One carried a ladder and another had a strange tool that Isabella thought might better fit in a gory film. "Not at all. Whatever you need."

“Great. Now, how this works is that the renovations and modifications have already been designed and approved between our company and your mother, but I like to finalize things once more with the client, you, before we go ahead with some of the more radical modifications.”

Isabella paused, unsure of what to ask first, there were so many questions swimming in her head. “Uh...already designed and approved by my mother?”

“Yes. She brought the blueprints in for us and we worked side by side going over the schedule of changes.”

Isabella wasn't sure if she should laugh or scream. “Interesting. And you used the word ‘radical’ — should I be concerned or is that just an industry term?”

Luke hesitated before he answered, looking amused. “Not an industry term, ma’am. I mean it how it sounds.”

Isabella sighed. “Oh, Mother...”

“Think of something in the house. It will probably be changed somehow.” He cracked a grin. “I have a list here of all the scheduled renovations. It’s a long one; you might want to look it over during breakfast. Here’s your copy.” He fished out a stapled pile of papers and pushed it toward her.

“And...how long did you say this would take?”

“Three months.”

She sighed again, feeling the headache throb to life. “Okay. Wow. That’s...certainly a surprise.” Isabella couldn't have been more surprised, in fact, and was planning on calling her mother as soon as she woke up from the second half of her slumber—it was so typical of her to do something like this and forget to mention it completely. Advance notice would have been nice; even an accidental mention of it the day before would have been tolerable. A surprise like this was something altogether different.

“We’ve got our work cut out for us, that’s for sure,” Luke said. “But we’re real fast workers, and real hard workers. I wouldn’t be surprised if we get this done early.”

Isabella nodded. “Great. Well, thanks. I’ll be going back to bed. Feel free to use whatever you want, change whatever you want, knock down whatever you want...” She started down the hallway, letting the news sink in further. “After all, the deed is in her name...” Isabella ascended the stairs and made her way to the bedroom. Once inside, she staggered to the bed and flopped down

face-first. She groaned, loud and long, allowing her thoughts to recede until she was deeply asleep.



"Holy shit," Luke said, stepping outside onto the patio.

"I know, what a job." Jimmy pulled the door shut behind them.

"No, that woman." Luke and Jimmy walked slowly around the perimeter of the house, comparing the blueprints to what was actually before them. Luke had recently been promoted and was the head of this monster renovation project—something that had been a long time coming, in his mind. Though he was friends with most of the team, he knew a few guys resented the promotion, especially since he was the youngest of them all. "Clueless. And did she get run over or something?"

Jimmy snickered. "She must've had a rough night."

"I'll say. How old you think she is, twenty-seven? Twenty-eight?" He paused to look at an aspect of the foundation.

"Thirty, at least," Jimmy said.

"Well, that's an awful high age to be living under Mommy's roof," Luke said. "Man, these people out here. I hate these neighborhoods."

"They're rich, that's for damn sure. But I'd be lying if I said I wouldn't kill for half their money. She's got a couple pieces of furniture in there that would make my old lady crap herself."

Luke shook his head, fishing a tape measure out of his tool belt. "Whatever. It's about priorities. We make plenty doing what we do. Maybe I couldn't afford this house, but I got my convertible and a couple nice pairs of shoes. What more do I need?"

Jimmy laughed, steadying the tape measure as Luke measured the distance between a window and the ground. "Not too much else, buddy. Certainly not ladies."

Luke grinned and stood up, rolling up the tape measure. "No, you guys make sure I stay on top of my game."

They laughed. For reasons unknown even to him, women flocked to Luke no matter where he went. It had been that way his whole life, but once he got into the construction business, his buddies wanted to see how far they could push it. What started as a one-time, "Oh, you think you're that good" bet had snowballed and now it was their tradition—or maybe bad habit. Regardless,

his buddies always provoked him and the game had evolved into their official pastime: see woman, make a bet that Luke can get her, but let the girl in on the bet too.

That end clause was what kept the game in the realm of morality, Luke figured. Admitting up front to these girls that he and his guys had a bet that he could woo her into bed by the end of the night offered transparency. It also added an element of excitement for the rest of the guys. Most of the time they figured there was no way any reasonable woman would actually agree to go home with a guy who had made a bet with his buddies that she would. Sometimes women were appalled, and sometimes they were totally into it. No matter what, he was able to get them to come around. The fact that women still decided to go home with him despite knowing about their bet further proved to Luke that he was, in a word, irresistible.

It didn't happen every day, but it happened enough to provide him with considerable pocket change. The more money that found its way into his pocket, the higher his ego vaulted. At his last calculation, it was hovering somewhere in the stratosphere. But he didn't consider himself cocky. What was wrong with being proud of a solid fact?

A couple guys came around the side of the house and motioned to him and Jimmy. The rest of the crew trickled out until they were in a big group.

"Why do you all have shit-eating grins on?" Luke crossed his arms, having an idea of what lay ahead. "What's up?"

A guy named Mark snickered. "New round. This one is too good to refuse."

"Already?" Luke couldn't keep the smile off his face. "We've been here a half-hour. Spill it."

Mark lowered his voice to nearly a whisper. "There's a new element to this one."

"A new element? What, do I have to get her into bed and film it or something?"

"We're not against that," Mark said, chuckling. "But here it is. If you can get that girl in bed within a month—and I mean all the way—we'll pay you a hundred bucks. Apiece."

His grin faltered. This certainly was new—betting on a client. But money was an important consideration, especially when the

payout promised to be that big. “Will that be in fifties or twenties?”

“But here’s the deal—you don’t tell her.”

Luke paused, the grin disappearing completely from his face. He felt an excited silence settle over the group. He looked around at the guys, skeptical. “You serious?”

“We’re sick of the same ole, same ole,” Mark said. “Time to spice it up a little. Whaddya say?”

“And what if I don’t get her in bed?”

“You owe *us* a hundred bucks. And I mean each and every one of us. Plus we get to hold this over your head for at least a month afterward. And good luck with her...she might have seen her better days already, if you know what I mean.”

It was precisely that inexplicable allure that made his buddies invest in the game over and over again; each time they were thinking that *this time* would be the one time Luke couldn’t charm the girl. His luck had to run out sometime...right? It was the same mentality that led other men like them to the casino night after night; Luke was the dealer who kept them coming back for more.

And Luke wasn’t complaining about their dedication to the game. “In bed” meant exactly what the adolescent euphemism suggested—in the pants, all the way, home run, a long or short night of steamy sex. No matter the phrasing, it all meant one thing for Luke—a damn good time. His coworkers could tell when he scored too. He wasn’t sure how—maybe the sense of accomplishment or sexual satisfaction was something they could smell, something that clung to his hair and clothes like a too-strong cologne. And though they doubted him on this one, like other deals before it, he wasn’t afraid to admit if he lost. He played the game, but he didn’t play games.

Usually the deals were a no-brainer, and this one seemed to be too good to turn down. One hundred dollars from each member of his crew would be nice, but without telling her about it? An actual client? His stomach twisted at the thought, but the number of eyes scouring his face for a reaction incited him to answer fast. He’d been thinking about beefing up his car stereo, and the money would help nicely. If she was attracted to him, he could have her in bed by the end of the week. But if she wasn’t, he was suave enough to pull it off within a month. Besides, Luke never paid out; it wasn’t in his nature to lose.

He shook Mark's hand. "You're on."



Isabella finally woke up around noon. Her head had ceased its throbbing and it seemed her powers of reasoning had much improved. In fact, when she stood out of bed, nothing was spinning and there was no stumbling involved. Yes, this might be a fine day after all. Then she spotted her reflection in the mirror across the room and noted the sinuous black mascara lines creeping down her cheeks. Not only that, her hair was alternately stringy and matted, something that looked like she had done it on purpose for the starring role in a horror film.

She started with a shower; it was halfway through her conditioning routine that she remembered that her house was crawling with construction workers. The thought brought her to a halt, hands arced above her head mid-lather. She couldn't quite recall what was so piercing until it floated to the surface of her mind: *three month renovation project.*

She flew through the shower, dried off, and threw on a tank top and tight black shorts before marching downstairs to find her cell phone. *Mother must be spoken to, and quickly.* She couldn't believe this oversight.

Her damp hair hung heavy down her back, pieces sticking to the moist skin of the exposed part of her chest. She nearly ran into a worker in the front hall and realized her skimpy attire might not be the best for a house full of men, but she plunged forward regardless. It was her house, after all. In the kitchen, she spotted her cell phone on the breakfast table, sitting on a pile of her books.

Luke was bent over the table, examining some papers. She cleared her throat as she approached from behind. "Excuse me. I just need to get my—"

Luke stood and swiveled to face her. She couldn't miss the look of surprise on his face. "Whoa. Hey. Sorry, I...excuse me." He stepped away from the table as she reached for her phone. It felt like his eyes were glued to her. She bit her lip nervously, unsure what was happening, and then offered a smile.

"Thanks. That's all I needed. I won't bother you anymore."

"Don't worry, you weren't bothering me."

Something in his tone caused her to stop in her tracks and turn back to him. He was watching her go, eyes sparkling. Some-

thing about the situation—a total stranger, checking her out in her own kitchen—rubbed her the wrong way. She couldn't find any words, no matter how desperately she wanted to retort with something witty, so she said nothing. She walked away slowly, wondering whether she had imagined the incident. Perhaps he was being friendly, making her feel comfortable as her house was invaded by construction workers? No, that was rationalization and she knew it. He had definitely been checking her out and if she'd responded, he probably would have invited her to come "bother him" after work or something similar. She shuddered. Men.

She escaped to her office, her sacred spot and work zone. She shut the door, locked it for good measure, and immediately dialed her mother's phone.

"Angela Moreno, how can I help you?"

She sighed. "Mom, you know it's me, why do you still answer like that?"

"Darling, it's a *habit*, I can't just go changing them willy-nilly."

"Well that brings up a good point. I need to talk to you about something..."

"Is this about David? You know, I *saw* him the other day..."

Her heart wrenched in her chest; however, she was happy to note it was no longer accompanied by the gut wrench like in prior times. "You...what? You did? No, this isn't about David... I don't care about him anymore, Mother, I really don't."

"Well, he was asking about you. I didn't know if you'd care to hear that or not."

"I don't care to hear it, as a matter of fact."

"Also, he gave me your key."

"My *what*?"

"Your key. The key you had to his house. He said you might want it."

Isabella was floored and could scarcely find words appropriate for the swell of different reactions. "I...I don't understand. The key to *his* house? Why would I need that? I don't speak to him, I don't see him, he barely exists to me anymore. That is senseless."

"Well, yes..."

"Throw it away. I don't want it." Once the words left her mouth, she felt a pang of accomplishment. She took a deep breath. "I called about something else."

"Yes?"

"Can you think of anything you forgot to mention to me recently?"

Her mother paused for a moment on the other end of the phone. Her lilting voice hummed as she pondered the question. "No, not a thing."

"What about...a house renovation?"

There was another pause. "Oh, *yes*, dear, I do believe I forgot to mention that to you, didn't I?" She laughed heartily. "Well, you can hardly fault me for springing a surprise gift, now, can you?"

"This is some surprise gift," Isabella said. "In fact, this is one gift I would have loved to know about in advance."

"I apologize, Isabella, you know it just slipped my mind. Oh, with all the wedding preparations and the business with your father and the appearances for the label, it's hard to know up from down these days. I hope you forgive me...and I hope you like it!"

Isabella sighed. Her younger sister, Kitty, was planning a wedding and the entire family was swept up in the preparations. Isabella had been recruited as the general copywriter and bridesmaid, and with the date only three months away, things were starting to get intense. Beyond that, her mother's social responsibilities frequently came before other, more important things. This was precisely why Isabella and her sister had almost never received proper immunization during their formative years; their mother simply never remembered anything about doctor visits. Manicures and pedicures, on the other hand, were prescheduled for several months.

"I think it will look nice, once it's done. But, that's the thing...it's a three-month renovation project."

"Yes, that does seem like a long time...I hired the best company in town, but, well, you know what they say...good things come to those who wait!" Her mother's laugh trickled through the phone.

The buzzing of a sander erupted from somewhere beyond the door of her sanctuary. *Is this how it is going to be for three months?* "Mother, I have a life. I use my home as my office and workspace.

Couldn't you have at least mentioned this to me beforehand so I could prepare, or arrange something else?"

"Darling, if you need someplace to stay while they're working, you are more than welcome to come stay with me."

Her stomach twisted at the thought. "I appreciate that, Mother, but I just can't rationalize moving back in with the parents at my age."

"Well, what do you want, then? A hotel? A cabana on the beach? What is it?"

Isabella sighed, still unsure how to resolve the problem. Her mother's options weren't sarcastic—those were all very feasible, should Isabella choose one. But she didn't want that either. She needed her living space. She wasn't prepared to just pack up and move out for three months. Damn it, life would continue as normal.

"I'll figure something out," she said. "But please, next time you run off with blueprints of my house and hire a team of beefy working men to essentially move in with me, can you let me know in advance?"

"Of course, dear." Her mother was beginning to sound distracted and Isabella was sure that she was in the middle of ten different things. Her attention couldn't be held for more than a few minutes at a time. "Darling, I have to go. I have a photo shoot in ten minutes. We're putting on the final touches right now and I don't want to powder my phone. I'll call you later and we'll chat more, okay? Love!"

The connection clicked off. Her mother was thoughtful, sure, but even the best gifts from her felt distant and rushed. She couldn't very well reject it; work had already begun, judging by how loud that sander was getting. She hardly had a say in what her mother did with her possessions, even when Isabella was the sole inhabitant. She sighed and set her phone down, noticing the pile of papers on her desk related to her current column. That could come later...now, she needed breakfast.

She crept into the kitchen, wondering who she might find and what they'd be messing with. She was hesitant to run into the lead guy again. They'd exchanged barely twenty words but she felt like he needed to be avoided. *Luke*. He had the name of a lead character in a soap opera...and had the looks of one too.

The man was gorgeous—that had been evident even through the micro-slits of her eyes that morning. As she prepared the ingredients for an omelet, she glanced out the window overlooking the backyard. There he was, shirtless in the sunlight, looking at some blueprints and pointing to different parts of the house. He was impossibly sun-kissed with a broad chest and a flat, toned stomach. Her jaw dropped a little. Every time he pointed somewhere, a different muscle in his body flexed. Her heart thumped in her chest.

She forced herself to look down at her countertop. Even though he was a safe distance outside, the image of his broad shoulders flexing flashed tortuously in her mind. He almost looked like a model out there, and with his features, with that body, he might as well be plastered across the walls of every teenage girl's bedroom. Suddenly, the image of him straddling a surfboard in the ocean sizzled in her head. She could see him wiping away his soft, blond hair, swim trunks clinging to muscled thighs as he paddled into the waves, and then turning slowly to beckon her nearer, to join him in the water, to rub her hands all over his abs and biceps...

Isabella squeezed her eyes shut, scolding herself for the fantasy. In her mind's eye, she grimaced at the imaginary Luke and walked toward an ice cream cone stand instead.

Besides, she decided she didn't like him. When he walked, he strutted. No doubt he had a different girl on his arm every three days. With that jaw line and that body, it wouldn't be hard. And beyond that, he looked like he had a rugged side—the type of loud-laughing, uncouth man who chewed with his mouth open, talked incessantly about sports, and went to the bars right after work. Definitely not the type of guy she was looking for: someone refined, gentle, and well-informed about worldly issues. But, she reminded herself, she wasn't looking for a man, so none of that mattered. Getting into that mental habit would take time, she knew. She'd been so programmed by her upbringing to look for a man every time she was single that she could barely help the automatic hunt.

Suddenly, the back door slid open. She knew it was him without looking up; all the tiny hairs on the back of her neck suddenly stood at attention.

"Isabella. Hey, again. It's gonna be a hot day today!"

She turned to look at him, preparing an unwavering, casual smile so that she wouldn't betray her natural, womanly reaction to such male perfection. But she couldn't suppress it. Once her eyes landed on his body, she was unable to remove her gaze from the tiny line of hairs below his belly button.

"You making breakfast?" He approached her; she noticed the glistening of sweat on his chest. She cleared her throat and turned to the eggs in front of her.

"Yeah, a late breakfast, but I gotta start my day sometime, right?" As soon as the words came out, she felt the heat rising in her cheeks. It was happening—girlish embarrassment in front of grown, gorgeous men, an impulse she could hardly control.

Luke leaned on the counter beside her, looking down at the ingredients. "Looks good." After a moment of quiet, she could swear she felt him ogling not the eggs, but her own body. She looked over at him. He snapped his head up to meet her gaze. "You like to cook?"

"Sure," she said, curious to see what this man might have to say for himself. "I know you guys bring your own food and all, but if you ever need to use the kitchen to make something, feel free. We'll be sharing the same space for so long, after all."

"Thanks, I appreciate that. Most of the guys can barely operate a microwave. We try not to intrude too much on our clients' lives, but I can't say they won't put a drink or two in your fridge."

"That's fine. As long as my wine is left untouched, we won't have a problem."

Luke leaned closer to look at the eggs. "Add some oregano. It'll taste good."

"You think?"

"I know." He grinned and crossed his arms over his chest. "So you live here alone?"

She was intrigued by his culinary suggestion, surprised that he even knew what herb to suggest. "Yeah, I do."

"Big house for one girl."

"Definitely. But it was a gift. What can a girl say to that?"

Luke nodded, thinking it over. "Some gift, though. Your parents are either loaded or feeling guilty about something."

She laughed, surprised by his candor and wit. "That's one way of looking at it." She reached past Luke into a cupboard and grabbed a jar of oregano. As she did, she caught the faint scent of

his body, a delicate mixture of outdoors and body wash. She felt lightheaded for a moment and cleared her throat again.

"So, what do you do around here? Where do you work?" He was watching her with narrowed eyes, and she could sense he was trying to figure her out, like he might be testing her responses against some preconception in his mind.

"I'm a writer," she said. "I do investigative journalism for a few different magazines, and I have a few columns."

He was quiet for a moment as he mulled over the information. She jostled the pan as the eggs cooked and added a pinch of salt. He repositioned himself beside her, arms still crossed over his chest. "So, you from Florida?"

"Yeah, more or less."

"What does that mean?"

"I grew up here but I wasn't born here. We're kind of an international family."

He nodded again. "Does that mean you're spies or part of a mafia or something?"

She laughed. He'd made her laugh more times than she cared to count; something about his frankness and unexpected wit was very appealing to her. "Not that I know of. Not that I could admit to you, at least."

He watched her flip the omelet and as it sizzled, Isabella asked, "Are you not supposed to be out there working?"

"We're on lunch," he said. "Or, for some people, breakfast."

She bit back a smile.

"But anyway, I'm the boss; I'm allowed to chat up the lady of the house if I want to. Hey, you a partier or something? Not too many investigative journalists are hung over at 8:00 a.m."

She raised her eyebrows. The guy wasn't afraid to ask questions, it seemed. "You have an eye for detail. You should try doing some investigative journalism."

"Yeah, you think I'd be good at it?" He smiled and she caught the subtle way that the corners of his lips turned up. Her heart fluttered. She looked back at the eggs.

"Well, at the very least you could do some fine reporting on the morning-afters for local single women."

"Oh, you're single?" He seemed suddenly hopeful. She could have sworn he inched closer to her, unless that was just the skillet throwing off such intense heat.

She didn't respond, and instead folded the omelet.

Quietly, he said, "With a body like yours, I was sure you'd be taken."

It took a moment for her to register the comment. She turned to look at him, mouth agape. "Excuse me?"

He was grinning, eyes sparkling as he gobbled up her reaction. He bit his lip, and she couldn't ignore the dimples that emerged as he did so. "You heard me."

"I can't believe you just said that to me."

"I'm just testing out my journalism skills," he said. "I'm reporting what I see." He laughed softly. "Like I said, do you think I'd be good at it?"

She turned back to the skillet, unsure whether she was appalled or amused. She fought back a laugh. "There's a difference between being a reporter and being a pervert."

"Come on, don't be like that!" He placed his head in her vision and made her look him in the eyes. "It was a joke."

"Hm." She met his gaze briefly, and then looked back at the skillet. "When does your lunch break end?"

He sighed, clearly still amused but catching on that she was done with his company. "Not for awhile. But I'll let you eat your lunch. I mean breakfast." He grinned and walked toward the back door. "Enjoy." He let himself into the backyard.

Isabella found herself clenching and unclenching her teeth as she worked through the past ten minutes in her mind. *How dare he!* Yet, at the same time, a small part of her was intrigued by his forthcoming nature, and despite all obvious signs that he was nothing more than a good-looking player, she felt compelled to play his game.

Luckily, she wasn't in the game anymore. At all. So he'd have to find his cheap thrills elsewhere.

She smiled at her omelet, satisfied, as she slid it onto a plate.



Outside, Luke couldn't help but smile as he got back to work. There was a lot that Isabella didn't know about him, but there were a few things she was starting to catch onto, the first and foremost thing being that Luke Peterson liked what he saw.

He didn't often make mistakes, but he'd made a big one when he figured her for an ugly Betty that morning. He was still reel-

ing from being near her while she was so visibly fresh from the shower and wearing those damn shorts. She smelled like floral shampoo; he could only imagine how soft her skin must be. Not only that, her tank top had displayed some surprising assets. And damn if he wasn't getting hard just thinking about it.

He shook his head, trying to clear the image of her body from his mind. He liked real women, and Isabella was a real *woman*. With fleshy thighs and a belly that begged him to grab her from behind—he didn't even want to think about how that body would feel wrapped around his own. He was sick of all those skinny girls his buddies kept sending him after. It'd been too long since he laid eyes on a body like Isabella's. But he had to keep his cool. If he got too mixed up in *wanting* her, there was room to fail. If it was a job to him, he did it without question.

"So, have you seen her bedroom yet?" Jimmy approached from the side yard.

Luke looked up and shielded his eyes against the sun. "I'll be seeing enough of it soon," he said, smirking.

Jimmy clapped him on the back. "Atta boy!"

Luke wondered, though, if he would even make it inside there. He already knew Isabella was quick-witted and sharp, definitely sharper than the kind of girls he was used to seeing. He still wasn't sure how the episode in the kitchen would pan out—whether it had repulsed her or intrigued her—but once they met up again he could figure out the game plan.

One thing he knew for certain was that he'd be pursuing her regardless of the bet. Money or not, there was something about Isabella that made him want to know more. And given his own history, there was a good chance she'd be on his side before too long.

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Jaded

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