



Chapter One

Going to Get Him Back

Aspen

Cell phone pressed to one ear, I slipped the high heel on, hopping a little to keep my balance. “I’m sorry, Mr. McGillis, I’m already working a case right now and I’m *really* busy.”

“That’s too bad.” The older man blew out a breath that echoed down the line. “My baby girl’s man is cheating on her, and I want her free of the asshole. He’s put her through hell. Warned her not to marry him.”

“I’m really sorry to hear that.” I scanned my closet floor for the other shoe. *Where the hell was it?* I stared longingly at my favorite pair of Nikes.

“When I asked around the neighborhood for a PI to help us, your name came up so many times. They said ‘you need to talk to Aspen Chandler. Girl’s a hard worker and gets the job done.’ That’s what everyone told me.”

A little kernel of warmth bloomed in my chest. “I’m so happy to hear that, and I really am sorry I don’t have time to help you right now.” No, I officially had zero spare time. I was working a tough case, and had my best friend’s husband to save. I blew out a breath. Right now, I felt like I was juggling a hundred balls in the air and at any second, they could all tumble down on my head. “Look, I know a few other private investigators I can recommend. Any of them would do a great job and help your daughter.”

“That would be great, Aspen.” Relief drenched the man’s voice. “I appreciate it.”

“Sure thing.” I spied the other black heel. “I’ll send you a message with the names. Good luck, Mr. McGillis.”

“Thanks, Aspen.”

Ending the call, I snagged the shoe and slipped it on. I could barely walk in these heels, but each day I worked this case, I was getting a little better at it. I just prayed I wouldn’t break an ankle. The Manolo Blahniks were sexy as hell—I’d snagged them for a song on sale—they just weren’t my usual footwear.

As a private investigator, I was usually conducting surveillance or tracking down missing persons. Hard to run or climb a fence in heels. Unfortunately, I had to run more than I liked.

I straightened and took a second to absorb the peace and harmony of my bedroom. It was my own little sanctuary, away from the chaos of the outside world.

When my father’s parents had died, they’d left their apartment, in an old pre-war building in Kips Bay, to me. I’d been touched and humbled. I’d tried to see them both as much as I could, but it never felt like enough.

So, I’d gotten an apartment, and taken over the mortgage they’d taken out to cover their medical bills, but it was still a great deal. There was no way I could have afforded a place in Manhattan, otherwise.

I’d slowly renovated it room by room. I’d painted the apartment in crisp white, with touches of wood and green. I’d sanded and refinished the hardwood floors myself, and I’d filled the place with plants. I couldn’t cook, but I was pretty proud of my green thumb.

A fiddle leaf fig sat in one corner of my bedroom, its large leaves a waxy, deep green. A bushy fern was perched under the window, and I had a row of smaller plants in pots resting on a

shelf on the wall opposite the bed.

My bed had a padded, gray headboard, and was covered in comfy, luxurious bedding. Since I spent a lot of time following cheating spouses, or doing surveillance on insurance cheats, I liked my apartment—or at least my bedroom—to be an oasis of calm.

“Juno, you drank the last of the juice!” The screech came from the kitchen.

“No, I didn’t.”

“You did!”

Ah, yes, I had so much peace and serenity when I had my younger sisters living with me.

I headed out to the kitchen to attempt to stop the fight before it devolved into name calling, hair pulling, or worse.

The design of the apartment meant that my room was on one side of the living area, while the twins shared the other room on the other side. It gave us a modicum of privacy. Unfortunately, we had to share a bathroom, which wasn’t ideal.

“You’re such a douchnozzle,” Briar snapped.

“And you’re a dickladle.”

Too late. The twins loved combining words to come up with weird curses.

“Hey, keep it down,” I called out. I followed the scent of coffee straight to the coffeepot. “Just put juice on the shopping list on the fridge.”

The twins swiveled to face me. Briar and Juniper were identical—five foot eight, athletic figures, blonde hair. It was obvious we were sisters, since I was blonde as well, but I was a couple of inches shorter and a little curvier. They’d both played volleyball at high school, and Briar still played at college.

The twins were nineteen going on thirty-five, and both attending college. Juniper was

studying business at Columbia, and Briar was pre-med at NYU.

Juniper, who went by Juno, looked me up and down, then put her fingers in her mouth and wolf whistled.

I rolled my eyes. I was wearing a fitted, long, black skirt, a white shirt with a ruffle at the neckline, and a camel-colored, three-quarter-length coat. It wasn't my usual work attire, but for this case, I was undercover.

"You look hot, especially in those come-fuck-me shoes." Briar waggled her eyebrows, then hitched herself up on the small kitchen island. "I'd bang you."

"Thank you...I think." I poured a coffee, inhaling the smell of my strong, earthy Robusta. Then I popped a piece of bread into the toaster. "I need to get going, or I'll be late for my undercover job." I also needed to meet my client, who happened to be my high school best friend, before I got to the office.

At the thought of Erica, my chest constricted.

"I like this particular job of yours, since you get to dress up." Juno waggled her eyebrows in the exact same way her twin had. "It's a *huge* improvement on your collection of jeans, jeans, and jeans."

Briar stole my coffee and took a sip. "And T-shirts, T-shirts, T-shirts."

"And Nikes, Nikes, Nikes."

I needed to stop them before they got on a roll. "I don't need to dress like a fashion plate for my usual jobs."

"So, where *are* you working?" Briar asked.

"That's classified." I stole my coffee back. "Don't you two have classes?"

"Later," Juno said.

“You work too hard,” Briar said quietly.

My head whipped up and I met her gaze. “What?”

“You work too hard. Take too many cases.”

Juno nodded. “I know some of them can’t always pay.”

I cleared my throat. “I like helping people—”

“Our father was a dickweasel,” Briar said. “But that doesn’t mean you have to make up for his crimes.”

I straightened. “That’s *not* what I’m doing. I like my work. I have a mortgage to pay, and two annoying sisters to support.”

They both rolled their eyes, but thankfully dropped the subject. My toast popped up, and I quickly slathered it with peanut butter and jelly. I glanced at my watch and winced.

Dammit. I had ten minutes to meet Erica at a coffee shop around the corner. “I have to run.”

I gulped more coffee and took a bite of my toast. I raced around shoving my things in my bag. After I’d wolfed down the rest of my toast, I brushed my teeth, and swiped some gloss on my lips.

“Bye,” I yelled, opening the front door.

“Bye!”

“Be safe.”

I smiled as I took the central stairs. Life with my sisters was always noisy and colorful. I wouldn’t trade it for anything.

A door opened. “Aspen?”

I spun and saw Mrs. Kerber in her doorway, with her fluffy, white cat tucked under her arm. Mrs. Kerber was a widow and lived one floor below me.

“Hey, Mrs. Kerber.” I glanced at the cat. “Hi, Milo.”

The cat glared at me with evil, blue eyes. I couldn’t ever shake the feeling that Milo was plotting my murder, or possibly world domination.

“You look pretty today, dear,” Mrs. Kerber said. “How are those lovely sisters of yours?”

Luckily, Mrs. Kerber didn’t always wear her hearing aid, or she’d hear that lovely and the twins didn’t always match up.

“They’re great. Doing well at school.”

“Wonderful.” Mrs. Kerber stroked Milo’s head. “Aspen, Skittles got out again. Could you help? I’m worried about him.”

I sighed. I didn’t have time for this.

The old woman watched me, pleading in her eyes. I knew she had trouble navigating the stairs because of her vertigo. I smiled. “Don’t worry, I’ll find him.”

“Oh, thank you, dear. You’re such a good girl.”

That was me, Aspen Chandler, good girl. I often took small cases from neighbors, and they paid me with baked goods, or by doing odd jobs around my apartment. Mr. Billings around the corner had replumbed my bathroom, in return for me surveilling one of his employees, who was claiming he’d hurt his back on the job. I’d gotten some great snaps of the guy at the gym, and him helping his friend move house, and snagged myself brand-new pipes.

I hoofed it down the stairs. I suspected I knew where Skittles was.

Sure enough, the yellow cockatiel was perched on a ledge in the building entry, waiting for someone to open the front door so he could make a bid for freedom. I was certain the bird was trying to escape Milo. If Milo watched me with a scary look of disdain, the cat watched Skittles like he was starving and dinner was served.

“Come on, Skittles.”

After I’d retrieved the bird and returned him to Mrs. Kerber, I was now officially late. I pulled out my personal cell and tapped in a quick text to Erica.

Then I hit the sidewalk and jogged. *Please don’t break an ankle.*

By the time I reached the coffee shop, I was huffing and puffing.

It was a tiny place, and popular. I pushed through the crowd, and spied Erica sitting at a table at the back.

My friend noticed me and shot to her feet. “Aspen.”

My heart clenched. Erica Knox was a coppery-redhead, with milky-white skin covered in freckles. Usually she was smiling, with a twinkle in her eyes. In high school, she’d always been giggling. She’d been one of my closest friends, after I’d been forced to change schools at fourteen. She’d made school bearable for me.

There was no sign of that smile or giggle now. She looked pale, drawn, and tired. Huge, dark circles underscored her blue eyes. Like me, she wore office attire, and I noted that her belted blue dress was a little loose. She’d lost weight these last few weeks.

“Hey.” I took her hand and squeezed. “Sorry I’m late.”

Erica swallowed. “Do you...uh, want a coffee or anything?”

“I’m fine.” We sat. “How are you holding up?”

“I...I...” Tears welled in Erica’s eyes.

I leaned across the table. “We’re going to get him back, E. I promise.”

Erica nodded. “I know. I just worry.” Her voice dropped to a whisper. “It’s been almost a month.”

Four weeks ago, Erica’s new husband, Jake, had failed to come home from work. She’d gone

to the cops, who'd told her to wait. That he'd probably turn up. Maybe marriage had freaked him out and he'd gone off to clear his head.

Then she'd gotten a message.

We have your husband. Do as we say, and you'll get him back alive. Do not contact the police or he's dead. If you don't do exactly as we say...

Erica had come to me, panicked and on the verge of a breakdown.

I'd suggested she go to the police, but she'd lost it. Then I'd told her to wait and see what Jake's abductors demanded.

Meanwhile, behind the scenes, I'd gotten busy doing some quiet digging and pulling in a few favors. I'd discovered who'd taken Jake.

Nexus.

Just the name set my gut churning.

Nexus was a smart, cunning group of white-collar criminals who specialized in corporate espionage, blackmail of wealthy business people and politicians, and a dash of embezzlement and corporate fraud. They kept their shit tight, took the time to plan their cons, and picked big targets.

What they wanted from Erica was neither quick or easy, and each day, I saw it wear on my friend.

Erica was a manager who worked in human resources for the Kensington Group—a large, multi-billion-dollar construction and property development company. Nexus had asked her to keep tabs on the company's owner and CEO. To feed them information on his schedule and movements.

Their next target was Liam Kensington—one of the infamous Billionaire Bachelors of New

York.

They didn't come much bigger.

"Nexus haven't sent me any instructions for days," Erica whispered.

"Don't worry, they've been dealing with me." As of three weeks ago, I'd become her stand-in with the shadowy white-collar crime gang. "I've been getting texts. They've been checking that I'm in place."

After Erica had come to me, I knew I had to help her. She was barely holding it together.

And I had extra incentive.

Every single thing I'd learned about Nexus had turned my stomach. They'd pulled off a huge insurance fraud earlier in the year. They'd destroyed the livelihoods of hundreds of families.

I smiled sharply. They were going down. I knew better than anyone the devastation that heartless criminals like these left behind. I'd lived and breathed it as a teenager.

I lifted my chin. The cold, greedy assholes who hid in plain sight and believed they had the right to everyone else's money were done. *Finito*.

I'd activated an old alias of mine and dropped some breadcrumbs. Nexus had swiftly taken the bait. They thought I was a shady lawyer called Penn Channing, who knew my way around some not-so-legal dealings, and liked to make a quick buck.

Barely a week after making contact with them, they'd ordered me to go undercover at Kensington Group. They'd told me they felt their asset at the company—I wanted to punch them for calling Erica an asset—wasn't solid enough to see through the plan. Erica had arranged for me to get hired as an assistant in the Marketing department.

I didn't know the big picture yet. Nexus was good at only revealing bits of info to certain people.

Only Kristoff Doyle knew everything.

The leader of Nexus was a fifty-eight-year-old man with no past. I hadn't found out a single thing about him. Not even a clear photograph. He stayed in the shadows.

"You think Nexus is getting ready to move on Mr. Kensington?" Erica asked.

I nodded. "Doyle's moving pieces behind the scenes. I have no idea what he has on Kensington, but it can't be good."

I was now the proud owner of a thick dossier on the billionaire. As far as I could tell, Liam Kensington was what he seemed—thirty-five years old, handsome as sin, rich. He liked his women long and leggy. He had an American mother and a British father, and he'd been raised in London until his parents' bitter divorce. He had a slew of half siblings from his father's second and third marriages.

While Liam Kensington was clean, his father was not. Rupert Kensington had been implicated in plenty of dirty deals. He also kept some bad company, but he'd never been charged with anything.

Word was that Liam didn't speak to the elder Kensington. He'd gone to Harvard, and then stayed in the U.S. He'd met his best friends—Zane Roth and Maverick Rivera—and the three of them had all gone on to huge success. The three billionaire bachelors of New York. Although according to the latest society pages, it appeared that Zane Roth was happily taken.

Liam Kensington also happened to be the sexiest, most beautiful man I'd ever laid eyes on.

I'd caught a couple of glimpses of him in the halls of the Kensington Group head office over the last two weeks, but I'd seen him up close and personal at a recent charity event at his newest nightclub.

I barely suppressed a shiver, but there was nothing I could do about the clench low in my

belly. Yes, Liam Kensington looked like some god come to life, deigning to visit the mere mortals.

He was over six feet tall, with a long, lean swimmer's body, and burnished-gold hair. He wore a suit in a way that made a woman want to whimper. And his face...

I'd never thought a man could be beautiful, but still masculine. But Kensington managed it, and was often at the top of all the lists of the most handsome, wealthy bachelors.

"Aspen?"

I blinked. *Crap*. "Sorry, just thinking." And totally not daydreaming about how gorgeous Liam Kensington was. "Did they send you a video today?"

Erica nodded and showed me her phone.

The grainy, black-and-white footage of Jake in a cell, lying on a narrow bunk and staring at the wall, was only a few seconds long. He shifted a little, and I studied the time stamp. It was dated this morning.

"He's alive, Erica. You keep doing what you're doing, and I'll keep working my end."

Erica pulled out a Kleenex and dabbed her eyes. "Nexus promised that as soon as they get what they want from Mr. Kensington, they'll release Jake."

I gripped her hand and prayed Nexus held up their end of the bargain. Behind the scenes, I'd been noting down Nexus locations in the hope of finding where they were holding the man, but I was coming up empty-handed. "We're going to get him back."

"Thank you, Aspen. You're the best. I...would have fallen apart without you."

I squeezed her hand. "You're stronger than you think. Now, I need to go and be Penn Channing. You know, I rock at being a marketing assistant."

Erica gave a watery laugh. "Something tells me you'd rock at anything you try."

I winked at her. “I might stay until Christmas. I hear Kensington gives a good bonus.”

Another small laugh. “He does.”

“Remember, if you see me at the office, I’m Penn, and we don’t know each other.”

“Got it.”

I hurried to the subway and headed to the Kensington Group building in lower Manhattan. It was a huge spire of glass that Kensington had built several years ago. He had several construction projects on the go around New York. I suspected the man owned half of the city.

As soon as I got to my desk, I was sucked into work and meetings. The upside of being undercover was I was getting a second paycheck, at least.

I didn’t see Erica, and I also didn’t see Kensington.

Bummer. I really wouldn’t mind another look at him.

My head was still humming with thoughts of Nexus. They were getting ready to make their move on Kensington. I could feel it growing like a thunderstorm.

What the hell did they have on him?

It didn’t matter. My priority was seeing this through and getting Jake Knox back home safely.

Finally, the office started to empty out and my stomach grumbled. I rose. Time to head home. My feet were killing me, and I had a desperate need for some chocolate.

In the elevator, I checked my phone. I had a missed call from my mom, and I also had several texts from my sisters.

I’m not cooking tonight.

That was from Juniper.

It’s your turn, Juno. You can’t weasel out.

That was Briar.

I'm tired. And I dumped Jason today. He's a twatwaffle.

Instantly, Briar morphed into loving, supportive sister.

Juno xxx. He is a twatwaffle, and a pisswizard. Never liked him.

I know. You made that very obvious, Bri.

I tapped in a message.

Juno, sorry about Jason. Need I remind you two that you live with me, rent-free, and the only expectation I have is that you cook dinner?

I sucked in the kitchen and I often worked odd hours. Having the twins cook was a huge help.

Fine. I'll make some pasta.

I could almost hear Juno's dramatic sigh all the way across Manhattan.

By the time I made it to the subway, my feet were really killing me. When I got on the train, I squished in with everyone else heading home, and knew there was no way I'd nab a seat. I promised myself I'd soak my feet when I got home.

I got off at 28th Street Station and took a convoluted path home. I didn't think Nexus were watching me, but there was no way I was leading them to my apartment. Satisfied that I wasn't being followed, I gave into my growing chocolate craving, and stopped at the small convenience store near my building. Neon signs flashed in the window, for beer, an ATM, and the lotto.

"Hey, Mr. Cavonis," I called out.

"Aspen," the older man replied from behind the counter. "How you been?"

"Busy."

"Haven't seen those sisters of yours for a while."

"Lucky you."

He laughed.

Navigating the cramped store, I grabbed an armful of different chocolates. I had a secret addiction to Belgian, Swiss, and some of the artisanal French chocolate, but I could rarely afford the good stuff. I usually ordered myself a box of truffles online for my birthday.

I dumped my selection of Hershey's, Snickers, 3 Musketeers, and Twix bars on the counter.

Mr. Cavonis' bushy eyebrows rose. "You having a party?"

"Nope. Wait a second—" I raced back for some Reese's bars.

The door jangled. I'd just grabbed some more chocolates when I heard Mr. Cavonis gasp.

I spun. A man in jeans and a gray hoodie stood at the counter, holding a knife up. "Empty the register! I want *all* your money."

Mr. Cavonis was frozen. I edged closer.

"Move, old man," the thief yelled. "Now!"

The newcomer was probably late twenties, white skin with freckles, and a few wisps of brown hair sticking out from under the hood. He was shaking a little, and there were beads of perspiration on his upper lip. I quietly dropped the candy bars back into their display box.

"Oh, my God." I injected panic into my voice, moving closer.

He spun to face me, the switchblade aimed my way. "Stop moving!"

His pupils were dilated. High on something. "Please don't hurt me." There, that was a pretty good impression of a terrified woman.

He looked away. *Yes, that's right. Just dismiss me as a hysterical woman.*

"Give me the cash!"

I hiked my tight skirt up to my thighs, and moved. I landed a hard chop to the man's arm. The knife hit the linoleum, and the thief yelped. I gave a hard front kick to his belly, my sharp heel digging into his gut.

Huh, they did come in handy after all. Who knew?

With a cry, the man flew backward into a display of cookies, sending packets spilling everywhere.

I grabbed some zip ties out of my handbag. A good investigator never left home without them. My Glock 43 was also tucked in there. I had a concealed-carry permit, and I tried to get to the firing range at least once a month, but I only pulled the weapon out if I really, really needed it.

I flipped the crying, struggling thief over and tied his hands behind his back.

“You’re lucky I didn’t punch you,” I said. “I’m tired, stressed, my feet hurt, and you got between me and my chocolate.”

The man made a strangled sound.

I straightened. “Mr. Cavonis, did you call 9-1-1?”

“Yes, Aspen.” The man’s voice was shaky. “They’re on their way. Thank you.”

I nabbed a Hershey’s bar, opened it, and took a large bite. *Mmm*. “What do I owe you for the chocolate?”

The storeowner managed a smile. “Nothing. They’re on the house.”

Well, at least one part of my day was looking up.

My burner phone beeped, and when I saw the message, my mood plummeted.

Be ready for instructions tomorrow. We’re ready to move on the target.