

Chapter One

Jordan turned the corner. That was all it took. Might as well have just slapped him with a fish and said, “*Voilà!*”

The man who walked out of his brother’s office was jaw-dropping gorgeous. He was obviously there to see Patton, but wasn’t in a suit. No, he wore well-worn jeans that fitted strong thighs, work boots, and a chambray shirt that looked as soft as down stretched across a chest that Jordan would have worshipped, if the beautiful man had even noticed him.

“Pardon,” Jordan mumbled, realizing he’d all but frozen to the floor as Patton’s client attempted to exit.

“Wait, Xavier. This is Jordan.”

Gorgeous paused. He stood eye-to-eye to Jordan’s six one. Maybe an inch shorter, but what’s an inch when you’re splitting hairs with pure, gorgeous, male on a stick?

A frown from Patton sank into Jordan’s fuddled mind, and he made himself focus. Not the easiest recovery under the circumstances. “Yes? What can I help with?”

“This is Xavier De Los Santos. He has an issue...” Patton’s explanation slowed, his hand on the knob to his office door. “Come back inside. Best to discuss it in private.”

Jordan noted the man nodded with a grim tightness. He was pissed about something—hopefully nothing they’d done at the law offices.

Patton respectfully closed the doors. Jordan joined them to take one of the open seats in front of his brother’s large teak desk.

“This, Mr. Santos, is the best number cruncher in our firm.” A flickered glance toward Jordan from the man seated at his side was about the extent of his assessment. “I was going to recommend him after I had a chance to discuss your problem with him, but barring any issues, he would be our first choice to assist you. If anyone can find the discrepancy with your books, he can.”

Xavier leaned casually into his chair, though a definite impatient tautness remained locked within his frame. “I’ll take your word for it, Mr. Belten.”

Xavier cocked his head, giving Jordan a full view of brown eyes that made his heart trip. *Oh, shit. Keep it off your face.* He managed, with effort. What Jordan wanted to do was get down on the floor and run his hands up those incredible thick thighs. What he *did* do was stand when they did and offer his hand. Calluses were rough and edgy against his own palm. A man who worked and worked hard. The tiniest shiver tapped his spine. Jordan pulled it all in and shoved it down hard while standing in front of the two men. It wouldn’t do in the least to allow any of it to show to a client, or his brother.

“It’ll be my pleasure to help you, Mr. Santos. I’ll get the details from Mr. Belten.” Jordan would dump the next year’s worth of accounts to get to work with this man, if he needed to.

“Good. I’ll see you tomorrow morning, then.” With a crisp handshake and a final acknowledgement to Patton, Mr. Santos—*Xavier, God that sounded exotic and sexy as hell*—left them alone.

When the door swung shut, Jordan sank back into the chair he’d taken. He did his damndest to pretend like Xavier was any other client. It seemed it worked. Patton

drew a file out of a drawer and handed it to him. “This is Mr. Santos’s reporting for the last three years. He can go farther back if you need it.”

“What seems to be the problem?” Jordan opened the folder and began scanning the client sheet. Name, details, company info. Address. *Something about tomorrow morning?*

“Bottom line, he thinks his ex-fiancée was skimming profits. Note the ex in that. He’s not a fool but when he confronted her with it, his numbers plummeted in landslide proportions. Not only did he lose money, but out of nowhere he lost clients and vendors. She almost ruined him, if it was her.”

Jordan let out a low whistle. He didn’t put his thoughts to voice. A smirk caught out of the corner of his eye told him Patton was on the same page. *Women were crazy.* And Patton was married. Alyssa was a doll, though. Even Jordan adored his sister-in-law, and that was saying something.

“So what does he want us to do?”

“First, locate and track the losses. Find out where they went. If it was her, he’ll press charges. He’s already stated that clearly.”

Jordan looked up from beneath his lashes. “Damn. So he needs a complete audit done?”

“From rafter to doorknob.”

Jordan nodded absently. That was totally doable. He flipped a couple pages, looking over columns of information and numbers to get a feel for what he was dealing with. “What time am I supposed to show up?”

“He said around nine would be fine. He’ll have a place for you to work.”

“With him?” Jordan was proud of himself. He managed to say that with absolute professional ambivalence.

“He’ll meet you there.”

“Good. What about my other cases?” Like it meant nothing to be working next to that hunk of goodness. *God, eat your heart out, Hollywood.* He felt flushed just thinking about sitting next to him again. He prayed he didn’t make a fool of himself when he was actually supposed to be doing a job.

“Let Shelly have the newer ones. Anything in the fire?”

“Not at the moment.”

Patton seemed to contemplate him, studying him. “This should be a piece of cake from what I’ve seen, but if it gets entangled, we’ll divide up your files again. He’s on the verge of collapse. If she’s behind it, he needs the monies she’s stolen.”

Jordan finally looked up and locked on his brother. “Why didn’t you give him to Shelly?” Jordan knew she was just as qualified, and likely didn’t have the workload Jordan carried.

“He just got fucked, and not kindly, by his ex-fiancée. That, and I know you’re the damned best in this office, even if you are my brother.” He crossed his arms on his desk, relaxing a little finally. “Take it back to your office and get familiar with his programs.”

“Will do.” He stood to stride from his brother’s office, his head already mentally preparing charts and ledgers. It wasn’t until he sat at his own desk to divide his files and clear his calendar that it really hit him.

Ex-fiancée. *Xavier isn’t gay.* Not a prayer.

Even though Jordan was looking forward to working with the man, Mr. Santos was a client, and that was all he’d be. Releasing a single sigh of longing, he pushed the

colorful, unfulfilled dreams out of his thoughts to focus on what he'd need to have for the morning.

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Xavier tugged open the glass door to Stratler Homes the next morning with a little less irritation now that he'd taken the steps to discover if his ex was behind his company's problems. He was ninety-nine percent sure, but he had to have proof. Hard facts. The law kind of worked that way.

Gynna smiled for him, and he fought damned hard to return it. She didn't push when he practically stomped past her desk. She knew where he'd been the day before. Stalwart and loyal, she was the best secretary and administrative assistant he'd ever had, and a good friend on top of it. Too fucking bad the woman he'd thought he was going to marry didn't carry an ounce of Gynna's traits.

He was positive it was Lindsey. *Fucking bitch*. He still couldn't say her name without cursing like Satan's son.

There were two messages on his desk. One was from Angela, one of his best friends, and the other was from Mr. Belten saying the accountant he'd met the day before would be in by nine. He glanced at the wall clock in his office. Five 'til.

Xavier slumped into his chair, framing his face in his palms. His mind was a wreck. He was exhausted and doing his best to not take it out on Gynna or any of his foremen. At least Gynna had not declared war on him and quit. He knew he deserved it for more than one thing.

He'd made the mistake. He refused to let those under his employ suffer for it. He'd find a way to make sure they kept their jobs and received paychecks. Even if he had to eat tuna and dime noodles for a year.

Rubbing his eyes, he fought to forget, but it wasn't going to happen overnight. Especially with cleaning up the mess Lindsey had dumped on him. A hundred and eighty thousand dollars did not just melt into the floor, but it made a damn nice cushion in a bank account, he was sure.

Just not his accounts.

His phone buzzed. "Mr. Santos, Mr. Belten has arrived."

He straightened behind his desk, steadying himself to face the coming day. "Good, put him in the conference room. Make sure he has anything he needs, and help him if he asks for it. I'll be there in a few minutes."

"Yes, sir." Gynna hung up.

Sitting in his chair, he dug deep for a state of calm. He was on the verge of financial ruin. It was logical that he'd want to crawl into a corner and cry his eyes out. He just didn't have that luxury.

So instead, he was going to fight tooth and nail to keep everything he'd worked so hard to create.

Hiring one of the best firms in the city to track the money was a start. If he could get proof, he'd nail her ass to the wall.

He hated thinking about her, but he had to. It was the only way he could try to pinpoint any details that would help solidify his case against her when it happened.

Lindsey hadn't started out as his in-house accountant. She'd helped here and there in a pinch, then he offered a permanent position when Hilo returned to Hawaii. The more he worked around her, the more he'd become attracted to her, and it was obvious—he ignored the silent snort of derision at being deceived—that she'd felt the

same. Maybe she had. Once. Maybe it had all been a plan to get into his accounts to begin with. He might never know. Xavier only had their shared history to examine, and that left him very cold.

One late evening. An office tryst that ended on her desk. And he thought he'd fallen in love. Endorphins were evil bastards.

That did make him snicker in utter disgust. Within six months he'd proposed, finally able to put his past in a locked closet and forget. They had almost a full year of relationship bliss.

Then things began to change. Subtle at first. He couldn't even swear to what had been the initial fuse to set off the first explosion. Sex began to leave him cold. He still loved her—he'd thought. Then she began to make accusations, and their whole relationship went downhill so fast that he could have joined the U.S. toboggan team. With accolades.

Orders began to arrive wrong. Clients began to ask questions. Then the money started to not add up. He scrubbed a hand over his face. He'd tried to find the mistakes, but couldn't, praying it was simple oversight or human error. He'd found absolutely nothing and had run out of time. Now he was on the end of a tether. One wrong step would send him hanging over the edge of the very sharp cliff she'd expertly cut for him.

Lindsey had known what she was doing, too. He hadn't suspected a thing until two months ago. By then, she'd walked out of his life with the snarled shout of hatred that still left him confused.

If he'd had any idea she was that closed-minded, he never would have even fucked her. He wasn't gay, but fucking hell, live and let live already. He had closed that door with determination. Curiosity aside, he liked women.

That's what he'd told himself for the last decade, and it had worked just fine for him, so she could go screw herself. Or the next horse to come into town for all he cared. *Just not on my dime, bitch.*

Blowing out a breath to expel the pent-up angst and frustration, he stood from his desk with a determined shove. His chair rattled a bit as it swooshed out from beneath him. "Time to go nail that slut to the wall."

He grabbed a cup of coffee at the community stand behind Gynna's desk. God bless her. She kept it filled and fresh. "Everything okay, Gynna?"

"So far," she replied, her voice winding over the floor up to the ceiling-high adobe textured partition that separated them. There was a large logo emblem in brushed gold tone metal mounted over her head on the front side. She was the gatekeeper. She was excellent at what she did, too.

"Don't play too much solitaire, at least while he's here."

He heard the distinct sound of a raspberry being blown his way. "Piss off."

Believe me, I'd love to, for about a month of no bullshit. Her antics made him shake his head. After almost eight years in his employ and her two kids, he couldn't do without her sass and saccharin snark.

"Are you in a better mood?" she asked, sounding concerned.

He stirred in his sugar with methodical strokes. "Not really, but I'm working on it."

"It'll be okay. Jordan seems to know what he's doing."

"Jordan?" He nodded as the name registered with her answer.

"Mr. Belten."

“Right. Conference room A?”

“All settled.”

“Thanks.”

Her brunette head popped out from behind the wall. The humor of it was it looked like her head was floating. And she knew it made him laugh. “We’ll be okay, Xavier. Weather the storm.”

“Thanks.” He didn’t know what else to say. Turning, he strode down the faux red marble tiled hall to the conference room to find Mr. Belten—Jordan—spreading out files and pages. Several boxes were already stacked against a wall. One stage shy of his underwear drawer, he was sure. His entire life, about to be dissected and exposed, down to the last frugal penny.

“Morning,” Xavier greeted.

Blue eyes with a hint of thunderhead grey circling them rose to his. Jordan reached out his free hand. The feeling of calm strength embraced him. Strong fingers, a warm palm.

And one hell of an electrical pulse that had him pulling his hand away rather unexpectedly. He clenched his fingers, feeling two pop. He forced his voice to work. “Can I get you anything? Coffee?”

Jordan shook his head. “I’m fine for now. Gynna showed me where everything is.” He fiddled with some papers then gazed at him again. “If I need into your office or other files, I’ll let you know. I’m starting with the most recent vendor orders, deposits, and transfers.”

Xavier mutely nodded. Blond and blue eyed. He looked impressive in a slate gray suit jacket. It took him a few seconds to realize they were standing there staring at each other. He cleared his throat. “Okay. I have two sites to oversee this morning, but I’ll be back after lunch.”

“It’ll take me a couple hours to get the first insight and ledger. Should work out well. We can discuss it this afternoon.”

“Good. Hopefully, she wasn’t as good as she prided herself to be, and this won’t take long.” Xavier could *not* lose Stratler Homes. He spun on a heel and left the room, fully aware that Jordan was watching him exit like Xavier’s tail feathers were on fire.

For some reason, Xavier thought the man just might be right.

Chapter Two

Jordan managed to maneuver his butt to find the chair. His heart was pounding from Xavier’s handshake. Even with a table between them, it didn’t matter. He’d felt the shock of contact all the way to the soles of his feet. The man was utter deliciousness. Thick black hair, the kind of hair Jordan loved to delve his fingers into, and oh man, those eyes. Golden honey in a jar. A kind of brown that melted or blazed. Or, if he was lucky, both.

“And you’re a desperate bastard to be perving for a client,” he castigated himself. *A straight client.* As though he needed to remind himself. But apparently he did need to. He’d never seen or met anyone as gorgeous as Xavier. Even though the man was straight, he was knocking Jordan for a loop.

Today he was wearing ass-perfect black jeans, a gray button down shirt, and cowboy boots. He must have been on-site yesterday when he'd come to talk to Patton. Today, he looked business sharp. Jordan drew a breath. Life was cruel in so many ways.

Pages and files lay on the lacquered table in front of him. He was there to audit the company to find where his missing income had vanished to. The least he could do was that, hopefully without letting on how much he wanted the owner of Stratler Homes. Xavier's anxiousness showed he needed this done quickly, and Jordan wasn't going to fail him on it. He couldn't make it personal. Drawing a breath, he settled in to do his job.

Three hours later, he walked out of the conference room toward the assistant's desk, a splayed file held in his steady palm. "Gynna?"

"Yes?" He peeked up and outward and forgot what he was going to say. Xavier was just walking through the door into the building.

"Jordan?" Gynna nudged quietly.

His head swiveled numbly on his neck, his mind a blank. Gynna dropped a glance to the file in his hand, and he knew he couldn't hide the heat in his cheeks.

Shit! Come on brain, say something! "Could I see the vendor files and receipts for Encapsilon and MatRix, Inc?"

"Sure."

Xavier lifted a hand, halting her rise. "It's okay, Gynna. I'll get them. And when you see Todd, tell him I need to see him."

"Can do." She wrote down Todd's name on a pad at her elbow.

"The files you need are in my office."

Jordan took the hint and followed Xavier. He captured a single groping stare of that hard ass, tight enough to bounce quarters off of, a mental treasure for later, then returned to the papers in his hand.

Xavier pulled out a long drawer from the lateral file against one of the office walls, then flicked over the name tabs. "Pretty much anything you need will be in this drawer or the one below. The last is a catch all."

He took the two files Xavier handed him with a quiet, "Thank you."

Xavier shut the drawer then sank, distracted, into the chair behind his desk. His office was modern neat. No plants, only two framed pictures on the wood-paneled walls, with broad windows that viewed, unfortunately, the access road to the freeway they abutted. There were no photos on the desk. Had there been frames of Xavier and his fiancé?

"Was there something else, Mr. Belten?"

"Jordan," he replied absently, his mind still wondering about Xavier's ex.

"I'm sorry?"

He finally met that golden gaze and knew he was screwed. "Call me Jordan. Mr. Belten is my dad." It wasn't quite love at first sight, but Jordan knew it was the end of whatever hope he had for himself.

He'd fallen head over heels for a straight man.

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Xavier tipped in his chair, his palm braced on the edge of the desk to keep himself from rocking forward. Jordan had rolled the cuffs back on his shirt, his tie long gone by the looks of things. He'd undone the top two buttons at his neck to allow for room, and if

the dun blond waves on his head were less tamed, they'd be in full curl, little loops perfect for fingertips.

Never shy about appreciating beautiful things, Jordan was definitely a collection of perfections. Jordan was simply a gorgeous-looking guy. The kind who made women look twice, or three times, and probably could make a lot of men do a double-take as well.

"What does your dad do?" he asked out of the blue. Xavier needed a distraction.

Jordan shifted, closing the files he held and letting his hands drift to his sides. "He's a retired proctologist."

"So, Dr. Belten was more likely what you heard a lot of?"

Jordan's eyes lightened, matching the humor in his voice, the weight of his thoughts disappearing. "And then some."

"Tell me something?"

Jordan nodded. "As much as I can."

Xavier crossed a leg over his knee. "How long do you think you'll need to go through all of this?" He cast a glance at the files in Jordan's hand, his stomach churning from the stress. His day was quickly spiraling into a hell zone, and at the moment, he'd do anything for a break.

Jordan glanced over his shoulder, seeming to consider it in depth. "A week, maybe two, then another to get the findings collected and determine where your losses occurred. If it's what you think, then it'll be all you'll need to take to the police."

Xavier let out a pained breath, feeling yet another part of his world crumble. "I was afraid you were going to say that."

Jordan's brow crunched. "Why? I can do it faster, but speed means a higher risk of mistakes."

"I know."

Jordan motioned to the door. "May I?"

Xavier waved permission, and Jordan shut the door to take a seat in front of his desk. "Why is time so tight?"

"Because I'm literally down to the wire with what I can do to keep us running."

Jordan tilted, considering. "Tell me."

Xavier's foot hit the mat with a flat slap under his desk and he rubbed his face. "I have to lay off my best supervisor today."

"This whole mess really fucked up your financials and your credit, didn't it?" Man to man, Xavier and Jordan both knew what that meant. Xavier and Stratler Homes were as good as flotsam in the financial sense.

"The bank won't extend again. I have to do it."

Jordan tapped his knee where he was seated before Xavier, his gaze lost in thought. "Don't do it."

Xavier stood, wanting to pace or, at the least, rage. He couldn't really do either. "I don't have a choice. It's either that or close doors by the end of next week."

"Is our fee doing this to you?"

Xavier crossed his arms, staring at nothing out the window. "No. I'm paying for it out of my pocket. If I had even a hint of Lindsey being behind this, that we could recover, the bank would open credit again. I took too long to have the financials investigated. I didn't even put it together that it was her until two weeks ago."

“How?”

Xavier leaned a shoulder to the window. “Something she said when she left finally clicked.” He cringed at the remembered thrown final barb. “What doesn’t matter. The problem is how long it’s been going on, how much damage she did, which I suspect started soon after we began to have things cool off between us. If even after...if I can prove we’re sound...if we’ll be able to recover. That’s all the banks care about. I’ve lost tens of thousands of dollars in capital from vendors pulling out at the last minute. Just canceling, leaving me shitting bricks to replace them for quality materials. That’s not counting the base income I know is missing.”

“If I can get you enough to cause suspicion by the end of the week, will that be enough to keep you going?”

“But you just said—”

Jordan jerked from his chair, cutting Xavier’s words off. He took two steps around the desk but didn’t get any closer. “I know what I said. I’ll make sure my findings are watertight. And I’ll find out if she’s behind it or not by the end. You’ll have your name, I promise you.”

Xavier gaped at him, silently, in awe at his determination, his fire. *No, you gave that up. Remember? Closet? Lock? You like women.* Suddenly he wasn’t so sure he’d made the right choice all those years ago. He’d never once had that doubt, until now. Jordan was twisting Xavier’s wires hard. Stifling the rising tide of confusion, he concentrated instead on what Jordan was telling him.

Swallowing, he did a fast calculation, then nodded. “Okay. One week. I can float for another week.”

Jordan narrowed the gap between them, his broad shoulders just as tight and muscled as Xavier’s. Maybe not as thick, but able to carry a heavy burden. One, for some reason, he was willing to share. “Thank you for putting your trust in me, Xavier.” A cocky, playful spark lit his blue eyes. “I might end up camped out here a few nights, but I won’t get in the way.”

“Why?” Xavier finally found the initiative to ask.

“Because the whole reason I’m here is to keep you from closing. We’ll ensure that doesn’t happen first, then we’ll nail your thief.”

Jordan leaned forward, the blue of his eyes circled by golden sunshine lashes. Eyes that suddenly became focused on Xavier.

Seemingly becoming aware of that fact, he quickly took a step back, something secret and shadowed zipping over his face so quickly that Xavier couldn’t catch it.

“I’ll help. You name it.”

“Keep me fed and caffeinated. I’m the work horse in the family.”

“Really?” Why did the mention of a horse suddenly bring to mind... Xavier slapped that image down fast. What was wrong with him?

Jordan’s frame relaxed, a grin lightening his features. “Oh, yeah. Patton was my idol. Hell of an icon to live up to when he’s also your brother.” He turned and grabbed the files he’d left to rest on the corner of Xavier’s desk. “One week.”

Then he spun on a heel and opened the door to march through it, on a mission.

“Jesus,” Xavier muttered. But if he could... If Jordan could get him the information he needed to get him out of this mess, regaining the trust in his suppliers and vendors would be easy, and he’d be able to keep his buyers from filing against him

for breach. Talk about a fast ride to perdition. Anything that man needed, Xavier would make sure he had it at his disposal.