

# CHAPTER ONE

“YOU WON!”

“Hmm... what did I win?” Casey rushed to move her papers as Lynn plopped down on the corner of her desk.

“Well, I might tell you, if you’d get your nose out of that paperwork.” Lynn glanced down at the stack of forms. “Why you see fit to do his work is beyond me. You didn’t even go on this call.”

They’d had a dinner party the night before. The man they were watching had just been released from the hospital with a new onset of diabetes and an irregular heart rhythm. There hadn’t been a need for any medical intervention, so the report Casey was writing was fairly standard.

“It’s better than standing around here and having to talk to him, or worse, having to work with him. I told him I’d write this while he went to the luncheon with a new client that’s been having trouble with his blood pressure. We were supposed to go as friends of his, and if he started getting too excited, we were going to divert him. Simple job. I just wasn’t in the mood to put up with Mr. Starkley today.” Casey looked over the papers in front of her and let out a small sigh.

She’d been attempting to find another job at around the same pay and hadn’t been able to. She had so much flexibility with her current job as an elite tactical medic. She’d been able to see so many beautiful places and eat foods that she’d never make or buy herself. It was better than sitting around a station waiting for calls to come in; she’d tried that. She had also tried flying with a medical service, but she didn’t like being in close quarters with only two other people. This job had more diversity and continuous educational opportunities; their motto was that there were always new skills they needed to learn, just in case.

But because of the flexible hours, she didn’t have the time to take on another job. Not that she had any true bills other than her living expenses, but she wanted to own some land one day; a few horses, and maybe even a few cattle. It didn’t help that she passed up on any overtime just so she wasn’t around her boss. He’d always made her feel uncomfortable and always signed them up to work together. It wasn’t worth it anymore.

He had never done anything wrong; it was more of a feeling she had. The more time spent near the man, seemed like the more possessive he got. And she couldn’t shake that bad feeling away. Oh how she—

“Earth to Casey!” Lynn gave her a shake. “Are you going to sit there in la-la-land, or are you gonna let me tell you what you won?”

“Okay, sorry. What did I win?”

Casey jumped as Lynn slammed her hand down on the paper. “Not here. We’re going out tonight.

My treat. Before you say anything else, just shut up, nod, and then say thanks.”

“But you—”

“Just shut up, nod, and say thanks. That’s all I’m asking you to do. Argue with me later, but for now, agree and accept. Because you know how stubborn I can be.”

“Okay, thanks, but just so you know, I don’t like this one bit. And I can be just as stubborn as you,” Casey added for good measure, “if not more.” She crossed her arms around her chest.

“I know, honey, but sometimes it’s okay to accept an invite from a friend. And we are friends, right?” Lynn already knew the answer to that; they’d been best friends since they were small kids in the same neighborhood.

Casey gave what felt like her first real smile of the day. “Yeah, we are.” She raised her brows while scrunching her nose as a thought occurred to her, she added, “Well, maybe. Depends on what you got me into.”

Lynn smiled back. “We are and you know it. Oh, and don’t worry about meeting up anywhere. We can just leave from here. That way you don’t have to go home, *and* you won’t have a chance to talk yourself out of going.”

“But—”

“I know you’ve got spare clothes here. All you need is your dress jeans and a button down, really.” Lynn glanced at her watch, “I need to get going. Reservations are at eight, and we have a ways to drive. Do *not* take any extra work tonight.” Her smile deepened.

Casey couldn’t think of any place that required a reservation but would let a person wear jeans and a buttoned-down dress shirt, granted they were dressy. But Lynn was always trying to spice things up, trying to add a sense of mystery. So, even if they ate at a fast food place, she’d let her get away with it this time. Plus, she did want to know what she’d won. She hadn’t bought any tickets to anything, hadn’t gone in on any lotteries, and never really went anywhere to sign up on a chance to win anything.

The day ended up being busier than it had been in a long time. Casey didn’t see Lynn again until right before five o’clock. Casey half wondered if maybe Lynn had planned it that way, but then again, she couldn’t know how busy they’d be. Casey was just finishing changing clothes when Lynn came in.

“Oh good, you’re already ready. Give me five minutes and we’ll get going.”

“Lynn, I’m not sure...”

“Girl, if you’d learn to be half as stubborn as you are, and maybe, double your trusting, wow, there’d be no stopping you. Now, you agreed and it’s settled. Give me five minutes, and then *we are leaving together.*” Lynn had her hands on her hips as if daring Casey to challenge her.

Casey stared at her for a minute, trying to gauge whether or not to test. “Okay, but in six minutes

I'm out of here, with or without you. Understand?" she finally asked, cocking her head and raising a brow to intensify her sincerity.

"Don't you worry about me, honey," Lynn answered with a knowing smile. "I'll be ready. I know what's in store for you — I mean us — tonight."

"It better not be some date thing. You know I won't go on them" A sense of nervousness washed over Casey. "You better not tell me I won some date with so-n-so, you hear me?"

Lynn, holding her hands over her ears, actually tried to hide her giggle. "Nope, I'll see you in five minutes." With that, she closed the door.

*Hmmm... I wish I knew what she was up to. Maybe I'll go work on the last report I started. Or maybe, I'll shock her and wait by her car. A little laugh slipped out. She'll be looking all over for me, and by time she gives up, she'll be so mad, and there I'll be, innocently standing by her car. She can catch me looking at my watch.* With a little smirk, Casey actually felt lighter than she had recently, maybe tonight would be good for her...

"What brings such a beautiful smile to that face of yours? It brightened up the whole area. In case no one's ever told you, you should do that more often." His voice lowered, almost to a whisper, as he continued his approach. "It makes you look more feminine and very tempting." One eyebrow raised, he tried moving a bit nearer.

As if she would ever look at someone like him. The man was at least twice her age and just creepy looking. She lost her smile. "Mr. Starkley, I... um... I didn't see you there."

"No, I'm sure you didn't. Why don't you smile like that all the time? It makes you even more beautiful than you already are. Makes men think of dinners and romance and evenings at home, alone with the lights..."

*Yuck, and here I thought I didn't have a life.* She shook her head. "Sir, did you want something?"

His eyebrows turned inward, showing his frustration that she kept him at a distance. "Why is it you stay so distant from me? Have I ever done anything out of line with you yet?" He took another step forward. "I'm starting to lose my patience. You have to know..." His head turned as Lynn came through to Casey's office without knocking.

"There you are." Lynn burst in. "I thought you might have gone on before me. I know you're excited about our plans tonight. Oh... hey, Mr. Starkley. I thought you left for the day."

*Okay, I might have to admit I like the way Lynn's leading this.* "I thought I was going to have to leave you behind." Turning toward her boss, Casey smiled as big as she could. "Sir, if there's nothing else, we're already running late for our dates."

"Actually, I need you to stay. I still have one priority left, and they're requesting you. Should only take an hour or so..."

She held her side of her lip between her teeth; Casey always felt she had the responsibility of every client that requested her.

As Casey closed her eyes, Lynn muttered, “Damn the man.”

But when Casey opened her eyes and smiled at her friend, ignoring her boss, she took a deep breath. “I’m sorry. Lynn’s a bit late already. I thought I was going have to leave without her. We’ve been so excited about tonight. If they still request me, you’ll have to see if they can reschedule for tomorrow.” Then she laughed, winking at Lynn, “Or maybe even the day after that.”

She linked her arm through Lynn’s, and half dragged her from the office, holding on for dear life for the way she’d just left her boss standing there, staring after them.

“Reschedule?” Mr. Starkley was yelling. “You can’t reschedule.”

“Hurry up. I can’t believe I just did that.” They almost skipped out the door.

As they got to the car, Casey looked over the hood at Lynn, taking a deep breath and, without ever saying a word, Lynn shook her head, winked, and then nodded for them to get into the car. Both of them wore a smile as they fastened their seatbelts.



“THIS IS GOING to be so much fun.” Lynn kept glancing at Casey. “I’m so proud of you. You really need to start putting yourself first. You’re young. You should want to go out with friends. I can’t remember the last time we went out together. And stop worrying — you have a right to have a life outside of work.”

“I know. I just wonder what will happen when I get back to work tomorrow, I’m sure I’ll have to pay for my attitude...”

“Well, maybe you won’t be going into work tomorrow...”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You’ll see, honey. You’ll see soon enough.”

With that, Casey figured she’d leave well enough alone. She looked out the window and just watched the city sights, not really paying attention to anything in particular. When the building structures and their lights were replaced by the countryside setting, Casey opened her window to let in the fresh country air and sat up a little more, trying to figure out what Lynn was up to. She was sure no restaurants were out this way, and Lynn had said they were going to eat supper.

But as Casey turned to ask her, she shook her head and turned toward the outside scenery, deciding that she really didn’t care where they were going.

She was out for the evening...

She was with a friend...

She was in the country...

She could feel the city's stresses melting away...

What more could a girl ask for?

Well, okay, she could think of a few things... maybe to go horseback riding, spend a lazy day fishing by a pond, or maybe a picnic lunch by the pond while letting her horse take a break after riding all morning. Yeah, she could think of a few things. But for now, she just closed her eyes and enjoyed the smells and the atmosphere.

She must have dozed off, because when she woke up, the sun had started to set for the night. Without the city lights, the trees lining the road made it seem darker than what it normally would be. She loved the summer nights, when the hot days were cooled by the night air. It was amazing the changes of city life to country life.

Lynn was driving much slower now. "Hey, you're awake," she said, and stopped right in the middle of the road. Not that they couldn't see if a car was coming from either way, but..."Okay, now you have to promise me that you'll keep an open mind about tonight."

As Casey opened her mouth to answer, Lynn cut in again.

"No, I don't want to hear any excuses. You deserve this, and I'll never forgive you if you pass it up." She gave Casey a stern look. "And I mean *never*."

"I haven't said anything." Casey just stared at her, wondering what she had gotten herself into. "Can you at least tell me what I won?"

"Almost, honey. You'll be finding out in about thirty minutes, okay?"

Casey just laughed. "Okay, you win. Whatever... it's not like it's going to change the rest of my life. But I am getting hungry. I thought you said we had reservations at eight. It's almost that now. We're not going to miss our reservation, are we?"

Lynn murmured something under her breath that might have been, "*You never know. It might.*" But Casey decided to let it go, for now. She actually felt happier than she had in months, maybe even years. She really needed to get a life. *I don't do anything for myself anymore. No wonder Lynn's worried about me. I'll show her, no matter what happens tonight. I'll play along with her. She giggled. I'll show her I can be a good sport, just wait and see.*



JASON WATCHED COLE from across the room. For being a farm manager, he sure knew how to play host at a party, talking with everyone, making sure everything was just where he wanted it. Jason knew he'd never let Cole live it down. Now might be a good time to start ribbing him, before any of the guests arrived.

His home had been transferred into a party room. He could remember his parents holding parties here. They would have the living room area as a dance floor, but tonight it held small tables. They had a makeshift dance floor outside. The hall where they held their weekly dinners was closed off. Tonight would be about mingling with the guests. He should be thankful that Cole was as helpful as he was. But, what kind of friend would he be if he just acted grateful?

“Cole, Betty needs to see you in the kitchen.”

“Betty?” Cole looked confused. “What’s she need?” Then, as if speaking to himself more than to Jason, “We don’t even have a Betty that works here.”

“Yeah, we do.” Jason started to laugh. “Betty Crocker. And her sister, Suzie, will be here soon too.” He laughed even harder.

“Real funny... not. Just tryin’ to make your life easier, and what do I get? Ya tryin’ to give me a hard time.” As Jason turned to leave, Cole rolled his eyes and hollered, “Hey wait. Just who the hell is Suzie?”

Jason stopped, turned around, burst out laughing, and, by the look on his face, Cole realized he'd fallen into another trap. “Oh, hell. Suzie Homemaker. I should’ve guessed. I’m gonna kill ya for that one. Ya just wait, before the night’s out... I’ll get ya back, and that’s a promise.”

Cole turned around and stormed toward the kitchen, but Jason caught Cole, letting out a little laugh.

Jason was near the door when the bell rang, still unable to quit laughing at the look on Cole’s face. Tonight was going to be great. He was breathing easier than he had in, well, a long time. As he opened the door, all good humor instantly drained from him. The gorgeous brunette standing in front of him had dressed for an evening out; she wore a very snug, very short, black dress, scooped even lower in the front, showing off her bought cleavage, generous breasts right in front of him, that were just begging for attention. Black heels, so high they made her legs look as though they went on forever, would make most men dream about those long legs wrapping around them.

But that would be before they really *knew* her. Before she let her true colors show. Before her claws sharpened and her fangs got thirsty.

Jason’s mind spun in so many directions. He grabbed the door handle. What was she doing here? She wasn’t supposed to be here, not now. Not ever. Especially not tonight... no... not ever again. They had said their piece and moved on about a year ago. *Or was it two years now?* It didn’t matter;