

The Third Side

Chapter One

My four o'clock appointment was late and that did not sit well with me. Lloyd Evans had agreed that we would meet at his offices at four o'clock. It was now four o'clock and he was nowhere in sight.

"Mr. Evans is five minutes away Mrs. Fox."

This came from the blonde receptionist after she hung up the phone.

"He asked me to show you to his office and make sure you are comfortable."

She gave me the requisite smile, one intended to assure me that I would be well watched over until Lloyd Evans managed to show up. I considered returning her smile with a snarl to convey my displeasure at his tardiness but then I remembered Lloyd's nicely stocked liquor cabinet. Perhaps she intended to make me comfortable by pouring me a drink.

With that in mind, I agreed to follow her down the hall to Lloyd's office.

As she led the way, I noted she had the long legs to match the blonde hair and smile. She wore the professional attire that Lloyd demands of his employees- a knee length black skirt, tailored white blouse and blonde tresses pulled back into a ponytail- but she accessorized the look by leaving the blouse just a little too undone. That, and the stiletto Louboutins with their sexy red soles, added just a dash of come hither to her look. I guessed her age between twenty-six and thirty. And I wondered where the hell she came from.

My name is Alana Fox and I am the gatekeeper to Malibu society. I have lived here for nearly thirty years, ever since my then-husband and I bought our first house and I set about turning his trust fund into a fortune. Twenty years into the marriage he did an about face and left me for Little Miss Tight Buns- a twenty something bimbo with a desire to procreate. The divorce left him with the house. I held onto the friends. And then I used my social clout to ensure Little Miss was never invited to any party, bar mitzvah or garage sale north of Topanga Canyon.

Worked great. Great enough that I created a tidy little business arranging social connections. If you understand the value of a stellar social network then I am your new best friend. Assuming, of course, you are willing to do exactly what I tell you.

I pride myself on knowing everyone in town- the teetotalers and the drunks, the tennis players and the couch potatoes, the artists and the accountants. I know who lives where, who does what and who does who. So Lloyd Evan's new blonde receptionist bothered me. Her, I did not know. And the last time I let a twenty-something blonde run around

unsupervised, I lost a husband.

We reached the end of the hall and the blonde opened the door guarding Lloyd's inner sanctum. Lloyd Evan's offices sit on the second floor of the Malibu Town Center, a U-shaped building housing nifty little boutiques on the ground floor and office space on the second floor. Lloyd owns the Town Center complex as well as hundreds just like it all over Southern California. Commercial real estate is not a glamorous business but you can make a living at it. Lloyd has done better than most. His name is spoken around town in the hushed tones used when speaking of Real Money.

"Please have a seat, Mrs. Fox."

Easier said than done if the goal was to make me comfortable. Lloyd's decorating style leans towards eclectic. Meaning the choice for sitting was either a low slung black leather chair that would allow me to rest my chin on my knees or a couple of black and white cowhide chairs that looked in need of vaccinations.

The blonde noted my apprehension.

"Perhaps you would be more comfortable by the window."

A conversation area sported a couple of sofas and a coffee table under a picture window looking over the parking lot and across the street to the Civic Center. The black leather and cowhide theme continued there but at least the sofas appeared vermin free.

"Did Lloyd say where he was?" I asked.

"He is coming in from L.A. on PCH but with this horrible weather, the traffic is slower than usual."

We both looked out the window at the mention of the weather.

It was, indeed, horrible. A nasty Pacific storm had its sights set on Malibu. Grey skies and wind preceded rain that was expected to hit the coast that night. The local weather people wore their sad faces when informing viewers of the approaching storm. The Weather Service had already issued grave warnings of mudslides and flooding. In Malibu we take these warnings seriously because there are so few roads in and out of town. PCH (Pacific Coast Highway) is the main artery and it has a tendency to get knocked out by mud and rain. Odds were good that Lloyd was stuck in the rush of people either leaving Malibu or trying to get home to Malibu. Odds were even better that he wouldn't arrive within five minutes.

I had plenty of time to get the goods on the blonde. And then snag a drink.

"I don't recall seeing you here before," I said. "How long have you worked for Lloyd?"

She looked startled. “Don’t you recognize me, Mrs. Fox? I’m Angie, you know, Teresa and Will’s daughter? Mr. Evans is my grandpa.”

My turn to be startled. I swear the last time I saw Lloyd’s daughter Teresa her three little girls were, well, little. Bobby sox and patent leather shoes little. It couldn’t have been that long ago. Could it?

She noted my confusion. The kid was good at reading faces, I gave her that.

“Gramps makes me call him Mr. Evans when we are working.”

“That must be it,” I said. “What have you been up to since I last saw you?”

Turned out she had been up to a lot. All the things I would expect from an Evan’s grandkid. High school cheerleader and president of the Honor Society, college at UCLA on an academic scholarship followed by a couple of years doing good around the world. Currently working part time at Gramps office while pursuing a PhD in Something Meaningful. I listened enough if not intently. I decided I wouldn’t need to supervise her activities around Malibu but that didn’t mean I couldn’t use her at some point. That undone shirt and the Louboutins told me she was more than a globe trotting Mother Teresa. I filed this info away in my mind just as Lloyd Evan’s Mercedes sloshed its way into the parking lot.

“I’ll run and tell Gramps you are here. I mean I’ll tell Mr. Evans.” Angie raced out with a giggle.

Which left me alone to entertain myself. I decided it would be rude to help myself to a drink after trying the liquor cabinet and finding it locked. So I amused myself by debating whether the décor was outdated or fabulous. The cowhide and leather thing could go either way. But then there was that god-awful post modernist painting hanging on the back wall. I shuddered to think how much Lloyd paid for it. The damn thing looked like someone had taken finger paints to a plate of glass, framed it and then hung it up backwards. I turned away before it made me cry.

I approved of the wall of bookshelves. Something about a collection of books lifts my spirits. Lloyd’s books looked like they had each been read, cherished and put away so they could be easily found again. Interspersed among the books were the usual family photos and diplomas. I go closer to see if I could recognize Angie in any of them. No such luck, the photos were all of Lloyd. Lloyd receiving a trophy. Lloyd holding up an award. Lloyd fishing.

Fishing?

One entire shelf was devoted to displaying old fishing reels and shots of Lloyd standing knee deep in a river holding a trout in his bare hands. The last thing I ever expected was to see Lloyd Evans, that pillar of elegance and good breeding, to be a fisherman. To hire

a fleet of fishermen to hunt and gather fish for him, yes. To venture into cold water on his own and catch them by himself? Never.

“Alana, so good to see you! Traffic was a nightmare! How are you?”

Lloyd Evans swept into the room like a burst of bright energy. He is a handsome man even at the age of 80 plus. He has a full head of shiny white hair and an honest grin. He has the means to have his clothes custom made and keeps a butler on staff to shine his gold buttons. Until I noticed the shot of him fishing, I had never seen Lloyd with as much as a scuff anywhere.

“I am well, Lloyd.” I gave him a hug.

“Angie tells me you didn’t recognize her!” Lloyd said as he took a seat at his desk. “She has grown up, hasn’t she?”

“Yes she has.” I decided my tetanus shot was up to date and sat in one of the cowhide chairs. “I honestly can’t remember the last time I saw her.”

“Well, let’s see,” Lloyd said. “Teresa and Will moved out to the Valley when Angie was twelve so that would have been thirteen years ago. We had a going away party for them as I recall. You and Alan were still married then, weren’t you?”

“Yes. We had just finished the house.” Alan was the ex-husband married to Little Miss Tight Buns. The house sat on a rise overlooking the Pacific Ocean. I had found the lot, negotiated the deal, designed the house and supervised its building with every intention of never living anywhere else ever again. So much for good intention. Little Miss Tight Buns was now systematically destroying my masterpiece by filling it with children.

I changed the subject.

“I’ve reviewed the lease agreement,” I said. “Everything is in order. I put you down as my reference, by the way.”

I signed the lease and my hand hardly shook at all.

Lloyd signed, too, and before you could say bankrupt, I was on the hook for five grand a month.

“Shall we toast to our new business arrangement?” Lloyd asked.

Finally, a drink. Lloyd pushed a button by his phone to summon Angie.

“Please bring in a bottle of champagne,” he said when she arrived. “Mrs. Fox and I are going to celebrate.”

“So tell me, Alana, you have been sitting on this lease for a few months now. What made you decide to move ahead with this?”

“It is the right time,” I replied. “I had to get a few things in order before I was ready.”

A few things like setting up a proper bank account, dancing through the bureaucratic nonsense to get a business license and then figuring out how to siphon fifty grand in cash into the bank account without alerting the IRS.

My tidy little business was cash only from its inception. I kept the cash neatly deposited in shoeboxes in my guest bedroom so I didn't have to inform the IRS what I was up to. I will admit to being surprised at how much had accumulated there. It wasn't until the money went missing that I acknowledged the advantages of a bank account. When the money was mostly recovered (that's another story), I told myself that I was going to go legit as a business. A business that no longer operated out of my beach house and stored the proceeds in shoeboxes. Which is how I ended up owing Lloyd Evans five grand a month for the foreseeable future.

My brand new business space was right next door. My lease included a small reception area with a decent sized office overlooking PCH. For all intents and purposes, I was a legitimate businesswoman. The whole endeavor scared the crap out of me.

Angie appeared with the champagne and then handed me the keys to my new office.

Lloyd opened the bottle with ease, poured two glasses without spilling a bubble, and toasted with “Here's to a long and happy association.”

I seconded the motion. The stuff was chilled perfectly. Of course.

“I haven't seen Alan in a while,” Lloyd said out of the blue. “I hear he and Tori are expecting again. Is this the third?”

Tori was Little Miss Tight Buns. And yes, she was pregnant. This was the third one. The second one wasn't even a year old.

“Rumor has it. I don't socialize with them.” I sounded curt. I meant to be.

Lloyd didn't take the hint.

“I would like to meet with Alan and kick around a few ideas I have.”

He hadn't asked a question so I said nothing. Most people are so eager to fill a conversational void that they will just blurt out the first thing that comes to their mind. But Lloyd Evans isn't most people. He settled quietly into enjoying his champagne while I wondered what the hell he wanted from me.

“The world of real estate certainly has changed, hasn’t it?” Lloyd said as he poured another glass of bubbly. “This economy is killing small businesses. I can’t tell you how many empty properties I am holding. How is Fox Real Estate doing?”

Ah, so that was it. A little competitive curiosity. The fortune I built from Alan’s trust fund came from a commercial real estate empire. Fox Realty Trust was a competitor to Lloyd.

“It’s tough all over,” I agreed. “Alan is hanging in there but I can’t say business is growing.”

“Let’s hope the worst is over.” Lloyd sighed. His face, ever so briefly, betrayed the worry of every business owner in California. The rotten economy, the high taxes, the dearth of public services. The only thing the Golden State had going for it was the weather and now even that was lousy. I was about to echo his sentiments when a gust of wind shook the walls of windows. Then the lights flickered.

“I’d better get going.” I rose from my seat.

“Are you settling in for the night? I am afraid this storm will hit before morning.”

“No, I have dinner plans tonight. I am going to Grace McDonald’s house for a girls night out thing. And you know what? Her mom will be there. You know Francis Ferguson, don’t you?”

“Really.”

Lloyd’s tone of voice stopped me in my tracks. It held an undercurrent of surprise. Like I had just told him I was going to walk home barefoot. I turned to face him.

“You sound surprised.”

He recovered nicely.

“Oh, no, no. I’m glad that Francis feels up to socializing. She and Milton were everything to each other. I just hope she isn’t taking on too much too soon.” I didn’t have a chance to ask him what he meant.

Another blast of wind hit the building and this time it took the lights with it.

