

## CHAPTER ONE

My 9a.m. appointment was quite certain that she didn't need my help.

"I've no idea why my daughter sent you here, Alana. I'm sixty years old and capable of having coffee with a nice man without a chaperone."

Marjorie Dunham squinted in the sunlight as she spoke. The morning was a perfect blend of sunshine and cool breeze. We sat outside the Starbucks at Broad Beach Road, each of us cradling a cup. Marjorie had a stylish new haircut and wore bright lipstick. She was a little too dressed up but then her last date had been sometime around 1976.

Still she didn't look bad for her age, which I knew, was not sixty.

"Your daughter's worried that you're naive. And you're sixty-four."

My name is Alana Fox and I have lived in Malibu for over 25 years. People who understand the value of a stellar social circle hire me to help them broaden their horizons. If you think this is frivolous then you haven't tried to make new friends after a certain age. Or you are too young to understand how the world really works.

Marjorie Dunham was recently divorced after thirty-nine years of marriage. She was typical of most of the women I work with- suddenly single, over sixty and terrified.

I'm divorced myself so I understood how she felt. After putting in thirty-nine years Marjorie figured her work was done. It was time to relax, travel with the hubby and maybe let her figure go. But the hubby had different plans and all of

them involved another woman. So Marjorie had to lawyer up and fight for enough assets to last the rest of her life. She was now sick and tired of paying people to tell her how to live and how to act. She was determined to prove she could take care of herself. Thank you very much.

Unfortunately, the world had changed since Marjorie last ventured out on as a single woman. When the daughter learned her mother had signed up for an online dating service I received a frantic call to intervene.

“Alana, I’m sure your services are very useful to some people,” Marjorie insisted. “But I can fend for myself. My daughter is being over protective.”

“How do you know this guy you’re meeting is telling the truth?”

“He looks like a lovely man. Here’s his picture.”

Marjorie held up her cell phone. On the screen was a full-length photo of a man with a grey beard and silver hair. He was in decent enough shape and he held a small dog in his arms.

“See? He owns a dog. It’s name is Danny Boy. And look at his shoes! My mother always said you can tell a lot about a man by the shoes he wears.”

“How do you know this is him?”

“Why would he post a picture of someone else?”

I took her phone away and pulled up her profile.

“Why did you list your age as 58?”

Marjorie grabbed the phone back in a hurry.

“That’s none of your business. And by the way, this website only cost me \$99. I don’t need to pay seventy five hundred dollars to meet new people. I’m a very good judge of character.”

“Fine then. Do this your way, but I promised your daughter that I’d keep an eye on you. I’ll sit over there and pretend I don’t know you.”

I moved to an empty table and waited for the lovely man to show up.

I didn’t have to wait long. The guy from Marjorie’s photo arrived wearing good shoes and leading his dog on a leash. The dog was some kind of mixed breed, bigger than a Chihuahua but smaller than a beagle. The guy spotted Marjorie right off the bat.

“You must be Marjorie! I’m Barry Stabler, so nice to meet you in person.”

Barry took Marjorie’s hand and gave it a kiss. He took the seat right next to her, which provided me a decent view of both of them. I busied myself by searching my phone for the plot summary to “Looking for Mr. Goodbar.”

“It is lovely to meet you too, Barry. Is this Danny Boy?”

“This is Danny Boy. Danny, meet Marjorie.”

Danny Boy raised his paw for Marjorie to shake.

“I got him at the SPCA when my daughter moved out,” Barry went on. “I hated living alone and this little guy hated living in the shelter. I don’t know who rescued whom. He has my back like all my buddies in the Corps did fifty years ago.”

Barry was pretty smooth, I’ll give him that. Thirty seconds into the conversation and he let Marjorie know that he was in his late sixties, a father, a veteran and an animal lover. His hair and beard were professionally trimmed and

his nails were clean and neat. And Marjorie's mother would have approved of his shoes- Tod's driving moccasins.

Marjorie ate it up.

"How long have you lived in Malibu, Barry?"

"Moved here just about a year ago from the Valley. Once my daughter moved out, I didn't need the big house anymore. I decided to get closer to nature and move to the beach."

"You've found it easy to make friends?"

Marjorie asked this of Barry but I knew the question was aimed at me.

"Moved here just about a year ago from the Valley. Once my daughter moved out, I didn't need the big house anymore. Danny and I talk to everyone. Especially the ladies."

The repeated answer was odd but given Barry's age, it was possible that he didn't hear Marjorie's question correctly. Marjorie must have thought so, too. She leaned in closer and asked again.

"Have you found it easy to make friends here in Malibu?"

I gave her an 'A' for effort.

"Yes I have. Danny and I just love the ladies. You know, you ladies are so lucky to live here in the States. You know what life is like for women in Southeast Asia?"

Barry didn't wait for Marjorie to answer. He went right ahead and fulfilled Marjorie's daughter's fears. And then some.

“All those commies keep them suppressed. They keep the vote away from the women and lock them indoors. That’s what’s wrong with this world. Danny and I knew as soon as we saw your profile that you were a lady who wouldn’t stand for that crap. Didn’t we Danny Boy?”

Marjorie’s faith in a man’s good shoes disappeared with that. I could tell by the way she grabbed her handbag and clutched it to her chest. I suspected she was close to changing her mind about accepting my help but I stayed seated and waited for the actual request. I’m very polite that way.

I wasn’t seated for long.

Barry pulled Danny Boy up onto his lap and kissed the dog full on the lips. Then he pushed the dog up to Marjorie’s face.

“Give Danny Boy a kiss. He loves American ladies as much as I do.”

Marjorie jerked back and put her bag between her face and the dog. Danny Boy’s snout bashed up against the bag, leaving a snotty smudge on the leather.

Marjorie gasped.

I felt her pain. The bag was a Birkin.

Marjorie glanced at me and mouthed, “Help!”

I was there in an instant.

“Marjorie! How good to see you!”

I pulled her to her feet. I gave her a hug and whispered in her ear “Just go along with me.”

“And who is this handsome devil?” I asked.

“This, this is Barry. Barry this is...”

“Nice to meet you Barry!”

I pushed Marjorie away and stuck out my hand.

“I’m Teri Ford, president of the Malibu Communist Party,” I lied. “Are you new in town, Barry? You do know there is a gubernatorial election coming up? We’re looking for all the help we can get.”

Barry ignored my out stretched hand. He grabbed Danny Boy up in one swift move and made it to the parking lot faster than you can say “God Bless America.”

I sat down in Barry’s empty seat.

Marjorie let out a sigh and slumped back in her chair. After a moment she opened her snotty handbag.

“Seventy five hundred, you say? Will you take a check?”