

Chasing Lust

Dove Harper

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Chapter 1

The bar smelled like bad decisions and cheap tequila.

Rowan Ellis leaned against the sticky counter, one elbow propped, her third—no, fourth—drink sweating a ring onto the lacquered wood. The music was too loud, the lighting too dim, and the man two seats down had been staring at her cleavage for the last eight minutes.

She let him.

“Marnie is going to kill me,” she muttered into her glass.

Marnie had said *one drink*. One drink to celebrate the promotion, then home, then bed, because tomorrow was the quarterly review and Rowan had promised—*promised*—she wouldn’t show up hungover.

But one drink had become two, which had become *fuck it*, which had become a dangerous game of eye contact with a man who looked like he’d never been told no.

He wasn’t Caden.

The thought arrived uninvited and she shoved it down with the rest of her tequila.

“Another?”

She looked up. Not the bartender. The man from two seats down.

She should say no. She should pay her tab and walk out into the sticky July night and go home to her apartment where her cat judged her silently from the windowsill and her plants were all dying slow, accusatory deaths.

“Sure,” she said, and watched his smile widen.

What Marnie didn't know wouldn't kill her.

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A Note from Dove

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Chapter 2

He had a name. Rowan didn't ask for it.

She learned it anyway, the way you learn things you're not supposed to: through proximity, through friction, through the way the universe likes to hand you things right before it takes something else away.

"Tristan."

She was half-dressed when he said it, her back to him, fumbling for the clasp of her bra that had ended up on his floor because she'd been too impatient to do this properly.

Rowan paused. "I didn't ask."

"I know." He said it easily, still sprawled across his sheets, one arm behind his head like a man who'd just had exactly what he wanted. "But I'm tired of being called 'hey' and 'the guy'."

She snorted and found her bra clasp. Snapped it shut.

The hotel room was expensive. She registered that now, in the thin gray light of dawn that cut through the curtains. High floor, good view, a minibar she hadn't touched because she hadn't been here to drink.

"Leaving already?"

"My cat judges me." She grabbed her jeans. "Also, I have a meeting."

"At seven in the morning?"

"No." She found her shoes. One under the bed, one by the door. "At nine. But I need a shower and at least three cups of coffee and possibly a lobotomy."

Tristan laughed. It was a nice laugh. Rowan wished it weren't.

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Chapter 3

Marnie was waiting for her in the break room.

“You look like shit.”

“Good morning to you too.” Rowan poured coffee with the steady hands of someone who’d done this walk of shame one too many times. “How was your night?”

“Better than yours, apparently.” Marnie blocked her path to the sugar. “Please tell me it wasn’t the guy from the bar.”

“It wasn’t the guy from the bar.”

“You’re lying.”

“It was *a* guy from the bar.” Rowan sidestepped and grabbed two sugar packets. “Not the creepy one. The other one.”

“The other—” Marnie’s eyes closed. “Rowan.”

“What?”

“Tristan.” Marnie opened her eyes. “His name is Tristan, and he’s the regional director for the Anderson account, and I have had three meetings with him in the last month.”

Rowan stopped stirring her coffee.

“Say that again.”

“Regional director. Anderson account. The account we are pitching tomorrow.” Marnie’s voice was very calm, which meant she was very not-calm. “The account you are *leading* the pitch for tomorrow.”

The coffee had stopped being hot. Rowan was aware of this in an academic sense, the way she was aware that her career was currently on fire and she was holding a cup of coffee instead of an extinguisher.

“Fuck.”

“Yeah.” Marnie crossed her arms. “Fuck.”

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Chapter 4

The pitch went fine.

Tristan sat at the head of the conference table with a look of polite professional interest, and if Rowan hadn’t seen that same mouth doing things to her that she was still a little sore from, she might have bought it.

“Ms. Ellis,” he said afterward, when the room had emptied and she was gathering her slides. “A word?”

She didn’t turn around. “I’m late for another meeting.”

“No, you’re not.”

His voice was different now. Lower. Closer.

She turned. He’d moved to the door and pushed it closed.

“What are you doing?”

“What are you doing?” Tristan leaned against the doorframe. “You’ve been avoiding eye contact for forty-five minutes. Every time I looked at you, you found something fascinating in your notes.”

“My notes are fascinating.”

“Mine aren’t.” He tilted his head. “I’ve been staring at you for forty-five minutes, and I can’t remember a single word of your proposal.”

Rowan’s pulse was doing something inconvenient. “That sounds like a you problem.”

“Does it?” He took a step closer. “Because you’ve been crossing and uncrossing your legs for the last twenty minutes, and I think—” Another step. “—you’ve been thinking about last night too.”

She had.

God, she had.

“Tristan.” She heard herself say his name and knew, instantly, that it was a mistake. The way he reacted to it—the slight flare of his nostrils, the way his hands tightened at his sides—told her everything.

“Say it again.”

“No.”

“Rowan.”

“We’re at work.”

“No one’s here.” Another step. He was close now, close enough that she could smell his cologne, close enough that she could see the pulse beating in his throat. “No one has to know.”

“No one *can* know.”

“Then what happens in this room—” His hand found her hip, light, testing. “—stays in this room.”

She should have said no.

She should have stepped back, picked up her laptop, walked out with her professional reputation intact and her dignity only moderately bruised.

Instead, she leaned in.

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Chapter 5

They met in conference rooms, in hotel bars, in the back corner of restaurants where no one from the office would look.

Three weeks. That was how long the “this is just sex” agreement lasted before Rowan started noticing things she wasn’t supposed to.

The way Tristan took his coffee—black, no sugar, like he’d trained himself not to need sweetness. The way he listened when she talked about her mother, really listened, asking questions that showed he’d been paying attention. The way his hand found her lower back in crowds, not possessive, just... present.

“You’re thinking too hard,” he said one night, his voice muffled against her shoulder.

They were in his apartment. His real apartment, not the hotel, because at some point he’d given her a key and she’d stopped pretending she wasn’t going to use it.

“I always think too hard.”

“That’s part of what I like about you.” He shifted, pulling her closer. “But right now, I’d rather you stop.”

She turned in his arms. “What is this?”

“A bed. A really expensive one.”

“Tristan.”

“Rowan.”

She looked at him—really looked—and saw something that scared her more than any career-ending scandal ever could.

“I think I’m in trouble,” she said.

He kissed her forehead. “Me too.”

Neither of them said the word, but it hung there anyway, dense as August heat in the space between them.

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Epilogue

Six months later, Marnie caught them in the supply closet.

“I *knew* it,” she said, holding the door open with one hand and a ream of printer paper in the other. “I knew it, I knew it, I—oh my God, is that my brother’s—”

“It’s not how it looks,” Rowan said, straightening her blouse.

“It’s *exactly* how it looks,” Tristan said, and Rowan elbowed him.

Marnie stared at them for three full seconds. Then she sighed, stepped into the closet, and closed the door behind her.

“Fine,” she said. “But you’re telling Mom.”

Marnie was going to kill them.

But as Tristan’s hand found hers in the dark, Rowan decided it was probably worth it.

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