



Five Ways to Fall: A Novel (The Ten Tiny Breaths Series)

By K.A. Tucker

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If Ben truly were a smart guy, he'd stay clear of Reese. She's the boss's stepdaughter and it's been made very clear that office romances are grounds for dismissal. Plus, rumor has it she's trouble. The only problem is, he likes trouble, especially when it's so good-looking...

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Editorial Review

Review

"Lush, atmospheric, and addictive, with a romance that sizzles. Guard your heart." (Amber Hart *author of Before You*)

"You'll only need one reason to fall in love with K.A.Tucker." (Jennifer L. Armentrout *#1 New York Times bestselling author*)

"This is a fun, flirty, super sexy love story that offers all of the best of opposites attracting. K.A. Tucker's writing is engaging, witty, and endearing just like her characters." (Jay Crownover *New York Times bestselling author*)

"Reese and Ben's story is wickedly fun, refreshingly edgy and irresistibly sexy. You'll fall in love in more ways than one!" (*Vilma's Book Blog*)

About the Author

K.A. Tucker writes captivating stories with an edge. Her books have been featured in national publications including *USA TODAY*, *The Globe and Mail*, *Suspense Magazine*, and *Publishers Weekly*. She currently resides in a quaint town outside Toronto with her husband and two beautiful girls.

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Five Ways to Fall

Chapter 1

■ ■ ■

REESE

I've never seen that look on Daddy's face before.

He's had it since he walked back from the pay phone. "Go on, now," he urges, his gruff voice cracking. "Go on inside."

"But . . . why?" I whine, casting wary eyes at the truck-stop diner, empty but for a man with a Santa beard.

Daddy rests his hand on the steering wheel and turns his body to face me. "Reesie, baby." I don't like his tone. It's that serious one that makes my bottom lip wobble. "I need you to go back inside, sit down in our booth, and ask that nice waitress for another piece of that pecan pie you like so much," he says slowly, evenly.

I swallow back my tears. "Alone?"

His face tightens, like he's mad. "Only for a little bit."

“And then you’ll come in?”

He squeezes his eyes shut and I’m afraid I just made him really angry, but . . . I’ve never gone anywhere alone. I’m only five. “Remember that Daddy loves you, baby girl. Now go on.”

Stifling back a sob, I slide along the old bench seat and push the heavy old Ford truck door open.

“Reesie,” Daddy calls out as my red shoes hit the sidewalk.

Turning, I see his hand wiping at something on his cheek before he gives me a wink and a smile. The truck door makes a loud bang as I swing it tight. Holding my breath, I climb the steps and push as hard as I can against the diner door, the jangle of the bell ringing in my ears. I dart across the black-and-white checkered floor and climb into our booth—the one we were sitting in before Daddy called Mommy; it still has our dishes on the table—just in time to see the taillights of Daddy’s truck disappear.

When the nice waitress with the big hair comes by, I tell her my daddy will be here soon and I order that piece of chocolate pecan pie with a please and thank you. I sit in that booth and gobble it up, thinking how lucky I am to get two pieces in one night.

And I wait.

With my chin resting on my palm, tucked into the corner of the booth, I stare out that window, watching for the familiar blue truck to reappear, checking the door every time that bell jangles. When the kind policeman sits down across from me and asks me where my daddy is, I tell him he’ll be here soon.

■ ■ ■

There’s no kind policeman to comfort me now. No nice lady bringing me a piece of chocolate pecan pie to combat the sourness in my mouth. But at least this time I wasn’t abandoned.

I’m reminded of that the second I see my stepfather’s face through the small glass window in the door.

His salt-and-pepper hair is more salt than pepper and he’s gained at least ten pounds around his waist since I last saw him—nine years ago—but there’s no mistaking Jack Warner. I don’t think he recognizes me, though. The way his steely blue eyes wander over my violet hair . . . my piercings . . . the giant “Jared” tattoo that coils around my right shoulder, I think he’s wondering if the police officer led him into the wrong room.

I’m lucky that I’m even in a room this time. Normally they throw you into a holding cell or make you sit in an uncomfortable chair next to a drunk named Seth who stinks of malt scotch and body odor. I’m pretty sure the female arresting officer felt sorry for me. By the lethal glare she threw at Jared and Caroline as I was escorted out of Lina’s apartment, past their apartment door, on my way to the cruiser, the officer wasn’t impressed with what she’d heard of the situation.

She didn’t hear it from me, of course. Growing up around lawyers, I’ve learned not to say a word to the police without one present. It was my best friend and next-door neighbor, Lina, who declared that the apartment I trashed earlier today is still technically mine—even if my name isn’t on the lease—and that they should be arresting the thieving, heartless bitch who stole my husband.

Unfortunately, I’m the only one sitting here now.

I hold my breath as I watch Jack take a seat, adjusting his slightly rumpled suit jacket on his large frame as he tries to get comfortable in the hard plastic chair. It's ironic—in this moment, it feels like he's both an integral part of my childhood and a complete stranger.

I can't believe I called him.

I can't believe he actually came.

With a heavy sigh, he finally murmurs, "Reese's Pieces." He's looking down at me the same way he did when I got caught rearranging the letters of a Baptist church sign to read something no nine-year-old girl—or twenty-year-old, for that matter—should have in her vocabulary. Despite the severe strain in our once close relationship, warmth immediately spreads through my chest. I haven't heard that nickname in years. "So . . . destruction of private property?"

I guess the cops filled him in. "I prefer to call it artistic expression." The canvas included Caroline's prissy clothes, her pretentious throw cushions, and that damn pornographic picture of them hanging over our bed. "Besides," I raise my hands, stained in crimson, and offer in a deadpan tone, "they can't prove it was me." When Lina found me sitting quietly in the dim kitchen light of her apartment, where I've been staying for the past two weeks, she let out a single yelp before realizing that I hadn't turned into a homicidal maniac and was in fact covered in red paint. I probably should have made the cops' job harder and showered before they arrived.

A tiny sad smile creeps over his face. I wonder if my attempt at humor adequately hides the crushing heartbreak and rejection that I'm drowning in after finding out my husband was having an affair with his high school sweetheart.

"I phoned Barry on my way here. Sounds like you've kept him busy these past few years." By his clenching jaw, I see that wasn't an easy call for Jack to make, even nine years later. Not surprising. Friends since they could barely walk, Jack and Barry were once equity partners together in his law firm. Until Barry had an affair with Jack's wife.

My mother.

All relationships instantly dissolved in a bath of bitterness that obviously hasn't fully drained yet. Glancing at his hand, I can't help but notice the absence of a wedding ring. I guess he hasn't remarried. After what my mother put him through, I don't blame him.

"And I understand why you called me now. You didn't have a choice, did you?"

"Not really," I admit, focusing on the stars and circles I'm finger-drawing over the table's cold metal surface. Barry is a high-priced, successful criminal lawyer who has gotten his unruly stepdaughter out of more than one debacle. The last incident was on my eighteenth birthday when I decided it would be funny to go retro and moon cars.

One of those cars was a police cruiser.

The cop was an uptight prick.

And I was drunk.

After helping me avoid indecent exposure and underage public drunkenness charges, Barry announced that my juvenile record was sealed, I was now an adult, and he was officially washing his hands of me. Three months later, when my mother left him for husband number four, it really became official.

"I'm surprised Annabelle's new husband didn't want this swept under the rug quickly."

"I didn't phone Annabelle. I don't want her to know about this." I stopped calling her "Mom" when I was eight. We both agreed it wasn't fitting for a woman whose true passions lay in exclusive club status and dirty martinis.

My doodling finger freezes suddenly. "You didn't phone her, did you?" That would be like handing her torpedoes for an effective insult air strike. She had called it after all. She'd said I didn't have what it took to keep my "blue-collar pretty-boy" husband happy for long.

Jack chuckles softly, though there's no mirth in it. "No, I definitely did not phone her. What would I tell her, anyway? You weren't exactly informative on the phone. Sounds like you're in some hot water, though."

My sigh of relief slides out and I'm back to doodling. "That's what they tell me." When the cops started throwing around words like "larceny" and "threats of bodily harm"—things that sounded excessive and unfitting, but permanently damaging to my fresh and clean adult record should they stick—I knew I wasn't going to talk my way out of this one. It didn't help that I used the picture of Caroline for target practice during my rampage, leaving a pair of scissors strategically placed through her eyes. "It's a good thing you still have that same law firm. You were easy to find."

Jack folds his arms over his chest and regards me with an unreadable face. A tiny part of me—the angry little girl lost somewhere inside—is ready to burst, to demand, "How could you have left me? I know why you left my mom, but how could you have shoved me out of your life so easily, too? I didn't cheat on you!" But I bite my bottom lip. Pissing off the one person who can help me right now wouldn't be smart. And I need to be smart.

Finally Jack leans back in his chair and says, "Okay, Reese. Start from the beginning and let's see how we can solve this."

I press my lips together to keep from smiling. Not because this is amusing. It's just that we've been here before. This really is starting to feel like days long since lost, when we'd meet up in the kitchen around midnight—after Annabelle had gone to sleep, when Jack was finally home from work—to contemplate my latest mischief over bowls of ice cream. He's even adopted the same hypnotic tone that always got me talking when my teachers, my guidance counselor, or anyone else really, couldn't. I'm pretty sure he uses it on all of his clients.

Twenty minutes later, after I've given him a rundown of my situation, I hear his disappointed sigh. "Working in a pet shop, Reese?"

"Not anymore." After leaving work early with the flu and coming home to the big discovery of Jared and her in the shower—oddly enough, the more it replays in my mind, the more it begins to resemble the shower scene from Scarface—I spent a week in Lina's bed, heavily sedated with Jim Beam and Nyquil. My boss fired me over the phone.

I don't care.

“And eloping in Vegas with a guy? At nineteen years old? After knowing him for six weeks?” I know that the chuckle that fills the room now isn’t directed at me, even before his words confirm it; Jack’s laughing at the irony of it all. “And you were always so adamant that you’d never get married.”

I have no answer to that, except a quiet “I loved him,” as the painful knot forms in my throat, as I fight the sob from tearing out of me. I did. I think I still do, despite how much Jared has hurt me. Since that day eight months ago when I stepped out of my best friend Lina’s apartment and quite literally ran into her neighbor, a reincarnation of a mint-eyed Greek demigod, I knew that I had met my soul mate. Fireworks exploded, lightning struck, electricity coursed. All that love-at-first-sight bullshit that I didn’t believe in—I instantly became a poster child for it. Common sense flew out the window with a cement block tied to its ankle.

Jared said he felt it, too.

And now, after six months of marital bliss, without a single warning sign, he’s back with her.

That rotten illness festering inside me enflames with the thought, the humiliating reality a burn that doesn’t want to subside.

“Look, Reese. I know you’ve always had a wild streak in you, even as a little girl. These choices you’ve made since I saw you last, though,” his head is shaking, “possession of marijuana . . . trespassing . . . underage drinking . . . a fistfight?”

“It’s not really that big a deal. A lot of people drink and smoke pot in high school,” I argue, adding, “I’m just the one who kept getting caught.”

“Drag racing?” He stares at me questioningly.

“Those were derby cars and that was totally blown out of proportion,” I clarify.

Jack slides his glasses off and gives his face a rough rub, looking exhausted. It’s a four-hour drive from Miami to Jacksonville and he arrived here five hours after I called, meaning he pretty much dropped everything to come. I can’t help but wonder why he’d do that.

“At least I didn’t get knocked up,” I joke.

By the look of exasperation he shoots me, he doesn’t find that remotely funny. “I had hoped you were too smart to get into this kind of trouble.”

“I guess even smart girls can make a clusterfuck of their lives, can’t they?” I mutter, though his words sting.

Because they’re true.

There’s a long pause, where Jack’s mouth twists in thought as he regards me. “What are you going to do with yourself now, Reese? How are you going to make up for this?” When I was little, Jack always asked me for suggestions as to how I should be punished for my various childish misdemeanors. I think it was his way of getting me to agree on the outcome without looking like the harsh stepfather. I was pretty good at coming up with suitable penances and it was definitely preferable to sitting in a chair while my mother shrieked about what an embarrassment I was to her, the gin sloshing out of her martini glass with her mad hand gesticulations.

But I'm not a little kid anymore and Jack's not asking me to come up with a suitable punishment. He's asking me how I'm going to fix my life.

All I have for him is a defeated shrug.

Because that's how I feel right now. Defeated. "I don't know. Get another job, I guess."

"What about college?"

The eye roll happens before I can stop myself. Jack always hated my eye rolls. "My transcripts aren't exactly going to woo the administrative offices." Neither will the private school expulsion, earned when I broke into a teacher's office and stole a midterm exam.

"Because you couldn't do the work?" My arched brow answers him. "Because you didn't do the work," he answers for himself, shaking his head, his face a mask of extreme disappointment. "Is this how you want to live your life? In and out of police cars? Working minimum-wage jobs? In unstable relationships?"

"Does anybody ever really want that?"

Jack's right. I was smart. Some may say I'm still smart. But I've made so many wrong turns along the way, I don't know how many right ones it will take to course-correct.

I don't know if that's even possible.

I sit in silence, listening to the monotonous tick-tick-tick of the second hand on the wall clock above, watching Jack as he spends an exorbitant amount of time playing with the gold Rolex on his wrist, his breaths deep and ragged. I don't know that I can count on him. I mean, he forgot about me once. Looking at the twenty-year-old version of who he once knew, he's probably ready to stamp "lost cause" across my forehead.

And then he settles those kind gray eyes on me. "I honestly didn't know what to expect when I arrived, but I had a long car ride up to think about it." Folding his hands together on the table in front of him, a stern expression settles over his face. "I have a proposition. It comes with conditions, though."

A small exhale escapes me as I chew the inside of my mouth, relief and wariness dancing together. "Okay. I guess?"

"No more, Reese. Not even the harmless stuff."

"This is my first time here in years, Jack." Ironically, I convinced myself that meeting Jared was a turning point in my life, leaving me the sated and smiling wife who was happy hanging out at home and keeping out of trouble.

"Yes . . ." His eyes graze the walls of the police station room. "And yet here you are again."

He doesn't get it. He must not have heard me. "This was different, Jack! She moved in! I haven't even moved out yet! All my stuff is still in that apartment!"

He raises his hand to silence me. "You should have turned around and walked out. That would have been the

mature, responsible thing to do. Instead, you let your emotions get the better of you.”

I smirk as another wave of familiarity washes over me. “You always said I was too emotional for my own good.”

“I did say that,” he acknowledges with a sad smile. “And I’m still right. No more, Reese.”

Picking at a loose thread on my sleeve as if the topic isn’t cutting into my heart, I offer casually, “Well, I can definitely promise that I won’t be getting married again. Ever.”

That earns a soft chuckle. “You and me both, kiddo.” A pause. “You remember Mason, don’t you?”

My geeky stepbrother who used to spend half his time scowling at me and the other half staring as if my head were about to revolve on my shoulders. I recall that the day we moved out, he watched with a bitter smile, condemning me to follow in my mother’s footsteps.

He despised my mother from the very first day that he met her.

My pursed lips at the mention of that name has Jack smiling. “Oh, yes. How could I forget? Your nemesis. Well, he’s finishing law school this spring.” Jack takes a deep breath and then holds it, as if he’s hesitating. “Why don’t you come and live with us until you get back on your feet.”

What?

Jack continues, not addressing the bewilderment that must be plastered over my face. “I can get you into the paralegal program at Miami U. If you finish that, you can work for me. It doesn’t have to be forever, but at least you’ll have something solid to put on a résumé. It’s a fresh start.”

“I . . . uh . . .” Did I just hear all that correctly?

His eyes drift over my hair again. “You should think about a more natural color for an office environment and . . .” His focus settles down to the tiny diamond-encrusted septum ring in my nose and he cringes. “Maybe a few less piercings.”

But . . . My tongue has somehow coiled itself into a useless ball inside my mouth as my mind grapples with this offer. It’s far from what I had expected. “Why are you doing this, Jack? I mean, it’s great and all, but why?” He really doesn’t owe me anything. It’s enough that he came all the way out here to bail me out.

“Because I shouldn’t have turned my back on you, Reese. I let—” A flash of pain betrays his otherwise calm demeanor. “Let’s just say I’m making amends.” He pauses. “What do you say? I need to get out of this town. I can feel Annabelle’s shadow looming.” He shivers for effect, making me snort.

“Well . . .” My fingers rap across the table as I give my current situation—that of a police station room—another once-over. I have no job, no home, a shattered heart, and a pending criminal record. I should probably make the first smart choice I’ve made in a long time. But . . . “Not sure the cops will let that happen, Jack.”

“You leave that with me.”

Another pause. “I’m riding my bike down.”

His mouth twists with displeasure. “I assume you’re not referring to one with pedals.”

“No pedals,” I confirm with a small smile. I got my motorcycle license when I turned eighteen and bought a bike a few months later. Another element of my “badass” self that Jared loves.

Loved.

Jack heaves a sigh. “That shouldn’t surprise me. You always did threaten your mother with getting one. Anything else I should know?”

“I’m a slob,” I warn him. “And a certifiable bitch in the morning.”

“Well, I guess some things just don’t change, after all.” Reaching up to give his neck a slow scratch, he mumbles, “Mason will be thrilled.”

■ ■ ■

Six months later

“Could we have picked somewhere more commercial?” I ask dryly, draining my fourth margarita in record time as my gaze drifts over the beachside bar, complete with canopies, twinkling Christmas lights—in July—and too many happy, laughing people. Even with the sun setting and the light ocean breeze passing through, a light sheen of sweat coats the back of my neck. It’s a typical summer night in Cancún, Mexico—hell-hot.

“Commercial is safe,” Lina answers in her distinctive flat tone. She always sounds bored to tears.

I roll my eyes. “You’re safer in this country than you are in our own nation’s capital—you do realize that, right? That’s all just media hype.”

“Tell that to the American couple who just had their heads lopped off a month ago.”

“If I were going to tell them anything, it would be to not run drugs for the cartel,” I retort.

She acknowledges that with a lazy shrug as she sips on some frothy calorie-laden pink thing with an umbrella sticking out of it.

“Why don’t we put on a pile of diamonds, jump into a random cab, and get the guy to drive us through the quiet, dark back streets of Mexico City?”

Lina’s thin lips purse together tightly as she regards me. “It’s never fun to discover your best friend has a death wish.”

With a snort, I wave the server down for another drink. “But it would be fun to watch someone try to take Nicki down.”

As if hearing her name from across the lounge, Nicki—who I met when I answered a “roommate wanted” ad

in the newspaper—and the third member of our little “Reese is turning twenty-one and is still bitter as hell so let’s go to Cancún” entourage, turns her head to catch our gaze from her seat on a swing by the bar. She winks as she downs another shot of tequila.

“How does she make that work so well?” Lina mutters with a hint of envy. I know exactly what she means. All around us are flirty girls in pastel barely-there dresses and sun-kissed skin. Not Nicki, though. She sits by that bar like a femme fatale in a skin-tight leopard print dress and four-inch black heels, her platinum-blond hair coiffed like Gwen Stefani’s, her red lips glaring against her pale skin, and sparkly chandelier earrings dangling from her ears. All that femininity oozing from her is counterbalanced by a full sleeve of ink and the muscular physique she’s honed through her latest passion: dead-weight lifting. The tall guy talking her ear off right now? She could bench-press his two-hundred-odd pounds without breaking a sweat. That, coupled with her three-year stint cage-fighting before she switched hobbies, makes her one badass twenty-five-year-old woman.

“It works so well because she’s beautiful and mysterious and she’s not stupid enough to run off and marry some guy she met in a hallway who’s still in love with his ex,” I mutter around my straw, catching the wince flash across Lina’s face. It’s the first time I’ve made any open reference to Jared since leaving for Miami, perfecting the art of denial while I impatiently waited for my heart to freeze.

Our waiter places a fresh margarita on the table next to me with a wink. I force a smile and I’m sure it’s altogether hostile by the way he hightails it back to the bar. I can’t help it. He has dark, shaggy hair and olive skin. Just like Jared.

“You have to let it go, Reese. It’s been six months. You—” My flat glare makes her voice falter, her words a dishonor to the very real, very raw pain I still feel. Especially today, on what would have been our one-year wedding anniversary.

And is instead Jared and Caroline’s wedding day.

Because karma hasn’t been cruel enough.

She quickly changes tactics. “You’ve started a whole new life. New city, new home. Soon, a new look . . .” Her free hand reaches up to flip strands of my hair, reminding me that the purple will be gone the day that I return. “You’ve got that great new job.”

I roll my eyes.

“It’s not cleaning up puppy shit and getting bitten by snakes.” She taps the puncture marks on the meaty part of my thumb. A physical reminder of the day I made the idiotic mistake of sticking my mouse-scented hand into a cage to freshen the aspen chips and ended up with a two-foot-long ball python’s fangs embedded in my flesh.

That happened the exact same day my sky fell. A very fitting scar.

“Not literally. But I’ll be working in a law firm, Lina. Plenty of snakes.”

After we made our agreement, Jack quickly went about throwing all kinds of legal jargon at the cops. In the end, it was unnecessary. Given the epically huge lack of judgment that Jared used sending me into that apartment unprepared to collect my things, he convinced Caroline not to press charges. So I walked out the

police doors without any record of my moment of crazy.

Jack let me wallow in his spacious Miami house for one week, wearing my pajamas and gorging myself on Ben & Jerry's Butter Pecan ice cream out of the tub for twenty-one consecutive meals, before he tossed a bunch of application papers my way. He said, "It takes four to six months for most students to get through, depending on how hard you work. You can do it all online if you want and I have a paralegal spot waiting for you when you're done. Decent pay, good people. It's just a start, Reese."

I've never had any interest in working at a law firm—especially the one tainted by my mother—but I had made a deal with Jack and I am smart enough to see a good opportunity. So I immersed myself in the program, using it as a distraction. Once I got into it, I actually didn't mind the course work. It took me five months to complete and I ended up finishing with a near-perfect score.

I start my new job the Monday after I get back from Cancún.

"Oh, no. You're having doubts. You're going to bail on Jack. If you do, you're dead to me," Lina says.

"Oh, ye of little faith." Surprisingly, as unreliable as I can be at times, the thought of bailing on Jack has never crossed my mind.

"Fine. Let's talk about happier things. How's Annabelle?"

"Okay, see this?" I gesture to my face, which has contorted into a mixed pucker of disgust and loathing. "Sour face. Do not speak of she who must not be named."

"Do you want me to break into her place while she sleeps and turn her fans on? Guaranteed death, according to my people." Lina was adopted by a lovely Korean couple as a baby and raised to fully embrace their culture, including all of their death-by-fan superstitions. The fact that she's a five-foot-eleven-inch willowy blond who towers over both her parents means nothing in the Chung household. Her name is actually Li-Na, but she Americanized it in high school to make life easier. She speaks Korean fluently—throwing more than a few people off—and can shovel food into her mouth with chopsticks like the best of them.

We've been best friends since sophomore year, when I discovered Lina crying in a bathroom stall after Raine Higgins and her posse of bored and bitchy juniors had been bullying her. I did what any naturally spiteful high school kid who hates bullies would do. I spray-painted Raine's car with Korean expletives that I found on the internet. That, along with a picture of her giving her boyfriend a blow job in a parking lot that I covertly took—after stalking her at a party—and glued to the inside of the windshield of her locked car with Krazy Glue, was enough to keep Lina from ever being bothered by her again.

The tightness in my chest suddenly lifts with Lina's attempts to sway my mood. "Are you sure you and Nicki don't want a third roommate?" Lina and Nicki moved down to Miami about a month ago, into a condo that Lina's parents bought for her as a college graduation present.

"Absolutely sure," she confirms without missing a beat, her focus intent on the little pink umbrella twirling between her thumb and index finger. Lina's living habits are about as opposite to mine as the Arctic Circle is to the Sahara Desert. Everything in her apartment—from her linen closet to her pasta jars—is tidy and labeled accordingly. Those two weeks that I sought refuge in her apartment after breaking up with Jared nearly destroyed her.

“Okay, enough about bad stuff. Didn’t we talk about finding you a fling?”

I groan as I survey the crowd. “I remember you talking about it and me ignoring you. I’ve tried. Three strikes is enough for me.”

“You have not tried, Reese. Admit it.”

Either there’s an influx of douchebags or Lina’s right and I’m subconsciously sabotaging myself. First there was Slick Steve, a senior at Miami U who showed up to our date with perfectly coiffed hair and an outfit right off the set of Grease the musical. Then there was Metrosexual Mark, a blind date from Nicki’s work who picked his teeth with his fork and had a weird habit of adding “if it were me” to 90 percent of the sentences that came out of his mouth.

The final straw, though?

Emilio. Good ol’ Spanish I-look-enough-like-your-ex-husband-that-if-you-dim-the-lights-this-might-actually-work Emilio. I might have been willing to see where it went had he not opened his wallet and laid it out on the table to proudly display his collection of extra-large Trojans, and then propositioned me in Spanish.

I shudder with the memory. “I’m starting my harem of cats.”

“You hate cats.”

“True. But I also hate limes, and look at me now!” I hold up my glass. “Besides, I’ve already found my Cancún fling. Lina, meet Mr. Cuervo. Mr. Cuervo . . . my best friend, Lina.” Leaning in, I waggle my brow and whisper, “If you’re nice, he’ll let you call him Jose. I plan on spending the next six nights with this naughty little Mexican.” I wave a hand at the server as he whizzes by, letting him know that I need another drink by pointing to my nearly empty glass, as I add, “He can be a bit of a whiny bitch in the morning but he makes up for it by dark.”

“Great. Because you’re not emotional enough when you’re sober,” she mutters, adding with a sigh, “Well, an incessantly drunk Reese should make for an interesting trip, at least. Just try not to get arrested. I hear the cells here aren’t as nice as the ones you’re used to back home.”

Nicki must have been monitoring my drink levels from her perch by the bar because she saunters over with a fresh margarita in hand, either oblivious or ignoring the attention she naturally garners. “Here you go, señorita,” she offers in a deceptively soft voice as she flicks her tongue piercing. I automatically roll my tongue, sensing the absence of mine. Jack hasn’t outright demanded that I remove my piercings but I knew, by the way he kept cringing, that the barbell through my tongue was truly freaking him out. I removed that one out of respect, but I’m holding out on the others until the last possible moment.

“Jose isn’t complaining about my level of intoxication,” I respond to Lina, giving the rim of my glass a slow, sultry lick. I have a high tolerance for alcohol, borne from years of underage partying. It would seem, though, that lame, tourist-trap Cancún serves strong margaritas and the warm and fuzzies are really kicking in.

“Who the fuck is Jose?” Nicki asks, her pretty face scrunching up.

“It’s Mr. Cuervo to you.”

She finally clues in and that musical laugh of hers rolls out. “Oh . . . oh, buddy! No! That’s so sad. We need to fix that.” Her curious eyes scan the lounge. “You promised me you’d exorcise Jared from your vagina if you met a hot guy . . . There. The one in front. Perfect.” She raises her inked arm, signaling someone as if she knows him.

Oh, God. I suck back a large gulp. “Seriously, Nicki. After the tooth picker you set me up with, I think I’m done. And exorcisms take at least two days to prepare for. Can’t I just drown myself in frozen green goodness for tonight? I’m not even dressed for it.” I’d thrown on a pair of shorts and an old faded rock concert tank. I don’t even have makeup on.

“What do you wanna be this time? Architect from L.A.?” she asks, ignoring my opposition completely. Her eyes twinkle as they flash to me. “Stripper from Pasadena?”

I nod with appreciation. “That was a good one.” Before Jared, the three of us used to head out to the bars on the weekends—Lina and I with fake ID. We’d make up identities: jobs, cities, sometimes names, and see how long we could keep it going while guys bought us drinks. Once, I had a guy completely sold on me being a goat herder from Iowa. He was as dumb as a bag of bricks.

The shuffle of approaching feet stirs an anxious flutter in my stomach. I really don’t want to carry on a conversation tonight, fake or otherwise. “Helloooo boys,” Nicki purrs playfully. I feel the eyes of women around us as they sit up to take notice, their rays of envy scorching my skin. I decide I can’t play disinterested just yet. I need to know what type of fiend Nicki has targeted. As casually as five margaritas will allow, I turn and . . . slide right off my chair, my shorts providing my ass with little protection against the hard tile floor.

“I have shamed Mr. Cuervo,” I mutter, ducking my head, the night air carrying mocking giggles my way as I accept that it’s only eight o’clock and I’m way more drunk than I realized.

A large hand appears in front of me, palm up. “Well, I’m impressed.” I hear the smile behind the masculine voice and I can’t decide if I like that or not. Accepting the help—because the sooner I’m off the floor, the better—I’m pulled to my feet and into the broad chest of a blond with a big, obnoxious grin.

Wearing a fucking red shirt.|Five Ways to Fall

Chapter 2

■ ■ ■

BEN

I love the angry ones.

Of course, anyone who knows me would argue that I love any and all women, and I can’t exactly disagree. But I love the angry ones the most. They’re a challenge to be conquered, the reason for their fury usually fitting neatly into three buckets: insecure, scorned, hormonal.

And this chick gazing up at me with fire in her caramel eyes?

I'm betting on bucket number two.

"My, what an awfully bright red shirt you have on," she pushes out between gritted teeth, as if she's trying to be polite but can't hide her disdain.

I didn't know what I was walking into when the punk-rock chick with the crazy-ass muscular body waved us over, but her friend with the purple hair and her back to me had me intrigued. Now that I'm getting a good look at her face, I know who I'm spending my last night with in Cancún. She's not what some would call traditionally "pretty." Her eyes are slightly too big and far apart, her nose is slightly too long and slender, and her lips—though nice and wide—are on the thin side. Yet something about all of that put together makes her sexy as hell. Maybe it's the little nose ring. Or maybe it's the way her decent-sized tits are pressing up against me, her low V-neck tank top—a casual shirt, telling me she's not trying to pick anyone up—giving me a fine view of her cleavage. Whatever it is, my dick is certainly pleased. "You like it?" I ask.

An irritated glare flickers to the material. "No."

I can't help but chuckle at her candor. "Will you at least give me a head start before you gore me?"

Those thin lips curl into a condescending smirk. "Bulls don't see color. That's a myth."

The only thing I love more than an angry girl is a smart, angry girl.

This is going to be fun.

"Well, how about I solve the problem for you." I take a step back from her and swiftly yank my shirt off, exposing six days of suntanned skin and an upper body that I know looks damn appealing because I work my ass off to keep it that way. The random catcalls from the tables around confirm it.

And then I simply stand there and grin like the cocky ass that I am as Angry Girl can't keep her eyes from scanning the muscles I've honed since my college football days, her lips parting ever so subtly. I see the shift in her, the moment where she realizes that, though she'd prefer to castrate the entire male species right now, she can't ignore her attraction to me.

At least, that's what I want to see.

"Sir. Excuse me, sir." A glance over my shoulder finds Angelo, the short Mexican waiter who's been serving us all week, standing there with a tray of beers for my friends and me. We didn't even have to ask. Hell, I love Cancún. I could live here forever.

"Angelo! Why the fuck are you calling me 'sir'?"

"Uh . . ." He licks his lips as his eyes dart to the tile floor. "Please. Management requests that you wear proper attire in the lounge area. Please."

"No worries, pal." Poor Angelo is probably ready to shit his pants, as afraid as he is to offend me, the guy who has lined his pockets with a month's worth of rent in tips. Snagging a beer off his tray, I take my time sucking back a few mouthfuls, feeling her eyes riveted to my throat.

Yeah, I've got this one in the bag.

With an easy smile, I place the bottle down on the table and pull the shirt back over my head. “Though you may have to deal with Angry Girl in front of me, now. She hates my shirt.”

Angelo casts a polite smile her way as he hands out beers to my friends, and I know exactly what he’s thinking. He’s seen me walk out of here with a few different women this week.

What else can I say but . . . I’m on vacation.

I was planning on just hanging low tonight, going to bed solo. Now, though, getting this purple-haired chick naked sounds like more fun.

“Angry Girl will try to restrain herself, Angelo,” she purrs, draining the last of her drink and placing it on his tray before scooping up a fresh one. She still has a full one sitting on the table, too. “But only if you come back with another one of these in under five minutes. Otherwise, there’s no telling what she’ll do.” Narrowed eyes glimmer with secret amusement.

“Sí, señorita.”

I smoothly tuck a twenty into his shirt pocket and pat his shoulder. “For causing you any trouble with management.” Angelo nods and quickly heads off as I stick my hand out. “I’m Ben. And you are . . .”

Angry Girl accepts it, the skin of her hand soft and cool within mine. “Jill.” Thumbing to her left, she adds, “Sabrina. And that’s Kelly over there. She’s Korean.”

What? My brow furrows as I regard the cute girl-next-door blond sitting across from us, trying to make sense of that strange introduction. A skillful distraction, it would seem, because it gives Jill a chance to slither into her seat, her back to me once again. She props her feet up to rest on the only vacant chair at the table, her long, shapely legs all the more visible thanks to the tiny shorts she’s wearing.

“Travis, Kent, Murdock,” I toss out with a lazy gesture toward the guys, three of my roommates from Miami. They can take care of themselves. I’m on a mission. I waste no time seizing an empty lounge chair from the table next to us. Flashing a big smile at the cougar eyeing me, a redhead who is definitely hot enough to fuck should this thing with Jill go sideways, I swing the chair around and take a seat so close that my knee—the one that cost me a guaranteed NFL career and still throbs in damp weather—rests against Jill’s bare leg. She doesn’t shift away. “First night in Cancún?”

One of her perfectly shaped brows arches. “You’re persistent.”

“A persistent fool,” I correct her with a grin, earning the non-Korean girl’s laughter. “First night in Cancún?” I repeat.

“How can you tell?”

Finally. An open door for a conversation. I jump through it like a circus dog. “Because you’re way too tense, you’re downing those drinks like you’re on a mission to wake up naked on the beach, and you have no tan lines.”

“Huh . . .” She ponders that for a moment while I inhale her perfume. She smells like strawberries and cream. I wonder if she tastes like strawberries and cream. “What are you, a detective?”

“Bouncer at a strip club.”

Her head falls back and she starts laughing, a deep, throaty laugh that I want to record and play back again at a later date. “Of course you are.”

I shrug. “It pays the bills.” I could kill whatever assumptions she’s making about me by telling her why I’m really here in Cancún: to celebrate finishing law school and taking the bar exam.

But I don’t.

I simply watch her tongue curl around the salty rim of her glass. Dirty thoughts flash through my head and I’m forced to discreetly adjust myself. If she notices, she doesn’t comment. Hell, she probably knows exactly what she’s doing to me. There are no innocent vibes coming off this chick.

“And what do you do?” I ask.

She purses her lips. “I’m a marine biologist. From Seattle.”

“A Doogie Howser marine biologist?” The girl could pass for twenty-three. Twenty-four, tops.

“I’m twenty-nine.”

“Sure you are.” I jut my chin in her friend’s direction. “And she’s Korean, right?”

In response, her friend spews off a string of something that sounds a hell of a lot like Korean, followed by a smug smile, and I’m left with my mouth gaping wide.

Okay. Still . . . “Marine biologist? Really?”

She takes another long draw of her drink and licks her lips before she announces, “I love me some big fish.” Yeah . . . lying. Fine. I’ll play along. “How long are you here for?” she asks, feigning disinterest, as the guys find chairs and pull her friends’ attention away.

I let my eyes skate over her features again, silently counting seven piercings—two in her nose and five in her ear—and wondering how many more she has hidden under those tight little shorts and that tank top of hers. And I suddenly find myself wishing I were just starting my vacation today. “This is my last night.”

“Really . . .” An unreadable look passes through her eyes as they quickly flitter over my features, landing on my mouth. “The exorcism needs more time,” she mumbles under her breath.

What the fuck? Wouldn’t that just be my luck to land a nut job for my last night. Not that that couldn’t be fun. I’m always up for something different. “Maybe we should start right away then?”

The heated look she shoots me with—like she’s deciding between jumping onto my lap or filleting me—makes me give this a moment’s pause. Maybe I should be more careful about who I bring back to my room. I take another look at her frame—she’s probably too small to cause any real damage without weapons—and notice the giant name inked into her arm. As much as I want to trace the letters, I keep my hands to myself. It’s like petting a strange dog; you don’t even reach out until you know it’s not going to lunge at you. So I point at the tattoo instead. “That would suck if it were an ex.”

“Yeah, it would.” The bite in her tone is suddenly back, and this time it comes with a sheen just barely glistening in her eyes. She quickly blinks it away, trying to keep the tough act going. Dammit. I groan inwardly as disappointment settles in. She’s not just scorned. She’s still raw. She’s going to be one of those drunk chicks who suddenly erupts in tears. Probably during sex.

Nothing worse than a girl crying halfway through sex. A definite limp dick maker.

She clears her throat. “I don’t see any tattoos on you.”

Okay, at least she’s trying to steer the conversation away from her and her current situation. I can roll with that. “You haven’t seen all of me yet.” I know I sound like a cocky bastard, but it somehow works for me.

A tiny sly grin curves her mouth for just a moment before she stifles it, as if she didn’t mean to let it slip out. “Any hidden ones?”

“Nope. Hate needles,” I answer truthfully.

“Wuss.”

I shrug. “You obviously don’t mind them. Any tats or piercings besides the ones I see?”

All I get is a taunting smile in return. Fuck.

A sudden burst of Rihanna pumps out over the speakers as the regular lights dim down and the dance-floor lights kick in, indicating that the hotel lounge is turning into a club as it does every night at this time. Jill’s cringe tells me she’s not impressed.

“Not your kind of music?” My gaze immediately drops to her tank top, a faded Pearl Jam album cover printed on the front of it.

She shakes her head. “I’m more into classic rock and nineties alternative.”

Seriously? “Were you even alive for that?”

“I can play every single Aerosmith song ever recorded on the guitar,” she says, as if that answers my question.

Sweet Jesus. Stretching my legs out as I try to picture her rocking out with a guitar strung over her shoulder—naked—I offer, “You know, girls who play the guitar are fucking hot. You any good?”

Another cunning smile behind her drink answers me. Yeah, she’s good. And, damn it, so sexy. In a loose-cannon kind of way. The only kind that snags me like a trout on a shark hook. Just like Kacey, one of my best friends, did. That girl had a self-destruct button affixed to her chest for the longest time. I saw it a mile away and I still fell for her hard.

Angelo chooses that moment to swoop in and place a drink in her hand and a shot of tequila on the table for everyone. Jill doesn’t even wait. She lifts the glass to her lips and downs it. No salt, no lime.

“Am I going to have to carry you home tonight?” I offer with a wide grin.

She smacks her lips as she drops the glass onto the table rather loudly. “I think I’m going to aim for waking up naked on the beach.”

“I have some experience with that. I can give you a few pointers.”

Her hawkish eyes roll over my body slowly before landing on my face, fixing a hard gaze on my mouth. “You’re not my type.”

I’ve heard this before and I don’t believe her. Hell, I’m everyone’s type! Eventually. “And what is it exactly about me that you don’t like?”

A wicked gleam in her eyes tells me she thinks I’m going to regret asking. Little does she know, I don’t give a shit. I have a thick skin and an easy sense of humor. This should actually be amusing.

“The womanizing mama’s-boy football-player part who spreads the charm on like peanut butter and has had a different girl in his hotel room every night this week.”

“Not every night.”

She rolls her eyes. “Oh, and you’re blond. I’m not into blonds.”

“You’re completely wrong about me.” She’s pretty much nailed it, actually.

“Really?” As if to prove her point, she taps the ring on my finger. The one I earned taking my team to the national championship.

“I don’t play anymore.”

“Not good enough?”

I chuckle. She’s good at the hits to the ego. “Too good, apparently, because some guy felt the need to wreck my knee.” Between the dislocated joint, the torn ligaments, and the nerve damage, I’m surprised I can even run anymore.

Those caramel eyes soften for just a flash, so fast I almost miss it. “I’m still not sleeping with you.”

“Well, I don’t know what you had planned, but I’m just here to hang out and make some new friends,” I offer, feigning innocence.

This one’s going to be a bit more challenging than I thought.

But she’ll change her tune eventually.

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