

## CHAPTER ONE

### *Saturday, November 19*

The sight of the tiny Mini Cooper crashing into the rear of the Range Rover made onlookers cringe. It looked like David against Goliath without a slingshot for David.

Peg Ryan, the driver of the Mini Cooper, fought the air bag in her face and her own sense of shock. How could she have spent the last half hour crawling north on Clark Street, unable to maintain any semblance of speed in the bumper-to-bumper traffic, only to suddenly find the front of her brand new car crumpled into the rear end of the massive vehicle in front of her?

Peg was traveling on the main drag of the Andersonville neighborhood in Chicago, a stretch of commercial property chock-full of boutiques, restaurants, coffee houses, taverns, and gay bars. Late on a Saturday afternoon, its sidewalks were still crowded with shoppers, and Clark Street was clogged with cars. It wasn't until she reached the four-way stop at Berwyn that a little space opened up in front of her. With pedestrians crossing the street in droves, it took some time and some welcome acceleration for Peg to make it through the intersection. That's when the Rover that had been in front of her for the last few blocks slammed on the brakes, leaving Peg with no chance of avoiding a collision.

Peg managed to put her car in park and unsnap her safety belt. The cars behind her started to lean on their horns, a noise that cascaded backward as the frustration of yet more road blockage flowed from behind the crash scene. Pedestrians paused on the sidewalks, waiting to see what they could see. The irony of the situation was not lost on Peg. Irony seldom slipped by her unnoticed. She had resisted getting a car for the entire year she had been living in Chicago. Having spent her adult life in New York City, she felt more comfortable in a cab or a subway car. But she had been increasingly tempted by the freedom to roam her new city that a car would provide, and parking was so much more manageable than in Manhattan. She finally gave in and bought the car she'd had her eye on for quite some time — the impossibly cute Mini Cooper. She had to fold her six-foot frame in and out of it, but it suited her perfectly. She had picked it up just the day before.

The blaring of the horns grew louder, but the sound of the driver's door slamming on the Range Rover cut right through it. Peg was just stepping out of her car as the Rover's driver marched toward her. She was nearly as tall as Peg, looked to be a bit younger than Peg's forty-nine years, and was angrier than Peg had probably ever been. She was dressed expensively in a long cashmere coat, designer jeans, and Italian boots, and she would have been stunning, had it not been for the snarl on her face.

*Oh, boy,* thought Peg.

The woman frowned at the front of the car rammed into the rear of hers and rounded on the driver. "What the hell were you doing?" she yelled, pointing at the crumpled cars as if Peg might misunderstand what she was referring to.

Since it was clearly not going to be an amicable encounter, Peg adopted her unruffled mode. This surface calm served her well in the courtroom and with most of life's irritating people and situations, but there were times when Peg longed to haul off and clobber the people who acted like this woman.

"I think we should exchange our contact and insurance information and let our representatives sort this out." Peg leaned into her car to grab some paper and the insurance card that was still in her bag, not yet even put into the glove compartment.

The other driver moved in closer. "I don't give a shit what you think. I've called the police. You'll get a ticket for this, and then your insurance will pay for my damage."

Peg sighed as she straightened up and opened her notebook. She refused to look at the woman next to her, mainly because the refusal to engage was undoubtedly going to drive her crazy. Peg heard the sound of another car door closing and looked up to see a woman moving toward them from the passenger side of the Range Rover. She was lovely — a warm and inviting face, long, silky brown hair, a body wrapped up in a wool coat... Peg instantly wanted to unwrap her. The woman walked toward them, a look of concern on her face as she looked at Peg and annoyance when she turned to her companion.

"I didn't know there was anyone else in the car," Peg said. "Are you okay?"

The woman turned back and smiled briefly. "Yes, I'm fine. Are you?"

"I'm okay."

"That's good." She turned back to her friend. "Camille, what is the problem? Let's get these cars out of the way of the traffic. I'm sure this woman will exchange information with us and we can all be on our way."

Camille did not relent. "No. We're waiting for the police. She rear-ended me and I want them to issue a citation. They'll need a statement from you, too."

"I don't think you want to do that."

"Of course I do. She rear-ended me. By law, she's in the wrong."

Turning back to Peg, the woman extended her hand. "I'm Allison Mitchell; this is Camille Bardon. I'm sorry this has turned into a scene."

Camille's hand slammed down on the hood of the Mini. "Why are you apologizing to her? She's in the wrong, not me."

"I think that may be debatable," Allison said.

"Why would you say that?" Camille asked, leaning against the Mini toward Allison.

Peg wondered what was going on with these women. Camille seemed like a spoiled teenager, and Allison didn't seem like a woman who would be with a person like Camille. Maybe they weren't together. Just because they were in Andersonville it didn't mean that every pair of women was a couple, but the odds were great that they were.

More people were gathering around. The horns had quieted down, the traffic having found a way to cope with the obstruction by taking turns through the narrow lane still open. A police car finally pulled up and found a place to perch on Berwyn. Camille went straight over to the officer to start presenting her side of things; Peg went over to Allison.

"Are you okay with her? She seems a little volatile," Peg said.

Allison glanced over at Camille. "She is a very forceful woman, but I've never seen her act like this. I'm very sorry."

"You really don't have to apologize. Let me give you my name and number, and hopefully we can just let the insurance companies sort this out." Peg handed over a page from her small notebook, her cell number underlined twice.

"Thanks."

Allison looked up at Peg, and for a moment Peg could see interest in her eyes. "And I'm relieved that your friend isn't often angry like this. I think I'd worry about you a little bit."

Peg was standing not far from Allison, trying to find that small spark in her eyes she'd seen moments before, but Allison was turning her head, trying to locate Camille. Peg's head was spinning a bit — from the accident, from the anger spewing from Camille, and from the germinating idea that this accident might turn out to be a very good thing. She looked over to see the officer and Camille heading toward them. "Here they come," she said to Allison.

Allison pulled a card out of her coat pocket and handed it to Peg. "If this thing gets messy, maybe we can talk about how to work it out."

Peg pocketed the business card and turned toward the police officer, careful to not look at Camille. She gave the officer her license and registration and followed his order to move her car out of traffic, relieved to find that the car was drivable despite the alarming dents in the front end. Camille moved her car at the same time, and when they rejoined the police officer Peg saw that Allison had left the scene.

"Where did Allison go?" Peg asked Camille. She saw that the officer was busy writing out a citation.

"Leave Allison out of this. She's no concern of yours." Camille turned to the officer. "Officer, are you issuing this woman a ticket?"

"That's next. This ticket is for you for traveling too fast for conditions."

Peg took Allison's business card out of her pocket and stared at it while waiting for her own ticket and listening to Camille yell at the police officer.

Allison was nearly home when her cell phone rang. It was no surprise to see Camille's number on the display. Allison decided to answer rather than put up with a dozen follow-up attempts to reach her. She was aware of Camille's habitual persistence, but the person she'd seen following the accident was new to her.

"Hi, Camille."

"Where are you? One minute you were there, and the next you'd disappeared."

"I decided to walk home and let you all hammer out the details. Is there a problem with that?"

“A problem? No, I don’t suppose so. I just thought you’d stay with me. I also thought you’d stick up for me more than you did.”

Allison saw her opening and took it. “Camille, I don’t stick up for positions I don’t believe in. It’s a little presumptuous of you to think I’d lie for you. You slammed on your brakes when you dropped your stupid Blackberry. You were as much in the wrong as the person who rear-ended you, and frankly, I didn’t like what I saw in you out there.”

Camille was silent for a bit. “You’re mad at me, aren’t you? I can hear it in your voice.”

Allison could hear the change in Camille’s voice. She sounded worried. “I’m upset, I’ll put it that way. We’ve only been seeing each other a short while, and I saw a side of you today that I haven’t seen before. It concerned me.”

She walked up her front porch steps. Mamie, her calico cat, was curled up on the wide window ledge in the living room overlooking the porch; her head swiveled toward Allison when she heard the footsteps. Mamie jumped down to wait for Allison inside the door.

“I’m really sorry if you were upset by this whole thing,” Camille said. “I think I can explain myself and ease your concerns. I’m on my way over.”

Allison stifled a groan at the idea of Camille trying to smooth things over. *Why can’t she say, “I’m sorry I was an ass” instead of just trying to smooth things over?* It occurred to Allison, in a way that it had not before, that Camille’s words and actions were all geared to getting what she wanted, usually under the guise of being charming, reasonable, and generous. She’d buy you a diamond, but she expected some loyalty in return. Allison felt a little sick, the diamond necklace she wore suddenly heavy.

“Do not come over,” Allison said with steel in her voice. “You have to let me alone for today, Camille, because talking to you right now is not going to be good for either of us. You can call me on Monday, and we’ll figure out a time to get together. I really need some time to myself right now.”

There was silence from Camille’s end. Finally she said, “I just need two minutes to try to make this up to you, Allison. That’s all.”

“Please, don’t argue with me about this.”

“Okay, okay. I’ll call you Monday, but Allison, please remember that I care so much for you. My anger today had nothing to do with you. I know I can explain this and we can go back to having fun — like we were right before the accident.”

“I’ll talk to you Monday.” Allison disconnected and went into her house. She felt relieved and suddenly liberated. She had the whole evening ahead of her and it felt like a gift, while just an hour before she’d been with Camille, on her way to dinner and the theatre, looking forward to the evening. The anger and deceitfulness she had seen in Camille had changed everything for her, but she suspected she had been uneasy with Camille before that. It was true that Camille had a way about her that made all of their dates a lot of fun, and fun had been the extent of Allison’s ambition when she started dating again. Camille was wealthy and gorgeous and, frankly, wickedly good in bed, but there was nothing drawing Allison in beyond those superficial qualities. It wouldn’t take much to topple the illusion that they had any real relationship at all, and Allison could see that the accident scene was a breath on the house of cards.

After feeding Mamie and changing into sweats, Allison listened to her voicemail. She was having an unusually busy November at her real estate agency and found that there were multiple voicemails each time she called in to her office. Thankfully, this time there was only one.

*Allison, it’s Peg Ryan calling. We met a short time ago under difficult circumstances. I’m the one who rear-ended your friend’s Range Rover. Anyway, I wanted to make sure you’re okay. You disappeared, so I figured you’d gone on home, caught a cab, or something. That’s what I would have done, too. I see from the card that you gave me that you’re in real estate and also that your agency is just a block away from the house I’m renting on Burling. It looks like my transfer to our law office here is going to be a permanent one, and I’ve been thinking about looking for a place to buy. I’m traveling the first part of next week and then there’s Thanksgiving, so I’ll give you a call after the holiday weekend to see if you can help me out. Take care. And let me know if there are any aftereffects from the accident. I want to make sure you’re taken care of.*

Allison saved the message and hung up. She dropped down onto the church pew in her large foyer and stared straight ahead. She wasn’t sure what to make of Peg’s call, but she knew what she’d like to make of it. She sat for a while, letting her thoughts settle before returning Peg’s call to confirm their plans. Certainly, if Peg had been just any prospective client she would have returned the call right away, so she wasn’t worried about looking overeager. She was more worried about sounding like a nervous schoolgirl, because that’s exactly how she felt.

Peg and her friend Morgan were standing in the small brick garage behind her rented house in Lincoln Park. They were staring at the front of Peg's Mini Cooper, frowning over the crumpled front.

"Man, that is cruel. You just picked the car up yesterday?" Morgan asked.

"Yep. I was heading north on Clark this afternoon when it happened."

Morgan shook her head. Morgan and Peg looked like sisters standing side by side in the dim light. Both were tall and lanky, dressed in trousers and jackets and long coats. Peg was older by ten years, her salt and pepper hair short, her reading glasses perched on the top of her head. Morgan was dressed for her job, her gun and cuffs and other accoutrements of a Chicago homicide detective visible beneath her jacket. They had been introduced through a mutual friend at Peg's law firm and hit it off right away. Morgan was one of Peg's few friends in her new city.

"The worst thing about the whole accident was that the other woman in the car in front of me was someone I would ask out in a heartbeat, and I can't remember the last time I felt like that." Peg fished the business card out of her pocket and handed it to Morgan.

"Hey, I know Allison Mitchell. She's the agent who helped me buy my place this year. She's gorgeous. I wanted to go out with her myself, but I was seeing Sandy at the time. Sandy? No, Cindy. Hell, I should have asked Allison out. But then she wouldn't be available for you." Morgan grinned. "You have very good taste. I'm relieved also to hear you're not dead from the waist down."

"Do you know if she is going out with this Camille Bardon? That's the driver of the Range Rover that I ran into."

"I think so. I remember Allison mentioning her at our closing. Is Camille the one who acted like such an asshole? Wow. I know Allison had just started seeing her at that time, and she wanted to know if I knew anything about Camille."

Peg looked surprised. "You mean as a police officer? Is she a criminal or something?"

"No, not like that. Just dyke drama-wise. You know — did I know any of her ex-girlfriends, that sort of thing. I only knew her name from the gay paper; she's usually at the big benefits, and I know she gives money to various charities and causes. You see her name on the donors list on playbills and stuff like that. Allison seemed happy to be dating again, but I wouldn't say she was jumping up and down about Camille."

"Why do you say she was happy to be dating 'again'?" Peg asked as she and Morgan headed for the back door to Peg's house.

"She had been in a long relationship that broke up a year or two ago. I guess she was slow to get back on the horse," Morgan said.

"I'm thinking she picked the wrong horse."

"You're hoping, anyway."

With darkness fully settled over the quiet neighborhood, Camille pulled her car into a spot just around the corner from Allison's house. She could see anyone entering it from the front, and a glance at the side-view mirror would tell her if anyone entered the alley that ran behind it. She could then crane her neck to see if that car pulled into the open spot next to Allison's two-car garage. Camille had taken the precaution of going home to pick up her other car, a Lexus sedan, knowing that the Range Rover with the crumpled rear would be as obvious as if it were lit up with search beams.

Camille's experience in business had taught her that her gut instincts were usually dead on target, and her instincts were telling her that there was something more to Allison's anger with her than her loss of temper at the accident scene. Camille knew on some level, though the evidence was scant, that Peg Ryan came into play, and she was prepared to sit patiently and watch. It wouldn't have surprised her at all to see the dented-up Mini Cooper rolling down Allison's street, Peg peering out the window, looking at the house numbers. Camille thought about the absurdity of worrying about losing Allison when she could have just about any woman she wanted. She'd certainly had plenty already. And that was the problem. None of the others compared to Allison — the way she looked, the way she threw her head back and laughed, the way she moved under Camille when they made love, the way she drove a conversation beyond the expected and into the delightful. Camille Bardon had many things in her life that were expendable or replaceable. Allison Mitchell was not one of them.