

OAKDALE
CONFIDENTIAL

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ANONYMOUS



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Prologue



Katie Peretti chose to panic.

She did not make such a monumental decision in haste.

Prior to determining that panic was the best—indeed, the only—option under the circumstances, Katie reviewed the facts.

Fact #1: Katie was broke. Katie was almost always broke. One would think that between co-owning a gym and a detective agency, she should have at least one stream of income flowing in at any given time. One would be wrong.

Fact #2: To remedy her cash-flow problem, Katie had taken a job helping Oakdale Memorial Hospital's most dynamic board member, Mrs. Nancy Hughes, octogenarian extraordinaire, organize a benefit to honor the Marron family's fifty years of support for the institution.

Fact #3: There were four members of the Marron family. Gregory Marron Sr., who insisted on being called "Gig,"

Gregory Marron Jr., who insisted on being called “Mr. Marron,” Gregory Jr.’s wife, Aurora, who’d had the nerve to say, “So what might be considered haute cuisine in Oakdale, these days, Kathryn? Is it still pigs-in-a-blanket, or have you all moved up to smoked salmon on a cracker?” and Gregory Jr.’s twenty-two-year-old stepdaughter, Monica, who told Katie, “Don’t pay any attention to my parents, okay? They kind of . . . well, they’re snobs.” All four were expected to be at the gala.

Fact #4: All four were not at the gala.

Katie had been the first to arrive at the banquet hall, located across the street from Oakdale Memorial Hospital. Her first order of business was to make sure that the botanical centerpieces for all fifty tables were the same size. The last thing she needed was for Barbara Ryan to pitch a public fit about how her roses were a millimeter less open than Emily Stewart’s, or for Lucinda Walsh to ask why her view was obstructed when Lisa Grimaldi could see the stage perfectly. Next, Katie checked that the band was set up, that the waiters were all accounted for, that the catering staff was at attention, and that the lights were dimmed to a level that flattered the “women of a certain age” in the room. She also double-checked that a gleaming engraved bronze plaque, thanking the Marron family for all they’d done for Memorial through the years, had been set up in front of the hospital’s main entrance. Encircling the plaque was a huge red ribbon for Gig, Gregory, Aurora, and Monica to cut with a pair of oversize scissors.

In anticipation of this spectacle, half of Oakdale was currently waiting in the plaza in front of the hospital. The men

were dressed in tuxedos, the women outfitted tastefully in a rainbow of cocktail dresses. Unfortunately at the moment almost everyone's hair was being whipped about by the still-brisk April wind. Simultaneously everyone's hands were darting to keep the variety of French twists, extensions, and chignons from flying off into the blue yonder.

Fact #5: It wasn't supposed to be this way. Katie had originally planned this evening down to the last second. By the time the sun started to set and the wind picked up, all the guests were scheduled to be safely inside, savoring their choice of vegetarian lasagna or filet mignon.

Fact #6: The reason the above had yet to happen (forty-five minutes off schedule and counting), was that while Gig, Aurora, and Monica Marron were already in their appointed spots, standing by the bronze plaque and in front of photographers from both the local papers plus one from a national syndicate, Gregory Marron Jr. was nowhere to be found.

Gig, Aurora, and Monica had all arrived together in one limousine, explaining that Gregory had some business to attend to, but would be following shortly in a different car. They'd assured her there was nothing to worry about.

Still, Katie worried. She worried when Gregory was five minutes late. She worried when the five minutes turned to fifteen. And, when that fifteen crept over the half-hour mark, she allowed herself to panic.

Because she'd be doomed if this gala didn't go off smoothly.

Nancy Hughes had vouched for Katie's competence because Katie had sworn she could handle it, that she would take care of everything and that nothing would go wrong.

But in spite of Nancy's endorsement, the hospital board still hadn't been enthusiastic about hiring her. Before the first meeting began, Katie had overheard bigwig Lucinda Walsh sniping that she wasn't exactly comfortable handing over the gala honoring the institution's biggest donors to "a twenty-something cheerleader Barbie doll."

So Katie had sweetened the deal. In a burst of act-first-think-later exuberance that had gotten her in trouble in the past, Katie told the board members they didn't have to pay her until the benefit had gone off without a single hitch. Katie was that confident she could pull this off.

Confident.

Stupid.

Such a fine line between the two.

The hospital board took Katie up on her offer. Apparently, a twenty-something cheerleader Barbie doll—though Katie preferred to think of herself as petite, perky, and unapologetically enthusiastic—handling the institution's biggest donors was okay as long as it also saved them some money during the planning stages.

Less okay for Katie was the reality that during the four weeks she'd worked with Nancy, putting everything together alongside the Marrons, she'd proceeded to spend her future earnings. Her credit cards were nearly maxed out and the fee she was counting on would only come her way if she pulled off a flawless evening.

But Gregory Marron Jr. was forty-five minutes late for his own party.

Katie looked helplessly into the shivering crowd and, gratefully, caught sight of Nancy standing by the plaque and

the ceremonial scissors. She was making polite conversation, trying to placate the increasingly impatient guests in the front row. As they were doctors — there was Nancy's son, Bob, plus his colleagues Susan Stewart, Lynn Michaels, and Ben Harris — they were particularly eager for the ceremonial part of the evening to be over, so they could return to work. If anyone would know what to do in this situation, Katie felt certain, it would be Nancy.

Murmuring "Excuse me" and "pardon me," Katie eased her way through the crowd, trying her best not to step on a dress-train here or snap a tuxedo button there as she passed.

She ended up right next to Nancy and, covering her mouth discreetly with one hand, whispered, "Please, help me, Mrs. Hughes!"

"I'm sorry, Katie," Nancy whispered back, equally discreetly. "But I'm afraid I just don't know what to do in this situation."

Oh, well. Showed how much Katie's certainty was worth.

Once again scanning the crowd in hope of finding a solution, Katie instead caught sight of Carly Snyder. Even within an assembly of over two hundred people, Carly stood out. She was dressed in a strapless silk turquoise ensemble with a full skirt and matching silver-trimmed wrap. On most blondes with her shade of fairer-than-fair skin, the dress would have appeared overwhelming. But Carly wasn't the sort of five-foot-two, blue-eyed blonde who would allow an accident of biology to keep her from wearing the season's hottest color. Carly simply made up for what she lacked in actual melanin with a — how to put it? — colorful personality.

Carly's husband, Jack, a detective with the Oakdale Police

Department, was in attendance, as well. He was moonlighting, doing security for the event. Katie wondered if maybe Jack would consider her plight enough of an emergency to put out one of those all-points bulletins on Gregory Marron and send a police car to escort him to the gala.

Katie also saw . . . no, it couldn't be . . . Henry, her business partner in their less-than-successful gym, would never let his little sister come to a party where alcohol was being served. Still, that sure did look like sixteen-year-old Maddie Coleman loitering there on the sidelines, doing her best to appear sophisticated and give the impression of fitting in. If Henry saw Maddie here, he'd pitch a fit. That's just what Katie needed now. More things to worry about. If Henry found out—

Henry!

Henry, for God's sake!

How could Katie have been so stupid?

—Just like Katie needed to grovel for gigs to make ends meet while they waited for the gym to hit it big, so did Henry. Only, in his case, he'd taken a job driving a limo. And he'd driven for the Marrons before. In fact, Henry had even gone so far as to boast that the family, who preferred to use a car service when they didn't feel like driving rather than keep a full-time chauffeur on staff, requested him by name now.

If luck was on her side and Henry was driving Gregory tonight, he could tell her where the heck they were!

And whether or not now was an appropriate time to panic.

Katie pulled out her cell and, within seconds, was patched through to Henry.

"Fear not, Bubbles!" he boomed majestically. "The Mounties always get their man, and so does Henry Coleman! The Marron Baron and I are rounding the corner of Oakdale Memorial, as we speak. So strike up the band, pop the champagne, and let's get this dog-and-pony show on the road!"

Katie allowed herself a little squeak of joy plus a hop of glee. All right, so maybe there was still a bit of the high-school cheerleader left inside her, after all.

She stood on her tiptoes and craned her neck for a clearer look at the end of the block where, as promised, Henry's limo dramatically rounded the corner and pulled to a stop right in front of the hospital's entrance.

Everyone applauded. Out of relief, gratitude and, she suspected, to stay warm.

Henry, with his flair for drama, alighted from the driver's seat just in time to catch the ovation's peak crescendo. He clicked his heels and offered a bow, then walked around to the passenger side door and opened it with a flourish.

Gregory Marron Jr., dressed in a black tux with a cream-colored bow tie and matching cummerbund, fell out of the car, rolling slightly mid-plunge so that he hit the pavement first with his shoulder, then with the back of his head.

Oh.

Wonderful.

Gregory Marron Jr. was drunk.

At his own tribute.

For a moment, the crowd could do no more than gasp and gape, not necessarily in that order (a few may have even nervously giggled). Then, the wire service's shutterbug

stepped up to snap a photo and the flash of his camera seemed to galvanize the spectators.

Somebody screamed. Was it Gregory's stepdaughter, Monica? It might have been Monica. As far as Katie could determine, the scream was high-pitched and youthful and seriously freaked out.

Somebody else lunged toward Gregory and as soon as one person began moving, the entire crowd surged forward.

Gig pushed his way toward the car, hollering to no one in particular, "What's going on?" He glared at Katie in passing, as if this was all part of her agenda.

Aurora followed, shoving people aside. She bent over to reach for her husband's arm, seemingly meaning to shake it, but Jack Snyder leaped ahead to stop her.

He stood between Gregory's inert body and the crowd, effectively blocking everyone, except for Ben Harris, who was the first doctor to reach Gregory.

Ben felt for a pulse along Gregory's wrist. Then his fingers moved to the base of Gregory's neck. In retrospect, that was Katie's first clue that maybe there was more than mere public drunkenness going on here. Drunk people, she suspected, still had detectable pulses.

Ben lifted Gregory's eyelids.

Katie suspected that wasn't a very reassuring sign, either.

She expected the good doctor to leap into action. To perform CPR, slam down a cardiac punch, call for backup or a crash cart, maybe even jab a long needle into Gregory's chest.

Unfortunately, when Ben failed to perform any of those life-saving measures, when all he did was sit back on his

heels and helplessly look up at Jack Snyder, Katie realized that now finally, was the appropriate time to panic.

Because Gregory Marron Jr. wasn't drunk or even experiencing what the medical establishment referred to as a cardiac or cerebral "incident."

Gregory Marron Jr. was clearly, indisputably dead.

Forgetting about her salary, her reputation, even her personal debt to Nancy, Katie found herself abruptly terrified about something much more important.

If Gregory was dead, and not from obvious natural causes, then Katie was very, very afraid that she knew who'd killed him.

Standing in the crowd, two other women suddenly felt exactly the same way.

1



"I'm not going," Mike had said the day before the gala.

His tone suggested it was the end of the discussion and that if Katie said another word about it he would leave the premises.

Unfortunately for both of them, Mike and Katie were currently in his car. He was driving her to work. Which meant that Mike had nowhere to walk off to and that Katie was faced with a dilemma.

On the one hand, she could press him for an explanation and maybe get an answer. That would clear the air, and their drive to work would end with a passionate kiss hot enough to make even Katie's usually stalk-straight blond hair curl a bit, and perhaps even an explicit promise of more to come once they reunited back home at the end of the day.

That would be good.

On the other hand, if Katie pressed Mike for an explana-

tion, he might only withdraw further. He'd silently steam, while she'd try to hold back her tears. The ride would end with a slammed door and the implicit promise of more silent treatment to come that evening at home.

That would be bad.

Katie knew from past bouts of fighting in the car that she should keep her mouth shut, give Mike some time to cool off, then pursue the topic at another time. It's what any mature woman who knew her man well would do.

So, while Mike drove, Katie bit her tongue and gazed out the Ford's window, desperately looking for something to distract her from the chorus of "But, why, why, why, Mike? Why won't you go to the reception with me tomorrow tonight?" that was echoing in her head. Alas, Oakdale, Illinois, at eight o'clock in the morning was not a bustling metropolis that was up to such a relationship-saving task. The problem with living in a small town was that you weren't likely to see anything at 8 A.M. on Thursday morning that you didn't see at the same time any other day of the week. There was Burt, owner of Burt's Garage, rolling up the groaning metallic door to announce he was now open for business. There was Gwen, the breakfast waitress at Al's Diner, smoking her final, hurried cigarette before reporting for her shift. And there was Gwen's older sister, Carly Snyder, walking down the block from her house, holding her daughter, Sage, with one hand and waving bye to her son, Parker, as he got on the school bus, with the other.

Katie waved to Carly like she usually did, thinking she could have done the same with her eyes closed. The daily route to work was that predictable and offered nothing to dis-

tract Katie from her need to mulishly question Mike's terse refusal to attend the reception at Memorial.

Okay. Sixty seconds had passed since Katie had committed to postponing her questions until another time. Sixty seconds later. That was another time. Wasn't it?

Katie asked Mike, "Why not?"

He shrugged, hands on the wheel, eyes on the road. "Just don't feel like it. You go on without me. Have a good time."

"I don't intend to have a good time. I intend to have a successful time and show everybody who doubted me that I can pull off a big function like this without something going catastrophically wrong."

"You do that, then. I'll be rooting for you."

"This is a very big night for me, Mike."

"I thought it was a big night for the Marrons."

"And it's a very big night for Nancy Hughes. This party was her idea and hiring me was her idea—kind of, after I suggested it. Nancy Hughes is one of my best friends in this town. I can't let her down. I owe her."

"Nancy Hughes is a very nice lady, I couldn't agree more."

"You weren't living here a couple of years ago, but there was a time when, well, there's no nice way to put this—everyone hated me."

"So I've heard."

"Well, believe it. Rumors of my pariah-hood were not greatly exaggerated. People enjoyed taking turns telling me what a horrible person I was. And all because I was a woman interested in a career."

"Didn't you poison Molly so you could take over her newscaster job at WOAK?"

"I didn't poison her! I simply stepped in and read her newscast when somebody else did."

"And didn't you make up a stalker for publicity purposes?"

"I did. But then it turned out someone was stalking me after all, and nobody ever gave me any credit for being—"

"Deceitful?"

"Prescient."

"Katie, I already know all this. I'm not sure what the point—"

"The point is, back when everybody and their great-uncle was calling me names and crossing the street so they wouldn't have to be on the same block with me, Nancy Hughes was the only one who believed I could grow and become a good person. And I have, haven't I?"

"Yes, Katie, these days, you're pretty darn swell."

"Well, this hospital benefit is a big deal to Mrs. Hughes. She wants a good turnout for the ribbon-cutting part of it so the Marron family can see how much we appreciate what they've done for Memorial and not think we're all just there for the drinks and dinner afterward. You should really come."

"Katie, give it up. I told you I'm not going."

"You haven't told me why, though."

"Because I don't want to. These black-tie affairs aren't my thing. I'm always nervous I'll eat my dessert with a salad fork and trigger a scandal or something."

"Yeah, right."

He turned the wheel more abruptly than he needed to, to make the turn. "Have it your way."

"Mike, you've been to plenty of black-tie functions and not once did I catch you drinking from the finger bowls."

"That's because I kept my little problem under wraps until now."

"Since when do you care what other people think about your manners, or anything else?"

"You're making too big of a deal about this."

"Only because you won't tell me what's really going on."

Mike shrugged. It was his "end of the line" shrug. The one that, in a mere twitch of the shoulders, managed to convey obstinacy, indifference, and resolve.

They rode the rest of the way in silence. When Mike pulled up in front of Katie's health club, he didn't turn off the engine or lean over to kiss her good-bye.

He didn't even wave as he drove away.

Or promise to see her at home, later.

Yup. This was bad.

Katie Peretti fell in love with Mike Kasnoff because he was the exact opposite of her ex-husband, Simon.

Sure, both men had that tall, dark, and handsome thing going for them, except that Simon's appeal was of the devil-may-care, Australian variety, while Mike's was all-American, God-and-country. Both men had equally disciplined abdominal muscles, smooth pectorals, and also a way of looking at a woman so intensely that it made her insides turn into a pit of