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CLG ENTERTAINMENT

Presents

TO CATCH A CHEAT

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CHAPTER ONE

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The cheaters I typically investigate for Finding All Cheaters Enterprises, or F.A.C.E., are as generic as something from the dollar bin at Target. Their situations are outrageous—a girl cheating on her girlfriend with the girlfriend’s brother, a guy cheating on his girl with the girl’s mother, but the cheaters are always generic, non-descript. After investigating hundreds of cheaters, I can’t tell you what any of them look like. Then Cheater Number 5302 stepped into my path and made an instant, distinct impression.

I stood in my bedroom, clad in only bra and panties as the MOD Squad, Raven, Daria, and Suzie, lay across my bed, flipping through Cheater Number 5302’s dossier. On the first night of every new investigation, the girls come over to discuss the case and offer me assistance on what to wear.

“He is so fine,” Raven said as she stared unblinkingly at 5302’s picture. She flicked her long, bone straight, black mane over her shoulder. “I almost can’t stand to look at him.”

I looked at her through the dresser mirror. She lay propped up on one dainty arm, her bright beige skin smooth and tight, her body tiny and lithe, her size-two Seven jeans painted on the nearly perfect curves of her ass, hips, and thighs.

She’s my friend, I thought. The sexy bitch is my friend.

“*Muy* fine,” Daria shouted before offering Raven a high-five. The trio began giggling like they were no older than 15.

“Okay ladies,” I said, turning to face them. I dropped my hands on my ample hips and cocked my head to the side. “We all know he’s fine. I’m pretty sure *he* knows he’s fine. How about you help me find something to wear.”

Raven hopped up from the bed and trotted into my walk-in closet. “I gotcha,” she said. “Pop in the video.”

I plopped down onto the bed between Daria and Suzie. Suzie ran a hand over her stiff, black bangs, then handed me 5302’s dossier. I had already read through it twice...and picked up 5302’s picture at least a dozen times.

Kenneth Stevenson was printed just beneath the picture of a guy who could definitely give George Clooney a run for his money in the looks department. Typically, white guys weren’t my thing. I was more a Denzel Washington chick; I liked a brother who was refined but looked like he knew how to do things properly. But Cheater Number 5302? I would straddle up on that stallion any day. But he was married. He was possibly a cheater. I was sent to catch him in the act. I was the act. Therefore, no pleasure and all work.

I read through the brief summary that began the dossier:

Name: Kenneth Stevenson

Age: 42

Height: 6’ 1 ½”

Weight: 195

Occupation: Lawyer

Married: 8 years to Cynthia Stevenson

Children: Two—daughter, 6, Rebekah. Son, 4, Kenneth, Jr.

Reason for coming to F.A.C.E.: For the last five months, Mrs. Stevenson has felt a disconnection from her husband. He’s been working longer hours. He’s consistently picking fights for no reason. He has practically stopped having sexual relations with Mrs. Stevenson.

Suzie took the pictures from the folder and said, “They look so happy in these pictures. I wonder what caused the rift.”

I looked in Suzie's direction and smiled. Though she was F.A.C.E.'s receptionist/secretary/informant/everywoman, I knew she had aspirations of being promoted to investigator. Whenever a case came through, she was the first to read the dossiers, to prep the clients, and always made sure to offer her thoughts and opinions to anyone who would listen; I always did.

With a purple-painted fingernail, she pointed to a picture of the Stevenson brood. Kenneth had Cynthia (the wife and unhappy client) wrapped up in a big hug beneath a willow tree. They both wore t-shirts and shorts. The kids covered their eyes and made sick, gaggy faces at their parents. The kids *could* pass for white; it was the first thing I noticed in the picture, but in closer inspection, you could notice that the girl was the spitting image of her mother—except for the coloring, and Kenneth, Jr. was totally his dad, but with his mother's big brown eyes. They were an adorable family. I frowned. I hoped I wouldn't find anything during my undercover work.

"Girl," Daria said, "this chica looks just like you."

"Yeah," I whispered, "I know. Who else could do this case?"

Vince, my best friend and co-owner of F.A.C.E. with me and our boy, Rico, thought we should first go with someone who resembled the positive attributes of Mrs. Stevenson. Kenneth had to have loved her inside and out once upon a time. Maybe my resemblance would make him want me.

Mrs. Stevenson was a full-figured, black woman. Last I checked, my size 16 body qualified for full-figured stardom, and my cinnamon coloring made me a sistah. She had the look of someone who should have had the biggest ego. She looked smart. She looked sporty. She looked girly. Cynthia really could have been my older sister. Long hair, big brown eyes, nice curvy body. She had about ten, fifteen pounds on me and an additional two or three inches in height, but those were incidentals when you looked at our faces, our bodies. The more I looked at her picture, the more I wanted to protect her from her cheating husband.

"Ta-da," Raven yelled as she ran out the closet.

In one hand, she held my Isabel's, a sexy pair of red Blahnik sandals that really just consisted of spike heels and straps. In the other hand, she held my black, almost sheer, empire-waist mini-dress.

“This has to be better than the Wal-Mart clothes and Adidas you’re always wearing,” Raven said. She offered me her most sugary smile.

“Fuck you, bitch,” I bit out.

“You wish. Now get dressed and somebody pop that damn video in please. I know I asked like five minutes ago.”

“Oh yes,” Daria said, trying to sound as haughty as her Latina, ex-Brooklynite accent would allow. “We’re so sorry, mistress.” She bowed and retrieved the video from the envelope that held it and the dossier. “We beg your pardon.”

Raven held out my outfit and rolled her eyes.

“The Issie’s will be a nice touch,” Suzie said. “5302 has a foot fetish.”

“Have him suck a big toe for me, okay?” Daria asked as she pushed the tape into the VCR. We all fell out laughing.

“You’re a damn idiot, girl,” I said.

I slipped into my outfit as the tape began playing. Vince immediately appeared on the screen. I grinned. Vince and I had been friends for almost ten years. We met while pursuing our master’s degrees in forensic science and psychology. He was fresh out of the police academy, both he and Rico, and the moment we met, we just clicked.

His face, golden and sun-kissed, filled the screen before the shot zoomed out a bit. He started the taping as he always does, with the date and time and subject, and then the shot widened to include Cynthia Stevenson, and I couldn’t help but to take in a sharp breath. Her face was fuller, but I still felt as if I was watching me on the screen.

With trembling hand, she raised a handkerchief to her eyes to dab away the tears that trickled. She was impeccably dressed in a steel gray pantsuit. Her long hair fell casually as if she just fingered back the hair and secured it into a clip.

“I’m not sure how to begin,” she whispered to Vince.

He leaned over the table and patted her hand reassuringly.

“How about you tell me what brought you to F.A.C.E.?” he suggested.

For the next fifteen minutes, the girls and I sat shoulder-to-shoulder on the bed, staring at my twin as she gestured with her hands, wiped tears, whispered, and at times, yelled about her relationship with Cheater Number 5302. She thought it was quite a coup for someone like her to meet and marry someone like Kenneth. My eyebrow had went up.

To me, and of course I was biased, she was a beautiful woman; he was damn lucky to have her. But Cynthia didn't see it that way.

"I used to be really," she said, then stopped before adding a barely there, "fat." She leaned as close to Vince as she could and added, "I hated myself, and I guess, I still have some, well, issues with that."

"Maybe she needs to come in for some counseling with you, Carter," Raven said to me.

"I was so grateful that the kids turned out, for the most part, to look like Kenneth," Cynthia said on the video. "They're cute. They're small. And most importantly, they are lighter than me."

"Um," I said to Raven, "I don't think I could help this woman. Her issues run far deeper than just her marriage."

Cynthia was a woman on the verge of being broken. She hated herself for being overweight. She was happy the kids turned out to be lighter than she. She was happy that someone who was white wanted her. She could somehow *be* somebody else because of him.

I wanted to reach through the TV and snatch Cynthia right out of it. She could have been my sister, and I never believed myself to be fat or unattractive. I was thick, but I never got a complaint for having juicy thighs or an attention-grabbing booty. I couldn't stand when a sister would lose her mind and think someone, anyone could replace what she needed to give herself—love and esteem. Especially when she thought she had to go looking in the rainbow connection to find it. If she couldn't love herself, why in the hell did she think someone else could?

Despite my job, I mean after all, I was working for Mrs. Stevenson, I almost understood why Kenneth's eye might wander. It must be tiring having to breathe for you *and* someone else.

I grabbed the remote on top of the VCR and turned the tape off.

"She'll make me too depressed to do this right," I said. "I need to focus and not go to the club and kick her husband's ass."

"That's right," Suzie said. "We want him to be attracted to you, not injured by you."

Raven snickered, then snorted. I laughed. Her snorts were the one thing I could keep in my head to remind myself that she wasn't perfect.

"With the way you look tonight, *hermana*," Daria said, "I think he'd still be attracted if you hurt him."

I walked over to the floor-length mirror on the bathroom door and studied myself.

I had to admit, Cheater Number 5302 would not be able to stop staring at my French pedicure, or the way that all the thin, red straps of my Isabel's wrapped tightly around the big toes, the ankles, the calves. As he raised his eyes upwards to the red straps, he wouldn't hesitate to keep going to view the well-toned calves, my knees, and the beginning of my firm, thick thighs before the rest of my goodies disappeared under my dress.

I did the obligatory side-to-side views, then turned my back to the mirror and whipped my head quick to see what the butt was looking like in the dress. The girls laughed.

I faced the mirror again and threw my hands up on my hips. One of my Victoria's latest recruits enveloped my breasts and pushed them together, then up. Instead of my normal black-rimmed specks, I wore dark gray contacts; they would bring flair to the aura that was me—more than my typical brown eyes could. My hair was precision cut and wrapped much like Cynthia's and much *not* like my typical crazy, crinkly, flyaway hair. It now laid silkily down my back. A loose lock fell over my left eye. My makeup, professionally done. Jewelry, minimal. I hardly ever looked this good, even during our weekly girls' night out. I almost didn't recognize myself, but I guess that was the point. I was supposed to be the finest girl up in the club tonight. How else would I catch a cheater?

"Are you done inspecting yourself, fly girl?" Raven asked.

"Yes, ma'am," I answered. "Just want to make sure everything is where it should be."

I reached over onto my nightstand and picked up my cell phone. I dialed a number and after Rico's hello, I said, "I'm on my way to Satisfaction."

"Are you calling my baby?" Daria asked, clapping her hands and jumping on the bed.

Rico laughed. "Hey sweetie," he yelled.

"Rico says hey," I said.

“Hey baby,” Daria cooed. Raven, Suzie, and I all stuck fingers in our mouths and made choking sounds.

“Screw y’all,” Daria said, rolling her neck. “Don’t be mad ‘cause I got a man.”

“Whatever, Sickenstein,” I said. “Anyway, I’m out, Rico, ‘k?”

“You know I got your back, *mamacita*,” Rico replied. “Be sexy.”

I twirled then sashayed in front of the mirror. “Aren’t I always?”

“Well...”

“Shut up, Rico. See you there.”

I slipped my cell phone into my small, red and black purse.

I looked back at the mirror and said, “Hey baby, what’s your sign?”

“Oh no,” Suzie said, giggling. “If 5302 says anything *remotely* like that, beat him for me.”

I laughed as I retrieved my credit card-sized recorder from the dresser. I slipped the recorder into the thin pouch I stitched into the inside of my dress under my right arm. I clipped the tiny microphone to my bra and fixed my dress again. Rico would test me for audio when I got to Satisfaction.

“Are you guys going to stay and destroy my house?” I asked.

Raven nodded. “Basically,” she replied. “We’re going to ogle Kenneth Stevenson’s picture some more and we’ll see what happens from there.”

I laughed, then grabbed my stomach and winced.

“You okay, Carter?” Suzie asked, rushing to me.

I took a few breaths and stood straight. I closed my eyes for a minute and bit down on the inside of my cheek as I felt the burn roll in my belly and lurch itself up my chest.

“Ulcer?” Raven asked.

All I could do was nod. I had thought that this time I would get through an investigation unscathed, but my body knew me better than my perpetrations did. I was first diagnosed with having an ulcer when I was thirteen and ever since, they grew in intensity and came whenever something remotely stressful entered my life. Pretending to be someone else in order to catch cheats? Just a *tad* bit stressful.

Raven left the room and came back with some Pepcid and a glass of water. After taking the pills and downing the water, I took a breath and said, “Thanks, girl.”

I shook off the pain and grabbed a tissue out the box on my dresser to dab at the perspiration that sprouted on my forehead.

“I think I’ll be okay,” I said.

The girls rallied around me and pulled me into a big hug.

“Rico will be there,” Daria said. “If you need anything, he’ll come running.”

I nodded then offered each a hug before saying my goodbyes and walking to the front door. I grabbed the knob and stopped mid-turn. I rubbed my belly, which still churned and burned.

“Stop this,” I chastised myself. “Get over it and do the damn job.”

I stood as straight as I could be and tried smiling. With the door open, I offered a prayer for safety and the truth, made the sign of the cross, and left for another night of rendezvousing with infidelity.