

# Excerpt from Only Chance at Love

## Chapter One

The online sales report stared back at Alexis, evidence of precisely what she'd suspected for a while. Sales for the quarter were down. Specifically, sales of shoes designed by Raffaele.

*Dammit!*

Alexis King was the owner and founder of AK Designs. She'd started the company ten years ago with a tiny store-front, designing shoes at her kitchen table in the off-hours while managing a l'Amour Lux fine clothing shop. Now the company had grown to four stores, two additional designers, and a huge online presence. Plus she had a new Forest Ridge location opening next month.

Running your own business was a juggle, she knew. Her investors acted like they expected the company to collapse at any minute despite the reports. She could feel the tension on every quarterly conference call. Lexi hired based on talent and experience—some of the retail staff were there for the paycheck, and the ladies liked the discount on rocking shoes. The guys—shit! Where to start? The straight ones thought they could bang her and be in line to take over when she retired. She was thirty-nine for the love of Christ.

She sounded cynical, even to herself.

*Snap out of it.*

Back to Raffaele. She'd brought him on as a fresh Parsons School of Design graduate, having seen the potential within his portfolio. She'd enthused over the fact that she could train him on her way of doing business—she hated retraining those who'd been in corporate America too long, even in design.

She'd hired Raffaele and Brea about three years prior at the urging of her bestie, Rachel, who had worried that Lexi was working herself to the bone. Something had to give, and managing a business left little time for designing. Not only did AK Designs sell shoes, but handbags as well. She'd confessed to Rachel that she'd hit a creative brick wall and Rachel had suggested hiring talented young people so that Lexi could focus on the operations end.

That had been around the time of the Dillion fiasco, but she didn't want to think about that.

Raffaele's work had captivated her with his use of color and unique and interesting lines. Several shoes and bags had gone into production within months of hiring him. But lately, something was off. It was like his mind was somewhere else, or perhaps he was just bored. Lexi knew that's how it could be with creative people—lose their attention on a project and there was little hope of getting it back.

She'd spoken to him about it twice before, but any fix he'd implement was only temporary.

On the other hand, Brea didn't have an issue with the pace of designing. She was detailed and appreciated time to create without feeling rushed.

Next month, AK Designs' fifth store would open and Lexi really didn't need this stress right now. Firing a designer meant a whole host of issues cropping up, the least of which was hiring a replacement for Raffaele. What would her investors think?

*It's Friday; maybe Rachel is free for a drink tonight.* Chances were good Rachel would be home with Hunter and the kids. Her friend occasionally had to run an errand for her upcoming

wedding, but she and Hunter weren't planning anything extravagant. In fact, she'd said they were saving all the extravagance for the honeymoon—two weeks in Australia. With all of Hunter's frequent flyer miles from work, he had enough for first-class round-trip tickets for both of them.

Australia sounded positively exquisite.

Well, no sense putting off the inevitable. Lexi picked up the phone to call Raffaele, figuring he'd be in the design/concept room—AK's playroom with sewing machines, white boards, and a plethora of leather scraps. They'd start with a conversation about a drop in sales and take it from there.

Brea answered. "Design room."

"Hey, Brea. Is Raffaele there?"

"No, sorry, Lexi. He said he had an errand to run."

That's strange. She tapped a pen on her desk. Why hadn't he told her he was leaving?  
"When was that?"

"Um, about an hour ago. I'm not a hundred percent sure."

Lexi sighed as she glanced at the clock: three in the afternoon. Not his normal lunch hour. "That's okay. Thanks." She disconnected the line to ring his rarely used office, as he spent most of his time in the design room. She stopped and placed the handset in the receiver, deciding to see for herself if he was in. She made the short walk down the hall not sure what she hoped to find, but maybe he'd left a note, or maybe she'd see what was distracting him from work.

She opened the door and went inside. The lights were off but other than that, the room looked as it always had—stacks of sketch pads, magazines, and various books on his desk and the floor around it. Lexi stepped farther into the space. Nothing seemed out of place. Crumpled fast-food lunch wrappers filled the waste can. No note to explain his absence.

Just as she was about to turn and leave, something caught her eye in the stack of papers on Raffaele's desk. A red and black logo.

She recognized that logo—Stiletto Inc. Stiletto was her competition and based in Kansas City. Henry Bumpass, CEO of Stiletto, had been jealous of Alexis for some time. She knew for a fact he wanted Brea on his design team, and he never got over that she'd chosen AK over Stiletto.

Lexi quickly glanced toward the door, but no one was there. Stepping closer, Lexi pushed aside the pile to reveal an envelope. She lifted it and peered inside. It appeared to be a statement; the kind that had a check attached. In this case, the check was gone. She could see by the perforated edges it had once been attached to the bottom. She tried to make sense of the words: CNSLT SRVCS.

To the far right read a dollar amount. A figure that was quite large, so it could hardly be a rebate.

Lexi scratched her head and squinted. *What is this about and why is Raffaele getting a check from Stiletto?*

She thought about the text and finally put the meaning together. It was for "consultation services."

*Sonuvabitch!*

Her stomach sank. Corporate espionage. No wonder he'd supposedly not been able to come up with a winning design.

She'd paid him well, gave him good benefits, treated him with respect, and this is how he repaid her? By selling secrets to the enemy?

Thoughts raced around in her head so fast she could hardly think straight.

Lexi had to get out of his office. She was in no frame of mind to confront him right then.

Her heart pounded in her chest, but she made an effort to keep her expression neutral and her legs steady. Document in hand, she passed Gregory, no doubt working hard as he always did, as she returned to her office.

She dropped into her chair with deep sadness, shoved the check stub in her drawer, and shot Raffaele a text asking him to swing by her office before leaving for the day. That was not an unusual text for her to send, so he likely wouldn't be suspicious. Of course, this would throw a monkey-wrench into whatever he was doing if he'd had no intention of returning to the office that day.

Next, she called the security team for the building and asked to have one or two officers on stand-by. She wasn't specifically fearful for Raffaele, but it was best not to take any chances.

Lexi hated this awful feeling of betrayal. She sipped in shallow breaths to ease her knotted stomach.

Whatever had she done to him? She'd chosen him as a designer and given him his own space to make a mark in the design world.

She unsuccessfully focused on combing through her email inbox, replying as needed, and scheduling an appointment for the following week.

At four a rap came at the door. Raffaele, tall and thin with disheveled hair, red Chucks, and designer denim, asked, "You wanted to see me, boss?"

Schooling her face, Lexi waved Raffaele in and dialed security. She swiveled in her chair to hide her mouth as she spoke, "Okay, we're ready."

"Yes, ma'am," the dispatcher replied, "we'll send someone right up."

She motioned to the chair in front of her desk. "Please sit, Raffaele."

His brows furrowed, but he didn't hesitate. He crossed a foot over his knee and sat back.

"Raffaele, I don't know where to start. I'm actually rather speechless." She'd felt betrayal before, and this time was no different, but shit! She'd thought she could trust him.

His head tipped to the side, gaze innocent. Was he acting, or being a cocky SOB?

*Oh, come on!* "I thought you were happy. We've known each other for several years now, and well, I thought I treated you fairly. Gave you extra time when your grandma died..."

Raffaele's nose twitched like a rabbit sensing the snare.

"And made sure we had a HEPA filter for the design room to help with your allergies."

His face lost its color, knowing full-well she was onto his dirty little secret.

"I just want to know *why*. Why sell our secrets to the competition?" She didn't know who she was more upset with—Raffaele or Bumpass.

He swallowed hard. "Lexi, I'm sorry." Raffaele gulped in air like a beached fish. "I don't know why I did it."

"Not buying that. You had to know. Did you sell them your designs too? Scratch that. I know you did and left us with the crap." Impatience and frustration bubbled up.

He glanced down and shook his head slowly. "I guess I felt important, valuable. They approached me and made it sound so easy. And they were willing to pay me..." His voice trailed off. He knew how ridiculous it sounded. He collected a great paycheck from AK.

A gentle knock rapped at the door. The armed security guard waited just outside. Lexi didn't feel like she was in danger, *per se*, but Raffaele had proved his actions were unpredictable at best.

She rose and smoothed her skirt. She had nothing more to say, and nothing Raffaele could say would change her mind about firing him. *Bumpass can freakin' have him.*

“So, as you can expect, this is your last day...” She strode to the door and opened it. A six-foot tower of muscle stood there, his arms crossed over his tank of a chest. “This gentleman will escort you to your office to clear out your personal items.”

Raffaele’s shoulders slouched as he stood and made his way to his *former* office. She grabbed an empty box from the copy room to give him and watched as he loaded a few items inside. She wanted to laugh when he added several fashion magazines.

Did he really think Stiletto would hire him now? He’d proved himself a spy. She just shook her head and watched as Raffaele shuffled toward the door, his gaze downward. She held out her hand. “Key.”

Everyone who had an office had a key, like Gregory and Brea. Of course, Lexi had all the duplicates and would likely have the lock changed, but it helped solidify the fact that he was gone and would never return.

He handed her the office key, and with sadness in his eyes, said, “I’m sorry.”

She had no response. He’d disappointed her beyond belief.

## Chapter Two

Lexi should still be burning mad, but instead, the icy chill of managing the backstabbing had thawed to a slow burn.

“I’m so over this,” Alexis said to no one as she slammed the top drawer of her desk closed and locked it.

What a freakin’ lousy day! What a way to end the week!

Brea would need to know what happened, but that could wait until Monday.

It was Friday, and she’d hoped to have a weekend to herself before the launch. Now, she’d likely be combing the job sites for another designer. Ever since she’d started her company, Alexis rarely had a free weekend but had no regrets. She loved AK Designs more than she loved just about anything, though it was starting to wear on her.

She needed a vacation. She’d never been to Switzerland. Hell, if she could carve out several weeks, she’d travel Europe to fill the creative well. Until then, she could use a distraction of epic proportions.

Lexi might not be able to vacation just yet, especially being short a designer, but at least she had time for a drink. She thought about calling Rachel or Milo, but really, she was emotionally exhausted. She just needed to unwind with a whiskey before driving home and starting again tomorrow.

She walked to the parking garage, got into her Lexus, then headed to her favorite bar, Bogart’s, a few short miles from her office. It was an upscale place Alexis could pop into when she needed to decompress. She didn’t go out often because—no offense to men—she was sick of getting hit on.

*Maybe I should buy a CZ ring, and everyone will think I’m married?*

Most men, Lexi figured, fit into three categories. The first group were intimidated by her—her designer clothes, nice figure, attractive face. And she knew she didn’t make it easy for them. They heard CEO and founder of a successful, growing company and fumbled over their

words. Their weakness reminded her of her exes. The second category had the gold-diggers—those men who recognized her wealth and saw dollar signs instead of the interesting, engaging woman behind the position. The third group held losers who thought more highly of themselves than they should. They'd worked their way to middle-management, perhaps, listened to self-help books during their commute, and couldn't hold a conversation with a woman without making it about themselves. Waste of her time!

She hung her new find—a vintage Prada—on the back of the barstool and sidled into her favorite spot at the end of the bar, away from the chaos. Most everyone gathered at the far end, on their feet, eyes glued to the TV. “Marker’s Mark and 7UP, Josh,” Lexi called to the bartender. He lifted his chin in acknowledgement.

“How you doin’, sweetheart?” Josh placed a drink on a cocktail napkin and slid it in front of her.

She took a sip. Josh made a good pour. Of course, it helped that she tipped him well. Josh and the laidback yet still-upscale atmosphere, were the reasons she could relax in this place.

Josh had let her know that he was available for a quick lay, if Lexi wanted. He was a good-looking guy, fun to flirt with, and about her age. But she didn't want to fuck up a great business relationship. Literally.

“Hell of a week. Had to fire a designer today.” Unwind tonight, because tomorrow she'd need to get the creative juices going and pull out her sketch pad.

Josh grimaced. “Bummer. Stay here as long as you can stand it. I have to warn you, though. The game’s on, and this crowd is live tonight.”

A shout sounded from a high-top table, followed by a whistle. Yeah, it might be a short night. “Thanks.” Lexi wasn't much of a basketball fan.

She sighed as a guy in an ill-fitted suit, a receding hairline, and stupid-ass swagger approached her. She'd walked through the front door—what?—three or four minutes prior. *This might be a new record.*

“Hey, sugar.” The man adjusted his ten-year-old tie. “Haven't I seen you someplace before?”

“Yes. That’s why I don’t go there anymore.” Definitely Category Three.

“Ooh, touchy. Okay, I can take a hint. But if you’re still lonely at the end of the night and need some lovin’, I’ll be right over there.” The guy pointed into the shadows of the bar. She had no idea exactly where and didn't care. She set her face and waited for him to leave.

After he retreated, she took a healthy gulp of her drink savoring the aroma and subtle burn as the whiskey made its way down. She may have moaned at the exquisiteness. It could have been the drink or the fact that she was long overdue for some alone time with her favorite bourbon. *Yum.*

Another man approached who scanned her body head to toe as if that was a turn-on. She'd peg him as in the first category. His hesitancy before speaking to her directly told her all she needed to know.

He leaned his elbow on the bar top. “Hey, bud. Can I get a martini?”

Oh, he wants to look like a power-player, she thought.

Alexis lifted her phone to her ear, making her voice loud enough to be heard by her unwanted admirer. “Why the hell are you calling?” She paused for effect. “Look. You can either sell me your company at the price I offered, or everyone will know what a sham you are by close of business Monday. And for good measure, I’ll publish the pictures I took of your minuscule penis. It’ll be viral within forty-eight hours.” She glanced briefly at the guy to her left and

narrowed her eyes. “Fuckin’ right. I want that contract signed before your wife comes home.” She pretended to end the call and sighed. “Asshole prick,” she said into her glass before she took another swig, catching a glimpse of the guy next to her. His face was ashen. He gripped the drink Josh left him and returned to his table without saying a word.

Josh grinned at her. “They’re on to you tonight, babe. I’m nominating you for an Oscar.”

Lexi couldn’t stop herself from snickering. It really was just a game to her. She’d resigned herself to living alone for the rest of her life. She’d likely never find her match. She’d retire on beachfront property someday, get off on the cabana boys waiting on her every desire, and have a cat. Or maybe a dog. Did it matter? Dog, they’re more cuddly.

When the ballgame returned after the halftime break, another bartender raised the volume, and all eyes turned toward the big screen TV. Alexis combed the bar, searching for anything interesting to distract her. Looked to be about eighty percent men, twenty percent women.

*Hot damn!* One woman had on a pair of *her* shoes. She loved it when that happened. Lexi smiled.

“You have a great smile.”

Her head snapped to the voice at her right, the only other seat at the end of the bar. Where the fuck had he come from?

The stranger sat in the seat beside her and nodded toward Josh.

“Hey, Derek, how’s it going?” Josh gave him a fist bump.

“Good, man. Can I get a Sierra Nevada pale ale? No glass.” Derek was tall, maybe six-three, with good muscle tone, like a gym rat.

“You bet.” Josh pivoted away to get the beer.

As Derek reached into his jeans pocket and set his phone on the bar, he glanced at her and said, “You’re welcome.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Excuse me?”

He looked up from his phone. “I paid you a compliment, you said ‘thank you,’ and I replied, ‘you’re welcome.’” His confident smile showed straight, white teeth that left Alexis momentarily speechless.

*Arrogant much?* “I did?”

The crowd yelled and screamed at the TV. Something good must have happened.

“I’m boiling it down.” He shrugged his shoulder. “If I recall correctly, it was more like ‘thank you for noticing. I’m immersed in a boring life, and it’s nice to have someone care enough to pull me from the monotony.’”

*Well, crap.* She might be mildly attracted to this guy. She forced herself to focus on his game. She ruled out Category One. Maybe Category Two or Three? But on some level, he intrigued her. Maybe she needed a new category...

His words also struck a chord within her.

He flashed his smile, and she let the corners of her lips curve slightly in response.

“Monotony, huh?”

“Sure.” Derek eyed Josh. “Thanks, man.” He saluted her and took a gulp from his bottle. “From the looks of you—”

Ah-hah! Category Two: gold digger.

“You’re very successful. You’re dressed like you just came from work. Perhaps after having a bad day? You’re probably in no rush to get home. You work your ass off and aren’t

appreciated. You sometimes question why you work so hard, even if you love your job. And life has become tedious and mind-numbing.”

*Shit!* He might have hit the nail on the head.

She sipped her drink. “Perhaps. And of course, you already know you sound cocky in your assessment.”

Ignoring her statement, Derek leaned close, so close she could feel his hot breath on her neck. “And you come here for entertainment and escapism, and maybe, just maybe, a challenge.”

A shiver raced down her spine.

Now that was an interesting take on things.

How long had he been watching her? Her heart kicked over. Was he a stalker?

Wait! Was that a Tag watch on his wrist? *Not* Category Two.

What’s this guy’s scheme?

“A challenge?” She lifted her eyebrows.

“You like a challenge don’t you, sweetheart?”

*Is he trying to be condescending?* She narrowed her eyes.

“I mean no disrespect. I am incredibly attracted to strong women.” His eyes, hazel, were sincere. “I would never say anything to hurt you.” Derek eased back a few inches. “The question remains—do you like a challenge?”

Lexi licked her lips. That was a loaded question. And she didn’t know how to answer it. Half of her wanted to tell him to fuck off. The other half wanted to accept whatever challenge he thought would make her think life wasn’t tedious and mind-numbing.

The crowd got raucous again. Nevertheless, she lowered her voice and leveled him a look. “I love a challenge.”

Derek sat back in his barstool and took a long draw off his beer, his full lips pressed against the bottle as he studied her.

Nice watch, manicured hands, but worn jeans, basic T-shirt, and mischievous smile. This guy was an enigma.

Her nether parts awakened when she thought about those lips against her instead of that bottle.

She glanced back at the crowd—a sea of backs. Everyone’s attention was glued to the TV. A few women chatted in a far corner, not caring about their surroundings. Three guys in game shirts leaned on the bar and impatiently waited for their drink refills.

Derek slid his barstool closer, his legs straddling her chair to get closer. “So, here’s the challenge, beautiful, should you choose to accept it...”

He faced her side with his arm on the back of her barstool. His spicy scent imbued her senses and clouded her brain. *Focus!*

“Right here in this bar, I will make you come without touching your skin.”

Lexi gasped. Her head spun to meet his gaze dead in the eyes, their faces mere inches apart. She blinked.