

ASPEN GOLD SERIES

A *Better* Man

Bernadette Jones

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Chapter 1

New Year's Eve

“You never should have run from me. Did you really think you could hide? Did you think I wouldn't find you? Did you think exposing me would protect you?” His laugh echoed from her computer speakers.

Breezy stared at the screen, her hand trembling over the mouse. Images of her own battered and bloody body, unfurled on the monitor, and the dreaded voice filled the room once again.

“Before, it was just fun and games. A little pain always intensifies the pleasure, don't you think? Next time the pleasure will be all mine. And I will extract the maximum pain.”

The voice paused. *“Surely, you didn't think this was my first time? You always were the whimsical one.”*

“I'm coming, sweet Breezy. Soon. Very soon.”

The sound of her real name on his lips sucked the breath from her chest.

The images and sound dissolved as suddenly as they'd appeared. The commanding photo of the German Shepherd she'd been viewing for adoption once again filled her screen.

Staggering to her feet, her desk chair skidded across the floor.

“You sonofabitch. You aren't going to win,” she shouted to the empty room. Grabbing her phone and Jethro, her sawed off shotgun and constant companion of late, she took the stairs down to her shop and studio. Checking the locks on the back door, she hopped onto the bench below the oversized transom windows and tested them as well. She moved through the space illuminated by the moonlight shining through the windows and a few strategically-placed motion lights.

She knew every shape and shadow in the open concept rooms on the lower level of her building. The hanging shoji screens used for privacy during dance classes had been locked in place against the wall, leaving the pole dancing floor open to the front merchandise shop. She hesitated, fingers on the light switch before she flipped on the light and made her way through the store. She paused and glanced out the window that faced the street before checking the main entrance door. With a sigh of relief, she headed back to the rear dance studio.

From the wine chiller under the buffet table, she grabbed a bottle of premium vintage wine. A burst of early firecrackers sent a shock down her spine and she almost dropped the bottle. Breezy rolled the cold bottle against her forehead. She needed to get a grip. She couldn't lose it now.

Two months ago, her lawyer had contacted her letting her know Hollis Moser had escaped during his last appeal hearing.

Escaped? Ha. More likely he'd bought his way out.

Despite the news, she'd been confident her stage name, Daphne, the only name she'd ever shared with anyone outside of this town, would protect her. After a month with no incident and no update from the lawyer, she'd foolishly convinced herself she was safe.

At first, the odd bits of internet mail addressed to her hadn't triggered much concern. Spam was an unavoidable aggravation of online life. But over the last month the fire prevention and premier medical emergency ads had escalated, triggering suspicions. The frequency had started to wear on her, and the recent mortuary ads no longer seemed innocuous.

For weeks something inside her had known. Had dreaded this night. *He knows where you are. He knows about Whimzy.*

How had he found her?

A thump, thump of boots on the stairs at her backdoor sent her spinning seconds before a bold knock.

"Miss Richards, are you in there?"

Another knock, then another. "Miss Richards, I saw the light."

Clutching Jethro to her side, she crossed to the door, flipped on one set of lights and called out, “Who the hell are you and what do you want?”

“A friend of yours sent me to check on you. She’s worried about you.”

“What friend?”

“IrishMist. She heard you’re looking for a Dog.”

“And you have one?”

JackDaniels laughed at the question. “I should have known Irish wouldn’t make this easy. She obviously hasn’t talked to you. Text her, Miss Richards. I’ll wait.”

Ivy had told him *Intimate Whimzy* was a pole dance studio and adult toy and lingerie store. His sister had said the owner was an independent woman but something had been off lately. Irish— no, she went by Ivy now, was concerned for her friend.

Five minutes later, the woman in question opened the door, a bottle of wine cradled under one arm, the other arm held tightly against her side and angled away. She was hiding a weapon.

Fingers hooked in his front jean pockets, leather jacket open, he leaned against the door frame and smiled at the vision in front of him. Red hair had been twisted in a messy bun on top of her head. She wore gray tights, black boy-short underwear and an off the shoulder, gray T-shirt knotted to expose her toned midriff. A tiny diamond piercing twinkled at her navel. Pink leg warmers covered her long legs from ankle to above the knee.

“Where’s the dog?”

He smirked. “My name’s JackDaniels. People call me Dog as in DogWidABone.”

Her cognac gaze traveled appreciatively over the width of his shoulders, abs, waist and below his belt to where his package was coming to life at her deliberate perusal. He liked her brashness. Breezy Richards appeared to be one confident woman.

“Hmmm. Yes, I can see,” she said. “The picture of you Ivy sent wasn’t nearly as complementary. She said you were a mangy SOB, but you could be trusted.” Dragging her eyes slowly back up she met his gaze. “I was looking for a dog with a mean streak.”

“That would be me, ma’am. And that’s the nicest thing Irish—Ivy has said about me in some time. Thank you for sharing.”

She waggled the bottle of wine between them and asked. “Can you get the cork out of this bottle?”

He met the challenge in her gaze. “Yes ma’am. Tight fits are my specialty. Into and out of.”

She snorted as though to suppress a laugh, turned and headed across the room. “Do up the locks on the door and follow me upstairs.”

His gaze lingered on the design of two male hands cupping her ass cheeks stitched on the back of her boy-shorts. As she rounded the corner, he got a glimpse of the sawed-off shotgun she held to her side. Definitely his kind of woman.

Closing the door, he set the deadbolt, then the second one, and slid the chain loop and bar locks. The last two looked new. Overkill or a very frightened woman.

Ivy had told him she’d noticed a difference in Breezy a little over a month ago. Her friend had started making excuses for not meeting on girl’s-nights-out and rarely left the building housing her business and apartment. She’d even started having her groceries delivered. Every time Ivy inquired, she’d been met with denial and a stone wall. She knew Breezy was private and didn’t want to alienate her by pushing too hard. But she had assured him she would push as hard as necessary if she felt her friend was in physical danger.

Out of habit he let his gaze scan the room, cataloging and assessing windows, doors, furniture, exit plans. He followed Breezy up a secluded set of stairs to an over-the-top open concept apartment. No dividing walls, no barriers, like the area below.

All the kitchen appliances were arranged on the left of the stairs along two corner walls. The marble breakfast counter was supported by six metal bars along the floor. A low couch was pushed against the wall, a pile of pillows lay on the area rug in front. Two floor-level platform beds, each with attached headboard and side tables were arranged in opposite corners. Shoji screens that could be expanded for privacy, were collapsed and leaning against the wall next to each. Across from the seating area, a floor to ceiling bookcase with a flatscreen in the middle and a desk with a computer were affixed to the wall. Off to the side, a dancer’s pole extended from floor to ceiling.

Even the sink and shower area were open with plexiglass walls. All the lighting was recessed in the ceiling, the walls high enough you'd need a ladder to reach the covered bulbs.

Crossing to the large window on the opposite side, he studied the glass, surreptitiously tapping it with a knuckle, reinforced glass. He glanced down to the street below.

Something in his gut twisted. Everything was obsessively open. She was either claustrophobic, or terrified of something, or someone, hiding in the shadows.

“Wow,” he said.

She laughed from where she stood at the island. “*Radically Modern*, my cousin calls it. It took her a while to get used to the concept.”

“What does everyone else call it?”

She shrugged. “Chauncey’s the only one who’s seen my personal space. She stays with me from time to time.” She frowned and worried her lower lip. “I like my private space to be *my* private space.”

He nodded his head. “Message received. I won’t tell.”

Crossing to where she stood peeling the seal from the wine bottle, he noticed she’d placed the shotgun within easy reach. Deliberately, he edged into her personal space and held out his hand. She gracefully stepped back putting at least four feet between them and extended the bottle.

Another interesting piece of the puzzle. He reached out his right hand. “Corkscrew?”

She handed it to him and grabbed two glasses from where they hung under the shelf holding the plates, bowls and cups.

“You got a permit for that shotgun? There are rules for modified weapons.”

She laughed. “That’s Jethro and he’s been like this since I was a little girl. My grandpa Whim taught me to shoot. He left the building and the gun to me when he died. Knowing Whim, he never asked anyone for permission for anything.”

“Sounds like an interesting character.”

Her face softened. “He was a good man.”

Opening the bottle, he sat on a barstool across from her as she poured for both of them. “Is this the extent of your New Year’s celebration?”

“I’ve got cheese, crackers and strawberries in the refrigerator.”

“I don’t know about you, but I could use a *good* New Year. You’ve got fifteen minutes ‘til the clock strikes. What do you say I stay and we talk about how we can both start next year off right?”

“If you’re looking for a quick and easy fuck, you’re barking up the wrong tree.”

He raised his hands palms up and glanced meaningfully at the shotgun on the counter. “I like my package where it is.”

Leaning back, he lifted his glass and took a swallow.

Breezy studied him for another moment, then turned to the refrigerator. “Do you go by Jack or JD?”

“I answer to JackDaniels or Dog.”

She raised her eyebrow.”

“It’s my name.”

She pulled the cheese and fruit from the refrigerator, got the crackers and grabbed the cutting board and two plates. Her computer dinged a notification, and she fumbled the knife.

JackDaniels caught it before it slid off the counter. “You, okay?”

Breezy tried to hide her shiver. “Yeah-ah fine.”

“Do you need to go check your messages?”

She glanced up and smiled. “Nah, probably junk mail.”

At midnight fireworks popped and crackled outdoors, announcing the new year. He extended his glass across the counter. After a second of hesitation, she clinked her glass against it.

“Starting over,” he said.

She nodded and they both emptied their glasses.

“You’re Ivy’s brother. I heard you brought Avie’s mom from Kentucky. How long before you go home?” Breezy asked.

“I don’t have a home. I move around a lot.”

“Okay, before you go back to work?”

He tapped his temple. "I work out of here. I find people. Solve problems. My phone and laptop are my office."

Breezy slid a glance toward her shotgun. "My bullshit meter is pretty finely tuned. What the hell do you do and who do you work for?"

He met her gaze. "I was a sniper and cyber spy for Uncle Sam. After parting ways with him, I occupied myself as a bail bondsman, skip tracer, and bounty hunter. I take the contracts that interest me. Jobs like helping to find who was after AvieLeigh. I can work anywhere I have connectivity. If I need to physically check out a place, I have my truck and drive there and rent a room."

He pinned her with a gaze. "What I don't do is point and fire."

He leaned forward and arched his brow. "Ivy is concerned about you. You want to talk about what's going on?"

She dismissed it with a wave. "Nothing."

"Nothing doesn't provoke a woman to walk around with a sawed-off shotgun."

"Kids, college students, you know how they can be. I own a sex toy store, and I'm a little off the beaten track."

"What do these 'kids' do?"

"Drive through in the parking lot, yelling propositions. You know, juvenile stuff."

"You aren't far from the college. Statistics show that six point one sexual assaults per thousand students occur on college campuses per year."

She tilted her head and eyed him skeptically. "You pull those numbers out of your ass?"

He clenched his jaw. He'd always loved research, statistics, and information. Because of Ivy, this particular topic had been a hot one for him.

He shrugged. "I like numbers. Can your cousin stay with you?"

"No. Chauncey's at the police academy. Hunter Lawe has already offered her a job with the Spencer Police Department when she graduates. Her leaving is what got me thinking I'd like a dog. I've always wanted one. Now that I have a place of my own, it's the perfect time."

"You're looking for a real dog with a mean streak. One to cuddle?" He persisted.

“Let it go.” She grabbed his plate and glass and put them in the sink. “The kind of dog I want is my business. Come on. I’ll show you out.”

JackDaniels walked to his truck. Pausing in the open door, he glanced up at the second story windows. She’d lied about the juvenile disturbances. Something or someone had the woman terrified.

* * *

JackDaniels ran a hand over his beard stubble, sat up in bed and threw off the covers.

Staying in Ivy and Gage’s spare bedroom was awkward on multiple levels. He and Ivy still hadn’t resolved all their history, and he really felt like he was infringing on her ‘personal’ time with Gage. The not-so-hushed sounds coming from the shower were starting to get to him. Especially after meeting Breezy, he was having trouble with his own fantasies.

Grabbing his earbuds from his bag, he put them in and cranked up the music, then wandered into the kitchen and started coffee.

Something was off with the beautiful redhead, and he wanted to know what. Once presented with a puzzle he had a hard time letting go.

Ivy and Gage playfully jockeyed down the hall and rounded the corner.

“Oh. Ah, morning,” Ivy muttered.

He stood, removed his earbuds and dropped them into his pocket before grabbing two more mugs and pouring coffee. “A really good morning from the sounds of it. Happy New Year.”

Gage snorted as he reached for his brew. Ivy flushed lightly.

“Want me to make breakfast?” he offered.

Gage shook his head. “No, we both need to get going pretty soon.”

“How did it go with Breezy?” Ivy asked, taking a sip of her coffee.

“Something definitely has her spooked. She said it was harmless teenagers. Can you check to see if she’s reported any disturbances?”

Ivy frowned. “I haven’t heard of any. I’m sure Hunter would have said something. The man keeps his eye on everyone close to his wife, Ruby.”

“She tried to imply that it’s been worse since her cousin went to the police academy. Can you check with Chauncey too, in case they’re both keeping it quiet?”

Ivy nodded.

“You told me to go to the back door, which is where the pole dancing studio is. You’ve taken lessons there, right?”

“We’ve done a couple girl’s-nights-out there, yeah.”

“How many locks did she have on the door?”

“Two deadbolts.”

“Did you think that was odd?”

“A little, but the building belonged to her grandfather. I assumed they were a carryover from him.”

“She’s added a chain and bar lock. Something she probably did on her own. They look new.”

Ivy straightened and set her mug on the counter. “I’ll head in to work early and see what I can find.” She paused. “You mentioned you’d think about the job on the police force here. I turned in your information, and they want to interview you today if possible.” She raised a palm. “It’s just an interview. Maybe nothing will come of it.”

He shrugged, “Sure. Text me the time, and I’ll be there.”

He and Gage both watched her head down the hall.

“You think something’s wrong with Breezy?”

“She’s jumpy and evasive. Yeah, something’s wrong.”

Ivy came back dressed in her uniform, stopped and gave Gage a meaningful kiss and nodded a goodbye to him.

“Ivy.” JackDaniels stopped her at the door. “Check on sexual assaults at the college and run a statewide check for stalker complaints.”

Gage turned to him when she was gone. “She really wants you to stay for a while. This isn’t a bad place to put down some roots. You know the two of you need to sit down and talk it out. She deserves to know why you left without a word.”

JackDaniels stood and dumped his remaining coffee in the sink. “I didn’t leave her. I beat the shit out of the kid who attacked her. I put him in the hospital. They put me in jail.”

“She doesn’t know that. She knows nothing. They never talked about you. It was as if you fell off the earth.” Gage met his gaze, then stood, grabbing his keys from the wall hook. At the door he turned back, concern and empathy clearly written on his face. “Talk to her. For both of you.”

Twenty minutes later, JackDaniels drove past *Intimate Whimzy*, Breezy’s business and parked at the gas station off of College Road. Until he knew what was going on, he’d decided to keep his presence low-key. Dressed like any other cold weather jogger, he effectively hid his face with a hoodie and balaclava. The location was out of the way, with only a liquor store nearby and a gas station up the street. In general, the area seemed quiet and well-tended. He didn’t like how the back of her property led into dense foliage or the fact that the two buildings to the south were vacant.

Walking around her building, he confirmed what he’d suspected last night. No motion detectors, outside lights or cameras anywhere on the exterior. Rounding the corner to the rear of the building, he paused to glance at the detached garage.

What the hell was she thinking? Small town or not, she was isolated here, and her business was such that it could attract all kinds of freaks.

A creak on the stair gave him a two second warning.

“Stop where you are Moser, or you’re dead.”

[END OF EXCERPT]

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