

KNOX - CHAPTER ONE

It's the last days of summer and I'm riding my bike alongside the Delaware River, appreciating the view of the lush foliage and quiet waters. When I ride on days like this, I usually go to Boat House Row, where I've spent many summers with my younger brothers rowing on the river. I love the water. It's one of the few places where I can think, and I'm pretty sure I get it honestly. Both my Grandpa Joe and my dad love the water as well.

My mom wants me to join the crew team at school, but taking part in a team sport on the water would ruin it for me, because that's the sport for all the rich pricks at my school. Participating in crew is some sort of elitist rite of passage for them. Maybe because they think universities like Harvard or Yale will look upon that activity favorably. I, on the other hand, don't care about that type of stuff.

I'm what some would call a loner.

I choose not to spend my time with entitled kids who rather talk about all the useless shit their parents bought for them. They're always trying to outdo each other with who has the latest tech gadget and whose parents bought it for them first. I rather hang by myself or with my family than those mindless dweebs any day of the week.

I'm halfway to my destination when I spot one of those particular idiotic fucks. His name is Mario Porter and his mother created some sort of special clothes hangers that made his family a shit ton of money. She was discovered on the reality television show, Shark Tank, and he never lets anyone forget it. He's obnoxious, not too bright, and normally I would ignore him, but he's sitting on the grass with Gigi.

I try to look away because the sight of them together sickens me, but just like a violent car crash or a bad Tik Tok video, I can't stop watching them.

Gigi is irritatingly beautiful.

She is the daughter of my father's best friend. I've known her my entire life. My parents always describe her as the daughter they never had, but that's a description I wholly reject, because no sister of mine would be stupid enough to like someone like Mario. His terrible

reputation for having little respect for girls precedes him. I can't be the only one who knows that his sole goal is to hit and quit as many girls in the school that he can.

I've ridden up this incline of the drive many times before, but suddenly my legs feel like two heavy pillars of cement, and I strain to push the pedals of my bike forward. I want to ride past them, but I can't. My conscience won't let me.

I stop several feet behind them to catch my breath and watch with growing dread as Mario slides his arm around Gigi's bare shoulders. She's wearing a billowy, yellow strapless dress with crisp white Converse sneakers. Her outfit is an unusual departure from her usual t-shirt and jeans and all I can think about is how easy it would be for Mario to slide his hand up her legs.

Fuck my life.

Gigi notices me first as I approach and a look of confusion crosses her face. The two of us do not socialize in school. In fact, we barely acknowledge each other. The only time the two of us have any meaningful dialogue with each other is when we're over at each other's houses, and that's because we have to. If my parents knew how the two of us actually feel about each other, they'd probably ground me for the rest of my life.

She's not happy to see me.

And the feeling is mutual.

Because Gigi's older brother is older and out of school, I'm the boy next in line and closest to her age in our circle. Therefore it has been tasked to me to "look out for her" no matter how much I want to pretend that I don't see this disaster unfolding in front of me.

I can't unsee it. I have to step in.

"Hey."

"Uh, hey?" she responds, confused.

Then the asshole speaks.

"What's up, K-boogie? You need something?"

Oh yeah, did I mention that this douchebag gives everyone in the school nicknames that they didn't ask for or acknowledge?

"I need you to get your hands off of Gigi's shoulders."

I notice immediately once Mario's sluggish brain realizes what I've just told him to do, and then his nostrils flair like an angry bull. He's not used to me saying much at all, much less tell him what to do, and he ain't happy.

"I'm sorry?" Gigi asks incredulously as she rises on her knees in the grass, hands on her hips. Dude didn't even bring a blanket for her to sit on. "What business is this of yours?"

"What's the deal with you two?" Mario looks between the two of us. "Are you guys actually related or something?"

"No," we both answer simultaneously.

"But whether or not I'm related to her doesn't have shit to do with you putting your hands all over her," I add.

"Damn, K-boogie, I thought the two of us were cool. I've known you since kindergarten."

Mario pulls Gigi tighter to the side of his body. It's obvious that she's not at all comfortable with his actions, but she's going along with it because I annoy her way more than he ever could.

"First, my name is Knox, so don't call me that K-boogie shit again. Second, we aren't cool and we haven't been since you snitched on me to Mrs. McHenry in the third grade. And finally, I'm going to need you to get your hands off of Gigi. She's not the type of girl you're used to."

Gigi's mouth tightens into a thin line. She's getting totally pissed with me, and I get why, but I'm only looking out for her as I've been instructed to do ever since I could walk.

"And what type of girl is that?" she asks angrily.

Of course, she is taking what I said the wrong way. I didn't mean it as some sort of slight against her, at least not this time.

Mario stands up and puffs out his chest as if he's going to try something with me. He is quite aware of my reputation and knows that I'm the best fighter in school, but he's obviously putting on a show for Gigi.

"Yeah, KAY-BOOGIE, what kind of girl would that be? The way I heard it Gigi is just my type."

Mario attempts to inconspicuously hold his balls as he emphasizes the word type. It's crystal clear what his meaning is even if it goes completely over Gigi's naïve head. It's

purposefully disrespectful, and I immediately see red, so I react without thinking and punch him square in the jaw.

It feels so good when my knuckles crash against the soft flesh of Mario's constantly running mouth, but it doesn't take long for me to discover that he fights dirty, like the punk that I believed him to be. There's nothing fair about it. He tries kicking, spitting, and biting me. In fact, I think he damn near bit a piece of my ear lobe off. I'm going to have to give it to the douche. I didn't think he had it in him to fight like this.

Our brawl doesn't last long, but for the short time that it does, it's bloody and brutal, and I don't know what comes over me but I want to annihilate him. I am in what my twin brothers call the red zone. It's like everything disappears around me and there's just me and Mario and a haze of red, blurry light. I'm pounding his face into the grass with my fist when the only thing that brings me out of it are the shrieking cries of fear piercing my ears. Gigi is yelling at the top of her lungs.

"Get off him! Get off him!"

I'm saving her from becoming the laughingstock of the school and all she's worried about is this loser?

Typical.

I finally stop and stare at him with hostility as he pulls away his hand from the three-inch gash I've made over his eye and notices blood. At this point, there's a small crowd of bystanders standing around us murmuring among themselves, but I ignore them while Mario puts on a show for them instead.

"My parents were right about you. You and your family are trash. I'm going to sue, you crazy fucker, and get you kicked out of school!"

I cock my head to the side after his outburst. Mario and I have known each other a long time, and he's definitely heard the rumors (truth) about my father and Gigi's father, for that matter. Our families have money like his, but we are not to be fucked with. He knows this, but again I realize that he's just puffing hot air for Gigi's benefit.

"You sure about that?" I say in a menacing tone. "You want to involve *my* parents in this?"

The blood continues to drip down Mario's face into his eye as he contemplates what I'm saying. I can tell that he's considering the situation he finds himself in. Will he save face in front of Gigi, or will he walk away?

"No bitch is worth this," he blusters, and then walks past the crowd to his parked car to leave.

The small crowd disperses and now there is only Gigi and I left.

She's crying.

"He's not worth crying over," I tell her.

"I'm crying because I'm mad, not because I'm sad!" she yells at me.

"What?" I ask, taken aback. "You're mad at me?"

"You ruined his face!"

Never mind the scratches on mine and the chunk of ear, he bit. Not to mention that Gigi and I have known each other our entire fucking lives. Where's the loyalty?

"He was using you, Gigi," I tell her matter-of-factly.

She plops down on the grass, and her dress rises a bit, showing her knees. I notice the faint scar on her left one. I put it there when we were ten-years-old and playing tag. I chased her so fast that she fell on some pavers around the pool and cried bloody murder. That was the day my father reiterated that it was my job to protect Gigi, not hurt her, because she was like family.

"He was the first boy brave enough to ask me out for a date."

"What do you mean, brave enough?" I scoff.

"Everyone in school knows that you're my guard dog, Knox. No boy in the junior or senior class will touch me with a ten-foot pole. You're ruining my life."

"You think I enjoy saving you from your damn self all the time?"

Actually, I kind of enjoyed giving Mario that can of whoop ass today.

"Then stop doing it."

Gigi is sixteen-years-old and as far as I know, hasn't had a boyfriend yet. She's definitely a virgin and may not have even had a first kiss. So, while I can understand her frustration with me, the truth is that I haven't met a kid yet at school who would treat her the way she deserves.

They're all shitheads that make choices led by the obvious parts of their anatomy. I should know, I'm one of them. And in our small world, that could mean the kiss of death for Gigi's reputation.

"You know I can't do that."

She sighs then stands up, brushing a few dead leaves off of the back of her dress. She stares pensively at me for a moment, like there's something she wants to say but decides against it.

"Go home, Knox."

I look around for her bike but don't see it. Then I surmise that Mario probably picked her up in his car, so now she doesn't have a ride home.

"Call an Uber first, then I'll leave."

"I'm going to walk."

"All the way to your house? Your dad will kill me and you too."

"Stop with the fake concern." She hands me a tissue out of the small black purse that's flanked across her body. "And wipe your face. You're bleeding."

As she turns around, my eyes can't help but be drawn to her ass as it pokes through her dress. Gigi's ass is my enemy and my nemesis. More boys at school have been looking at her ass over the last year than they ever have before. It's probably the only reason why Mario was dumb enough to take her out today. Clearly, her butt has the power to make boys do crazy shit.

"Ugh, you got blood splatter all over my sneakers," she laments.

"Why are you even wearing them? You were sitting in grass by the water. They were bound to get dirty."

"Because they're my favorite sneakers."

She walks away.

"Did you wear them for him?" I call out. Regretting the question as soon as it slips from my mouth. It sounds dumb, and it's none of my business, but I wait for her answer, anyway. I picked those sneakers out for her when my mom took us Christmas shopping last year. Mom wanted to get Gigi a gift that she would actually like, and I knew she'd love them.

She turns around and stares a hole right through me.

"No."

I'm frozen to my spot and cannot move. There's deep meaning behind her simple one-word answer, but I don't know exactly what, and it's probably best I don't find out.

Gigi is not my friend.

She is simply my responsibility.

I've just got to protect her through one more year of high school, and then we'll both be free from this unholy alliance of our parents making.

And for me, that day can't come soon enough.

Before, I really do something stupid.

© Lisa Lang Blakeney 2021

Want to know what happens next?

DOWNLOAD KNOX TODAY



