

Chapter One

In the Beginning There Was Tad

All right, let's just say it up front – Dan-O should never have agreed to help Tad (excuse me, Theodore J. Bentley, the Third) in the first place. But ... the way Little-Lord-Perfect rushed into the diner, breathless, his ice-blue eyes projecting fear and need and horror on top of that tender little quiver he could get in his voice as he whimpered, “Danny, please, I have no idea what to do,” well, I have to admit it would've breached the walls of any defense. Maybe even mine, and I hated his ass.

Well, hated might be kind of strong, but I sure as hell didn't like him. Especially after what he pulled on Dan-O just six months earlier. You see, that's when Tad dumped him. After they'd been together for nearly three years (okay, two-and-a-half, be technical)! It left my guy unable to do anything but lie in bed for two days as he tried not to think, and the only reason he got back to life that quickly was his rent was coming due, so he had to work or get evicted. Not an easy time, lemme tell ya.

But crap like that don't really matter to people like Tad (excuse me, Master Theodore J. Bentley, the Third; he'd snarl in disgust without the full and flowing exclamation of his name). He was one of those young, privileged East-Coast-types who know from the cradle that they're destined for great and glorious things (meaning a producer in Hollywood, in his case; helps to know the shallowness of his aims). And man, was he putting everything he had into it. He'd already produced a cable movie using one of Dan-O's mysteries – *High-Heeled Moccasins*, featuring yours truly, Ace Shostakovich – but what made him a player (someone who must be paid attention to, in Hollywood-speak) was that he had also taken an option on two more of my guy's books – *The Dr. Pepper Tryst and Tristan* and *The Tangerine 42-D Cup Madam* – all of them with a nice, solid little cult following. And, again, featuring me.

Meaning, yes – I don't really exist except on the page or in the back of your brain. But if you think it's weird a fictional character's telling this story, you ain't seen what happened, yet.

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Unfortunately, even having six mysteries published don't mean making enough to live on in New York City. So while Tad was flying high playing Mr. Great-and-Glorious-Producer-Dude, my guy was still tending bar at two different eateries. And that's probably how things would have stayed if Tad's "little problem" hadn't reared its ugly head.

You see, as the Golden-One put it, he'd hired this way-too-pricey-twenty-one-year-old-Cheeto-eater (AKA: laptop potato) to adapt those two books into eight scripts for a cable series. Everyone Tad talked to had sworn he was the hottest screenwriter since Orson Welles, so who better to give him something high profile and eye-popping to show the money boys?

Well ... Tad finally got the screenplays on a Friday. And just knowing they would knock anybody's nose ring off, Mr. Brilliant arranged a drop-dead face-to-face with the "yea or nay" guy at HBO for the following Monday (sort of a "meet me, now, or I take it to AMC" kind of deal; being bilingual helps). Only then did he actually read the damned things ... and that is when he saw his fledgling career crash and burn before his designer contacts.

Seems the Cheeto-eater'd had so little interaction with reality (since birth, I bet), he thought characters in movies were more real than real people were, especially when spitting third-rate film noir dialog that was dumb in the 1940s and doing crap that'd be idiotic even for a spoof of the mystery-thriller genre. But just as Little-Sir-Perfect was about to toss himself off the balcony of his multimillion-dollar condo, he remembered Dan-O worked weekday lunches, nearby, so raced over to waylay him.

Now he and my guy were seated in a downstairs booth in a back corner of the diner's faux black and white 1890s décor, right by the hallway to the restrooms. And having filled Dan-O in on his "worse than death" situation, Tad shifted into whine mode. "This means ALL the scripts are crap, all fuckin' eight of them, including the bible," ("the bible" not being that well-known book of Christian conflict but one that outlined the direction the characters and story would take; just keeping you up with the patois).

"C'mon, Tad," Daniel being the only one allowed to call him that, "I write books, not scripts."

"But they're based on your books! And you're the one who consistently informed me that a story's a story."

My guy snorted as he snapped, "A script isn't a story, it's a desecration." Then he dug into his cheeseburger, served nice and hot, for

once, by his buddy, Orlando, and which he was using as both lunch and dinner since he had another shift to work, that night.

“Danny, I told you from the outset,” Tad growled, “you cannot fit a full two-hundred and fifty pages into an hour and forty minute movie without cutting some things. And you know, reviewers still said we kept very close to your story.”

Didn't matter. So the movie had turned out nice enough, so what? It still wasn't ... well, it just wasn't right. I'd been made cynical to the max and Carmen (she's my sexy secretary), she was nothing but a sex toy, not at all like we were in the book. Honest. But Dan-O'd made enough cash off the rights and a bump in book sales to pay off a couple bills and move to an apartment that had fewer roaches, so he couldn't bitch too much. And since this series of screwed-up scripts were based on what he'd written, he probably did have a pretty good idea of what they'd need to work.

“Besides,” Tad kept on with, “you're the one who's always said ... and I heard it every time you were stuck in a plot ... ‘My characters'll work it out. Ace'll take care of everything.’”

“Which you said made me sound crazy.”

“So why stop now?”

Dan-O all but growled back, “I wasn't, Tad.”

“Then why're you on Prozac?”

“I'm NOT!”

Not anymore, anyway. He'd stopped taking it three weeks before the breakup.

“Danny, the last time I was at your place, you still had a bottle in the bathroom.”

“It's an old prescription and – whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, wait, you went through my medicine cabinet!?”

“Yes. I was ... was looking for some Tylenol and ...” And all of a sudden, Little-Lord-Perfect could see in Dan-O's glare that he'd fucked up.

Oh, a little background here – he'd appeared at Dan-O's door a few weeks ago with a list of questions the Cheeto-eater had about ... *Tristan* and had used the bathroom twice while my guy was trying to understand where in the hell the damn questions came from since they had zero to do

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with the book he'd written. And His-Majesty'd said nothing concerning either the meds or the weirdness of the looming rewrite, then.

Well, Sir-Great-and-Glorious rolled his eyes in that way that always pissed my guy off (not so much because it was condescending or dismissive, but because he looked so damned good when he did it) and he said, "Okay, fine, fine, I shouldn't have done that. And so what if I've seen you say things that would've put you in a padded room, fifty years ago? I know that's merely you being creative because I have seen it work. I never should have said that, Danny. I ... I'm sorry."

Which floored Dan-O and me, both. This dude was one of those people who never admit they're wrong about anything, and who have the looks, attitude and charisma to pull it off. Seriously, if he says the sky is green, it sorta-kinda is – even when it's really blue. And if he says the world is flat – hell, not even the horizon would dare argue with him. But here was big, bad, beautiful Tad (oops, Theodore J. Bentley, the Third; I keep forgetting one must have one's moniker correct, y'know and ... oh, the hell with it; let him snarl) – here he was, allowing that he might have made a mistake.

That alone would've told anybody with even half a functioning brain that the bastard was up to something.

Anybody but Dan-O, of course, because as painful as the breakup had been, my guy still dreamed of getting back together with the creep. Which begs the question – why would anyone even want to be with someone so self-absorbed, even if he is good-looking? Jeez, even from the beginning, it'd been way too much of a one-sided relationship, with Dan-O catering to the Glorious-One's every wish (including those he simply thought Tad had), as if he was the bastard's servant.

Well, the reason was probably as simple, stupid and shallow as you might think; Tad wasn't just good-looking, he was fucking gorgeous. And boy did he know it. If you bring to mind the epitome of every gay man's dream, no matter what his type – that was Tad. Period. End of story. And if you don't believe me, here's how Dan-O laid it out in ... *Tristan*.

"... But then, he was built by the gods of Greece, with a face so classic, cool and elegant, it was painful even to gaze upon him. And watching as he strolled along the beach in his scarlet, square-cut Speedo," (one would never put a thong on a guy like Tad, nor flowery-designer brief, nor would he be caught dead in board shorts; those were for fat Russians, Brazilians and boogie-boarder-boiz) "you could not help but sense the aura of a golden panther policing his lair, cloaked in the casual assurance that he could handle anything."

Yeah, be it male, female or Flipper. How he and Dan-O had ever wound up as a couple had been the source of endless speculation by one and all, especially since my guy was so his opposite.

Oh, don't get me wrong – Dan-O's not ugly, no; he just has ... well ... nice looks. Lean face. Crazy thick brown hair with eyebrows to match, hovering over dark sloe eyes. Smooth olive skin except for this sorta-kinda five o'clock shadow dancing across his jaw and a surprisingly sexy scar along his left cheekbone. Put it all together with a bit of a hawkish nose (which "dear mother" insisted stemmed from his father's French-Portuguese heritage) and the fact that he was tight and trim, he had what you'd call a Joe-Above-Average kind of attractiveness. So why the hell an I'm-all-that guy like Tad would let a sorta-kinda guy like Daniel play high priest to his shining light for over two years meant only two possible answers to most people ... money or sex.

Well, since Tad was the rich one in the equation, the gossip was cast in stone and spread in glorious fashion by way of more than one flapping tongue, who "revealed" they'd heard from somebody whose current lover had slept with another guy who'd been told by a friend of his that Tad was a lousy lay. And in the same breath, they'd pointed out that Daniel was reputed to have tricks up his sleeve that would turn the straightest guy to the pink side, which he'd supposedly proven with a certain butch-action-actor he'd known. Who'd supposedly been so upset Dan-O had gone exclusive with Tad, he'd lost his sorrows in the arms of a porno god on that other Coast ... and promptly got outed. And who'd tried to "un-out" himself by getting married and begetting twins ... who actually looked like him (much to everyone's surprise; including his, according to these self-same tongues).

But you still have to wonder: why would anybody want to fuck around with anybody who just wants to fuck around with them ... in every meaning of the term? That ... is one of life's greatest mysteries. Yet that was Dan-O's wish, with reality making no hint of an appearance in any corner of his brain.

Dammit.

Meaning my guy was still just off-center enough to let His-Greatness wriggle his way back into Dan-O's hopes by capping off his plea with, "It's just ... Danny, this series – it'll only be as good as the scripts I hand the jerks with the network, so they can mangle it with their notes and suggestions and stupid ideas and ... and, you ... you have your books out there, all nice and neat and selling nice and steady and all yours and ... and all I have is my ass on the line, putting more of my investors' money

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into this project than I should've by hiring that twerp, and ... and the meeting's Monday! At noon! I can't change it; I'll look like an idiot, and I can't find anybody else on such short notice and ... and if you don't do this, I'm fucked. I'm totally fucked. My backers'll sue me, and I'll spend my life bankrupt, and I know I don't have the right to beg you like this, but you ... you have to help me, Daniel Bettancourt; you're my only hope."

Aw, jeez, the *Star Wars* reference!? That was below the belt! He fucking knew how special that movie was to Dan-O.

Sure enough, my guy jolted back to the first boy he'd ever loved, because *Star Wars 4* was the movie they'd seen on their first date. So what if it was just the super-slick re-mastered re-release version? Dan-O'd never seen it before, and it was one of his few pleasant memories. He and that kid had talked about it for hours as they kissed and fooled around, and he was sure they'd still be together if his own dear mother hadn't gone through divorce number three and marriage number four and moved him to Philadelphia. He'd resented her for years.

That made Dan-O bolt up from the booth and start pacing – three steps up and three steps back, his hand rubbing the back of his head like he always did when he was threatening to get one of his headaches. I'd have jumped in with a few words of advice (like, "DON'T DO IT!"), but he wasn't gonna hear me because Tad was still filling his head with shit.

"You're a good man, Danny. You've always helped me when I needed it. And I haven't done much in return, have I?"

You haven't done shit for him, you prick.

My guy grabbed some fries, still pacing as he said, "I ... I don't know the format, Tad."

"They're already in it. I have them here on a USB drive, with the program disk; all you need to do is upload it, then make the dialog work and the characters not suck."

"But I won't have the time. I have another shift, tonight, and I'm working all day, tomorrow, and Sunday brunch and ..."

"I'll get you out of it."

"Tad – shit, I need the money!"

"But your books're selling and ..."

"And royalties don't get paid for another month."

“Y’know, Danny, you really need to learn how to budget,” Tad popped off, in his best big-brother tone of voice.

“This from a trust fund baby!” my guy snapped back as he flopped in the booth to focus on his quickly cooling meal. Made me happy to see him show the dick some backbone.

Tad stiffened. It was the one vulnerable spot in his life – that he would never have to work, if he didn’t want to. Yeah, yeah, yeah, he’d always been able to live like he felt like or wherever he’d wanted, and everybody assumed he’d been handed his life on a silver platter and didn’t understand how he had to bust his ass twice as hard to gain people’s respect and on and on and – aw, jeez, if you got him going on it, he’d never shut up. But to my surprise, he jumped past the whining, for once, and went straight to his usual method of getting back on top.

“Okay, I’ll add another thousand to my option on your books,” he said in a quiet voice. “Up front. And you know, if HBO gives a green light, I have to buy the rights. Which means another eighty-nine-K.” Then he took in a deep breath and added, “Of course, if they don’t, the option expires and you don’t receive another dime. Plus the books will be considered damaged goods, so no one will want them, after that ... and ...”

And the son-of-a-bitch let his words trail off, with the meaning obviously being, play nice with me, or I take my toys and go home, and you get zero, zip, nada. The dumb fuck. You’d think he would’ve learned by now that my guy could live for a year on what most people wasted in a week. Shit, Dan-O had so few clothes and possessions and such minimal emotional support, it amazed me he was still human. Plus Tad knew damn well he was paying for mother’s psychiatric care (not to mention his own therapy, thanks to her), and that was why he was close to the edge by the end of each quarter, when a royalty check would magically appear in his checking account. Yet here was Little-Lord-Moneybags using cash and cruelty as bargaining chips. Make you feel as desperate as I can while I eat caviar, right asshole? Shit, the rich’re different, all right; they’re sociopathic motherfuckers.

Well – Tad’s last comment startled Daniel into confused silence as he tried to figure out why the bastard was being so hard assed in his attempt to talk my guy into doing him a huge favor. In fact, he was so introspective, I think it made Tad nervous because after a minute he added, “Sorry, I ... I forgot about your mother’s situation.” Bullshit, bullshit, bullshit. “So ... there goes dumb-as-dirt-Tad saying the wrong

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thing, as usual.” No shit there, Sherlock. “It’s just, everything’s been out of balance since we broke up.”

... Oh, no ... he wouldn’t dare ...

“We didn’t break up, Tad,” my guy said, quietly. “You dumped me.” Then he took another bite of his burger.

“I know,” sighed His-Worship. “And I wish I hadn’t.”

... And he fucking did it! The son-of-a-bitch!

You see, that comment made my guy damn near stop breathing, waiting to hear the rest of it. And sure enough, Tad kept on with, “What if ... if this works out? What if we spend a week in ... in Bermuda? Just you and me? Away from all this snow. See if we can ... can start fresh.”

“A week?” my guy whispered, not looking at him.

“Yes,” Tad said, nodding. “Truth is I miss you, Danny. I just haven’t had time to let myself think about it. But if I get the go-ahead on this, it’ll take a good ten days for them to pull the contract together and ... and we could ... you know ... just be together. On my Amex. Everything. Totally.”

Oh, Tad always did have perfect timing. Book number six, *The Dirty Baker’s Dozen, Plus 2*, had just been published and was getting great reviews. It had even reached number twenty-four on the NY Times mystery bestsellers list and was trending higher, so Dan-O was on an emotional high. Gregory Taylor, his editor, predicted that by the end of the year he could stop tending bar and live the life of a real writer, since the new one was handing all my other stories a new life on the mystery shelves.

And yes, I do mean mine ... oh, all right, as well as Dan-O’s, since I’m him and he’s me. That’s why we work so well together. Plotting out the plot. Trying this secret path and that dark corner. Going left or right or up or down. Jeez, some of the arguments we’d have. And laughing fits. Okay ... maybe that would have put him in line for a lobotomy fifty years ago, but these days? A touch of schizophrenia helps a writer’s career.

Oh, Carmen was part of it, too. In fact, he even described her as dark and pretty in a tender way, meaning she was a female version of him (except for a nice set of ... uh, headlights, but don’t tell her I said that), and she was always ready to jump in anytime I needed her. Wanna know why? Guess who Dan-O made me look like in the last four books? I already gave you a clue, from the passage in ... *Tristan*.

Right – I'm Tad's fucking doppelganger, except I have sensitivity, street smarts and savvy (along with an occasional love of alliteration, and don't ask me why; my patois is Dan-O's beast, not my own).

Tad knew, of course, and thought it was cute. As well as to be expected. I mean, why wouldn't someone want to make a guy like him the center of their universe? He knew his value and accepted my guy's tweaking of my description as something that ought to happen, without question.

But that was when things were hot and heavy between them. Then came the split, and I had to kick Dan-O's ass to make him finish proofing *Dirty Bakers'* ... in time for his deadline. We'd only just made it, and that's because he didn't change anything. Which was unusual for him.

Look, don't get me wrong – I want my guy to be happy, and I really mean that. Just because he borned me to be a chick chaser instead of a noodle hound means jack shit. Everybody deserves to have somebody they can be one with. I got it with Carmen, and for a little bit, Dan-O had it with Tad.

But that was then and Tad had gone ... and my guy'd returned to living on nothing. But by this point he'd caught on to just how much of a nothing that was, and he hated it. And now here was Little-Sir-Perfect scrambling back into his life seeking support of both the physical and emotional kind, and the fact that Dan-O was letting him do it really pissed me off. Not that there's much I can do about it. I mean, yeah – I'm him and he's me so, my viewpoints ought to be his ... but when you put up blinders for yourself so you can't see the truth of a scumbag, you won't see it. Period. End of story.

But ... not the end of this one. No. This was just the beginning.