

New York Times Best Selling Author

MELODY ANNE



Kiss Me

AT DAWN

Kiss me at dawn

Forbidden Series

Book Two



By

Melody Anne

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Dedication

This is dedicated to my good friend Ruth Cardello, who inspires me to be a better writer, who makes me dance, and who can *shake it off* all the way down the streets of Edinburgh. I adore you!



Table of Contents

[Dedication](#)

[Table of Contents](#)

[Books by Melody Anne](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Two](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Three](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Four](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Five](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Six](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Seven](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Eight](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Nine](#)

[Chapter Thirty](#)
[Chapter Thirty-One](#)
[Prologue](#)
[Chapter One](#)
[Chapter Two](#)
[Chapter Three](#)
[Chapter Four](#)
[Chapter Five](#)
[Chapter Six](#)
[Chapter Seven](#)
[Chapter Eight](#)
[Chapter Nine](#)
[Chapter Ten](#)
[Chapter Eleven](#)
[Chapter Twelve](#)
[Chapter Thirteen](#)
[Chapter Fourteen](#)
[Chapter Fifteen](#)
[Chapter Sixteen](#)
[Chapter Seventeen](#)
[Chapter Eighteen](#)
[Chapter Nineteen](#)
[Chapter Twenty](#)
[Chapter Twenty-One](#)
[Chapter Twenty-Two](#)
[Chapter Twenty-Three](#)
[Chapter Twenty-Four](#)
[Chapter Twenty-Five](#)
[Chapter Twenty-Six](#)
[Chapter Twenty-Seven](#)
[Chapter Twenty-Eight](#)
[Chapter Twenty-Nine](#)
[Chapter Thirty](#)
[Chapter Thirty-One](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Two](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Three](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Four](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Five](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Six](#)

[Epilogue](#)

Books by Melody Anne

FIRST SERIES

[*He Saw Me First*](#)

[*She Saw Me First*](#)

[*At First Sight*](#)

Forbidden Series

[*A Kiss at Midnight*](#)

[*Kiss me at Dawn*](#)

Kiss me Forever

The Andersons

[*Wins The Game*](#)

[*The Dance*](#)

[*The Fall*](#)

[*The Proposal*](#)

[*The Blackmail*](#)

[*The Runaway*](#)

[*The Final Stand*](#)

[*Unexpected Treasure*](#)

[*Hidden Treasure*](#)

[*Holiday Treasure*](#)

[*Priceless Treasure*](#)

[*The Ultimate Treasure*](#)

The Anderson Heirs

[*Book One: Sweet Noel*](#)

[*Book Two: Jacob's Challenge*](#)

[*Book Three: Jasmine's Homecoming*](#)

ANDERSON SPECIAL OPS

[Shadows](#)

[Rising](#)

[Barriers](#)

[Shattered](#)

[Reborn](#)

THE ANDERSON BILLIONAIRES

[Finn](#)

[Noah](#)

[Brandon](#)

[Hudson](#)

[Crew](#)

HORIZONS OF CHARLIE

[Diamond Horizons](#)

[Sapphire Horizons](#)

[Opal Horizons](#)

[Emerald Horizons](#)

SURRENDER SERIES

[Surrender](#)

[Seduced](#)

[Scorched](#)

[Saved](#)

UNDERCOVER BILLIONAIRES

[Kian](#)

[Arden](#)

[Owen](#)

[Declan](#)

TRUTH IN LIES

[One too Many](#)

[Two Secrets Kept](#)

[Three Outs](#)

[Four Seconds Gone](#)

[Five Goodbye's](#)

BILLIONAIRE AVIATORS

[Turbulent Intentions – Book One \(Cooper\)](#)

[Turbulent Desires – Book Two \(Maverick\)](#)

[Turbulent Waters – Book Three \(Nick\)](#)

[Turbulent Intrigue – Book Four \(Ace\)](#)

The Titans

[The Tycoon's Revenge](#)

[The Tycoon's Vacation](#)

[The Tycoon's Proposal](#)

[The Tycoon's Secret](#)

[The Lost Tycoon](#)

[Rescue Me](#)

HEROES SERIES

[Safe in his arms – Novella](#)

[Baby it's Cold Outside](#)

[Her Unexpected Hero – Book One](#)

[Who I am with you – Book Two – Novella](#)

[Her Hometown Hero – Book Three](#)

[Following Her – Book Four – Novella](#)

[Her Forever Hero – Book Five](#)

[Her Found Hero – Book Six](#)

TAKEN BY THE TRILLIONAIRE

[#1 Xander – Ruth Cardello](#)

[#2 Bryan – J.S. Scott](#)

[#3 Chris – Melody Anne](#)

[#4 Virgin for the Trillionaire – Ruth Cardello](#)

[#5 Virgin for the Prince – J.S. Scott](#)

[#6 Virgin to Conquer – Melody Anne](#)

Chapter One

McKenzie

Failure. I'm an utter failure. A year ago my life was fine, perfect in fact, or as perfect as life could be. Then it all went to hell in what I can only describe as a total meltdown. I quit a job I loved to start a new adventure, walked away from my comfortable life, and thought I'd finally find peace and happiness . . . but I failed.

I'm only twenty-seven, but I should know what I'm doing by now. I should be so much further in life. Instead I'm locking the doors to a business I believed in, a business that was supposed to help me and others. I'm not a weak woman — I never cry — but right now, if I allowed myself, I'd fall over, drowning in tears.

“No!” I say aloud. I need to get myself out of this damn pity party I'm in. “You're McKenzie Beaumont, and you don't take crap from anyone.” My pep talk does the trick. My shoulders come back, and I realize that this door might be closing, but I'm still standing, and I'm walking away from a business I built myself, not being pushed out. I'm a better person for what I've done. I've helped others.

Some might say the business I attempted was immoral, that it enslaved women and catered to terrible men. I disagree with them. I ran an escort service after volunteering for years at a women's shelter where I saw so many young women lost in a world that didn't care about them.

I started the business to save them, to allow them to take back control of their lives. I didn't count on how much it would affect me, on how few people wanted to be saved. I couldn't take the lost women anymore. The business made money, but it was taking my soul.

My desire to rebuild myself has consumed me for years after what my first love did to me. It's hard to shake the trauma from a time in my life I still can't think about. I can't go there, can't think of those awful days when I wasn't able to look myself in the mirror without fear.

No one sees the scared woman inside me. To the rest of the world I seem cool, calm, and collected, untouched by everything around. In reality I've been to hell and back. The most important part of this is I'm surviving this ride I've been on for fifteen years. This next step is only the beginning of my new life.

"It's been a pleasure doing business with you, McKenzie. What's your next adventure?"

I turn to look at the real estate agent who helped me sell the building. She's a nice woman in her early thirties who's never had a hard day in her life. But then again, how do I actually know this? Just because the woman wears a pale blue suit with a small silver barrette in her hair, doesn't mean she's as nice, happy, or innocent as she appears. She could have a drawer — or a toybox — full of whips and chains in her apartment, and her fantasy could be of tying men up like dogs and making them bark.

Everyone has secrets. It's only a matter of time before others discover them.



“With the profit from this sale, I’ll be able to complete setting up the accounting firm I’ve wanted to open for the past few years,” I reply.

Shirley laughs. “Accounting, huh? I wouldn’t take you for the type to sit behind a desk and pour over numbers all day.” I’m only slightly offended by her statement. I had an office job and it worked for years. I’ve learned that everything works out the way it’s supposed to in the end.

“It might sound boring, but I love the stability of it,” I tell her.

“Well, I think you’re far too beautiful to hide in a windowless room,” the agent says with another laugh.

“Ah, but looks can be deceiving,” I tell her with a wink. “And trust me, I’ll have plenty of windows. I like the freedom of opening them and feeling a breeze, even in this rainy area.” I hand the woman the keys and turn to lead us both to the parking area behind the building.

“Yes, looks aren’t always what they appear,” Shirley says. That laugh again. It’s delicate, but oddly pointed. I may be right about Shirley. She might not be so innocent after all.

We make it to our cars, shake hands, and part ways. As I drive off, I know that I won't have contact with her again. I'm not a girl-bonding kind of gal. As a matter of fact, the only woman I've become close to since I was a teenager is Jewell.

It took me a while, but I consider Jewell a friend. I smile at the thought, but my lips quickly turn down into a frown. When I first met Jewell nearly two years ago, I saw the pain in her eyes. I wanted to help her, but wasn't sure how. In the end, it worked out beautifully and she's thriving now, with no more shadows beneath her eyes. She's married to a wonderful man and is three months pregnant. I've never seen her happier.

Not only do I normally avoid girl-bonding, I've never been a baby type of gal either. I don't want to hold them, have never felt my biological clock ticking, and have never wanted a white picket fence, kids, pets . . . the whole American Dream. Some say this makes me abnormal. I choose to believe it makes me focused on what *really* matters.

But I can't deny I'm excited at the thought of meeting Jewell and Blake's first child. He or she is surely going to be as beautiful as the two of them. I even shopped with Jewell for baby clothes last week.

That's when we ran into Byron Astor. This memory sends a shudder through me as I pull up to a red light. I hit my brake a little too hard, locking my seatbelt against me, unable to move for a terrifying moment.

"Byron Astor," I growl.

That man has constantly run through my brain over the past year — hell, he took up shop there — ever since the night he showed up at my door, accused me of ruining his brother's

life, kissed me senseless, then disappeared as quickly as he'd come in.

I was furious when that whole disastrous night began, and even lifted my phone to call the police. When he started kissing me, my first impulse was to claw his eyes out. However, after a few seconds, I melted against him like a pathetic female. When he pulled back, a cocky look in his eyes — the arrogant bastard — my claws came out again. But before I could strike, he disappeared, making me wonder if any of it really happened. I began second guessing myself, but no more of that.

I didn't see Byron again for nearly a year . . . until last week, and the look in his eyes when our gazes collided sent strange sensations up and down my spine. Absurd. Why is this man even a blip on my radar, let alone at the controls of what I feel? And what are these feelings?

I'm not a fool. I'm very aware that most people enjoy sex. Some of my acquaintances tell me they don't always have to fake orgasms. But my only sexual experiences have been . . . horrific. I shudder thinking about it.

Why am I thinking of Byron Astor and sex in the same sentence? His kiss heating my blood doesn't mean a thing. I've been around overconfident men for years, and they do nothing for me. Byron Astor makes no difference in my life, and he never will. Though I'm a friend of the intolerable man's sister-in-law, I'll only run into him on rare occasions. Certainly not at my new business, which will open its doors very soon.

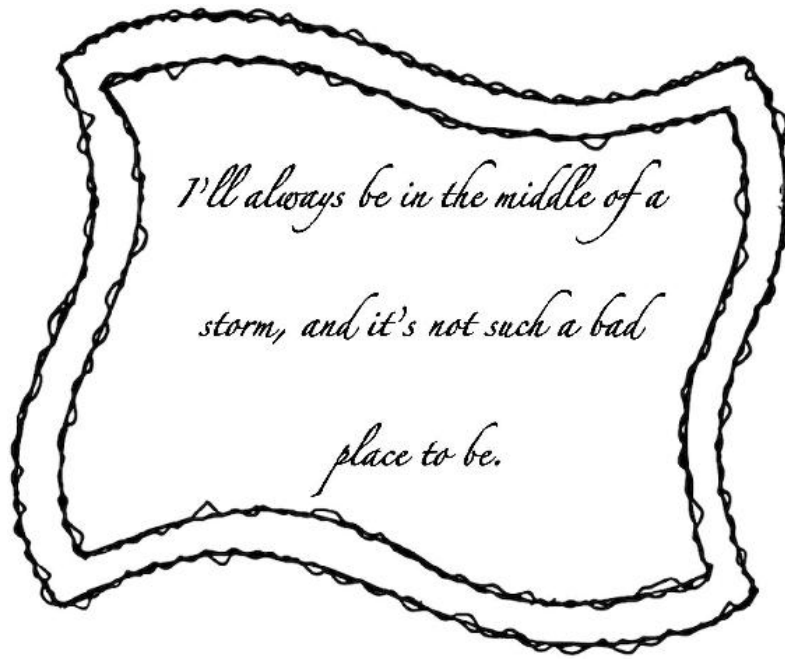
He won't know where these offices are, and a man of his status will have no need for an accountant like me; he'll hire someone to be in his offices like I was for years. With luck I'll never see him again. So what if I'm attracted to the man? It will pass. Attraction is unavoidable. A male preying mantis is attracted to a female even knowing he'll literally get his head bitten off if he isn't fast enough to get away. Attraction is a part of life. I think I'll forgive myself for my weakness.

Out of sight, out of mind. This is my philosophy. If I don't see him, don't think about him, don't talk about him, I'll soon forget about him. It isn't like he's hanging out with Jewell — he rarely shows up at Jewell and Blake's place. So all is well. I won't have to see the insufferable man ever again.

The stoplight turns green — finally — and I make it to my street, pull into the driveway, and walk inside. It doesn't matter how many times I come and go, when I look at my modest living room, peace washes through me.

It's *my* house, a house I paid for. No bank can take it away like they did my mother's home. My life has been difficult, but the baptism by fire — okay, baptisms in the plural — have made me stronger. I am who I am *because* nothing has been handed to me. I'm strong and independent and there isn't anything I can't do.

It's time to put the finishing touches on my business plan. Next week, my life will once again change . . . as it has many times over. I'll always be in the middle of a storm, and it's not such a bad place to be. At least life's always an adventure, one I won't ever give up on.



*I'll always be in the middle of a
storm, and it's not such a bad
place to be.*

Chapter Two

McKenzie

Three Months Later

“We’re officially in the black,” Zach shouts.

I take a break from staring at my computer screen and look at the smiling face of my business partner, Zach Sinclair. It really is too bad I’m not attracted to the man. He’s intelligent — one of the most intelligent men I know — and, more importantly, he makes me laugh. On top of that, he’s single.

It doesn’t matter. I feel nothing but friendship for the man. I’m broken, that’s been well established, but I’m not dead. I’m twenty-seven years old, haven’t been in a serious relationship for a long time, and haven’t been interested in being in one, either.

There are plenty of men who ask me out, but I turn them away. My ex, whose very name still turns my stomach, left quite a mark on me. I don’t need a psychoanalyst to tell me this, and knowing when and how I was messed up can’t change how I feel.

I shake my head as I come back to the present. Oh, yes. We’re in the black. “Did you ever doubt we would be?” I ask with a genuine smile.

“No. But most businesses don’t make a profit in the first three months. It usually takes years,” he replies as he props himself on the edge of my desk. Our doors have been open for

two months this coming Friday, and business is good — or better than I pictured it would be at this point. I went from running an escort service, which was supposed to be great, to running an accounting firm. Excitement to boring ... just what I need and want.

“That’s why we save for rainy days, Zach. But we still bust our asses so we don’t have to rely on savings.”

“Well, don’t get too excited, sweetheart. We’re only in the black by a very small margin. We need to land more clients pronto.”

“We’re new. It will take time for big clients to trust that we aren’t only competent, but *better* than many other accounting firms in this area. Until then, we have a lot to smile about, because we already have four full-time employees and three part-timers. We’re doing better than most.”

“Yes, that’s true. And I have meetings with potential clients every day this week.”

“I was afraid to take on a partner, Zach — you know that. But you’ve given me reason to hope that some of you men are worth trusting.”

“Ah, coming from you, that’s a true compliment,” he replies. “We meshed well when I was your college professor. I knew three years ago you were going places. I’m glad you took me up on the offer to open this place. We’re going to be the finest accounting firm in all of Seattle.”

He impressed me with his teaching skills back then and still teaches a night class two days a week, but to have his own business has been Zach’s dream for a long time. If I hadn’t

been in several of his classes over a three-year stretch, I never would've had the confidence to go into business with him. But I watched him do his job well and shared a few coffees with him during his office hours when I went by to ask questions. It's too bad I don't feel attracted to him. But it's great he's never shown attraction for me, either.

He's thirty-five, though he acts younger than I do on most days. He has slightly wavy blond hair and green eyes. Most women find him charming. I find him brilliant. A work partner is far more important and reliable than a romantic one. The phone rings . . . and doesn't stop.

"Beth's out to lunch. You're going to have to take that," he tells me.

"Seattle Accounting, McKenzie Beaumont speaking. How may I help you?"

"Hello, Ms. Beaumont. Dixie Pedmore here. I'm calling on behalf of someone who'd like to meet with you today, if possible."

I look down at my calendar, and today isn't the best day, but I don't want to turn down a potential client. Still, it's good to show people I'm not available at the drop of a hat, that my time's in demand.

"I'm booked up today, Ms. Pedmore. Can we do Friday instead?" I ask. Friday is three days away.

The woman pauses for a pregnant moment; she's clearly not used to people who don't accommodate her requests. I have a way of reading people, even over the phone. When I don't immediately agree, Dixie sucks in her breath, not loudly,

but just enough for me to hear it through the phone line. This piques my curiosity. Who does Ms. Pedmore work for? The woman hasn't said.

"Hold for one moment, and I'll see if that will be workable," Dixie tells me, quickly recovering, and before I can agree or disagree, the woman places me on hold.

"Who is it?" Zach whispers.

I hold my hand over the mouthpiece in case Dixie jumps back on the line. "I don't know," I reply. "Someone's secretary, I'm assuming." A couple of minutes pass, and then I hear the phone click as the woman comes back on the line.

"Thank you for holding, Ms. Beaumont. Friday will be fine. Meet him at noon on Friday at Cutters on the Pier."

"Can I get your boss's name?" I ask, but the question gets me nowhere. The woman said what she needed to say and hangs up without asking whether noon's an acceptable time.

"So what's that about?" Zach asks. "Who's the potential client?"

"I don't know. The woman hung up. No contact number, no information. Nothing." I shake my head in frustration.

"Don't go if you're worried about it," Zach says, a frown marring his normally cheerful face.

"You know that's not going to happen. I want this business to be a success, which means I'll meet with anyone and everyone," I reply, taking a few seconds to mark the appointment in my calendar.

"Want me to go instead?" he asks.

“I thought you had meetings all week.”

“I do,” he says, the frown still in place. “But I can adjust my schedule.”

“It’s at Cutters, and I love the food there. I promise I’ll be fine, Zach. I’ve dealt with a lot of less than pleasant clients. I’m not worried about a business lunch at a public place.”

“But don’t they have private rooms there?”

“Yes, they do, but they’re usually for larger parties. Even if I end up alone with the mystery person in one of the rooms, it won’t matter because of the waitstaff.”

“I don’t like it, but I trust you to do what you feel is right,” Zach says before looking at his watch and grimacing. “I have to run, doll. We’ll have more time to talk about this later — *before* you go or don’t go.”

I barely have time to tell him goodbye before he rushes out the door. This is our lives right now. Fourteen-hour workdays followed by more work at home, and no days off. In the end it will be worth it, though, because I’ll retire early, and most of the time it doesn’t feel like work anyway. I love my business.

Well, I love it at least eighty percent of the time. Still, it’s different from working at my last place. That had been full of trauma and feeling like a failure far too often.

In this new business, I rarely catch a glimpse of the people I manage. A client comes in to request an accountant for their business, and I dispatch one. Some of the jobs turn into permanent retainers, and some are temporary. Some are complicated and some are easy. I’m good at finding new clients and excellent at matching employees to businesses.

Time will only make Zach's and my business more reputable. This is going to be my year to shine.

Pushing the unusual phone call from my mind, I look at my computer, and I'm immediately immersed in work. Friday will come soon enough. I have plenty to worry about without obsessing over an enigmatic phone call.

Chapter Three

McKenzie

“Right this way, Ms. Beaumont.” The host is impeccably dressed, fitting for a nice restaurant located next to the historic Pike Place Market. When we bypass the regular dining room, my stomach clenches the slightest bit.

This potential client clearly has money. It isn't cheap, or easy, to get a last-minute private dining room anywhere in Seattle, let alone one with a view of Elliott Bay, Mount Rainer, the Olympic Mountains, and the Port of Seattle — all at once.

Why would anyone with this kind of money be interested in my fledgling accounting firm? The room I step into is large, with only one small table set up by the impressive windows looking onto the bay, and I know right now that I *must* have whoever this is for my client. This man — or woman — can bring my business into the forefront with a big solid bang.

“I'll hang your coat for you,” the host says. Excitement teams with my nerves as he pulls out my chair and waits for me to hand over my coat and sit. This accomplished, I wonder how long I'll have to wait to meet this mystery person.

He — it has to be a male — most likely knows I'll wait all day if that's what it takes. I can't believe I've gotten away with putting this person off for three days. It was a silly power play, and it could've cost me a big client. I'll have to be more careful in the future. Will I have to do some serious sucking up

now? I don't even care. I'm going to make this business the best Seattle has to offer.

"May I offer you a drink while you wait?"

"Yes, an iced tea, please," I reply.

The man vanishes right away, zips back in, and vanishes again, leaving me alone in the room. This level of service is new to me. I've made a lot of money over the years as a motivated businesswoman, but the host's behavior makes it clear the person I'm about to meet has a whole new level of wealth, a wealth only a few possess. And though I've made a lot of money, I also have a lot of expenses. Luxurious meals aren't one of them.

A few minutes later I realize I'm no longer alone. My body tenses, and I have a feeling I'm not going to be happy when I look up. However, I have to find out who's draining the oxygen from the room so I turn . . . and of course, walking toward me is none other than Byron Astor. I should've known, and maybe I did somewhere deep down inside, but I've refused to think he could be the man behind the phone call.

If I had, I wouldn't have come, and I *desperately* want his business. Call it my competitive nature, or my will to survive, but all I know for sure is I have to make it in Seattle's business world — in my own business — and Byron Astor has a wealth I want a piece of.

"I see you found the restaurant," Byron says as he walks up beside me, pausing before he moves and sits. When his knees brush mine under the table, I curse the intimate setting and scoot back a couple of inches. It will make eating a bit more difficult, but I don't care.

I don't bother to respond to his remark about finding the place. It's downtown Seattle. Even a tourist can find the restaurant. So I cut to the chase. "Why all the secrecy, Byron?"

He smiles before answering my question with one of his own. "Would you have come had you known it was me?"

I lift my glass and take a sip before looking him in the eyes. Never show weakness, I say to myself, so I make sure I have on my most businesslike mask. I rarely wear any other, but I'm struggling this time. "Of course I would've."

"Very good, McKenzie. I *almost* believe you."

"Would you like the appetizers brought out, sir?" the waiter asks.

"Yes, please. And I'll have iced tea," Byron says.

"What? No alcohol at high noon?" I ask with only the slightest mockery in my voice.

"I don't want you to accuse me of being inebriated while we have a business discussion," he fires back. "And didn't you know the three-martini lunch went out of style before you were born?"

"Why am I here, Byron? Are you wasting my time?"

The waiter delivers Byron's tea before disappearing again, presumably to grab the first course, which clearly Byron has ordered in advance.

"Not at all, McKenzie," comes his easy reply. "Our head accountant has had an unfortunate accident and is out of the offices for the next thirty days — at a minimum. So I find myself in a pinch, and I've heard good things about your

company. Besides that, my brother said you did an excellent job when you worked for him.”

Several plates of food magically appear on the table, and even though I’m tense, I can’t help but appreciate the sweet aromas drifting up, but I don’t grab anything.

“So you want to hire our company temporarily?” I ask. I decide to pick up some food to give myself something to do. I take a little of the calamari misto, some of the fried cheddar curds, and a few mussels.

Byron fills a plate for himself and devotes a little time to nibbling before he speaks again. “I want to hire *you*, McKenzie.” I don’t miss the emphasis on *you*, but choose to ignore it.

“Why don’t you tell me about the project? Then I can tell you if I think our company will be a good fit,” I say. For the next few minutes, Byron explains what he needs, and my mouth practically waters. This is a perfect job for my company. It’s filled with challenges, and Astor Construction is so diversified that it certainly isn’t run-of-the-mill accounting work. It will take a sharp mind to cut through everything, and I have this in spades.

“Our company is more than qualified to help you,” I tell him.

“My brothers and I have been spending more time at job sites, where we can swing a hammer and get back to the basics. We do this on the assumption that we’ve hired a responsible team to handle the paperwork. This isn’t going well right now. Too often important things are getting forgotten. That’s why I’m stuck at a desk . . . and I don’t like

being stuck anywhere. It doesn't help that our accountant had a boating accident. But that's what your company is here for, correct? To come and perform when needed?"

The way he says these words makes it more than clear there's a double meaning, but his tone stays level, and his expression doesn't change. I want to call him on it, but I'd look petty.

"Yes, of course. We can come in while you need a temporary accountant, we can help solve problems, or we can come in permanently. Whatever your needs, my goal at Seattle Accounting is to ensure you'll frequently use us." I nearly flinch at this last line, especially when his eyes twinkle.

"Well, between the challenges of new projects and our overseas operations, our accounting team has been working nonstop. Because the head of the department has been out for the past week, it's gotten chaotic, but it's been like that for a while with the turnover I already mentioned. I hate to say this, but at some of our operations we're not sure who we can trust. I need you to start on Monday," Byron tells me, "and it will be a *very* long week."

"I know the perfect person to send over. He's been in the field for twenty years and has been able to solve problems multiple high-level clients deemed unsolvable." This will ensure I don't have to work directly with Byron. I'll be helping behind the scenes of course, but I don't want to work at his side.

"That won't work for me," Byron says as he takes a bite of his salad. His voice doesn't change. It's firm, but not unkind.

“I haven’t given you his résumé yet. I can fax it over right after lunch,” I tell him.

“I said I want *you*, McKenzie.”

I pause, hearing what he’s saying. “I don’t go to work sites, Byron. Of course I’m involved in all operations, but I have my own business to run,” I tell him. “That’s why I hire capable employees and place them where they’re needed.”

He shrugs. “Then I’ll have to go somewhere else.”

I pause before speaking, not wanting to sound desperate, but also not wanting to lose this job. “Why don’t you look over Jim Dallinger’s dossier? I assure you he’s as qualified as I am, if not more so.”

“I won’t argue this point. Either I get *you* or there’s no deal.” The waiter can probably feel the tension rolling off of me in waves as he replaces my barely touched salad with a cup of clam chowder.

“Did you order the entire meal?” I ask. I express enough vexation in my voice to show him I’m not pleased.

“Yes, I did,” he replies, a challenge in his tone.

“Luckily, I’m enjoying the meal . . . so far,” I say, taking a spoonful of soup. I’m losing my pleasure in the food, as my irritation grows.

“I don’t think they serve anything that’s less than stellar, McKenzie.” After throwing me an annoying grin, he digs into his own chowder.

“How long are you expecting me to work in your offices?” I ask when it’s obvious he isn’t going to speak again until I do.

“Until the job’s finished.”

“That isn’t telling me much. What if this emergency ends up going over a month? I can’t leave my business for that long. I can possibly fill in for a couple of weeks, maybe even a month, but there’s no way I’ll be able to work past that,” I say. If he wants more of my time, I’ll have to turn down this dream job. What good will my company’s reputation be if it falls apart because I’m working for him and not for myself?

“Thirty days will be sufficient,” he says. It’s his first compromise of the day.

“And if your current head of accounting isn’t in better health by then?” I push. I need him to agree to thirty days max, or I’m not going to go along with this.

“At that time, I suppose, I’ll consider having one of your employees come in.”

“Is there a chance that one of my employees can come in sooner than thirty days?”

He pauses for several moments as he looks at me.

“Anything’s possible, McKenzie,” he says before giving me a wicked smile. “If my goals are accomplished sooner, we’ll discuss other employment options.” What in the hell does this mean?

“Thank you.” It’s like pulling teeth to get me to push these two words out. His smile widens as if he knows exactly what I’m thinking. Damn him.

“Now that the initial hard work is done, I’ll order wine to go with our main course,” Byron says, holding up his hand. The waiter practically appears in a puff. Our soup’s taken

away and grilled Alaskan king salmon and a glass of fruity Pinot Noir is placed before me.

With the possibility of gaining a big client without being locked to Byron's side for an unlimited time, my appetite returns, and I thank the waiter. It's too much of a stretch to thank Byron. The two of us discuss more precise questions and answers about his accounting problems until it's finally time to go. Even though the meal was fantastic, the company isn't exactly pleasant, and I have a lot to do the rest of the day, and all weekend for that matter, if I want to get any sleep at all while working in the Astor brothers' building . . . once again . . . instead of my own.

I really should turn him down, but working with Astor Construction will look very good on my client list. This will mean I can hire more employees, make a lot more money, and build a solid reputation in Seattle for being the best of the best.

I stand, not caring if I should wait for Byron to stand first. I'm finished with business and more than finished with his company. Byron doesn't take long to stand after I do. When he holds up his hand again and the waiter brings my coat to him, I hold back more irritation.

"Thank you," Byron says, dismissing the man. "We're finished here." And I'm again left alone with the enemy.

"I appreciate you coming to us for your needs," I say as I hold out my hand.

"You know why I came to you, McKenzie." His tone has changed, and his eyes are burning into mine.

"Because I'm the best at my job."

“Yes, and because I have unfinished business with you,”
Byron says.

“What unfinished business are you talking about?”

He steps up close to me, his lips a firm line. He doesn't touch me, but he doesn't need to. This man commands a room no matter where he is or who he's with — just as he's commanding my feet to stay firmly planted right here where I am. I don't like it one little bit.

“You messed with my family,” he says. “Now it's my turn to find out if you have an ulterior motive for screwing with Blake.”

I gasp, too stunned to say a word. When I'm finally able to speak, the words come out barely above a whisper. “Is this job real?” I'm finally able to take a step back.

“Yes. If you please me in your work, I'll back off. But I want to know what makes you tick. I don't believe in lying, and I'm not the easiest person to work for. So, if you can't take the heat . . .” He leaves the sentence unfinished. He moves a step closer to match every step I take back until I find myself against the window.

“Why should I take this job? From what you've said, it's a losing battle . . . at least for me.”

“If you're who I think you are, then, yes, you'll lose.” At least he's straightforward. But so am I.

“Then I shouldn't take the job.”

“The choice is yours.”

I firm my shoulders. “I don’t play games, Byron.”
Managing to step around him and free myself from his gaze, I look out at the picturesque view of the bay.

“Neither do I,” he says. His hand comes up to my shoulder and he turns me around to face him again.

My heart’s in my throat. There’s no doubt that I should walk away, but the pay’s great, and I have nothing to hide, so there’s no way for this man to hurt me. If I back down now, he’ll think I’m up to something. Why is it that when a person looks at you as if you’re guilty, it makes you shift on your feet, even when you haven’t committed a crime? I’ll probably never have the answer to this.

Looking him in the eye, my back straight, I make my decision. “Then we have an understanding.”

“I guess we do. Let’s seal the deal.”

I know exactly how he plans on sealing the deal, and I’ll be damned if I’m going to let it happen. Stepping sideways, I manage to get away from his grasp, and after putting an appropriate amount of distance between us, I stick out my hand.

Byron smiles, though it certainly doesn’t show in his eyes, and he finally reaches out and takes my fingers. But instead of offering a handshake like a normal person, he holds tightly, raises my hand, and places a kiss on my palm.

“I look forward to Monday,” he says.

“You can release me now,” I say, my face blank, though I refuse to break eye contact.

“Are you sure you want me to?”

“You’re an arrogant bastard.” I say sweetly.

His eyes widen just the slightest bit at my remark, and then a true smile flits to his glorious lips, shocking me more than anything else he’s done. “That I am, Ms. Beaumont; that I am.”

He releases me at last, and I flee the restaurant before he can say or do anything else. When I feel I’m far enough away to breathe, I stop and lean against a wall. What in the world have I just gotten myself into?

Chapter Four

McKenzie

I give my tile flooring a beating when I walk inside my offices. Blowing past my secretary, I'm thinking about slamming the door shut. It takes all of my legendary self-control to keep from doing so. Still, I get a measure of satisfaction as I take out my foul mood on my purse by tossing it into one of the empty chairs with a little extra vigor.

I storm around my desk, sink into my seat, lean forward, and close my eyes, resting my forehead on my hands and taking a deep breath. I'm out of sorts, to put it mildly, and more than a little frustrated. I should've turned down the job, but it's too good to be true . . . which means it's probably going to come back and bite me in the ass — hard!

“Meeting went well, I see.” I growl as I look up and try to give a semblance of a smile to Zach as he perches on my desk.

“I have chairs, you know,” I tell him, but it's something I've said many times before. He doesn't seem to like chairs, one of his many endearing quirks. “I don't want to talk about the meeting.”

“You know we're going to banter back and forth for several minutes while you pretend you don't need anyone, including me, then you'll finally cave and tell me all about it. So why don't we skip the song and dance? It won't kill you to come right to the point. Inquiring minds want to know.”

I again growl. Of course, he's right. Knowing this doesn't make me want to share anything with him., but if I don't get this off my chest, I might go out of my mind.

He *is* my business partner and therefore has a right to the information. It isn't as if I'm acting weak by telling him what's happening. Plus, I don't have to fill him in on the sexual-tension part of the story. Everyone in the business world knows the Astor brothers have a reputation for being a pain in the ass to work with. Those men think they're gods. In their defense they're not that far off ...

“Come on, McKenzie, how did the meeting go? Who was it? Please tell me we're going to bring in more riches than we can possibly spend in our lifetime.”

“It was a horrible meeting,” I grumble.

“Well, we've had failed meetings before. Just because we didn't get this client doesn't mean it's the end of the world. My meeting went well, even though it was only a mom-and-pop place. We'll make this work.” He can switch cheerleading points in a single breath. I like this about him.

“We got the job.” Byron's a dirtbag but he isn't going to force me into doing anything I don't want to do. Maybe that's the biggest problem. I'm worried *I'll* want to do many things with him — things I most certainly will regret.

“Alright, sugar britches. I'd never try to decipher the female mind, but I have to ask you: Why aren't you a lot happier about obtaining another client? Until now, I thought it was just small-potatoes stuff that you consider a waste of our time.”

“He demanded that I personally work there,” I grouse, finally making eye contact with Zach.

His jaw drops and he’s silent, if only for a moment. “How in the world will this place run if you’re working at a job site?” he asks. A bit of worry has crept into his usually bright eyes.

“I don’t know. That’s why I’m frustrated,” I say, my voice rising and my hands lifting in the air. I barely fight back the urge to yell.

“Um . . . do we need this client that badly? Who in the heck is it?” Zach asks, rapidly regaining his composure.

“Astor Construction.” I don’t need to add more. The name is powerful in itself.

My partner’s quiet as he thinks over the different options. I can practically see the wheels turning in his brilliant mind. If one of the Astor brothers wants me to work in person, that’s exactly what will happen. You don’t turn down clients like them. Zach and I both know it.

“We have very good employees, McKenzie. Did you point that out to him?”

“*Of course* I pointed it out to him.”

“I had to ask,” Zach says in self-defense.

“I . . . uh . . . kind of have some personal business with him. I guess he figures he’s killing two birds with one stone.”

“Personal . . . or business?” he slowly asks.

I never share anything personal with anyone. Okay, except maybe tiny snippets with Jewell, but even that’s rare. Zach

knows this, so I'm a bit peeved with the question, but I'm the one who opened the can of worms.

"Does it matter?" I ask. "*He* thinks it's personal. I don't."

"Okay, you're going to play things close to your vest. That's what you always do, but I think you should take time and think about this. Yes, we can use the boost we'll get from having a client as powerful as Astor Construction, but it can also kill us if this man has a private agenda against you. If he disses our business, we'll be royally screwed."

Zach's always the voice of reason, and I think about his words for a moment before speaking. "Byron Astor is an ass of the highest order. And though he's gunning for me, I don't think he's unethical in business. If I do the job well, which of course I will, I doubt he'll slander us. My working there will bring us a lot of money for the actual job, and the word of mouth will immeasurably help our company."

"Well, then, I guess you're going to take the job," Zach says, his smile back in place.

"And I'll work nights here," I promise.

"I can handle things here. You already don't sleep enough. I'll bring in a temp employee to keep up with the crap work; you just worry about securing us a good full-time position with Astor Construction," he says, springing down from my desk.

"I can't walk away from the work here, Zach."

"You can take a break from here, with daily emails and phone calls from me to assure yourself we aren't going under. This will build our business," he tells me, looking more

professional than I've ever seen him before. Gone is the carefree look he wears so well.

"I don't know how this company could survive without you, Zach," I say in a rare moment of open praise.

"Of course it wouldn't survive, sweetie. *You* wouldn't survive a day without me," he says, then surprises me when he moves around my desk, kneels in front of me, and grabs one of my hands. "Don't let this upset you. You're McKenzie Freaking Beaumont, badass businesswoman."

I smile at the combination of his serious tone and flippant words. "I appreciate you, Zach," I say while tugging against his hold. I don't do well with casual touching. Zach knows exactly what I'm thinking as he quickly lets me go. He throws me a brilliant smile, then stands and walks from the room.

I don't allow myself to dwell any further on Byron Astor. I have a lot of work to do before Monday, and there's no time like the present to start. I'll prove to myself and to Byron that I know my stuff. And, more importantly, I'll survive the challenge Byron's throwing my way. Not only will I survive it, I'll excel.

Chapter Five

Byron

“What in the hell are you up to now?”

“Excuse me?”

I knew I’d get this reaction from Blake. That’s what big brothers do. But I wasn’t expecting him to come barging into my office at the crack of dawn to yell at me. I hoped Blake wouldn’t notice McKenzie’s been here working. He was a big help to her when she wanted to go out on her own, openly supporting her. For me to bring her back is surely pissing my brother off, as he’ll consider it setting her back.

Because I have her working in the office adjoining my own, my brother was bound to see her, but since Blake married, he’s worked more and more from home — when he isn’t at a construction site. I was crossing my fingers I’d get away with this with zero consequences. It’s only Wednesday, and McKenzie’s worked here for three days now. I got caught much quicker than I thought I would.

“You have McKenzie working here. Don’t play stupid with me, Byron.”

“Stupid?”

“Yep. You got it in one. In our last conversation, you told me you despised the woman and thought she screwed up my life,” Blake says, hands on his hips as he glares at me.

“She opened an accounting company,” I tell him. “We’re in need of an accountant.”

If only it was that simple. Since she stepped into my office on Monday all I’ve pictured is stripping her down and throwing her across my desk. It’s nothing personal, I assure myself. I want to take ownership of her. Infatuation, or whatever the romance writers of the world call it, has nothing to do with her being here.

Are the fates with me or against me? It’s hard to tell. Before our conversation continues, McKenzie steps through the doorway, looking at the papers in her hands, not noticing I’m in a deadlock with my brother.

The outfit she’s wearing is appropriate to the office, but my eyes are still drawn to the top two buttons of her modest blouse. They’re undone, and though not even a hint of her cleavage is showing, I’m captivated. I’m hot to undo the next couple of buttons to see what she’s hiding.

Subtle pink lipstick fills out her lips, making them appear more than kissable, and my pulse speeds up as she moves closer. And her scent . . . I can’t figure out what it’s doing to me, but my hormones are running amok.

She looks up, and a genuine smile appears on her lush lips. “Hi, Blake. I’ve been hoping to see you, but I’ve been so busy I haven’t had a chance to seek you out.”

She walks up and gives Blake a *very* unprofessional hug, in my humble opinion. It has me grinding my teeth. I know she isn’t after my older brother, but it still gets to me. My head’s spinning because I don’t really know this woman when it comes down to it.

“Did you figure out the problem?” I snap, making both Blake and McKenzie turn my way. McKenzie’s eyes narrow at my tone, and Blake looks as if he wants to punch me.

“Unfortunately, I believe the problem runs deeper than a numbers issue. You have someone at the Boise office who is . . . shall we say, skimming a bit off the top. I’ve been over this repeatedly, and there’s no other explanation. If I were you, I’d have an internal audit done. It’s going to take quite some time to figure out exactly who, but from what I’ve seen, I’ve narrowed it down to three possible people. If you know your employees well, you might be able to narrow it further.” Her tone’s professional, and it’s putting me on edge.

This makes no sense. I want a professional, don’t I? So why is it that no matter what she does, I’m irritated? Why do I still want to punish her? Hell, I don’t even know which direction is up anymore.

“I’ll look this over as soon as Blake leaves,” I briskly say, hoping my brother will take the hint and go away.

“Maybe I should help,” Blake says, his expression changing as he looks between me and McKenzie. I in no way want my brother getting any ideas in his head about me and McKenzie. Hell, there is no me and McKenzie.

“I thought I’d have a couple of our employees come over for interviews later today or tomorrow if you’re up for it, Byron. I know you’re wary about trusting anyone other than me, but you’ll see I have a more than competent staff,” McKenzie says. My temper escalates even further.

With Blake standing right here, though, I can’t refuse McKenzie’s request, which appears to be what she already

knows. She's wicked smart. I have to give her credit for that. A person doesn't get to where she is at such a young age without having incredible intelligence.

"I'm picky, as you know," I say. "But go ahead and bring them in." This sounds gracious enough.

"Of course." Her tone doesn't change, but the expression in her eyes tells me she isn't fooled — I'm not going to give any of her employees a chance. I want her, and *only* her, working here. And we both know it.

"That will be all for now, McKenzie. I'll call you in when I'm finished speaking with my brother." It's more than obvious that my dismissal rankles her, but she gives a slight nod of her head, turns on her heel, and stiffly walks from the office.

During these few seconds, the tension's so thick it could be cut up and deep-fried, and I almost smile knowing I'm getting under her skin. She gets beneath my thick hide so easily that it's more than fitting I get to her as well. Turnabout's fair play.

"Did you forget we own this company together?" Blake asks, clearly irked at my attempt to shut him out.

"Of course not, but I'm in charge of the accounting department," I say, hoping this will be enough to get my brother to back the hell off.

"Since when do we ever say something like that?" Blake asks, though he doesn't look angry — he seems more curious. Which is worse.

"I've been under a lot of stress," I tell him. "I spent too much time away from the offices and it's catching up to me."

“Hmm.”

“What in the hell is that supposed to mean?” I fume.

“You seem awfully upset over an office issue,” Blake says, giving me an assessing look.

“I’m not some damn specimen for you to place under a microscope, Blake!”

“I’m not the one getting upset over nothing, Byron.”

“Don’t you have work to do?” I practically yell.

Blake’s quiet for several moments, and for the first time I can remember, I feel like squirming in my seat. What is wrong with me? Blake’s next words absolutely infuriate me.

“So, I’ll ask this again: why is McKenzie working here?”

“I already told you we needed to fill the position.”

“She runs her own accounting firm. She doesn’t personally fill in at job sites,” Blake points out.

“Well, the job called for her and *only* her,” I say. I’m getting sick of defending myself.

“You’re playing with fire, Byron. You *will* get burned,” Blake says, a knowing smirk on his lips. “*Badly* burned.”

“She’s just filling in for a job, Blake. Why don’t you stop trying to look deeper than that and stop trying to play a shrink? We promised years ago we wouldn’t pull that crap with each other.”

“Don’t play games with her, Byron. She might put on an act that she’s strong and independent, and she certainly isn’t weak,

but she has wounds, some of them deep, and you have the power to break her,” Blake warns.

“Why don’t you stop worrying about her? Worry about your own life, and your own woman,” I snap, very done with this ridiculous conversation. Hmm . . . the way I worded that might suggest I think McKenzie is *my* woman, and only I should worry about her. That’s not the case.

“I understand. I can see you’re struggling with the way you’re feeling, so I won’t take offense over what you said. But be warned, brother, she’s my wife’s good friend, and if you put her through hell, I’ll be forced to step in and knock you down a peg or two.”

“I’d love to see you try, Blake. It’s been a while since I’ve had a good brawl.”

“Alright, then. We’ll talk about this later.”

Before I can reply, Blake walks out, and I grind my teeth when a couple of seconds later McKenzie’s sweet laughter drifts in through my open door. She never laughs around me, but maybe that’s because I never try to make her laugh. Making her happy isn’t on my agenda.

I wait a while to be sure my brother’s returned to his own side of the building. Then I decide to make the woman — the *maddening* woman — wait even longer. I’m not in a proper mood to work with her right now. So I try to push McKenzie from my mind by digging into other projects on my computer. It’s much easier thought than done.

Chapter Six

McKenzie

When Blake leaves my desk, I don't know what to do. Byron wants to discuss the Idaho files, but twenty minutes have passed, and he still isn't calling me in. I feel flustered and out of sorts, but I'm not the type to sit around and do nothing. I need to pull myself together.

The last few days have been almost surreal. Business is supposed to be just business, so I came in Monday morning, got my assignments, and went to work. He hasn't brought up anything personal — not once. He confuses me, and I'm not easily confused.

A few times when we're working together, I'll look up and catch his piercing gaze focused on me, but I'm almost sure I'm imagining it, because the second he notices me looking, his face grows unreadable.

That's fine with me. I don't want to dance this particular dance from his playbook. I want to run my business, make a new start for myself, and let my past life go. Byron isn't making this easy — not one little bit.

There's a darkness in Byron that seems to call to me on some basic level, whether I want to hear the call or not. Inside, I'm as messed up as he is, and there isn't a chance anything could work between the two of us. Though, I wonder what it would be like with him in the bedroom. Strange — sex isn't

something I've ever enjoyed. But being alone with this man sends jolts of electricity through my body. And that kiss . . .

That kiss melted me inside and out. I'm sure he's a phenomenal lover — but all in self-interest. The woman never gets the same pleasure from the dirty deed. None of that matters. Nothing matters but survival. And no matter what people think of me, I'm not a whore.

Since Byron doesn't have an ounce of empathy in his entire body, I'm certain he won't want to hear my story. He deemed me evil before he knew anything about me. But here's the thing — even though I'm exhausted working what looks to be sixty-hour weeks for him, then putting in as many hours as possible at my own business, he's actually helping me. In the end, when I can show Astor Construction as a client of mine, I'll have people pouring in through my doors.

When Byron still doesn't call me into his office, I decide to get some work done — something that will require my full concentration. Looking down at my paperwork, I sink into the numbers and forget my woes for at least a few minutes. When my phone rings twenty minutes later, it gives me a start.

A familiar number shows up on the screen and I smile as I pick up. “Good morning, Zach.”

“Morning, beautiful. How's it going in the real world?” he asks, his natural humor coming through, making me miss my office.

“It is what it is,” I reply, sending the file I'm working on to the corner of the computer screen. “How are things going at our company?”

“It would be a lot better if you were here, but I think I’ve got a handle on things. Did you talk the boss into letting anyone come in for interviews?” Does Zach sound hopeful?

I shudder. “Please tell me there isn’t a disaster going on that you’re too afraid to tell me about.”

“If there was a disaster, McKenzie, I’d tell you, even if I didn’t like it. I’d probably send flowers with a note that said our business is going down in flames, but since that isn’t happening, you have nothing to worry about. Again, did the boss agree to interviews?”

“Yes, sort of,” I say, though I’m sure it’s a waste of time.

“Great. When can I send Jim in? I can do it now if you like.”

“Let me talk to Byron. I don’t think we should send Jim. Let’s bring in Mary. Her personality would be a lot better fit here.”

“Are you sure?”

Mary’s sixty-eight, and she’s a master accountant, flawless in her work. She’s also a no-nonsense kind of woman. If Byron doesn’t like her, he isn’t going to like anyone.

“Yes, I’m sure. I think they’ll get along fine,” I say. “Hang on.” Before he can reply I place him on hold, take a deep breath, and walk into the lion’s den. He’s well aware I’m in the room. Still, he makes me wait for a full sixty seconds before he finally looks up from his computer.

“I have Zach on the line, and Mary — I’ve told you about her — is available to come in this afternoon if you can make

the time.” I’m brisk and impersonal, matching the way Byron speaks to me.

His eyes narrow for a brief moment, but just as quickly, a small smile tilts his lips. “Bring her in now.” He looks back down at his computer, clearly dismissing me.

I hurry back to the phone, tell Zach to send Mary over ASAP, then pace the hall as I wait for her to show, my nerves screaming until the woman walks around the corner.

If Byron likes Mary, this game can stop, and I’ll be free to attend to my own business. I’m not foolish enough to think he’ll stop tormenting me so easily, but at least it can be done after business hours.

Though Mary arrives quickly, Byron makes her hang out in the sitting area for nearly an hour before calling her into his office. I don’t attempt to get anything important done while I wait for the woman to walk back out. If I was a nail-biter, I’d be down to stubs.

Only fifteen minutes into the interview Byron’s door opens and Mary steps out, looking less than pleased, and I know this isn’t going to work. I can send in a hundred people, but Byron isn’t going to hire any of them. He’s wasting their time right now.

Still, I have to ask. “What do you think, Mary?”

“I don’t understand how you can work for that man. He sat there stone-cold and asked me a few questions, then stared at his computer screen for a while before thanking me and sending me on my way. I’ve never been so insulted in my

life.” Mary has one hand on her hip, and she’s clutching her briefcase with the other.

“He might be having a bad day. You’re exceptional at what you do, Mary. Once he’s had time to think about it, I’m sure he’ll realize you’re exactly what’s required for this job.”

I’m hoping and praying I won’t lose such a valued employee over this. Mary could’ve retired five years ago, but she works because she loves to. She’s a widow and says it’s much nicer to be out with other people than to sit at home alone, hoping for a visit from the grandkids.

“I don’t know that I’d accept at this point,” she says. “I enjoy coming to work. And the past two months at *your* business have been satisfying. I have a feeling, however, that I wouldn’t enjoy coming here at all, even if it were only for a few weeks.” And with that, Mary turns and walks out.

Crap! Going to the bathroom first to refresh my lip gloss and take some deep breaths, I make my way back to Byron’s office, pausing outside his door before stepping inside.

This time I don’t wait for him to acknowledge my presence. “That was a quick interview,” I say with too much false cheer in my voice.

“She isn’t a good fit.”

Gritting my teeth, I count to ten. “Why?”

“I can read people, and though she has an excellent curriculum vitae, she wouldn’t be a good fit for Astor Construction.”

“Is anyone going to be a good fit?” I ask.

He gives me a hint of a smirk as he looks into my eyes, freezing me where I stand across from him. “Not right now they won’t, McKenzie. You’re stuck here.” I wonder for how long.

A shudder passes through me. I’m never going to survive this. With no way to respond, I wrench my gaze away from his mesmerizing eyes and leave his office. The day isn’t even half over, and I desperately need a drink. Happy hour can’t come soon enough.

Chapter Seven

McKenzie

My eyes are barely open as I pull into my driveway and sit in the car for a few minutes just to catch my breath. I need to paste a smile on my face and pretend I'm not burning the candle at both ends. Long ago someone told me if you smile past the pain, you'll eventually make a real smile appear, so it's my goal to turn my lips up no matter how upset I am. I also need to remember there's a reason I'm doing all that I'm doing.

I'm barely able to pull myself from the car, and my stomach rumbles with hunger as I drag myself up the short path to my front door. I fumble around on my keychain until I find the right key, slip it into the lock, and turn it. Before I'm able to open the door, a voice speaks from behind me that sends a chill down my spine.

“You're looking mighty fine, McKenzie.”

That voice! For years that voice has given me nightmares, haunted me in ways I fear will never go away. I hoped I'd heard it for the last time when I changed cities. It's the voice of the man who ripped away my innocence, something I can never get back.

Anxiety fills me, but I won't give him the satisfaction of showing it. He's a part of my past I prayed I'd never have to face again. I should know the past is never truly forgotten, though.

Turning, I find him with a lit cigarette dangling from his puffy lips. Though the voice is exactly the same as I remember, the man is nearly unrecognizable. Time hasn't been good to him. Over the last ten years he's grown larger, in a bloated, beached-whale kind of way. His eyes have also changed. They're dull and lifeless — drugs and alcohol have obviously not been kind to him.

His taunting eyes move up and down my body, and though he's trying to appear relaxed as he leans against the rail at the bottom of my porch, I can see the twitch in his fingers, and other subtle hints that he's high on something, but already flirting with withdrawal.

“It's been a long time, Nathan,” I say between clenched teeth. I'm afraid if I unclench them, they'll begin to chatter and show this man weakness. Not acceptable. What is he doing at my home, at my refuge?

“It would've been much sooner, but I lost track of you after you ran away. I've searched for a very long time. You can imagine my surprise when I found out you were running a top-notch whorehouse,” he says, a gleam lighting his eyes. “I was disappointed the doors were closed by the time I was able to get here. I would've loved to taste your offerings.”

I'm sure he would love that, but that wasn't the business I was running. It won't do me any good to argue, and I don't care about his opinion enough to try to explain what I'd been trying to do. Never in a million years would I inflict him on any woman I know.

“What do you want?” My temper's escalating the more he looks and speaks to me.

“Now, now, McKenzie, I’m not feeling very welcomed. Why don’t you invite me inside for a nice drink so we can reminisce about old times?” How had I ever found him attractive? How had I ever fallen for his lies?

“I told you the last night we were together — if *together* is the right word — that I never wanted to see you again,” I remind him. Yes, I’m afraid of him, and I have good reasons to be, but I’m not about to pretend I feel anything for him but disgust. Dealing with him has always been a lose-lose proposition, and that hasn’t changed no matter how long we’ve been apart.

“Ah, those are just words spoken in a lovers’ spat, baby doll,” he says, his lips twisting up in his sick attempt at a smile. The man never smiles, not really, not with any warmth. He’s a predator of the most despicable kind, and I was unlucky enough to find out too late.

“Please tell me why you’re here.” My exhaustion returns, and it’s overwhelming me. Not good. The last thing I want is to pass out. I did that once in his presence, and the result was unthinkably horrific.

“You stole from me, McKenzie. I want what’s owed to me.” My mouth drops open at his words. I can’t have heard what I think I just heard. Not a chance. I’m silent for several moments as he squirms on my bottom step, and I gape at him.

“Would you care to repeat that?” I ask, my voice colder than ice.

He shifts again and breaks eye contact, as if unable to face my wrath. He’s pathetic, but I’m not foolish enough to underestimate a desperate man. While speaking with him, I

pulled out my pepper spray, gripping the small bottle in my hand, ready to use it if necessary.

“You ran away with the money from that night . . .” He trails off at the outrageous gasp coming from me, but adds, “*My* share as well as yours.”

“I took nothing from you, Nathan,” I tightly say. “And if I were you, I wouldn’t bring up that night.” Cold fury — or is it hot? — is pouring through me.

Desperation must be making him brave, because he straightens at my words and his eyes dart around, maybe searching for witnesses. I don’t know. But if he takes one step toward me, I’ll make him regret it.

“That’s where you’re wrong, sex kitten. I spent time and money on you, trained you, prepared you, and got you a good first job. You thanked me by running away in the middle of the night with *my* money. That, in my book, is theft.”

“I didn’t know I was being trained,” I tell him. “I thought we were a couple.”

“Ah, but you see, don’t you, that you used what I taught you to create a very successful business?”

“You didn’t help me with anything,” I spit out.

“You’ve been successful because of me. I’d think you’d want to give me a little bit of your take as a thank-you.”

“Are you kidding me?” I gasp. He shrinks back the tiniest bit at my show of outrage, but then he stands back up and glares at me. I need to be careful. A desperate man equals a crazy one. My hand grips the pepper spray a little tighter, my finger on the trigger.

“There’s no way you’ll get a single dime from me. Do you understand?” Rage is the only thing keeping me on my feet right now.

“You *do* owe me, McKenzie, and you *will* pay it — one way or another.” His eyes drift up and down my body, making my stomach turn. Never, ever will this man touch me again, not while I’m still breathing.

Nathan makes a big mistake — he takes a step toward me. I don’t budge an inch. I stretch out my arm and blast him with the pepper spray. The man who’s responsible for the most nightmarish night of my life lets forth an ear-piercing scream as he stumbles down my front steps and collapses on the ground, grinding his hands into his eyes.

“You bitch!” he screams over and over again as he writhes on the ground in agony. I’m not going to take another second of this. Reaching for my phone, I dial the police and sit at the top of the steps, my eyes not moving from his twisting body.

After about fifteen minutes, he lays in a fetal position, crying. I still don’t trust taking my eyes off of him. When the police show up ten minutes later, I take my first deep breath.

The next forty-five minutes are some of the longest of my life. I watch Nathan get cuffed and placed in the back of the squad car, and then I answer the officers’ questions before they finally drive away.

I don’t know whether I’ve seen the last of that . . . slimeball, but I’d be a fool to underestimate him. He looks to be out of choices, and this makes him dangerous. I won’t stroll down any dark alleys anytime soon.

Once inside my house, I engage the locks and determinedly move through my place, checking every window. When I'm assured everything's locked up tight, or seems to be, I go to my bedroom and collapse across the bed.

The tears finally fall. I curl up in a ball on top of my blankets and cry out my frustration. I should've known it's never over with a man like that. How had I been such a fool as to ever trust him? I might've been young, but I should've known even back then. Now there are two men in my life who want the impossible from me . . . and neither is going to get a damn thing.

Chapter Eight

Byron

A bead of sweat drips down my neck as I take a break and lean against the wall of the building I've been pounding with a hammer. No, I don't have time to be out on the job site. And no, I'm not running away from the office, the office where I've brought in a woman who's making my life a living hell.

Okay, *maybe* I'm running from that woman. I'm a fool — a certifiable fool. The village idiot, dammit. At least I can admit this in my own head. I've had her working for me for a week. At any time, I can hire one of her employees and see her maybe once or twice a year if she happens to be at my brother's house when I'm there. End of problem. But the idea of doing that turns my guts inside out. Absurd, simply absurd.

"We're heading to lunch, boss. Do you want to join?"

My foreman is waiting by the work truck and the rest of the men are piling into varying vehicles as they get ready to head off in search of food. "No. I'm going to finish what I've been working on and head back to the office," I tell him. "I've already wasted too much of my day."

"It's never a waste to work up a sweat," Wyatt says before jumping in the truck and taking off.

I move to my truck and pull a bottle of water from the cooler, then sit down under a tree not too far from the building. The place is going up fast, and it's a beauty. Astor Construction is building a new development on the outskirts of

Seattle, far enough away to not feel like the city, but close enough to get to easily, and we want it to feel historic with several architectural features that haven't been seen in a long time. All three of us have been working on and off at this site — it's a pleasure to be a part of the actual construction.

Closing my eyes, I lean back and feel a small measure of peace. I love my business, love working with my brothers, and love being independent with no one to boss me around. If I could only quit obsessing about a certain woman, my life would be damn near perfect.

When I open my eyes after a few minutes, horses are out in the field. What the hell? Where have they come from? They're looking at the opening to the building, and I turn then freeze at what I see.

"McKenzie?" I call out, but she only smiles and gives the smallest shake of her head before holding a finger up against her lips.

I stand, intending to move over to her, but again she shakes her head. Her delicate fingers rise to rest on the top button of her blouse, and my body instantly turns rigid. Looking me in the eyes, she moves her other hand up, tilts her head back, and her fingers travel down the front of her blouse as she moans. I'm instantly rock solid. I take a step toward her, but her head comes back up and she shakes it a third time.

Fine. If she wants to play, I'll let her play. I step back and lean against the tree, my body pulsing, my eyes glued to McKenzie as her fingers rise again and she slowly begins undoing her blouse, one small button at a time. I'll finally see what her clothes keep hidden from me. Her full breasts are

revealed, and they're everything I've imagined . . . and more. Oh, yes, with her dark pink nipples jutting out just so . . .

She doesn't wear a bra to work? Now that's going to make me even harder when I'm at the office. My eyes shift to her waist as she reaches behind her and undoes the zipper at her back and then her skirt is dropping to the ground. *No panties, either? Hell yes!*

I feast my eyes on her glorious body as she kicks her skirt away, then spreads her legs and props herself seductively against the doorway of the building, her chest pushed out, and her ass dipping low as she opens and closes her legs. Enough is enough.

Slowly, I move forward. She turns her head and looks at me, a come-hither expression playing in her eyes. "Is this what you've been wanting, Byron?" she asks as she stands and faces me, one hand high on the door, waiting for me to reach her.

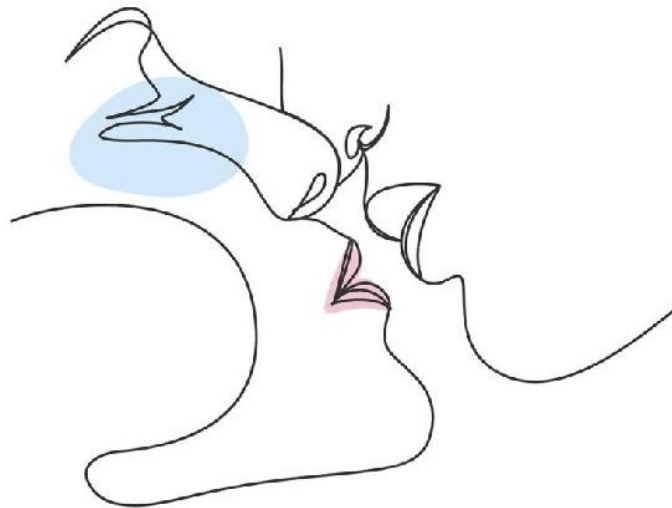
"Oh, this and so much more," I huskily whisper. "You're making me burn."

"It's a very warm day," she says, lifting her free hand to her neck and letting it travel down between her breasts and along the plane of her stomach. She stops at the top of her incredibly sexy mound.

"It's certainly getting hotter," I gasp as her fingers dip lower and circle the very part of her body I want my mouth to devour.

"I'm getting lonely here, Byron," she purrs as she reaches out toward me.

She doesn't need to say anything more. I close the small gap between us and roughly pull her against me. My head descends and I finally taste her sweet lips. I plunder her mouth, reach down, and grip her backside, pulling her against the roughness of my jeans and the straining hardness of my arousal.



She grasps my hair with both hands as she groans into my mouth, begging me for more. I'll give her anything she wants — anything at all. Her kiss is filled with promises of what's to come, and I accept what she's offering, making my own silent promises of what I'll do to her, with her, for her. This woman is making me come unglued, and I never want to put the pieces back together again.

She pushes her hips against me, her leg lifting behind me, her foot caressing my calf as she tries to get closer. "Clothes. They need to come off," she pants before reconnecting her mouth with mine in a passionate display of possession.

With an urgency born of desire, I drive one leg between her thighs, and push her legs apart. Then I drop to my knees,

resting my head on the silk of her stomach as I inhale her sweet scent. “So perfect, so beautiful,” I reverently say.

I grasp one of her legs and raise it to my shoulder, spreading her wide open for my view. Without hesitation, I lean forward, finally getting my first taste of her heat, and I nearly lose it.

My tongue swipes up and down the soft folds of her heat, and I suck the pulsing flower of her core, her cries of pleasure telling me how fast and slow to go. I worship her body, learn every inch of her most tantalizing area, until I can take no more.

I let her go and stand, and in less than a minute, I toss my clothes aside. “I need to take you now, McKenzie,” I groan.

“Finally,” she gasps, and she looks down, her eyes filling with delight at the sight of my throbbing erection. “It’s all mine,” she exults, then looks back up and licks her lips.

Our bodies meet — it’s all so ethereal that I don’t feel any movement — I lift her up, and soon her tight heat is surrounding me, her perfect core holding me deep inside her.

“Oh, Byron, more,” she cries as she lays her head on my shoulder and sinks her teeth into my skin. I don’t care. The pain grounds me just enough that I don’t explode inside her too soon.

But I move faster, gripping her *derrière* as I cry out her name, seeking release for both of us. Leaning down, I lick the salty skin of her neck and suck on the point where her pulse is thundering.

“Please, Byron . . . please . . .” she moans. “I need . . .”

The feel of her breasts sliding against my chest, of her legs gripped tightly around my hips, of her mouth caressing my shoulder — it's all too much.

“Let go, McKenzie, let go,” I cry out, my own pleasure building.

“Yes, now!” she cries as she convulses around me . . .

“Wake up!” I shoot upright, confused and hard, wondering what in the devil is going on. I look around blearily, my eyes trying to adjust to the bright light. Where's McKenzie?

“What in hell were you dreaming about?” a person asks.

“I don't know,” says another, “but I'll have what he's having.” Laughter accompanies this comment.

With a groan of frustration, I realize I fell asleep beneath the tree. To make matters worse, I must've said something unfortunate, because my crew members are back and enjoying my pain.

“You might want to go find the girl and get some satisfaction,” my foreman says with a big guffaw.

“Go back to work, Wyatt. I'm heading to the offices,” I grumble. As I walk stiffly back to my truck, trying desperately not to show the men how painful this walk of shame is, the thought of finding the girl is a damn good idea. It's time McKenzie and I close *this* deal. I can only be patient for so long before I need satisfaction. I have a feeling both of us need it more than either of us are willing to admit.

Chapter Nine

McKenzie

I'm late getting back to work. I didn't wake up in the best of moods today, so being stuck in lunch-hour traffic is dragging my mood down one more notch. I've been seething ever since my miserable ex thought it might be fun to torment me a few days ago. I'm not afraid of him, but he most likely figures if he pesters me enough, I'll give him what he wants just to make him go away.

How was I so stupid as to be with that man at the vulnerable age of seventeen? *What in the world is wrong with me?* As soon as I have this thought, sadness envelops me.

This isn't the time nor place to think about the past. Even so, the past is continually with me. Filled with deep regret, I have to remind myself that I'm living my life. Even if I encountered some bumpy roads along the way, I was able to handle them without utter disaster. Not everyone can say the same.

Again, I shake off depressing thoughts as I park my car and step out of it. When Byron came in yesterday, he was in a mood even more foul than mine is today, snapping at me and everyone else. Today, he's been in business meetings with his brothers all morning, so I haven't had to deal with whatever mood he's in. This is only a temporary job. As long as I keep reminding myself of this, I'll be fine.

Slipping back inside the Astor building at about a quarter past one, I make my way to my desk, click on my computer, and try to return to work mode. When I hear a shuffling noise and look up, my gaze meets Byron's standard scowl, and it's even harder to handle than normal.

"I thought you were going to take this job seriously," he snaps.

"Of course I am," I reply, confused.

"Then why do you find it acceptable to come back to the offices late?" What the actual heck? Is he timing me? I haven't been on a time clock in a lot of years, and no one has *ever* questioned my work ethic. I refuse to argue with him, though.

"Is there something you want, Byron?"

"Yes, for you to do your job and do it right."

"I *am* doing my job. Is there anything else you want?" I'm losing what little cool I have left.

He pauses for a moment before speaking again. "Gather up the Boise papers. I want to go over that situation in an hour." With that he turns and walks away.

I take a deep breath and then another before I pull up the files. I'll go over them one final time so I'll have every detail on the tip of my tongue. There's no need to have him insulting my work.

Before I can dive back in, my cell phone rings, but instead of ignoring it, I glance down and cringe when I see the number. This isn't the time to deal with more problems, but I know there's a good chance Nathan will come barging through the doors if I ignore him. They only kept him in jail for one

day after he trespassed on my property. Sorry, they told me, but he hadn't committed an *actual* crime. And he's called me every day since. I answer the call.

"What do you want now?" I snap.

"I'm not going away, McKenzie. As a matter of fact, I'm hanging out in the park across the street from where you work. You can never be too careful when you're out walking. Strange things can happen." I take a deep breath before responding.

"You don't scare me, Nathan. You're pathetic and weak, and no matter how much you harass me, I'm not caving, so please go back to the hole you crawled out of and leave me the hell alone."

"I *should* scare you," he says, but he can't quite pull off the menacing tone with his weak voice.

"I don't have money to give you, but even if I did, I'd rather burn it in a dumpster on the side of the street than give you anything I earn. Are you hearing me?"

"You might have got the drop on me once, but it won't happen again."

"Maybe if there wasn't such a little-boy whine in your voice, your threats would come off as a lot more convincing," I say. The thing is, even though he's a pathetic excuse of a human being, I can't forget he's also desperate.

"I have nowhere else to go, so it looks like I'm sticking around," he says.

"It's not my problem—"

He hangs up on me, and I let out a sigh while rubbing my forehead. How many more problems can I take before I explode? I concentrate on my breathing for several moments before I realize I'm no longer alone. I don't want to look up, don't want to know how much of the conversation Byron heard.

His expression gives nothing away. I'm silent as I wait to hear what insult he's going to skewer me with next. Hell, he might as well bring it on. My day can't get any worse.

"My office . . . now," he says, and he turns and walks away. He's confident I'll follow.

I slowly rise from my chair and take a step in the direction of his office before my shoulders go back and a bit of the fire that's seen me through many hard times flares up inside. I'm sick of getting bossed around, sick of men trying to control me.

Instead of following Byron into his office, I grab my purse and make my way to the restroom around the corner. And I take my time. I wash my face, the cool water feeling incredible against my heated skin, and reapply a modest amount of makeup. Then I prop myself against the sink and stare at my image.

"You are McKenzie freaking Beaumont. You've survived things most people could never handle, and you'll continue to survive. No one can make you feel inferior. No one but you can decide your course of action. No one can trample the life you've made for yourself. Bullies are bullies because they can't earn respect any other way. Deep down, they're cowards."

This is a speech I've delivered to myself many times over the course of my life, and I have a feeling I'll say it many more times. No, I'm not immune to fear, and yes, I'll have weak moments — everyone does — but I won't let these moments define who I am. And I won't allow anyone to keep me down for long.

With my head held high, I leave the restroom and head back to Byron's office. My armor is back in place and I'm going to keep this job. I'm going to make a success of my business and I'm definitely going to beat Nathan Guilder — damn him to hell. He's nothing more than a pathetic excuse for a man trying to make up for his tiny dick.

I nearly smile at my thoughts. That is until I step into Byron's office and see the way he's looking at me. This isn't going to be my easiest battle . . . not by a long shot . . . but it won't break me. Nothing will ever break me again.

I stand my ground and wait. Let the match begin . . .

Chapter Ten

Byron

Just when I think I have a clue who McKenzie Beaumont is, something happens to throw my preconceived notions into disarray. I don't know her at all. She's a mystery . . . one I want to solve.

That phone call changed not only her voice, but her entire demeanor. I'm very aware of true fear — and though McKenzie was obviously irritated, she was also afraid. I *will* find out why. I might've believed it was an act except she didn't know I was listening. She wasn't acting for my benefit. So what is going on?

“Who were you on the phone with, McKenzie?” I learned long ago not to let my opponents have time to think. If I catch her by surprise, she won't have time to make up a good lie. She already managed to get away for twenty minutes between the phone call and coming to my office. Damn woman is stubborn.

“It was no one you know.”

“Hmm. Try me. I know a lot of people.”

“Trust me, Byron; you don't know *this* person,” she says.

“Whoever it was seems to be wanting something you're not willing to give,” I say. She nervously shifts on her feet. I'm sure she's wondering how much of the conversation I heard.

I want to think of this woman as cold, calculating, and interested in only herself, but I can't help but notice the frightened look in her eyes and the way she's carefully holding herself together. Improbably, I want to be her knight in shining armor and rescue her from whatever dragon was on the other end of her phone line.

"A lot of people seem to want things I'm not willing to give," she pointedly says. She doesn't pause before continuing though. My calls are none of your business." Her eyes connect with mine and show me she hasn't lost a bit of the steel in her spine.

My pulse speeds up. I want to grab her, shake her, and get past the icy composure she inevitably reverts to. Instead, I fire off more words in a voice that is, if possible, even icier.

"Everything that goes on in this office is my business," I assure her. "As a business owner, you should understand that."

"Let me repeat that my *personal* business is none of *your* business."

"When your personal life spills over into the workplace, it *becomes* my business," I counter. Her eyes narrow as we remain in a silent face-off, both refusing to back down. Then I see the telltale slump of her shoulders and know I've gained a minor advantage.

"You're right," she says. "I'll make sure to keep my phone put away while I'm working."

Though she says the words, she clearly doesn't mean them. There's something going on in her life she has zero control over. I want to know what that is. Short of shaking the

information from her, I don't know how in the hell I'm going to get her to tell me. I should leave it alone and let her deal with her own messes. It's not my concern.

But words still slip from my mouth. "I can help you with whatever it is."

"There's nothing going on that I care to tell you about. I don't need help."

I never — absolutely *never* — offer to help anyone, particularly a woman, and to have the offer thrown back at me is frustrating. But neither of us say anything for several moments.

"Dammit, McKenzie! This is ridiculous," I finally growl.

"I don't need help from you, Mr. Astor." And for a brief instant I swear I see a sheen of moisture spread over her eyes, but it's gone so quickly I may have imagined it.

Distance isn't doing the trick, so with all of my will to stay away from her gone, I stand and move across the room, drawing closer to her. I have to give her points for not retreating. I see the look in her eyes, see that she wants to turn and run, but her stubborn pride won't allow her to do that.

"I heard your end of the conversation, McKenzie. You *do* need my help." I stop in front of her, forcing her head to tilt up so she can continue facing me. This might have been the wrong move, because now her subtle scent is drifting over me, her warm breath brushing against my throat, her body heat practically burning me.

This woman is certainly casting a spell over me, and I have a feeling the spell won't be broken until I capture her lips,

capture her body, and purge her from my system. Especially after my incredibly vivid dream the day before that left me hungry, wanting, and in the worst of moods.

“Even if I did need help, I wouldn’t ask for it,” she says. Her tone holds only a trace of vulnerability, but that small measure of it makes me want more than ever to pull her into my embrace.

When her helplessness evaporates and a taunting smile fills her lips, the small strand of elastic holding up my will to resist her, snaps. Snaking my arms around her back, I draw her to me, and at long last, kiss her again. How have I managed to wait this long to bring us back together? It’s what we both need.

When she melts against me, I pull back. “You can’t stop me,” I say. What do I mean? Am I speaking about helping her or bedding her? Maybe both. We can’t stop the inevitable.

My lips claim hers again, preventing her from protesting. I expect her to fight me, expect her to protest, but she doesn’t lie to either of us, doesn’t put up a front. Instead, her hands come up to rest on my arms as she opens her sweet mouth to me, and I claim her in a way I’ve been dreaming of doing since that first kiss months ago.

A sigh escapes her, but I catch it. My blood rages as my fingers dip over the curve of her derrière and I tug her hips against my pulsing erection. I want there to be no doubt in her mind about what she’s doing to me. I haven’t had sex in a long, *long* time, and it’s showing.

I know we’ll be incredible together. Still, as much as I need a woman, need *this* woman, I should stop. I kiss her a while

longer before I find the will to pull back. I do it because this woman has power over me . . . and I don't like it.

I don't know whether she truly comprehends her power or not. She's beautiful, sensual, and the most fascinating woman I've ever met, yet there's something behind her eyes, something that scares me . . . as much as it beckons me.

"That shouldn't have happened," I say.

"I agree," she says, her lips trembling.

Finally, a smile spreads over my lips. "The kiss isn't what I meant shouldn't have happened, McKenzie," I whisper as I move across the room and lean against my desk. "You holding anything back from me is what shouldn't happen."

"I don't understand," she says as she takes the smallest step backward, a sign of weakness. She seems to notice the gesture and stops, her shoulders firming once again, her eyes narrowing.

"There's something going on between us, and it's not going away. The logical conclusion is to relieve the ache . . . for both of us." My tone and eyes reveal nothing.

She pauses before smiling . . . the merriment not showing in her eyes. "Is this what you want, Byron? A sweet submissive woman? Should we climb on your desk and screw like bunnies right now, or schedule a time?"

"A little crude, McKenzie, but that can be arranged. Still, I'd prefer to be outside of the family headquarters when I . . ." If I wasn't rock hard before, I am now as I picture doing just this. I cut myself off from speaking.

“So what if we consider each other desirable? So what if you turn me on . . . on occasion? I still think you’re an asshole. Just because my body might say I want you doesn’t mean the rest of me will go along.”

I’m not fooled. “I *will* enjoy taming you, McKenzie.”

She’s silent for a moment before raising her hand to her hip and looking around the room. “How long do you need, Byron? Five minutes? Ten? Surely not more than that. With you acting like a hormonal teenager, I’m sure if I simply bend over your desk, you could be done before the second hand reaches the minute mark.”

Her spate of words intrigues me more. She’s obviously used to getting her way, used to dominating men and making them pant and throw themselves at her feet. She’s never dealt with me before. I’m neither submissive nor easily sidetracked.

“That’s a start,” I tell her. “But I’ll need a lot more time. Trust me. Have you ever heard the phrase ‘the best sex you ever had’? I’ll be that and more. I guarantee it.” She takes a deep breath, and then her eyes glaze over, shutting me out. I know we’re done with this . . . for now.

“I’ll gather the reports you need,” she says, turning to walk away like we didn’t just have this intimate conversation. How can she be so hot and then cold? I’ve never seen another woman flip a switch so quickly. Before I comprehend what I’m doing, I step away from my desk and catch her in the doorway. I rest my hand on her shoulder and skim my lips across her neck.

“This *will* happen,” I murmur. A shudder passes through her, and then she pulls away and walks from the office without

responding.

I sit back down, my tailored trousers way too tight, my erection throbbing. Still, I feel somewhat satisfied. I can't wait for the next round of this epic war the two of us are waging.

A few minutes later I realize she managed to distract me from finding out what her phone call was about. Dammit! I'll let her keep her little secret from me for now. In the end I'll learn exactly what's going on in her life. Then, whether she wants me to or not, I *will* help.

Chapter Eleven

McKenzie

After finishing the last of my work for the day, I hurry to clean up my desk. It's nearing six thirty and I don't want to miss my dinner date with Jewell. It's the best part of my life lately. I collect my coat and purse, then waver on telling Byron I'm leaving. It's well past quitting time so I don't need permission, but as only the two of us are left on the floor, it would be polite to let him know I'm heading out.

The choice is taken from me when he steps through the open doorway, his coat hanging from his fingers. We haven't spoken since the kiss, not even to go over the Boise papers. Maybe we can both forget about it . . . but probably not.

"It's late, and I'm starved," he says, blocking my exit. "Why don't we get something to eat and finish the discussion we began earlier?"

There's no way I'm going to get back into *that* discussion. We'll fight, he'll kiss me, and I'll fall into his bed. I'm not a stupid woman, and I know the way this is going to end if I'm not very, *very* careful with what I do and say around him over the next couple of weeks.

"We finished that discussion," I tell him as sweetly as possible.

"Not to my satisfaction," he counters and doesn't budge an inch from the doorway.

“Sorry, boss.” I have to remind him of his position and mine before continuing. “I have dinner plans. Maybe some other time.” I scoot a few steps toward the door, hoping he’ll move out of the way. He doesn’t.

“What are your plans?” The tone of his voice doesn’t change, but something in his eyes does, and if I was a stupid woman, I might think he’s jealous. But that’s absurd. He might want to bed me, but he has no feelings for me — no good ones, anyway — and he certainly doesn’t feel anything strong enough to cause jealousy. Still, I don’t want to push him — not with the way he’s been acting. And not with the weakness I seem to suffer in his presence. I’ll surely lose any fight we get into.

“I’m going out with Jewell,” I tell him, and the sharp look in his eyes fades. *Hmm. Interesting.*

“Where’s Blake?” he asks, though I’m sure he knows. Then again, maybe he doesn’t.

“This is a ritual for us,” I say. “We meet up at least twice a month unless a natural disaster occurs. So Blake uses it as an excuse to have a boys’ night, or do whatever it is men do when their wives aren’t home.”

“A boys’ night?” he asks before his lips turn up. “Please tell me what a boys’ night consists of.”

“I don’t know. I just said *something*. I have no idea what he does when we have our dinners. I know he doesn’t complain about it because he’s not over-the-top possessive.”

“Invite me to join you.”

“What?” Did I hear him correctly?

“It’s rude to make someone repeat themselves, McKenzie.”

“You’re calling *me* rude?” I gasp. “You tried to invite yourself along to a girls’ night out.”

“I didn’t call you rude; I told you it was rude to make someone say something more than once, which you’re making me do again.”

“Ugh.” I throw up my hands in frustration. “I’m leaving now.” I’m finally brave enough to walk up to him and brush past. He steps back and our gazes collide as I move around him. There’s something in his eyes I can’t comprehend ... almost like he’s genuinely hurt. What the actual hell?

A shiver wracks my body when I turn away and begin walking toward the elevators. His devilish eyes, rock-solid body, and kiss-me lips have my stomach churning, and it would be disastrous for me to remain in his presence for too long. Why do I feel bad about walking away? Insanity is my only guess. I have nothing to feel guilty about.

He isn’t disappointed not to be going out with me. He simply wants to interrogate me — that’s all. If Byron wants a dinner companion, he can open his little black book and find a thousand women to go out with him. That’s a gross understatement. A man like him has to have a million dates on call.

The elevator door is almost closed when a hand stops it. I tense all over again. The doors open, and Byron steps inside. When they close again, I suddenly feel incredibly claustrophobic.

When I think the silence can't get any louder, Byron speaks, and I focus on the steel doors in front of me. "I'm going to the Boise offices next week. I need you to be there."

Every instinct in my body tells me I have to get out of this. "I already gave you all of the information you need for the trip. My presence isn't necessary."

"You can't read faces through a picture, McKenzie. You're the one who narrowed this down to a few individuals. Now we need to finish it and get the Boise offices running the way they should."

That *almost* sounds professional, all business and nothing more. I might buy into it if it weren't for the earth-shattering kiss the two of us shared — and, of course, his confidence that I'll end up in his bed.

"Honestly, Byron, I don't think I can do anything other than slow you down. I'm great with numbers, but not so great with people." That's a lie. I can read people well, which is why I've been successful in most jobs I've had.

"I think you're being modest. I won't force you to go, but if we solve this matter quickly, it will look much better for our company . . . and, of course, the reputation of yours."

Oh, that's a low blow. My job performance has been flawless. I want to question him, to find out what he means by this statement, but I already know. I need to complete this; I need to go. But I don't need to be happy about it. I can accept my fate or argue for a while, but I'll lose anyway. I decide to stop arguing.

"Fine, I'll accompany you. It's only a day trip — correct?"

The elevator doors open, he places his hand against the door while I walk out, and then follows me. “If all goes well, McKenzie, we can be in and out of those offices in a few hours.”

That isn't what I asked, but when he puts his hand on my lower back as we exit the building, I forget all about what I planned to ask next. Never before has a man had the ability to silence me when I want to speak — not without drugging me first — but, with Byron, I seem to be in a constant daze. This isn't where I want to be in life.

If I don't pull myself together soon, I'll be in deep trouble working and playing games with Mr. Byron Astor. It might be more trouble than I've been in before. I keep trying to move away from him, but he's not letting me go. I'm not sure what will happen next.

Chapter Twelve

McKenzie

The air's chilly with a hint of mist in it, hardly unusual for October in Seattle, as Byron and I make our way down the busy city sidewalks. "Tell me again why walking's such a great idea?" Byron asks as we turn a corner.

"You aren't going to melt from a little bit of moisture. It's ridiculous to take a cab or drive a few city blocks," I say, huddled inside my coat. "And last I checked, I haven't invited you to be at my side, so you can leave anytime now."

I was so flustered leaving the office, I forgot to grab my gloves, so my hands are stuffed in my pockets. There's no way I'm admitting I'm cold to Byron, though . . . not after calling him a wuss. I let out a sigh of relief when we stop in front of a dingy-looking place.

"This is where you're eating? Seriously?" he asks.

"Look, buster, you're the one who's following me. You can leave at anytime," I say, and reach out to open the door so I can end this walk from hell.

Byron jumps forward before my fingers connect with the handle and he opens it for me. Noise from inside blares out, and I have to smile. Although the place isn't exactly posh, I've eaten here many, *many* times, and the food is one of the best-kept secrets in Seattle. The head chef is a personal friend of mine.

“I’m fine with this place,” Byron says as I glide past him, mumbling a thank-you because he opened the door.

“You don’t appear to be fine with it,” I point out, my stomach tightening a bit when my body brushes his.

“I was thinking the two of us could go somewhere a little quieter.”

“Ha! You mean you were hoping to go to a place a lot fancier. Please, by all means, go and have dinner at a snobby place.”

“You’re putting words in my mouth,” he says before leaning down, leaving me zero personal space as his eyes bore into mine. “If I want something in my mouth, you’ll be the first person I tell.” I freeze as his breath washes over my face. The noise, the crowded front area, the people — *everything* disappears except him and his irresistible lips.

I’m grateful when a group of college kids come up behind us, bumping into Byron and pulling me from the spell I’ve been under. I was about ready to let him kiss me right here in a crowded room full of strangers and servers. I need to pull myself together or I’m not going to last a few more days, let alone two more weeks, in this man’s presence.

I begin moving through the crowd with Byron right on my heels. Will he leave when I reach the table. Jewell should already be here, guarding our favorite table, and with luck she’ll have a drink ready and waiting. I *really* need a drink if I plan to get through this night in one piece.

The back corner of the place offers a measure of privacy — almost, but not quite — and Jewell’s sitting at our favorite

table, a virgin daiquiri in front of her and a cold mimosa on the opposite side of the table. Thank goodness!

“Sorry I’m late, Jewell,” I say. My friend gives me an easy smile before her eyes widen as she takes in Byron.

“Um, no problem . . .” Jewell replies, letting the words trail off.

“Good to see you, Jewell,” Byron easily says. “McKenzie and I have been discussing work and I realized I haven’t had a thing to eat all day.” Byron says as he leans against me so he can reach around and pull out a chair. As my blood races, I go mute again and plop down into the chair.

When Byron sits next to me, I have to bite my lip. Had I been thinking, I’d have slid in next to Jewell on the side of the table with a bench, giving myself some much-needed space away from Byron. But then, of course, I’d be forced to look at the miserable man during the whole meal. I’m not sure which setup is worse. I glance over at Jewell and can see a myriad of questions in my friend’s eyes, but Jewell compresses her lips for a moment and gives Byron a smile.

“It’s good to see you, Byron. You work so much that your brother complains you don’t come over often enough.”

“I’ll have to change that,” he says.

The waitress, Marsha, appears, notepad in hand, and eyes glued to Byron. “I haven’t seen you in here before,” she purrs, her cheeks slightly flushed.

I make eye contact with Jewell and roll my eyes. What is it about good-looking — okay, incredible-looking — men who turn normal women into drooling disasters?

“Well, if the food turns out to be as good as it smells, I’ll have to become a regular . . . Marsha,” Byron says after looking at her name tag. He practically beams at the waitress, irritating me more than I’m already irritated at the whole ridiculous situation.

Marsha giggles, actually *giggles*, making me roll my eyes again. But as Byron turns to give the waitress his full attention, his leg brushes against mine, and my agitation morphs into a case of hormonal overdrive. I try to pull away from him, but he pushes a little closer, and I can’t find an escape.

“What can I get you to drink?” Marsha asks, as if knowing she’s been staring too long without speaking.

“I’ll take a Johnnie Walker Blue, on the rocks,” Byron replies, and the waitress practically flutters her eyelashes before rushing away to fill his order. He’s lucky that bottle is in here.

“It must be nice to fluster people like that,” Jewell says with a laugh, and Byron turns to her with his eyebrows raised. “Oh, come on, Byron, you have to have noticed the way our waitress drooled all over you. And she’s normally sane.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” he says, but I know he’s very aware of his effect on people — on women in particular.

“I’m starving,” Jewell tells us, “so please figure out what you want to eat. We should get our orders in before the rest of the people piling through the front doors place theirs.”

We’re silent for a few moments as we all look down. I stare at my menu, not seeing a thing on it. Thankfully, I’m a

creature of habit and already know what I want, so I won't be required to use my brain for a while. When Byron sets his menu down, he captures Jewell's attention. She throws him an amused look that I have no doubt is meant to irritate me. And it works.

"So, Jewell," he asks point-blank, "are you going to tell me what's going on with McKenzie? What is she so desperate to hide from me?"

I gasp in outrage. "There's nothing going on," I tell him before Jewell can say a word. I look sternly at Jewell before turning back to Byron. "And if there was something going on, Jewell would remain loyal to me and *not* spill my secrets."

From the mischievous look on Jewell's face, I have a sinking feeling my friend isn't above selling me out. I was with Jewell when one of Nathan's calls came in, and though I tried to cover things up as much as possible, I was shaken, and Jewell voiced her concern. At least the guy hadn't shown up in person.

"I know women like to stick together and all, but if McKenzie's in trouble, don't you think it would be in her best interest to have as many people helping her as possible?" Byron asks, reaching across the table and patting Jewell's hand.

I want to punch him. "I'll repeat that *nothing* is going on," I practically growl.

"I think your friend likes to keep secrets," Byron remarks to Jewell. Then he turns and looks at me, first making me want to squirm in my seat, then ticking me off. He's reducing me to something like a scolded child. I don't like it.

“She isn’t sharing with me right now, Byron. If she was, and if I felt she needed help, I’d agree with you,” Jewell tells him. That takes me by surprise.

“Okay, I can accept that,” Byron says. He gets a mysterious look in his eyes and turns back to Jewell, a megawatt smile suddenly on his lips. “Is she dating anyone?”

Both of us fall utterly silent for a moment. I’m the first to recover. “Don’t you dare answer that, Jewell,” I insist, but it’s Byron I glare at. “I’m working for you right now, Byron . . . for some strange reason. And I care about doing a good job. But my personal life is *none* of your damn business.”

He shifts, his leg glued to mine, and though I want to remain angry, his touch isn’t helping me achieve that. He leans in way too close, his expression unchanging, and speaks only when he knows I’m completely tuned in to him.

“I want to get to know you more, learn every . . . little . . . thing about you. Whatever it is between us *is* personal. If you can’t take the heat, I suggest you walk away right now,” he warns.

It takes a moment for me to say a word, then my shoulders rise up, and I glare at him. “And if I do?”

He says nothing for so long that I don’t know if he’s going to answer, but eventually his lips, which tightened with his last words, turn up again, this time in a far more conquering smile. And it scares me. “Be my guest, Little Miss McKenzie. I’m not forcing you to work for me.”

I hesitate a moment before glaring at him again. “Yes, you are. You completely bullied me into the job.”

“I’m a businessman, Ms. Beaumont, and I know how to get what I want.”

“And if I walk away?”

“You have free will,” he tells me. “Or you seem to . . . sometimes. Do you want to walk away?”

As I stare into Byron’s eyes, I forget Jewell’s sitting across from us. I’m only thinking of myself and the man next to me. Do I want to leave? That’s the million-dollar question. Or billion-dollar — someone in my line of business has to take inflation into account. I should want to leave, want to get as far from him as I possibly can. But is that what I *really* want? I can’t say the words that might set me free. And I don’t understand why not.

“I didn’t think so. You’re as curious as I am about what in the hell is going on between us,” he says before turning his attention back to Jewell. “So, tell me, when was McKenzie’s last relationship?” He goes on as if we haven’t just had a spat, a tense moment, or whatever in the hell we’ve had. I’m in so much shock at him questioning my friend, I don’t protest this time.

An impish light returns to Jewell’s eyes. “I honestly don’t know,” she says. “I haven’t *ever* seen McKenzie with a man.”

Byron’s hand comes up and rests on my knee, and though I want to remove it, I also love how it feels there. I have good reason to hate men. And even though I’m well aware Byron’s intentions are far from honorable, I can’t shake the pull I feel toward him.

I'm in more trouble than I can handle. And it seems to get worse with each new day. My thoughts are interrupted when Marsha comes to take our food order, then disappears again . . . after flirting, of course.

Luckily, she soon returns with our drink refills and breaks the tension. The conversation turns to more neutral topics. Byron's giving me a reprieve. But I'm certain the reprieve won't last.

Chapter Thirteen

Byron

I can almost *see* the tension. This is exactly where I want McKenzie, isn't it? So why am I backing off? I should go in for the kill, but instead I'm sitting back, eating away at my steak and pasta bordelaise, sipping on a scotch while the women talk.

Jewell isn't paying attention to me, so I take the opportunity to look at her, to *really* look at her. When she first came around, I didn't trust her. But it's impossible not to notice that whenever Blake's name comes up, no matter how subtly, she glows.

If Jewell's an exception among women — if she really does love my brother, and they're good for each other — is my vendetta against McKenzie still valid? I don't want to face the answer. I'm not sure what my motives are any longer. What I do know for sure is I'm not ready to let McKenzie walk away from me.

The only certain thing about my life is that I don't do relationships. I enjoy sex, and I like female companionship in the short term, but I don't do the whole boyfriend-girlfriend thing. I don't hold hands and stroke a woman's ego. That had gained my father death . . . a very ugly death. A weak man in the clutches of a female who was no better than a prostitute.

But these thoughts aren't helping. Even though I've only been with McKenzie for a limited time, she's getting under my

skin. Why? She isn't playing games with me, or I don't think she's playing games, but still, something's going on. I have to get to the bottom of it because I can't stand being left in the dark. And that's exactly where I feel at the moment.

"Do you need anything else?" Marsha asks, interrupting my thoughts, all of her attention on me.

"The pasta bordello . . ." I pause, look pointedly at McKenzie, and simply wink when she sends me a glare. I turn my attention back to Marsha. "The pasta bordelaise is some of the best I've ever had."

"That's wonderful to hear. I'll let the chef know," she says with a giggle before retreating.

We finish our meal, and when the check comes, I snatch it up and pay, including a generous tip. When the two women protest, I simply smile as I stand and hold out a hand for McKenzie. Will she refuse my help?

She accepts my hand with obvious reluctance, and I tug, pulling her off balance just enough that she stumbles against me. I look into her eyes, *needing* to kiss her. I don't normally do public displays of affection, but everyone around us seems to fade whenever I'm touching McKenzie.

"Do I need to call the fire department before this place goes up in flames?" Jewell asks.

"What?" McKenzie asks, looking dazed.

Jewell chuckles. "The way the two of you are looking at each other, I think you're going to spontaneously combust at any minute."

I'm grateful for the interruption. I never let anyone know what I'm feeling, even in rampant lust. Besides, when I next kiss McKenzie, I intend to finish what I start, and I certainly can't do that in a crowded bistro.

"I have to get going, McKenzie, but I'll see you next week. We *will* talk before then," Jewell tells her with a meaningful look. She says goodbye to me and heads out of the place ahead of us.

I have McKenzie all to myself again as we walk down the street back to the offices, where our cars are parked. "I enjoyed Jewell's company this evening," I say, surprised that it's true.

"It's very difficult to be around her without enjoying her company," McKenzie replies.

"How did you become friends?" I ask.

She's quiet for a moment. "While working at your company, we talked . . . a lot, and our friendship grew."

"I think I'd like Jewell if I spent more time with her." This is a real breakthrough for me.

"Yes, you could like a lot of people if you gave them a chance." Her voice is suddenly sad, and I need to know why.

"What's happening in your life, McKenzie? Why all the mystery, and all the secrets?"

"I have nothing to hide," she says with cold determination, in an attempt to shut me down.

"Not true, McKenzie. I watch you," I say, and her eyes flare. "And I listen. You're in trouble, and you think you can

handle it, but I've seen your strength and I've seen you frightened. Sometimes it helps to talk to a neutral party." Why in the hell am I suddenly acting like Dr. Phil?

She stops and faces me. "I'm perfectly capable of taking care of myself, and I'm not so foolish as to think that you and I are friends, or can ever be friends. I know what this is, Byron. I'm a puzzle, and you can't stand not being able to solve me. The bottom line is I'm not worth solving. You'd find all of this very anticlimactic in the end," she says with a fake laugh.

She resumes walking, and it takes a moment to catch up to her. "I understand you're capable of taking care of yourself, but I *am* involved now, and if you think I'm one of these new weak men you're sadly mistaken. When I want something, I get it." I take her arm to keep her from entering the building when we reach the front door.

"Sometimes you have to accept that the world isn't always in the palm of your hand," she tells me. "You don't get to know my secrets, and you don't get to control me. I'm not yours to manipulate."

I'm done with words. Frustration bubbles inside me, and I know of only one way to release this tension. Before she has time to blink, I pull her into my arms with the intention of plundering her mouth. That will keep her from arguing. One hand slides behind her neck and the other around her back as I tug her close to me, demanding immediate surrender. She doesn't disappoint.

Our mouths connect and passion ignites. This is how we communicate best. This is where the two of us should always be. My body ignites and she sighs against my lips, her

carefully controlled armor slipping as she presses against me. More. I need more. A car driving past backfires, and she springs from my arms, her breathing heavy, her eyes bright with desire. Dammit!

“Let’s finish this in private,” I practically beg.

She takes another step back. “That’s not going to happen,” she whispers, and I can barely hear her above the noises of the city.

“We need this, McKenzie. Quit fighting it.” I’m not normally a man to beg, but right now I’m willing to drop to my knees if that’s what it takes to get her to come home with me.

“It doesn’t matter, Byron. I’m used to denying myself,” she says, a sad smile on her lips.

“You can only deny yourself for so long before you fade away.”

“I think I’ll take the risk,” she replies as I move toward her. But she backs up, turns toward the parking garage next to the building, and makes her escape.

I could chase her down and probably kiss her into submission long enough to get us both satisfaction, possibly on the hood of her car, but for some reason I don’t go after her. She said no. As much as I don’t want to, I need to respect that . . . for now.

I enter the Astor building with heavy feet. If I’m not going to get laid, I’ll work until my eyes hurt, and if that doesn’t do the trick — *bad thought, bad thought* — I’ll leave and beat myself up in my home gym.

I want to bed McKenzie, but surprisingly, I don't want to destroy her anymore. Why not? It can't possibly be because I'm growing attached to her. I refuse to attach myself to anyone. Especially to a woman who has secrets. That would be nothing but trouble.

Chapter Fourteen

Byron

I take a deep breath as I pull up to the office building where Bill Berkshire has a modest setup. The man formally retired years ago, but he needs something to do in order to keep from going insane after the death of his wife.

The old codger is a royal pain in the butt for me and my brothers because he won't let us take care of him. The worst of it is he insists on living in a run-down house, and we have to fight him every step of the way to keep it maintained.

Bill was a friend of our grandfather, also a wonderful man, and when our parents died, Bill and Vivian were the ones to step up and take care of my brothers and me. I know for a fact the old man has at least a few million dollars sitting in his bank account from that time so long ago — money designated to him for acting as our guardian — but the man refuses to touch the cash, saying it's tainted. He didn't want anything coming from our parents after what those two had put us through.

As much as I love Bill, I'm not looking forward to this particular visit. Bill hasn't told me why he's summoned me, but I'm no fool. My damn brother must've called Bill and told him about McKenzie. That's the only interpretation I can put on the stern tone Bill used when he'd demanded I come and talk with him immediately.

I could've said I'm a busy man and couldn't come by, but I'd never do that. Bill's one of the few souls on this earth for whom I — hell, all of us brothers — will drop everything, no questions asked. Even if that means suffering through a lecture.

Once inside the ten-story building, I head toward the elevator. I've been to Bill's office many times before. But several businesses lease space in the building, and before I get far, a woman stops me.

"May I help you?" she asks, and I wonder if she's supposed to be security.

"I'm here to see a friend," I say as I attempt to walk past her.

"You haven't been here in the last sixty days . . ." she begins, but when my intense gaze zeroes in on her, she chokes on her words.

"What does when I have or haven't been here have to do with anything?" I ask, trying to hide my irritation. By the rounding of her eyes, it doesn't appear that I'm doing a very good job of that.

"Um . . . it's just that . . . we . . . um . . . have new security protocols. Everyone has to check in at the . . ." Her cheeks flush.

"Front desk?" I ask with as little sarcasm as I can manage.

"Yes, I'm sorry. I'm not usually so . . . I don't know . . . at a loss for words," she gulps, her shoulders going back as she tries to regain her composure.

“Fine. I’ll check in,” I say. I’m not happy about it, but, it’s the same at my building.

“It’s just that we had a robbery a little while back and the people in the offices wanted better security,” she rushes to explain as she walks next to me to the front desk.

“I understand.”

“Thank you,” she breathes as we reach the desk together.

“Byron Astor to see Bill Berkshire,” I say with crisp efficiency.

“One moment, sir,” says the man behind the desk, and he lifts his phone.

“You’re Byron Astor — *the* Byron Astor of Astor Construction?” the woman gasps, giving me no choice but to turn my attention back to her.

“Yes. Do I know you?” I ask, giving her a second glance. I don’t recognize her, but that doesn’t necessarily mean anything. I bet there are a dozen women I can pass on the street without recognizing them a month after I’ve taken them to my bed. They mean that little to me.

“No . . . not really, but my brother’s been working for you for three years, and he talks about you and your brothers and what a great job it is. I applied at your building a couple of times, but haven’t been called back,” she says, looking up at me hopefully.

“I don’t do the hiring,” I tell her, my standard reply when people approach about getting work.

“Oh, I wasn’t implying anything,” she hastens to say, but I can see the disappointment filling her eyes as she tries to smile. To my amazement, I feel a twinge of guilt. Should I at least offer the woman an interview?

“You’re cleared to head up to the eighth floor, Mr. Astor,” the desk attendant tells me. “Here’s your visitor’s badge.”

“Thank you.” I start walking away.

“It was very nice to meet you, Mr. Astor,” the woman says with an attempt at a flirtatious look. I say nothing else as I walk to the elevator. I want only one woman in my bed. And within the next few days, that’s exactly where I’m going to have her.

It’s a short elevator ride to the eighth floor, then I walk around the corner to Bill’s office. I’d honestly love to know what Bill does all day — maybe the old man simply plays solitaire on his less than state-of-the-art computer. Whatever makes him happy is all that matters, and if sitting in a downtown office is what he wants to do, I’m going to continue letting Bill think the rent hasn’t gone up in four years and that he’s paying fair market value on the space. He’ll never know we made a deal with the manager of the building and we’re the ones ensuring our friend stays where he wants to be.

When Bill looks up, I have no doubt I’m on the man’s naughty list — the old man is absolutely glowering at me. I probably deserve it for the many things I *do* wrong on a daily basis. So I’ll take the verbal abuse, and hopefully act humble enough to leave on Bill’s good side. I decide to wait and see what Bill will say before I speak. I don’t have to wait long.

“What in the hell are you doing playing games with a fine woman like McKenzie Beaumont?” Bill gruffly asks, slashing into me with a fierce stare from behind his desk.

“It’s good to see you as well, Bill,” I say as I move forward and take a seat in the chair facing him.

“Don’t patronize me, boy. I helped raise you, in case you don’t remember,” Bill grumbles, and the words I’ve heard my entire adult life make me smile.

I’ve never said I love anyone out loud, but without a doubt, I love this man — this gruff, grumpy man who’s probably the only reason I have any humanity left in me.

“I’d never think of doing such a thing, Bill.” I’m trying not to smile, or Bill might think I’m laughing at him, and that’s not at all the case.

Bill looks at me suspiciously for several moments before speaking again. “I asked you a question, Byron. Don’t think you can smile and make me forget why I called you here.”

“What have you heard?” I’m certainly not going to spill my guts if the man doesn’t know anything more than a rumor or two.

“Your brother told me how you went after this nice young lady, and that he’s worried you’re going to hurt her. I’ve met McKenzie, and I agree with Blake. She’s a beautiful woman, and she doesn’t deserve to be harassed by the likes of you,” Bill says, his glare not flickering.

“I’m not harassing her,” I insist. There’s no other man I’ll actually defend myself to other than Bill. Usually, if someone speaks to me this way — and it doesn’t happen often — I

simply get up and walk away. I'd never treat Bill with disrespect like that, though. I'll take whatever the man dishes out . . . for as long as he wants.

"You certainly won't be anymore," Bill says, enunciating each word.

I'm silent for several heartbeats and then sigh. I don't want to give anything of myself away — I never do — but I feel as if I have zero choice right now. If I don't give Bill something to chew on, this could get really ugly.

"Look, Bill, it might have started out with me . . . harassing her, or gunning for her, but it's different now. I . . . I can't get this woman off my mind. I can't sleep, eat right, or even think most days. I just . . . I don't know." I rub my hand across my face. Even knowing everything I know, I have to admit to infatuation, if only a little.

"But you're making her unhappy, so maybe you should back off. Maybe she doesn't want to be with you," Bill says, but his voice quiets as he observes me. This is the last thing I want, and my defenses pop up, but with a lot of willpower I push them back down.

"She wants to be with me," I tell him. "Believe me, if I felt she had no interest, I'd back off, but there's something between us, something that can't be denied. She's scared — and I don't know what she's scared of, but she's running, and it's *not* from me."

"How are you so sure it isn't you she's running from? You Astor youngsters have always had humongous egos."

“I know when a woman has the hots . . . umm . . . is interested in me,” I say. I’m confident about this, above anything else.

“Is sex worth torturing this woman over?” Bill asks.

“It’s not just sex . . .” I stop myself before I say too much. This is going into territory I refuse to enter. “Of course, sex is always worth something to some of us,” I admit, but it’s too late. Nothing will make this better.

“Look, Byron, by watching your incredibly messed-up parents you got the worst example of what love should be. In the end your father was weak, and your mother — well, your mother wasn’t . . . I shouldn’t speak ill of the dead, but your mother was a stone-cold bitch,” Bill says, shocking me. He doesn’t normally speak this way. “You don’t want to repeat those patterns. If you open your heart and allow others in, you can have a good life. Mistreating women isn’t the way to do that.”

I let out a bitter laugh as I look at the only father . . . grandfather . . . uncle —whatever I choose to call him, Bill is the only male figure I’ve had worth modeling myself after. “I’m totally screwed then because I have no desire to ever feel something like that. Not after what I witnessed. Love is a fairy tale.”

“I’ve had my own demons a time or two in life. But while I was married to my beautiful Vivian, those demons were kept at bay. Every single day since I lost her, I’ve been fighting depression. You need to open yourself up before it’s too late or you’ll find yourself alone and filled with . . . emptiness.”

Bill's statement stops my next words. Suddenly, the man who's always been there for me seems incredibly lonely, so much smaller, so frail. Is this how I want to end up — all by myself sitting behind a desk with nothing to do?

“Bill . . .” I don't know what to say now.

Bill straightens as if he suddenly realized what he said. “Don't you even think about offering me comfort, boy. I'm trying to prove a point and nothing more.”

“And what point is that?”

“Don't be a fool,” Bill gruffly says.

“I won't,” I say, and mean it.

“Good. Then our meeting's over. Get the hell out of here and quit screwing up. I won't be so easy on you the next time.”

Bill obviously needs to protect himself now. I understand, and it's okay with me. But I want to do something I haven't done since I was a child. When Bill stands to walk me to the door, I go to him and give the man a hug, gently slapping his back before I pull away.

Bill doesn't say a word as I release him, and we make it to the door, but when I tell him goodbye and glance at the old man's eyes, I'd swear there's a slight sheen. Am I really such a bastard that my smallest act of kindness inspires tears? If that's the case, I need to make serious changes in my life. Maybe I will.

Chapter Fifteen

McKenzie

I gaze in dismay at my computer monitor. This is one of the only times I can remember being unable to make sense of what I'm seeing. It might as well be a jumble of numbers fluttering on the screen or a fuzzy video of *follow the dancing ball*. Today is not my best day at work.

I haven't suddenly lost my ability to read or suffered a stroke. There's only one possible explanation for such disgusting ditziness: *Byron Astor*. He's a menace to society and should be stopped. One minute he's demanding and in my face, the next he's gracious and kind. I can't keep up with him, and it's throwing me for a loop. It's Tuesday, five days since the kiss on the street. He was gone on Friday and came into the offices on Monday acting as if nothing had happened between us.

I'm going to start screaming at any minute; I don't enjoy being this crazy, irrational person. I don't enjoy that my feet don't seem firmly planted on the ground anymore. I feel as if I'm going to be carried off into the atmosphere at any minute if my brain doesn't get some density to it.

On top of all of this, I haven't heard another word from Nathan, and though this should bring me joy, it worries me. Has he given up? I'd be thrilled if that's the case, but I doubt it. I'm waiting for the axe to fall. That's the story of my life these days. In a perfect world, Nathan will disappear and

Byron will let me bring another accountant into his office and give me unlimited business, recommending my company to all of his friends.

I learned long ago that I live in a far from perfect world. With a heavy sigh, I close the program I'm working on — or rather *not* working on — and lean back in my chair. I'm not getting anything done.

I'm too busy wrestling with a whole heap of emotions. At the top is something inside me Byron's awakened, something I didn't know I possessed — desire. I feel it more each day, and every time he walks by me, his appealing scent wafting out to entice me, I grow weaker.

I let out a relieved breath when I see it's five o'clock. Byron isn't in the building, so I can slip away at quitting time. *Hallelujah*. As I begin gathering my things, Blake pops into my office, a smile on his lips.

“I was hoping I'd catch you, McKenzie.”

“What can I do for you?”

“Can you come for dinner?”

“Could I beg off tonight, Blake? I have a mountain of work waiting for me at home.”

“That's why Jewell wanted me stop by and see you instead of calling. She's convinced my charm will win you over. Besides, everyone needs to eat.” Blake holds my door open wider as I approach.

“I know, but I shouldn't.” Still, I hesitate. It would be nice to visit with Jewell for a while, maybe even do some venting, though I doubt I actually will.

“I refuse to take no for an answer. Jewell specifically told me to stuff you into my car to guarantee you don’t try to get out of this. She’s worried about you,” Blake says as the two of us begin heading toward the elevator.

“Well, I guess if I’m being kidnapped . . .” I step onto the elevator and wait while Blake pushes the down button.

“It’s settled, then.”

We chat on the way down and I follow him to his car, promising myself I won’t stay late. I feel guilty about the pile of work waiting for me at home. Fifteen minutes later, we arrive. Blake calls out to Jewell. She calls back, and he leads me down the hallway into the family room.

When we enter, I freeze. Byron’s sitting on the couch, looking more than comfortable, a smile on his lips, with Jewell’s puppy biting at his toes. Justin’s next to him, appearing to be in uncle-idol heaven. The sight almost makes me take a step back.

I think for a moment about beating a quick retreat, but I can’t own up to how much this man affects me. If only I’d taken the time to talk to Jewell after that debacle of a dinner last week, to let her know that Byron’s the last man on Earth I want to spend more of my precious social time with. Too late now.

“Evening, darling,” Blake says. He walks to his wife and pulls her into his arms, kissing her as if he hasn’t seen her in months instead of hours.

“I missed you,” Jewell tells him, giggling when he pulls back.

His hand goes to her belly. “Our son or daughter has a good, solid kick.”

“Just like their mother,” she replies with a wink.

“I’m famished,” he says. His wicked smile makes me squirm where I stand.

“You two are disgusting, and you’re forgetting there are other people in the room,” Justin says, making a face.

Blake laughs before moving over and pulling Justin to his feet, giving him a hug. “Well, I’m hungry for real food, too.”

“You’re terrible.” Jewell pretends to huff. “But I guess I should feed you in spite of that.”

“You said your back was hurting not five minutes ago,” Byron breaks in as he stands, causing Blake to look concerned. “Let McKenzie and me get the food together while you rest for a few minutes.”

“You’re guests,” Jewell protests. “I can’t have you do that.”

“Of course you can. We’re family, aren’t we?” Byron points out.

“Let me give you a back rub and see if that helps,” Blake suggests as he begins pulling her toward the stairs.

“I have a bit of homework to do anyway, and I’d rather get it done before dinner so I can play the Xbox after,” Justin pipes in and dashes from the room.

Jewell looks at me. “If you’re sure you don’t mind . . .”

I certainly can’t beg my pregnant friend not to go and lie down, but, oh, how I want to. I want anything other than to be left alone with Byron, especially when doing something as

domestic as cooking together. I should've tried harder to refuse Blake's invitation to dinner.

"Go get some rest, Jewell. We'll make sure you have a wonderful dinner," I end up saying.

Blake leads Jewell away, and I stand awkwardly with Byron, the first time I've been alone with him since after dinner in the bistro last week. The Fates aren't in my favor right now.

"After you, McKenzie," Byron says as he holds out a hand, leaving me with no choice but to go along with him to the gourmet kitchen. "How was work today? I was solving a crisis on a job site," he tells me as he rummages through the fridge and starts pulling items.

"It went smoothly," I lie, and wait for him to tell me what to do. When all the dinner fixings are on the counter, he glances back at me.

"I'll do the meat if you want to prepare the salad," he says, unwrapping a package of steak.

I find a cutting board and begin dicing vegetables. Soon the two of us are moving around the kitchen, and though it's large, Byron takes every opportunity to touch me. It's just a slight brush here, our arms bumping there, but it's enough to drive me batty. My nerves are raw by the time we're finishing. If Jewell doesn't show up soon, I'm calling a cab and getting the heck out of Dodge.

"It smells delicious," Jewell says as she enters the room in the nick of time.

Her cheeks are glowing. My eyes narrow in suspicion. Was my friend's back truly hurting, or had it all been a pretense to leave me alone with Byron . . . and maybe do something else for *certain* aches of hers? Wait till I get Jewell alone for five minutes!

"Thank you, Jewell. We've been slaving away," Byron says. He places the last of the food on the table and the four of us sit.

"Yeah, I'm sure you had a rough time," Blake says.

"Don't you need to call Justin?" I ask as we start dishing up.

"He's on an iPad chat with a schoolmate. They're trying to figure out their group project, so we told him to finish up. He can grab frozen burritos. The kid doesn't like steak for some reason," Blake says.

"He likes what he likes," Jewell says in her little brother's defense.

"He's incredible," Blake says, leaning over and kissing her.

"How's the new world of raising a teenager going?" I ask between bites.

Blake gets a big grin and answers, "It's been hard at times, but I adore him, and he's so damn smart. He'll be working in the offices in no time at all."

"As long as you don't make him grow up too fast," Jewell reminds him.

"I've already grown to love him. I wouldn't think of making him grow too fast."

“This steak is fantastic,” Jewell says.

“I have a secret method for cooking ribeye,” Byron brags. “I’m thinking of patenting it.”

“Yeah, you throw it in a pan and watch it sizzle,” Blake says.

“Hey. I know how to impress in the kitchen.”

“That’s not a room I’ve heard you brag about before.”

The two brothers guffaw, and Jewell looks at me and rolls her eyes. “Men. They’re not trainable,” she says with a shrug.

“Or they’re crude,” I add.

“That too,” Jewell says.

“Thank you for doing this,” Blake pipes in. “Jewell felt much better after lying down for a few minutes. Sometimes it helps to get the weight off her back.”

“Of course. It was no problem,” I tell them.

“How far along are you, Jewell?” Byron asks. I’m surprised he doesn’t know.

“Six months already. I can’t believe this child will be here in three months. I’m nowhere near ready.” Jewell leans back with a wince. Maybe her back really has been bothering her.

“I can’t believe it, Blake. Not only do you have an eleven-year-old boy, but you’re going to be a dad to a newborn,” Byron says.

“It’s something I vowed I never wanted,” Blake says.

“What a fool I was to think being *free and easy*, or whatever

they call it, is better than having a loving family.” Byron doesn’t reply to this comment.

Thankfully, the topic changes from family, and flows smoothly as we share a nice meal. The brothers keep ribbing each other, and I’m surprised when I actually laugh at a number of things Byron says.

I’m seeing a side of him I’ve never seen before — not that I’ve had all that much contact with him before this past month. Still, I’m shocked when two hours pass; it feels more like fifteen minutes.

Justin flits in for a few minutes, throws burritos into the microwave, and rushes back out, saying he’s still tied up with homework. What in the world kind of homework does an eleven-year-old have that requires hours of effort?

“We don’t let him do this every night,” Jewell says. “We normally eat as a family.”

“I’m not judging you,” I assure her.

“But I’m judging myself, and I probably always will. I hate that he was away from me for so long in the foster-care system. When I finally got him back, I overcompensated. Hell, I barely let him out of my sight. I totally smothered him. But I was always so worried. He’s doing wonderfully now. He loves school, and he’s made good friends. It kind of makes me sad at how little he needs me now,” Jewell says with a sigh.

I recall my own childhood. I could’ve done with some smothering, but I’m not about to say that. “You’ve done a good job with him,” I tell her. “That shows you’re an amazing sister, and I guess you’re sort of his mom now.”

“I’m just his sister,” Jewell says. “We had a super mom.”

“I think it’s great,” Blake says.

“I can’t get used to this softer side of you,” Byron says, but he laughs, taking any harshness from the words.

“Don’t worry, little brother. It won’t be long until you have the same attitude,” Blake assures him.

“Don’t place any bets,” Byron says before sending me a look so intense I feel scorched to my seat. Who is the real Byron? Is he the insensitive hard-ass I first met? Or is he the kind brother-in-law and uncle? I really don’t know what’s an act and what’s genuine. But here’s the question: Do I want to know? The answer should be an emphatic no. But I’m not so sure. Once we finish dinner, Blake offers dessert and coffee, but I need to get home and back to work.

“I have a ton of work left to do since I wasn’t in the office all day, so I’m going to pass,” Byron says. “Do you need a ride home, McKenzie?” I forgot for a moment I rode here with Blake. It leaves me with little choice other than to accept.

In a flash, Byron and I say our goodbyes. We don’t speak as we move outside, hop in his vehicle, and drive down the road. I only live fifteen minutes from Jewell’s place, but the ride’s excruciating.

When Byron pulls up in front of my house, my stomach’s tied in knots. He gets out while I’m fumbling with my seat belt, opens my door, then holds out a hand to help me from the car. I pretend not to see his hand. I climb out, walk stiffly to my front door, insert the key, and twist the knob.

“I had a wonderful time with you tonight, McKenzie. Thanks for sharing a family dinner with me,” Byron says, and to my utter amazement, he walks down the steps. I stare after him. He didn’t even attempt a kiss, let alone try to get an invite inside.

He climbs into his car and revs the engine. I walk inside, shut and lock my door, and look out the front window as his taillights fade away. What just happened? Nothing. That’s what happened. Or hadn’t happened. Is Byron done chasing me? Is his game over? Has he lost his desire for me? Did my last refusal turn him away for good?

And, if it’s over, is this disappointment I’m feeling? I don’t have a single answer to any of these burning questions.

Chapter Sixteen

McKenzie

A bead of sweat drips down my temple as I walk alongside Byron to the rental car we picked up this morning at the airport. We just left the offices in Boise. Clouds cover the sky and rain threatens, but it's unusually warm for early November, and I'm dressed for colder weather. It would be much nicer to shrug off my jacket, but I feel more protected in my wool suit.

"I hate it when I have to fire someone who's worked for the company for so long," Byron says as he unlocks the car and peels off his jacket, setting it and his briefcase on the backseat.

"It's troubling to fire anyone," I agree as I climb into the passenger side of the car and wait for him to get in and start the engine so I can point the vent in my direction and cool off.

"At least when I threatened to close the entire operation, we finally got some answers." He loosens his tie before pulling it off and tossing it over his shoulder. He finally starts the car.

I hate that his small toss with the tie makes my stomach clench with desire. He isn't stripping for me; he's simply making himself more comfortable. But all I want to do is scramble over the console and into his lap.

It's Friday afternoon and nothing's happened between us since the dinner three days earlier. He came to work, behaved like a complete professional, and hasn't attempted to touch me. And my job at Astor Construction is coming to a close. I

only have a week to go. In the beginning it seemed like this job would drag on forever. Now, a week seems impossibly short.

I have my own business to run and working on Byron's books is eating up time I don't have, but I'm used to walking into his office in the morning, exchanging a few pleasantries with him, and speaking to him throughout the day.

When the man isn't trying to intimidate me, he's actually pretty decent company. And the longer I'm around him, the more I desire him. Is it because he isn't doing anything to provoke this reaction from me? Or is it because I've finally lost it.

I try to assure myself his loss of interest is the best thing that can happen. He thinks of me as an easy woman, so if I jump into bed with him, I'm proving him right. It doesn't seem to matter as my eyes trace the slight opening at the V of his neck. I need to get out of this car as soon as possible.

Byron pulls out of the attached parking garage, and we head down the road. The air conditioning should be cooling me off, but my body is too heated. I'm again tempted to ditch the jacket, but my blouse is damp, and I don't want to expose my lacy bra, so I'll suffer in silence. We'll soon be at the airport. I'll rush to the bathroom and splash cold water on my face.

"I'm starving," Byron says, startling me out of my thoughts. "Are you hungry?"

"A little, but I can grab something at the airport."

"We have plenty of time, McKenzie."

“What time is the flight?”

“We’re taking a side trip before heading home.” He doesn’t elaborate, and I grow more heated as nerves shoot through me.

“What kind of side trip? Is it hot in here, or is it just me?” I add, reaching over to fiddle with my vent again, feeling on the verge of fainting.

“It’s not too warm,” he says, a sparkle in his eyes that makes my breathing even heavier.

“Side trip? Where?” Maybe he’ll answer if I say fewer words.

“You’ll see.”

Ugh! I look out my side window and focus on breathing. *In, out, in, out . . . Damn!*

“I don’t want to miss our flight,” I say.

“McKenzie, I own the jet. It leaves when I’m ready.”

“Your brothers might need it,” I point out.

“We have two. And if suddenly Blake *and* Tyler both need to go somewhere, it’s only a one-hour flight back from here.”

I don’t have any further arguments, so I suffer in silence while he drives on for another half hour. We’re driving farther and farther from Boise, and I have a feeling we won’t be flying home tonight.

When we still don’t stop, I have to say something or explode. “I’m not staying overnight with you, Byron.”

“Would you mind being more specific?” he asks.

“We are *not* having sex.” There. It doesn’t get much more specific than that. After a long moment of absolutely nothing, he turns and looks at me for several heartbeats.

“Are you trying to convince *me* of this . . . or convince *yourself*?” he quietly asks, turning to look at me.

“Look at the road!” I gasp, and he turns back. He’s quiet for several moments then gives me a predatory smile.

“I’ll promise you this — we won’t do a *single* thing you don’t want to do.”

This doesn’t reassure me in the least. I become even hotter as we continue driving to who in the heck knows where. And I have a feeling my convictions aren’t going to last . . .

Chapter Seventeen

McKenzie

The silence in the car stretches out long and thick, and I finally have no choice but to remove my jacket. I'm going to pass out if I don't. Even with the air blowing full blast on my face, I'm heavily sweating, uncomfortable and downright hot as sin.

"What's the temperature outside?" I pant, grabbing my purse, pulling out a magazine I brought for the plane ride, and fanning my face.

"Sixty-two degrees," Byron says with a knowing chuckle that has me grinding my teeth.

"It must be the sun pouring in through the windows. It's magnifying the heat or something," I say. *How lame can I get?*

"Sure . . ." He draws the word out, but I refuse to take the bait.

When I feel his fingers drift over my thigh and grip my hand, I jump as far as my seat belt will allow, and jerk my head toward him. I can't take his touch right now.

When he outlines the edges of my knuckles with his thumb before turning my hand over and tracing the inside of my wrist, I feel his touch all of the way to my core, which is now pulsing and, like the rest of me, overheated. I squeeze my thighs together and try desperately to remember why I need to stop this cute little seduction scene right this minute.

With as much effort as I can muster, I yank my hand away and tuck it between my thighs, waiting for a supernova to come and obliterate this vile car. It's so damn hot now that some crazy conjunction of the stars can offer the only explanation. It certainly isn't *my* hormones. After another ten minutes, I again jump when Byron squeezes my thigh.

"Are you going to remain silent this entire ride?" he asks.

I stare at him in outrage. "Haven't you been listening? I've hardly been silent." When he throws me a derisive look, I take another tact. "How much longer is this ride going to be?"

"About thirty more minutes."

"Where are we going?"

"To one of my favorite places."

"That doesn't tell me anything," I say, but I can't suppress a ghost of a smile. He's so excited, almost boyishly so, it's hard for me not to appreciate the change in his demeanor. Even if he's kidnapping me.

"It's not a well-known place, but I've been here before," he says. "It's a nice, small resort in the mountains. They have private cabins, and all of the comforts of home, with room service."

"Ah, we wouldn't want to go without room service," I say before turning to look at him. "How many cabins did you rent?" My stomach's nervous as I wait for his answer.

"Two, but I'm hoping one of them remains empty," he says, and I let out the breath I was holding.

That he's rented two means a lot to me. He's obviously hoping for sex this weekend, but he's also showing enough respect to offer separate sleeping quarters if I insist on them.

"Considering that I want to pull this car over onto a nice little logging road right now, strip your clothes off, and touch every single inch of your silky skin, it might be a good idea for you to distract me," Byron tells me, making my head whip around.

I gape at him in partial shock and awe. "Um . . . I don't . . . um . . . What do you want to talk about?" I finally manage to ask.

"Tell me about yourself. How did you end up in Seattle?"

This is a subject I really, *really* don't want to discuss. "How about anything other than that?" I ask in my lightest tone. He isn't buying it.

"Everyone has a beginning, McKenzie, even if that beginning isn't what we think it should be."

I decide to challenge him. "Why don't you tell me about your youth, then?"

His shoulders tense, but he doesn't back away. "I might do that, but you go first."

I pause for a moment. If there's anything I know about Byron, it's that he doesn't lie and he doesn't make promises he won't keep. He hasn't said outright that he'll tell me about his past, but it's a big step for him to consider it and enough to loosen my tongue.

"I had a typical childhood. Or are there any 'typical' childhoods anymore? Divorced parents, a sister . . ." I choke

on the last word.

“Wait!” he says, jerking his head in my direction. “You have a sister?”

“Please pay attention.” I gasp when we swerve toward the ditch. He quickly corrects the wheel, then faces forward.

“Yes, I *had* a sister,” I say quietly.

“Where is she? Why doesn’t anyone know about her?” He obviously hasn’t picked up on the word *had*.

“When we were fourteen—”

Byron interrupts again. “We?”

“Susie and I were twins,” I murmur.

“I’m sorry. I won’t interrupt again,” he says before throwing me a sheepish smile. “Or I’ll try really hard not to.”

“When we were fourteen, my dad gave us a quad. One of few nice things about being the children of divorce is when Daddy comes to town, he tries to be the cool parent, so we always got really expensive, outrageous gifts that would drive our mother crazy. She told us we couldn’t ride the quad until we were trained. Of course, she worked two jobs and couldn’t exactly monitor us. We lived in a small town outside of Sacramento, up in the hills, and it was summer. We wanted to try out the new toy.” It hurts to even think about this day.

“Please go on, McKenzie,” Byron gently says.

“We took turns racing down some old logging roads, each of us fighting over who got to drive and who had to hang on for dear life. Yeah, *dear life* . . . It was her turn to drive, and she was all sorts of confident at this point. And our father,

being who he was, had bought us the toy but not the safety items needed with it. Neither of us had helmets . . .” I close my eyes as I relive a brief second in time that changed my life forever.

“You can stop,” Byron says, squeezing my thigh, this time not as a come-on but in reassurance.

“She didn’t die,” I whisper so softly I’m not sure Byron hears me.

“What?” he gasps, turning toward me again before realizing what he’s doing, and then quickly faces the road again.

“No. And I felt guilty for years because I wished she’d died. It would’ve been easier,” I say.

“Tell me, McKenzie.” It’s a soft plea.

“We were going too fast and came to a bend in the road there was no way we could take at those speeds. We flew over the cliff and . . . while we were still in the air, we hit a tree,” I say, a tear falling at that brutal memory. “I immediately blacked out, but later they put all of the pieces together and figured out what happened.”

I take a few moments to compose myself before telling Byron something I haven’t told another living soul. How sad is my life that I have no one I can truly share things like this with? I have Jewell now, but Jewell has a husband and responsibilities. Hell. It doesn’t matter. I’m not normally the sharing type. I don’t understand why I’m telling all of this to Byron — a man who most certainly doesn’t care about me.

Then again, maybe I’m telling him this old, sad story because he doesn’t care and it will make him go away. Men

never like psychodrama, do they? Unless they're therapists. Money in the bank. But this is sort of like talking to a therapist. I decide to continue.

“Susie’s body protected mine. She flew forward and hit her head on the tree, but, in the process, she was there to cushion my impact. Her brain swelled. By the time help found us, I was awake, but couldn’t see, so I had no idea what condition Susie was in, let alone how to get out of this horrible mess. A family out riding bicycles found us. They called emergency services and sat with us until they arrived. Susie was in a coma. My mother . . .” I choke up again, feeling the sting of my mother’s words to the very depths of my soul.

“My mom was so distraught, she barred my father from coming near us again, and he was so consumed with guilt he let her get away with it. After she didn’t have our father to yell at anymore, she turned her anger on me. She told me she’d still have her daughter — her favorite daughter — if I hadn’t been so reckless, hadn’t been so much like our father . . . out to prove to the world how macho I was.”

“McKenzie, those were words spoken in grief,” he says. Counselors said the same thing to me, and it hadn’t helped.

“Except that she never apologized, and the longer Susie was in the care facility, the angrier Mom became. We lost everything — our house, possessions, everything — because she wouldn’t leave Susie’s side, and the medical expenses were outrageous. After a year, she went back to work, but every dime she had went into Susie’s care. My mother died when I was twenty, but not before telling me I’d better take care of Susie, especially since I was the one responsible for the

vegetable she'd become. My mother let out her dying breath while she was lying next to Susie in a cot, holding her hand. She never gave up praying my twin would one day wake." Tears are streaming down my cheeks as I think back to that day . . . think back to those early years.

"What happened to your twin?" Byron asks. "How long was she in the coma?"

"Does that matter? Really? Love never ends. You don't give up on the people you're supposed to love," I say, wishing now I hadn't brought up this topic.

"McKenzie . . ."

"She died five months ago . . ." I barely manage to whisper. It's why I had such a major life change, and finally took a risk on myself.

"I'm sorry," Byron says.

"That's what the doctors said, and the counselors too. Everyone is always so *sorry*." I'm still bitter, more bitter than I realized.

"McKenzie, your sister was in a coma for thirteen years," Byron says in a tone that ensures I'll listen. "Would you want to wake up after all of that time and realize how many years had passed, that mentally you're a fourteen-year-old girl but physically you're twenty-seven? Besides, people who have been in comas for that long normally have serious brain damage, and they have to relearn everything again . . . walking, talking, eating . . . if they can relearn it. I'm not discounting your sister's life. I'm simply telling you that, in my opinion, your sister's much better off now."

No one has ever said these words to me — not one single person. I never thought about what it would've been like for Susie to wake up and not know who she is, not know how to do basic things in life.

"I . . . I don't know. That's something I never considered," I finally say.

"Your mother was wrong to keep Susie alive by machines after a certain point, and she was horribly wrong to blame you," Byron tells me. "No matter who was driving — and you weren't — that's not the point. The point is, you were simply being kids, having fun, and you *both* made a mistake — a tragic mistake, but still a mistake."

"But I should've told her to slow down. I should've tried to grab the brake. And it was my responsibility to take care of her," I say, pulling away from him and wrapping my arms around my chest. I've been hot for hours, but now I'm unbearably cold.

"You did far more than anyone could've expected of you, McKenzie. I think it's time for you to forgive yourself *and* your sister."

He pulls off the main road and turns into a long driveway that's flanked on either side with huge trees, creating a canopy, making me feel as if I'm in an Old Southern movie.

"Well, we'll have to agree to disagree," I say.

"We *will* revisit this later. Right now, I want you to stop dwelling on the past and what went wrong, and look ahead instead. We're here."

When we turn a corner, a beautiful three-story building looks as if it's rising out of the mountain. "Home, sweet home," I say, trying to push the sorrow away.

"Home, sweet home," he repeats.

Chapter Eighteen

McKenzie

I sit at the bar and leisurely sip my martini. It's my second, and I still don't know what I want to do. That's not true. I know *exactly* what I want to do. I want to let Byron take me to his cabin, peel my clothes away, and make me forget everything bad in my life. Maybe he'll actually make me feel something good. I've never thought sex might be a good experience, but for some reason, I know it will be wonderful with Byron.

I take another sip and struggle to string together words that mean something, words that will tell Byron what I want. Nothing comes from my throat — for some bizarre reason, it feels parched — so I sip from my glass again. This isn't about love, or even affection — far from it. But what's so wrong with discovering my body, with being a little selfish for the first time in a long while?

Byron's handsome, devastatingly handsome, and I have no doubt he'll make me feel more sensations like the ones when he kissed me. This is about sex, about hooking up, and nothing more.

But this is so clandestine, so forbidden, so not my usual style. But, at the same time, I feel a certain amount of freedom in letting down my hair and my guard, in focusing on my needs. If I accept what he's offering, what would be the big deal? The sexual revolution took place more than half a

century before, so maybe I should get my own piece of it, try it on for size.

After another half hour, he turns and looks at me. “What’s it going to be, McKenzie? One cabin . . . or two?”

Byron

I inhale McKenzie’s sweet scent, feeling as if I won’t make it if she chooses not to stay with me. Yes, I’ve ambushed her with this place, and I’m pushing her, but I’m not doing anything I don’t want to do.

I want her to stay in my room . . . and I believe she wants the same. She wants to let go. She just doesn’t want to admit that’s what she wants. She’s stubborn, but why? Maybe this is her payback for the way I approached her in the beginning. I might’ve been a little . . . harsh.

All I have to do is sleep with her — maybe one night, or maybe a few — and I’ll be able to purge her from my system. I know how to be romantic, how to put on a pretty damn good song and dance to impress a woman. But it’s something I haven’t cared to do in a long while. If a woman isn’t interested, I normally move on, because there’s a horde of eligible women in line right behind her.

I’m about to give up when she turns her head. “Let’s go to your cabin, Byron. I’d like to see it.” My heart stops beating for a few seconds after she whispers these sweet words.

I stand up in a flash and hold out my hand. “This way,” I say. I don’t want to give her a chance to change her mind.

We silently walk from the bar and make our way down a small path to a large cabin, the lights welcoming, the heavy curtains preventing the two of us from seeing inside until I open the door and hold out my arm to usher her inside. I’ve been to this place before. It’s a favorite retreat of mine when I want to get away from the city, want time to think, want to be left alone. I’ve never brought a woman here before.

Though the cabin appears rustic from the outside, inside it has all of the modern conveniences I’m too spoiled to give up. In addition, it boasts granite countertops, top-of-the-line stainless-steel appliances, hardwood floors, plush rugs, and a rock-faced fireplace with a stack of wood next to it.

This unit only has one bedroom, but two full-sized bathrooms, plenty of cupboards and drawers, and a decent-sized living room with a cushy couch and a couple of overstuffed chairs.

“They even have books and magazines sitting out,” McKenzie says as she slowly looks around the cabin.

“I hope you like it,” I say, making sure my voice gives nothing away — especially none of the anxiety I’m suddenly feeling.

“It’s beautiful.” She turns toward the bedroom and I can see the tension in her eyes.

“I need a shower, McKenzie. I’ll use the one out here in case you want to use the master bath.”

I don't give her a chance to say anything. Instead, I grab my bag, shut myself in the bathroom and take a second to lean against the door. What I should do is shower, walk from the bathroom naked, and ravage her. It's what we both want. What I do is shower, shave, and get dressed. I promised her dinner. It will be better for both of us if we have some fuel to sustain our nighttime activities.

When I come out, the cabin smells of peaches. I close my eyes for a moment and inhale deeply, thinking I can get used to entering a room and having this experience over and over again.

Shaking my head in frustration, I push the thought out of my head. I'm a loner, and I prefer it this way. I have no need to change anything in my life. Sure, I appreciate a woman who takes care of herself, but that doesn't mean I need to make a fool of myself over her. I find McKenzie in the bedroom, combing her wet hair. Our eyes connect in the mirror and she smiles.

"The shower was heaven," she says with a nervous giggle as she sets down the comb. And I can't resist any longer.

Taking a few short steps, I turn her around, pull her to me, then bend and kiss her. I want her to know what she's been missing by continuing to resist me, but after a single minute of my lips on hers, I'm not sure who's being taught a lesson.

My hands slide down her back, my palms cupping her sweet derrière, and I tug, lining her hips up with mine, letting her feel how hard I am — how hard I am each time we're alone. Hell, we don't even have to be alone. Since our first

kiss, I always seem ready in an instant to plunge into her sweet, hot folds.

When her soft sigh of surrender slips into my mouth, I know I can walk her backward, strip her clothes from her, and thrust inside her without any preliminaries. Somehow, knowing this helps ease my pain. My lips soften as I trace her mouth with mine, but I finally pull back, triumph filling me at the desire shining in her eyes.

“We can finish what we’ve started, McKenzie, or I can feed you first, as promised.” Oh, how I hope she takes option one. I can see the conflict raging within her and see when she decides. Damn!

“I’m really hungry,” she croaks, and the tremor in her voice makes me feel much better about being rejected yet again.

“Fine. I’ll feed one hunger first,” I say before a smile overtakes my lips, “and then I’ll feed the other.”

She says nothing as I turn to leave, but I feel her follow me from the room and out of the cabin. As we stroll back along the trail toward the lodge, side by side, I take McKenzie’s hand. She doesn’t pull away from me. I hold the door for her as we enter the small restaurant, and we’re soon seated on the back patio, deck heaters warming the area, the smell of pine trees filling the air.

“This is amazing, Byron,” she says with a sigh as she looks out into the dark gray sky. The moon’s nearly full, illuminating the hills, but this time of night doesn’t offer much of a view.

“In the morning, this place is spectacular. I love sitting on the deck back at the cabin, watching the sun come up, and

hearing nothing but the birds singing. Sometimes I forget what that's like while living in the city, where traffic drowns out all other sounds."

"That *sounded* slightly romantic, Byron. You'd better be careful what you say," she tells me with a sidelong glance under her full eyelashes and a smile that takes my breath away.

"Well, then, we'd better look over the menu and figure out what we're going to eat," I say. "I wouldn't want to get too mushy and destroy my reputation."

Though a reflex makes me want to instantly put up my defenses, something inside me resists the urge. I want to be a different person this weekend; I want to speak of sunrises and sunsets and of those stupid birds chirping. But that isn't who I am. That isn't what this is about. It's about sex, and nothing else. I have to be careful. I can easily get a lot more than I'm bargaining for, and that isn't something I'm willing to accept.

It's much better to focus on sex and pleasure, and much better to remember exactly who McKenzie Beaumont is. She isn't the innocent face she's trying to show me and the rest of the world right now.

I make idle chitchat for a few minutes. But after our waiter comes, takes our order, and brings bread and drinks, the conversation dies out. I'm soon lost in my own head while our meal's served, and we eat in silence.

When we finish, I sign the check, and take her hand again as we move toward the cabin. My heart pounds as we draw near, and I feel the nervous tension in her body, but I'm done with the games.

We've come to this place to discover each other. And that's exactly what we're going to do. The moon casts a delicate glow over our walk back, the breeze cool enough to keep her locked tightly to my side.

When we arrive at the cabin, I stop after I pull open the door. I look down and gaze into her eyes. I want no doubt in her mind about what's going to happen the second we step over the threshold.

"If you don't want this, we need to part ways right now," I warn, lifting my hand and letting it trail through her hair.

"What . . . what do you mean?" she stutters, a shiver traveling through her.

"You know exactly what I mean," I say, my voice firming from the restraint it's taking to say this. "The cabin right next door is mine too. Tell me no right now, I'll leave you here, and we'll both have a very unsatisfying night."

Her face blanches a little, and I can see she doesn't want to say the one word that will decide how our evening's going to end. She wants me to take the choice from her, but I'm not going to show her that kindness. I want her to admit how much she wants me.

Still, I hold my breath, afraid she'll refuse, that she'll deny us both. I push this fear aside. She's mine for the taking — she only needs to admit it. My heart stalls as her lips open and I wait for her final verdict.

Chapter Nineteen

McKenzie

“Yes.”

I can't say anything other than the one word I need to say or I'll die right here on the front porch of a cabin in the woods of Idaho.

Byron's eyes flare, and raw need vibrates off of him. This gives me the confidence to know I'm making the right choice — at least for now.

When the last of Byron's patience breaks he grabs my hand, drags me across the threshold of the cabin, and, without another word, pulls me into his arms. After he kicks the door shut, his mouth captures mine in a hungry kiss.

I need this man. Worry no longer flits through my brain as his mouth and hands stoke the fire building within me. Can something that feels this right ever be wrong? No way. It won't be perfect, but sex never is for a woman. Still, it might have its moments. My body has taken over for my brain and is far more optimistic about what's going to happen.

I thread my fingers through his hair as I arch into him and rub my aching core against his straining erection, desperate for our clothes to disappear. “I need you,” I huskily whisper when he releases my lips so he can trail his tongue down the side of my throat.

“I’ve been waiting to hear those words for a while now,” he growls before hoisting me into his arms. He carries me to the bedroom and gently lowers me beside the bed.

My skin’s on fire as he removes my clothes, worshipping each inch along the way. When he drops to his knees, pulling my jeans down with his hands and running his lips across my now naked thighs, I tremble before him, barely able to keep from falling backward.

His tongue slides along the inside of one thigh before darting upward and gliding across my stomach. My knees can’t take it anymore and give out, sending me backward onto the luxurious bed behind me.

“Hmm, are you feeling weak, McKenzie?” he asks with a throaty chuckle. Before I can reply, he begins removing his clothes, and my throat tightens at the male beauty before me. *Perfection*. Now I know the true meaning of the word.

He’s pure, unadulterated perfection, and I want to trail my tongue along his skin the same way he’s done with me. “You’re taking too long,” I gasp, making his fingers stall as he looks at me with such fire I don’t know how I’m not burned.

He quickly sheds the rest of his clothes, grabbing several condoms from his pocket — smart guy, he has them at the ready — before tossing his pants aside. He climbs onto the bed and immediately draws me into his arms.

Skin to skin has never felt so right. I arch into him, loving the feel of his hard planes against my soft curves. We’re a perfect fit. I knew we’d fit in every way possible; this has to be fate.

“Pure silk,” he murmurs as his lips graze my collarbone before caressing the tops of my breasts. I moan when his tongue circles my peaked nipple then sucks it into his mouth, making me arch off the mattress and grab his head to hold him right where he is. “And greedy,” he murmurs, pulling away from me long enough to speak, then diving back in.

When he crawls up my body and turns me on my side to face him, I finally have the chance to explore him. My hands seem so small as I splay them on his tanned skin. I push him onto his back and take my time kissing the salty muskiness of his neck before moving down and flicking my tongue across his exquisite pecs.

“So hard,” I murmur as I reach his stomach, my hands crawling down to his thighs, and the beauty between them. “So solid . . .” My words are a reverent whisper as I circle his throbbing manhood with one hand. And without hesitating, I lean down and taste its satin head. The salty flavor explodes in my mouth.

“McKenzie . . . I’m too close to embarrassing myself for you to do that,” he groans as he reaches his fingers into my hair and tugs.

I ignore him and let my mouth sink deeper onto his thickness while my fingers grip him tightly. “Mmm . . .” I moan, the sound muted because he’s filling my mouth.

“Enough!” He sits up and pulls my mouth off, flips me onto my back, and covers my body with his.

The pure heaven of feeling his hardness resting along the seams of my core makes me whimper. He slides his hands beneath me and tugs my hips upward while he rubs the outside

of my heat, soaking his erection with my arousal. *Arousal* . . .
So hard to believe. I haven't felt anything like this before.

I reach for him, needing to guide him inside me, but he gives me a look of victory as he pulls his hands from beneath me, grasps my wrists, then pins them above my head while he traps me beneath him.

"Oh, please, Byron, please. Take me now," I beg, but he kisses me again, silencing me in the most efficient way. Spreading my thighs wider, I bend my knees and push up against him, wriggling beneath his solid form as I try to force him to enter me.

"You're enough to test a saint," he groans, and the tip of his erection slides a couple of inches inside me.

"Then take me, damn you," I tell him. "We've both suffered long enough." I push upward again, desperate to have all of him and forgetting why my reaction to him makes no sense. I've never felt this, never wanted sex before. I can't stop my reaction to this man though, and don't want to analyze how or what I'm feeling.

He pulls back and I whimper in protest. This game of his isn't to my liking. I'm ready to feel pleasure, and he's holding off from giving it to me. My eyes narrow as I try to yank my hands free.

He releases his hold and I immediately wind my fingers in his hair again and draw his mouth back to mine. I devour his lips, slipping my tongue inside his mouth and capturing his hungry groan.

But before I can drag him farther inside me, he pulls those precious few inches out of me, then ends the kiss and moves his lips down my body again. This time he makes a beeline to the part of me that aches the most.

When his mouth circles my core and he swipes his tongue across my painfully swollen bud, I feel . . . I feel . . . what is it? My whole body's trembling and I seem to be in some sort of altered state. My ears are ringing and my heart's racing and everything around me looks . . . different. Within seconds he has me crying out as my body shakes in some strange ecstasy. *Whoa*. And then the room darkens as my body clenches repeatedly in what seems a never-ending paroxysm of bliss. So, this is what sex is truly about.

“You're ready now, McKenzie. Ready for me.”

I open my eyes and see him poised above me. With one solid push, he thrusts inside my wet heat, making me cry out. The air whooshes from my lungs as he pauses, his entire length buried within while my walls pulse with the pleasure of my very first orgasm. I've never felt anything like this before.

“How can you be so tight?” he groans.

I don't want to talk. I want to feel more pleasure. I move my hips upward, needing him to plunge in and out of me, not tease me like this. I want it hard and fast. He places a hand on my hip and holds me in place. “Wait,” he says as his eyes close and he leans his head back, a look of utter enjoyment and gratification filling his face.

Finally, *finally*, he begins moving, pulling his hardness from me before he pushes back inside, rocking my whole body

with the amazing impact. This time, we groan together at the pure pleasure of the movement.

My first orgasm has barely ended, and I feel pressure build again — build immediately — and my eyes widen as I look into Byron's eyes. His are narrow as he begins moving faster, filling me over and over and over.

Then he leans down and captures my lips as he grabs my hip and drives hard and fast within my needy body. A cry wrenches from me and he greedily takes it while I begin convulsing around him with an orgasm even more intense than my first.

He thrusts inside me again, and then once more. His body tenses and he buries his mouth in the curve of my neck, his loud groans resounding against my skin as he throbs inside of me. After an endless stretch of time, Byron sinks against me, our skin hot and slick, our breathing shallow, our initial hunger sated.

"I've never . . ." I begin to tell him, but I let my words fade. I can't tell him this.

"You've never what, McKenzie?" he asks against my ear, his tongue tracing the outline and making me shiver.

"Nothing," I murmur. I can't believe the way my body's responding to his tongue.

"I have ways of making you talk," he says. His mouth returns to my neck and he sucks on the tender skin.

"And I have ways of making you forget to question me," I warn, letting my hands slide down his back and over the firm muscles of his butt.

“Witch,” he says so quietly I wonder if I’ve heard him right.

But I feel a twitch from his still-buried erection, then feel him begin to move again. All is forgotten as he makes love to me once more. I’m terrified. This is something I can get all too used to . . . even if I know I shouldn’t.

Chapter Twenty

Byron

Two nights and one full day of pretty much nothing except making love — in the bed, in the shower, on the small kitchen table, on the couch, in front of the fire, and that isn't all . . .

I'm certain we've christened every square inch of the cabin.

Yet as I stand on the front porch, watching the soft morning sunrise, I'm still not sated. I want more. I can't remember when I've spent so much time with one woman, made love so often, and still felt unsatisfied.

Not that I'm not pleased beyond my wildest imagination each and every time I join my body with hers. But as soon as we're finished, I can take her again, and again, and again . . . I'm beginning to wonder if I'll ever get enough of this small but surprisingly strong woman.

If I don't get myself under control soon, I'll be no better than my pathetic father. Is this what happened to my dad? Had the man been so infatuated with my mother, so whipped, that, after she gained control over his body, she was able to destroy him? It seems a very likely conclusion to draw from the way things ended with my parents.

Sex is essential to survival. It might not be listed as one of the food groups, but it should be. A myriad of women are ready and waiting to offer the use of their bodies. There's no reason a man should ever lock himself down with just one.

Okay, the thought of making love with any woman other than McKenzie turns my stomach. But that's something I have to change. I need to cut this off, to push her out of my life, if I want to keep my sanity intact. I don't need answers about who she is. Screw all of the mystery.

It's settled. I'm going to fly McKenzie back home, release her from her contract with me, and never see her again. Even though she's friends with my sister-in-law, I can easily avoid her. However, the thought of this infuriates me. Since when do I, Byron Astor, need to hide from anything or anyone? I haven't done that since I was a child and witnessed my parents' gruesome murder. That day hardened me, and I'm determined to stay hard.

As I shift uncomfortably on the front porch, I realize I'm already hard in other ways. McKenzie and I made love only a few hours before, and it's taking every ounce of my strength not to march back into our cabin and wake her by sinking deep within her tight body.

There's so much that doesn't fit when it comes to McKenzie. The entire point of this weekend was to exorcise her from my system, not to raise more questions I fear I'll never find answers to. I'd originally planned to satisfy my bodily needs then interrogate her. I haven't gotten around to the interrogation part.

I have to stay focused, to remember who and what she is. She messed in the life of my brother. And if a person messes with one of the brothers, then they mess with all of us. Tyler and Blake are the only blood relatives I have, the only true

friends I have, the only two people on the planet I'd take a bullet for — okay, maybe three if you include Bill.

No matter how hard I try to resist opening my heart, I'm forced to do it against my will. Now I have a nephew too, so I guess my list of dying-for-people is growing. I didn't want to like Justin. But how can I not adore the small boy with so much strength? The kid reminds me a lot of my brother Blake.

Why does everything have to change? Why can't we simply go through our lives with no bumps in the road? That's an easy answer ... because of women.

The creaking door alerts me I'm no longer alone, but even without it, I'd know. I have a sense when McKenzie's around. I *feel* her presence.

It doesn't fill me with anger. Instead, I feel her satin-encased arms wrap around my back and bring peace to my thoughts. Her open hands slide beneath my shirt and caress the skin of my stomach as she leans into my back.

"Morning," she mumbles. The rasp of her voice sends lust surging through me. Closing my eyes, I take a deep breath as I try to tamp down my desire.

"You're up a lot earlier than I thought you'd be," I say. My hands involuntarily rise to settle over hers, and I caress her soft skin.

"I woke up cold without you beside me," she whispers.

Her words should send terror through me, or anger, or anything other than an odd sense of joy. I don't want her to get used to me being here. This is all temporary, and though she's said she knows the score, she's getting too familiar already.

So why am I not pushing her away?

“I have an obligatory party I’m attending Friday. You’ll come with me, McKenzie.” Yep, I called it right. Insanity.

Her hands still on my skin and her body tenses the slightest bit, then I feel her take a breath and relax. She resumes caressing my skin, but the tension inside her remains.

“I’d prefer not to, Byron.”

I wait, but she doesn’t explain. So I lean against the sturdy rail around the porch and fold her into my arms, needing to look in her eyes to see what she’s trying to hide.

“I want you there.” If I want it, she should know that’s exactly what I’ll get. We’ve gone over this territory several times before.

“No, you don’t. I’m not good with parties, and I’m sure you have a long list of people willing to go with you.”

Anger flashes through me. She’s right. This event is far too much like a date, and we aren’t dating. We aren’t boyfriend and girlfriend. We aren’t anything to each other. I should be grateful she’s refusing me. So why am I upset?

“I know what I want. I want you there,” I say, a dangerous edge to my voice.

She’s quiet for a moment as she looks at me. “We both know what we’re doing, Byron. Don’t try to make it something it’s not.” She speaks with a smile, but she’s not kidding.

Before I can respond, a wicked gleam lights her eyes, and she pulls from my grasp, drops to her knees, and reaches

inside my sweats. She pulls me free, and the cool air doesn't affect my hardness at all.

“What in the hell are you doing, McKenzie? People could walk by,” I say, turning to look out at the trail only a few hundred yards from our cabin.

“Then you'd better shield me,” she says. She takes me in her mouth and makes me forget everything we've talked about.

Within minutes, I feel my release coming. “Stop. Now,” I groan, but my fingers are tangled in her hair, holding her in place.

My words only serve to spur her on and speed her up. I barely manage to muffle my cry as I spill my pleasure inside the warm recesses of her mouth. After I stop shaking, I drag her into my arms, covering myself as I struggle to figure out what this sorceress is doing to me.

“Your turn,” I say, and lift her in my arms to haul her inside the cabin. But before I do, I deliver a warning: “You've managed to delay this conversation, McKenzie, but I won't forget. It's decided. You *will* go to the party with me.”

When I'm not in a sexual haze, I might realize what a dangerous road I'm taking as I continue to delve into my infatuation with McKenzie Beaumont.

Chapter Twenty-One

McKenzie

“It’s a good thing I don’t spend every weekend like that one,” I say as we approach my house, a yawn slipping from me before I’m able to stop it.

“I thought it was a pretty great weekend,” Byron says. He’s been grumpy since we left the cabin.

“It’s not that I didn’t have an amazing time, but I need sleep. Most humans do,” I tell him with a false laugh. The closer we get to my house, the more downcast I feel. Our time is about up.

I’ve managed to distract him from his discussion of next Friday’s party, but only because I’m well aware he’ll regret inviting me the minute he drops me off. He’s on a sex high right now, but I have no illusions about where I stand with Byron.

We’re consenting adults, we had great sex, and now it’s done. We aren’t a couple, never will be a couple, and this is something I need to keep reminding myself. We’ve managed to spend a couple of days together without the walls caving in around us, but that doesn’t mean we’re compatible.

Anyone can have sex. It’s a natural instinct — survival of the horniest. But men like Byron Astor don’t settle down, and if they do, certainly not with women like me. I need to appreciate the wonderful weekend, finish my time at Astor Construction, and get on with my life.

After pulling into my driveway, he shuts off the engine and turns. “Invite me in, McKenzie.” The intensity in his voice nearly makes me issue an invitation.

At the last minute I manage to keep my mouth shut and do my best to find the right words. “We both know that’s not a good idea. I invite you in, we head straight to my bedroom. We had our weekend. It’s time to go back to our real lives,” I say as I undo my seatbelt. I have to get away from this man — the sooner, the better.

“You know you aren’t ready for this weekend to end, McKenzie.” He reaches over and cups my neck before I exit the car. “Your body knows what I can give, so stop fighting me every step of the way.” This sounds like a command.

“My body — along with every other part of me, including my sad and muddled brain — is exhausted.”

His eyes grow soft, and a beautiful smile fills his sensuous mouth. “Then we’ll only have dinner — no sex,” he says, looking as innocent as he possibly can.

Though I’m well aware I should say no to him, I nod. He’s right. I’m not ready for our weekend to end. It doesn’t count as a date when it’s still Sunday and we haven’t parted yet.

I have to scoff inwardly at this absurd rationalization for spending more time with him now that we’re back home. The more I prolong this, the more it’s going to batter away at my fragile heart. But knowing what’s best and acting accordingly are two entirely different things.

“Wait right there,” he says as he gets out of the car. I’m shocked when he comes to the passenger side and opens my

door. Byron has never professed to be a gentleman, so what's he doing?

"Thank you," I say in a low voice, and wait while he grabs my bag.

We make it only a few feet down my driveway when I freeze. Byron isn't expecting me to stop, and he bumps into me. Humiliation burns through me, and I fight tears as I gaze ahead.

"Call the police now," he says through gritted teeth.

"There's nothing they can do about this," I say with a heartsick shake of my head.

"That's bullshit, McKenzie. This is vandalism," he thunders.

"Please calm down, Byron. I don't need the neighbors alerted to what's going on." I need to find sandpaper, spray paint, and anything else that will erase what was done. Byron catches up to me before I'm able to unlock the front door with my shaking hand.

"Maybe one of the neighbors saw something, saw who did this."

"I doubt it," I say as I finally open the door.

"Something needs to be done about this!"

"Why, Byron?" I ask, feeling defeated. My humiliation, exhaustion, and stress has hit a peak. "You call me the same thing. So why do you care?"

He takes a step back as if I slapped him. "I don't . . ." He trails off. What can he say after all that's happened between

us? I look out the window to see the word *whore* sprayed across my car and turn away again. It turns my stomach.

“Please go home, Byron. I need to fix this,” I tell him, so tired I can’t see straight anymore.

His shoulders stiffen. “What aren’t you telling me, McKenzie? There are obviously problems in your life. Why don’t you let me help you?”

“Nothing’s going on, Byron. It was probably drunk teenagers thinking they’re being funny, and my house was empty, so they went on the attack. It’s just my car so it’s not that big of a deal.”

Without asking permission, Byron pulls out his phone, hits his contact list, and arranges to have my car picked up and taken in for repairs. I’d try to stop him, but I’m learning to choose my battles. And the reality is that I need my car and I don’t have the emotional stamina left to deal with the problem right now.

When he hangs up, I move into my living room and sit. Byron follows, a look of concentration on his face, as if he’s trying to find the right words to say.

“Go pack some clothes,” he says. “I’ll take you to my house.”

I wait for him to continue, but he doesn’t say anything else. I close my eyes for a brief second. If I do that, I’ll become reliant on him, and that’s as dangerous as facing the man damaging my property. Maybe even more so.

“Our weekend’s over, Byron,” I finally say, crossing my arms against my chest.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” He takes a step closer.

“I’m not going to your house, and I’m too tired to cook. I think you should leave.”

“What if whoever did that comes back?” he asks. “You aren’t safe.” He begins pacing my small living room, eating up the space and making it seem even smaller.

“I’ve been taking care of myself for a long time, and I don’t need to start leaning on anyone now,” I insist. I’m very close to falling apart. If he touches me, I’ll lose it.

“I need to take care of you.” I freeze. How can he take care of me when he thinks I’m such a terrible person? He can’t.

“This weekend was a bad idea. The sex was great, but now that we’re back, I realize that it . . . um . . . complicates things. I need to finish my job at Astor Construction, and you need to let me do it on my own. There’s no reason for this game to continue. It needs to end.”

His face goes blank, and he stares at me for several tense heartbeats. “Are you sure that’s what you want?”

This isn’t what I want, but it’s what I need. What I want is for him to take me in his arms and tell me I’ll never be hurt again. What I want is for him to want me for more than a good time in the closest bed. But that’s not what I tell him.

“Yes. It’s what I want.”

He moves to the couch and leans down, coming within inches of my face. “Be very sure that’s what you want, McKenzie. Because I don’t need to be told no over and over again. I wanted you; I pursued you. We had sex. If you really

want me to go away, I'll walk out your door and never come through it again," he says as his hot breath caresses my face.

I wait until I'm sure my voice won't shake, and I'm proud when the welling tears don't come through in my words.

"Would you like me to find a replacement at work tomorrow? I have two people who are more than ready to take my place at your company."

His eyebrows come together and he draws half an inch closer. But he suddenly pushes back to put a distance of several feet between us.

"No. Be at work tomorrow. I'll send a driver. And I'll make sure your car's in the parking garage in the morning."

With this, he walks from my house. I hear him start the car, then pull away, and I sit as still as a statue. It's at least fifteen minutes before I manage to stand and look out my window to verify that he's gone. Only then, do I curl up into a ball on my couch and let the tears fall.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Byron

I need to remember that whatever doesn't kill me makes me stronger. I don't do regrets, and I don't stay angry . . . for too long. Anger is for the weak and I'm not a weak person.

I'm trying to help McKenzie against all odds, and the woman has the nerve to throw it back in my face. This isn't the first time she's refused my help. Why do I keep coming back for more? It makes no sense.

I should've taken her up on her suggestion that she leave Astor Construction. I should say goodbye and never look back. But the mere thought of letting her go turns my guts inside out. I can't let her go. What in the hell is going on with me?

I hit my fist against the steering wheel while stopped at a red light. When a car honks, I realize the light has turned and I'm still sitting here. Slamming my foot against the gas pedal, I peel away from the intersection with a squeal and make my way toward home.

McKenzie and I are nothing to each other. We aren't even friends or lovers. We simply shared a casual weekend of sex, but that doesn't put us in a *relationship*, and I shouldn't give a damn if something's going on in her life that's causing her distress.

Try as I might to convince myself, I can't help but worry, can't help but feel compelled to step in and save her. It's ridiculous, because I'm one of the people in line who want her

destroyed — or at least I was. I should be able to send her out of my life without a second thought.

I make it home quickly and head inside. The change of scenery doesn't change the tenor of my thoughts though. Why can't I let this go? Why can't I call her and tell her not to come into work, tell her she can go back to her accounting business free and clear. I can get over all of this.

I move through the day on autopilot then lie in bed for hours without being able to sleep. Maybe if we're together a few more times I can purge her from my system. I never needed a woman like I need her and it drives me absolutely crazy.

Without her beside me to warm my body and heart, I spend a restless night tossing and turning, the little sleep I manage to get marred by nightmares of McKenzie drifting from me.

When I walk into the Astor building the next morning, I'm exhausted, and more of a bear than usual. My employees know me well enough to read the look on my face. Not one person tries to speak to me as I storm past them into my office. They know from experience it's best for all concerned if they let me be.

I sit at my desk and attempt to get down to some actual work, or at least to look as if I'm doing so. After ten minutes of wasted effort, I give up, drop my mouse, and surge to my feet. I need to know if McKenzie's next door.

Standing in her doorway, my spirits lift when I see exhaustion lining her face — her night wasn't any better than mine. Did she miss me the night before as much as I missed her?

What if the vandal or vandals came back to her house? No. She's sitting in the office. She's fine. Or maybe she isn't. Anyone would be rattled by the events of the day before. Or maybe I simply want the dark circles to mean she missed me.

"The driver I sent for you said you weren't home," I say. She looks up, but keeps her expression neutral.

"I took a cab. I told you I don't need your help," she says, her voice devoid of emotion. "I don't need a free ride from a narcissist."

"I'm losing patience with you." I slowly walk forward like an avenging devil and shut and lock the door behind me.

She sits back, eyeing me warily. "I'm sorry. As I said, I shouldn't be working here anymore, Byron."

"What you should do is tell me what in the hell is going on." I tone down my anger but I need some answers from her.

"I don't trust people," she tells me, her eyes filling with tears.

"Why not?"

Her tears evaporate, and she gives me a stubborn look. "It doesn't matter, Byron, but I know better than to rely on anyone but myself."

"You can't do your job if you're holding this much stress inside, McKenzie. The best thing you can do is tell someone." I take a chair and face her.

"I can do my job just fine. Work is what keeps me focused," she says.

“I’d be happy if I didn’t give a damn about you. I’m trying not to. But we have . . . something going on. I need to know what’s happening. I worry about you . . .” I immediately want to take the words back, but they’re out there, so I seal my lips together and wait.

“Don’t waste your time feeling anything for me, Byron. My life’s messed up. We’d be nothing but trouble together.” Her laugh is brittle and bitter.

“McKenzie . . . I’ve never told another woman I want to help her. I don’t try to help anyone but my brothers.” I grab her hand and rub my thumb on the delicate skin of her palm. She inhales deeply and tugs to get her hand free, but I refuse to loosen my grip. “Talk to me,” I say, and it’s more than a simple request.

Her lips part but nothing comes out. She sucks in another breath, then looks away for several moments, focusing her eyes out the window. I wait. Still she says nothing, and short of violence I don’t know how to get through to her. I really don’t need to do this to myself.

“I’m trying to be a decent guy, McKenzie, and you’re pushing me away,” I finally say.

The silence drags on for so long that I wonder whether she’s going to speak any more. Then she turns and looks at me, so much sadness in her expression that it shakes me to my core, making me wonder if I’ve gotten anything right about this woman in my time of judging her.

“I want to get back to work.” Her defeat comes through loud and clear.

“Then work it is . . . for today.”

I leave her office. I have a lot to think about — a lot of things I don't want to think about. I have no idea where this is going with McKenzie, but I know one thing for sure: the surprises aren't over. She's getting closer to talking to me. She eventually will, and apparently it's what I need and want. Maybe this time I'll actually listen without judgment.

Chapter Twenty-Three

McKenzie

I'm still motionless fifteen minutes after Byron leaves. Even thinking about work seems impossible, forget about actually *doing* it. I'd been close to sharing everything with Byron, but that would be a monumental mistake. Men like him can't be trusted — hell, men in general are best avoided.

I don't have confidence in him or his motives, and I suspect he's trying to gather evidence to use against me. I'd be a fool to forget who he is, to open my life and heart to the man.

I pick up my cold coffee and take a swig. I don't care that it tastes like crap. I need the caffeine to stay alert. I can't let down my guard or believe for a second that Byron and I shared anything more than a weekend of sex. It was good-beyond-my-wildest-imagination sex, but still only sex. If I imagine it to be anything more than that, I'm a fool. The temptation to lean on him, though, to let him support me, is almost too much to resist.

Enough of this. I put aside my personal problems and worries, and get back to work. After an hour, I'm doing okay — I'm not moving as quickly or as efficiently as I should, but I'm getting *something* done. Something other than moaning and groaning about a past that's over.

When my phone rings just before lunch, I look down and smile. I haven't spoken with Zach since last Thursday, and I'm missing the guy.

“Good morning, Zach. How is it at the office?”

“Without you, it’s terrible.”

“Is something wrong?”

Zach chortles. “No. Of course not. Hard as it may be to believe, I’m capable of doing my job.”

“Then why in the world are you trying to scare me?”

“I wasn’t. I was trying to let you know that this place will never be the same without you,” he says. “I forget how you can go from point A to point Z in one second flat.”

“I’m ready to get back there. I can only do this job for so long before I go completely insane.”

“Are things any better between you and Byron Astor?”

“I shouldn’t have told you that he’s a pain in my ass. But . . . yes, they’re fine — pretty much the same,” I lie.

“Okay, McKenzie, keep things to yourself. I’ll try not to be offended,” Zach says with an elaborate sigh and a sniff.

I chuckle. “Quit being so dramatic, Zach. You’d make it big in community theater.”

“Don’t I know it. I’m calling to let you know the accountant you’re filling in for contacted us today,” he says.

“What are you talking about?”

“Remember why you’re there? The head accountant who met with an unfortunate accident? The guy, Norm Dannon, called this morning to let us know he won’t be able to return to Astor Construction. Fallout from the accident and all that. So you’ll need to find someone who can take your place, because

if you stay there permanently, our business is going down in flames. Or up in smoke. Or . . . never mind.”

I pause for a second as Zach’s words sink in. “Why in the world did he phone you?”

“There was a mix-up in communication. He called in to personnel over at Astor and they directed him to our number for some reason. I told him he’d best call them back, but I wanted to give you a heads-up.”

I’m instantly irritated and more than a little suspicious. Does Byron already know about this? Has he been trying to keep it from me? I doubt I’ll get answers even if I do try to talk to him about it.

“Thanks, Zach. I promise I won’t be here much longer.”

“I see you’re on the phone again, McKenzie.” I look up to find Byron standing in my doorway, looking less than pleased.

“I’ll talk with you later, Zach. See you soon,” I say, staring directly into Byron’s eyes as I hang up the phone.

“What do you mean by that, McKenzie?” Byron asks as he comes closer.

I don’t answer. “Did you know Norm isn’t coming back?”

He doesn’t immediately respond, and as always I can’t tell what he’s thinking — the guy’s a master at making his face blank. I wish I could do that so well.

“Yes. I was going to inform you today. I’ve decided to hire Mary to replace him.”

This is what I want, so I don’t understand the sudden sadness creeping through me. There’s no way I’ll allow it to

show on my face. Not a chance.

“That’s wonderful. I can tell her right away if you’d like, and get her in here and up to speed within a few days.” I’m speaking as stiffly as he is.

“That won’t be necessary. I’ll have human resources set her up in an office and go over everything. She’s very capable. It won’t take long for her to catch on to the way we operate.” I’m floored since he’s been so unwilling to let me go. Now, he seems like he can’t get rid of me fast enough.

I brightly smile. “That’s wonderful. I’ll box up my stuff and head out,” I say, trying to infuse excitement into my tone.

“Thank you for filling in, McKenzie. It’s been a pleasure. Your car’s by the elevator on level three.” He turns and walks from my office.

My time with Byron is over. As quickly as it began, it ended. I sit in silence and try to process it. I’d heard all sorts of things about Byron Astor — what a tyrant he is, how cold he is, how badly he treats women — but being on the receiving end of his dismissal is humiliating. I’ll get over it. I rise from my chair, gather up the few things I have in the office, and walk away.

For years, I’ve protected myself by wearing a hard outer shell. Who cares what people think of me? I’ve built up my defenses to keep people from getting inside my head or my heart, but somehow Byron has managed to do both.

I can’t think such a thing. I’m a successful woman, a woman who has a lot going for me and a busy road ahead.

Why would I let a man mess with my head or make me think foolish schoolgirl thoughts? I won't.

I'm barely aware of driving from Astor Construction back to my accounting firm, but when I realize I'm parked in the garage beneath the building, I take a few moments to collect myself.

Zach will be thrilled to have me back, and even sooner than expected. I fight down tears, check my image in the mirror, and give myself a pep talk to ensure I don't fall apart.

I climb from the car and snatch up my briefcase. It's time to get to work. *My* work. I've been trying to keep up, but doing two jobs makes that impossible. I'll forget all about Byron as soon as I sit at my desk and turn on my computer.

Before I have a chance to sit, Zach rushes headlong into my office. "Didn't we just get off the phone?" he asks as I'm pulling out my chair.

"That we did," I reply with the best cheerful voice I can manage.

"Did something happen? Not that I'm complaining at having you here, but I wasn't expecting you so soon. Are you okay? You look a bit . . . off."

Dammit! The tears I've been wrestling with well up in my eyes, and now there's no way in hell I'll be able to tell Zach nothing's wrong. He sits on the corner of my desk, silent for once, and looks at me in shock. I understand. I've never broken down in front of him before. This isn't who I am.

Slowly Zach slides from my desk and kneels in front of me. "You know you can talk to me, right? We're friends,

McKenzie.”

I want to laugh at this. I have no friends — well, maybe I can consider Jewell a friend, but there’s a wall there as well. A true friend knows you inside and out and loves you no matter what. There isn’t a single living soul who knows who I really am.

“I’m an idiot, Zach, and I behaved like a typical idiot,” I say, pushing back the tears with a will of iron forged on the anvil of a hard life.

“The last time I checked, doll, you were about the most brilliant person I’ve ever met, so we both know that’s not true. Tell me about it. I swear it will make you feel better.”

I try to hold back, but I feel my mouth open and the words pour out. “I had sex with Byron . . . a lot of sex,” I mutter.

My statement’s met with silence. But then a smile appears on Zach’s face. “Well, he must be incredibly bad in the bedroom if you’re looking so melancholy about it.” I’m so flabbergasted by what Zach says that I don’t know how to respond. It isn’t the reaction I expected from him.

“Well . . . um . . . I . . .” How in the world do I reply?

“Did you enjoy yourself, darling?”

Again, I’m so stunned by his question, I answer, “It was amazing.” Because of past experiences I assumed all sex was horrible. Never, ever could I have imagined how great it could actually be. If I were younger, *OMG* might come to mind.

“Well, then, I don’t understand the tears. You’re an adult, McKenzie, and Byron Astor is one hot piece of ass. He’s single; you’re single. Enjoy the fact that you had some out-of-

the-ballfield sex, and quit beating yourself up over it. It's okay to let down your hair once in a while," he says, then stands and moves back to the door.

"I don't know how to respond to anything you just said." He laughs then winks at me.

"You don't have to. Simply close your eyes and picture that moment of ecstasy," he says with a sigh. "Damn, it's been too long since I've had sex!"

"Um . . . sorry," I tell him, but finally smile.

"Since you're all warmed up, you could help me out . . ." he tells me with a theatrical wink.

"I think I'll pass, if you don't mind," I say with a laugh that feels heavenly.

"Sucks to be me. Okay, my sweet, I'm going to let you get some work done. If and when you need to vent again, call me. I'm always here for you."

I thank him and look around my office. I've been trying to get back for the past three weeks and now it seems so lonely, devoid of life. I'm heading out on a mission this weekend — some major shopping's in order. It's time to add color to my life. I knew when I went into this thing with Byron it wasn't going to last, so I won't let it keep me down. No way, no how.

Chapter Twenty-Four

McKenzie

“I’m glad you decided to come.”

I glance up at Byron, and my hard-won calmness instantly evaporates. I haven’t seen him since Monday morning, and I’ve gone back and forth on whether to show up at this fancy fundraiser.

I refuse to give him even a hint of the tremors rushing through me. “You promised it would be good exposure for my company for me to be here,” I reply. *Well, at least that sounds calm enough.*

“Yes, a lot of people are here. You’ll be able to make good contacts,” he assures me as he offers his arm.

We’re at the legendary Anderson mansion, and I can’t help but be happy to step inside its stately doors. Quite a number of jaw-dropping mansions can be found in this area, but none compare to the masterpiece Joseph Anderson built for his wife more than fifty years earlier.

The castle walls stand high, and the solid wooden doors open to a home of marble and elegance unlike any other. As Byron and I step inside, I have a difficult time suppressing a gasp at the grand staircase and priceless works of art lining the walls. And this is only the beginning.

I twist a piece of hair as I shift from foot to foot. I’ve dealt with wealthy men for years, but I’ve never entered a home like

this one.

“You’re a stunning woman, McKenzie. There’s no need for you to be nervous,” Byron whispers.

“How would you know if I’m nervous?”

“I can see it in your eyes and from your fidgeting. Hold your head up. You belong here.” So maybe I don’t sound as calm as I think. Coming here is a mistake. Now I have little choice but to push down the nerves.

With his hand on my lower back, he leads me to another huge room with six-foot crystal chandeliers dripping from the ceiling, music hanging in the air, and a polished waitstaff serving hundreds of guests.

“I can’t imagine growing up in a home like this,” I say. “How in the world did they keep track of their children?”

Byron laughs. “For one, I’m sure they have an army of staff to take care of the home and keep an eye out for missing children. But any house you make comfortable is a home. It doesn’t matter if it’s a one-bedroom apartment or a colossal mansion. When it comes down to it, we’re all the same,” he says as he accepts two glasses of champagne from a passing waiter.

I look at Byron for a moment before speaking. “That’s easy for you to say. This obviously comes from a man who’s never had to spend a day of his life in a small apartment.”

“No, I haven’t, but I did live with Bill for a while in a small house. We’re getting off subject though and . . .” He’s wise enough to change the subject. “Do be careful while you’re in this particular home. There are rumors that the family

patriarch, Joseph Anderson, is quite the matchmaker. All three of his boys quickly fell into matrimony, and many who know the family say it has everything to do with their father. And then his nieces and nephews began marching down the aisle one by one after his children married.”

I scoff. “Their father — or the patriarch or whatever — can’t *make* them get married. That’s impossible.”

“Joseph actually loves his sons, something you don’t often see in wealthy families. Hell, wealthy children are often raised by the nanny and closer to her than to the people who gave birth to them. But rumor has it he helped . . . shall we say . . . prod them along.”

“What do you mean by ‘prod them along’?”

Byron glances around. “It’s nothing like an electric cattle prod. He played matchmaker behind the scenes. He hired the perfect assistant for his oldest son, a cook for his youngest — that sort of thing.”

“Just because he hires certain people doesn’t mean he’s playing matchmaker,” I point out.

He looks down at me with such intensity, I’m barely able to hold on to my champagne flute. “You know more than anyone what happens when two sexually compatible people begin working closely together,” he says, taking my breath away.

“You’re being inappropriate,” I warn.

“Just filling you in on some local Anderson history. Not trying to be inappropriate,” he says, but his hand moves up and down the length of my back, a back my dress leaves largely bare.

“Did I hear you speaking about me?”

I jump at the loud voice booming right behind me, both of us turn, and I look up, up, up. I thought Byron was tall — heck, he’s six foot three — but the man with the white hair and a groomed white beard is a giant compared to Byron.

“Only in the most respectful of ways,” Byron says. “How are you doing, Joseph?” I’m surprised to see genuine affection on Byron’s face. This is something new.

“I can’t complain in my old age, Byron.” His attention is quickly diverted to me, and he gives me an intense look. “And how are you?”

“I’m sorry, Joseph. I’m being rude,” Byron says. “Joseph Anderson, this is my date, McKenzie Beaumont.”

I’m flabbergasted. I don’t want to correct him in front of our host and tell the man I’m not Byron’s date, but I also don’t want him to think this is going to lead to a happy ending at the end of the night.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Ms. Beaumont. I hope you enjoy the party.” He ignores my hand and gives me a half-hug.

“Um . . . it’s a pleasure to meet you too, Mr. Anderson. Thank you for having me,” I say. “And please call me McKenzie.”

“McKenzie recently opened Seattle Accounting,” Byron says, “and she supplies temporary or full-time staff if you ever need anyone.”

“Is that so? I’ll have to come in and see you on Monday,” Joseph says. “Most certainly.” Someone calls out to him. “I’m

sorry to rush off. You know how these parties go. But I won't forget about Monday." And like that he's gone.

I can barely think, let alone get words out about how excited I am at the prospect of having Joseph Anderson visiting my place of business. "Do you really think he'll come?"

"Joseph never says anything he doesn't plan to follow through on," Byron assures me.

"Oh, my gosh, Byron, do you have any idea what it would do for my company if he hired us?"

Byron laughs. "Hey. Am I now chopped liver?"

"Of course not!" I say as I grab his arm. "It's just that it's the Andersons . . . *The Andersons!*"

"Yeah, yeah, Seattle's royalty," he replies, but with humor. Yes, the Andersons are a force to be reckoned with, but that doesn't make Byron any less of a force.

"You're pouting now," I tell him. Somehow my nerves have evaporated along with my champagne. Before I can tell Byron I don't need more, another flute's placed in my hand, and I sip it.

"Come. We have more people to meet," Byron says, taking my hand and squeezing before he wraps his arm around me. I feel like royalty as we make our way across the gleaming marble floors and greet a number of influential people.

I get a rare glimpse into why Byron's such a successful man. Though he tells everyone and anyone that he doesn't particularly like his fellow human beings, he's a natural crowd-pleaser, a person who knows exactly what to say to

both men and women. I'm in awe of his ability to shine when he puts his mind to it.

"Ah, another important person for you to meet," Byron says, leading me to stand in front of none other than Rafe Palazzo. He's next to a petite brunette wearing a gown that's worthy of the red carpet, with emeralds so brilliant they seem to outshine everything in the room.

"It's been a while, my friend," Rafe says, shaking Byron's hand.

"Yeah, we both work too much," Byron replies. "Rafe, this is my date, McKenzie Beaumont."

"So what's a nice woman like you doing with a man like this?" Rafe asks, holding out his hand. Before I can answer, the woman next to him rolls her eyes.

"Don't mind my husband. He likes to shock people. I'm Ari."

"It's a pleasure to meet you both," I say. The Palazzo family came from Italy and settled in San Francisco. Everyone knows of them because they're beyond powerful.

"Are you enjoying the party?" Rafe asks. "I have to say Joseph knows how to throw one and guarantee the pockets of his guests are empty at the end of the night."

"That's for sure," Byron says. "But he and his wife, Katherine, always pick the best charities, ones that deserve every dollar in donations, so I give without a second thought."

"Very true," Rafe replies. "And the deductions don't hurt either."

I stand by and listen, knowing I'm far out of my league. I want to hang out with people of this caliber, but I don't come anywhere near their level. Am I trying too hard to carve out a name for myself? Are my ambitions doomed from the get-go? Is everyone here secretly laughing at me?

After Byron and I leave Rafe and Ari, I'm introduced to a number of other people, and the night becomes a blur of names and faces. How can I remember any of them when my mind's so focused on what Byron's doing with me and why he's telling everyone I'm his date? Then there's the real question, the one I'm afraid to ask. What's going to happen when the two of us leave the party?

Chapter Twenty-Five

Byron

Trust isn't easy for me to give. I grip my glass and try to pay attention to what some woman whose name I've already forgotten is saying to me. But all I can do is watch and listen in awe as McKenzie leans back and lets out a peal of laughter. It's a beautiful sound.

But the man making her laugh doesn't realize his life's in jeopardy. I don't do jealousy, but at the moment, the green-eyed monster has me in a choke hold, and my testosterone is spiking to dangerous levels.

I don't think McKenzie's interested in leaving the fundraiser with another guy, but again, trust doesn't come easily to me. My mother — more accurately, the woman who gave birth to me — laughed like that, flirted with men right in front of my father. But there's a difference. My *mother* had gone to those men's beds and her husband was well aware of that fact.

She was a flat-out bitch — a whore to end all whores — and aren't all women the same? Sure, McKenzie's here with me tonight, but only because I promised she could meet wealthy people who will come running through her doors to buy her services. Which services does she want to provide?

I down my champagne and take a step toward her. But I stop myself. For the past few hours I've been by her side. I can spend fifteen minutes without her. Yet why does everything

inside me make me want to walk up to her and stake my claim? She's bad for me, so very bad that I can't seem to care about the way she's messing with my head.

I had an easy out. She no longer works with me at Astor Construction. All I had to do was *not* call her, not invite her to this function . . . go on with my life and forget I ever heard about McKenzie Beaumont. But that's not what I did.

Now here we are. And I'm furious with her and with myself. She hasn't done anything wrong this evening — in fact, she's been a perfect companion, and my peers clearly adore her. So I have no reason to feel this gut-wrenching anger.

But I can't forget her taste or scent. I can't get the sound of her voice out of my head. Everything she is lingers with me, refuses to let me go. I need her, and I'm a fool to think I don't. But for how long?

When she looks up and our eyes meet, her laughter stops and the smile on her lips falls away. Ah, there it is. There's the passion I want to see. I refuse to let her look away from me. I take another step forward, but someone passes in front of me, breaking the connection.

McKenzie's no longer captured by my gaze, but I see the tension in her shoulders. She knows I'm walking toward her, and I enjoy that she's so aware of everything I do. I enjoy everything about this woman. Even if I hate that I do.

When I finally reach her side, I slide my arm around her possessively and look at the man she's chatting with. "I'm sorry I took so long," I say, my lips an inch from her ear, causing a shiver to run down her spine.

“This is Crew Storm,” she tells me. “He’s one of Joseph’s nephews, but I’m sure you already know that. He’s been entertaining me with some interesting work adventures.” McKenzie’s smile returns.

“That’s nice,” I say, not meaning it. “I didn’t know Joseph had nephews with the last name Storm.” Is this good-looking guy some sort of pathological liar?

“It’s a very long story,” Crew says. “We didn’t actually know we were related to Joseph and George until a couple of years ago.”

“How is that possible?” I ask.

“Our father was stolen at birth.” Crew doesn’t even blink as he shares this jaw-dropping information.

“Wait! I think I heard something about this last year, but your family has done remarkably well at keeping the story out of the papers,” I say. The pieces are coming together. I remember how Joseph and his twin brother, George, discovered they were actually from a set of triplets.

“My uncle Joseph’s a great man, and everyone, including me, loves and respects him,” Crew says. “And whenever the Anderson family does something, it’s newsworthy, but there’s been very little said about my father coming into their lives. I don’t expect that to last forever, unfortunately.”

“Joseph did a pretty good preemptive strike with his press release,” I say. “He beat the tabloids to it. That’s why the story temporarily fled my mind.”

“Well, Byron, it’s been a pleasure to speak with your beautiful date tonight, but I see my brother calling, so I’m

going to have to continue this conversation later. It was delightful to meet you, McKenzie.”

Crew leaves, and I turn to McKenzie. I’m more than ready for this party to end so I can take her home, rip her clothes off, and have her writhing beneath me. The night has dragged on long enough, and the last thing I want to see is her conversing with any more single men, or men who appear single because they wear no wedding ring.

“Have you had a good evening?” I ask in a tight voice as I begin leading her toward the ballroom doors.

“Yes, it’s been wonderful,” she says. Then she realizes where we’re going. “Are we leaving so soon? It might be rude.”

“There are so many people here that no one will notice we’ve gone. I’ve already written my check,” I say, still pushing her toward the exit. Before we reach the doors my brother Tyler steps in front of us.

“Where are you two off to in such a hurry?” Tyler asks as he looks at us slyly.

“We’ve done the rounds,” I practically snarl. If we get interrupted one more time, I might do something stupid like throw my *date* over my shoulder and make a dash out of here.

“You can’t possibly be thinking of leaving, not when McKenzie looks so absolutely ravishing,” Tyler says, turning his attention on her and making my gut burn. Tyler leans in and kisses her cheek before letting his eyes glance downward at the modest amount of cleavage she’s showing. I seriously

think of smacking my little brother, something I haven't done in a lot of years.

"Thank you, Tyler," McKenzie says. Her musical laugh comes out again.

Tyler sends her a salacious grin, then turns his focus back to me. "So . . . when did you two start hanging out outside of the office?"

"It's not a big deal," McKenzie says. "Byron wanted to introduce me to his business associates. He's trying to help drum up more business for me."

Before I'm able to contradict her, Tyler gets a wicked gleam in his eyes. I know right away I'm going to have to stomp my little brother for sure before the night's finished.

"Well, McKenzie, if this isn't a date, can I talk you into a dance?" Tyler asks.

"We're together," I say, the *Rs* sounding fierce when I speak.

"Wait . . . I'm confused," Tyler replies, looking far too innocent. "I thought you were only here for business."

"Tyler, why don't you go find an eligible girl? McKenzie's off limits."

McKenzie stiffens beside me, but I don't care. There's no way in hell I'm going to watch my woman waltz off in my brother's arms. She's mine and *only* mine.

Tyler guffaws. "That was far too easy," he says. He pats me on the back, tells McKenzie to have a great evening, and then wanders away.

“What was easy?” McKenzie asks.

“My brother likes to play stupid little games,” I tell her, my temper settling down as I realize what an idiot I’m being.

“He’s very good at them.”

Of course Tyler hadn’t been making a move on McKenzie. We brothers like to poke fun at each other, but we’d never do anything that crossed a line. One of those lines is to not poach on the others’ territory. Female territory. It’s never been done, and it won’t ever be done.

“Okay, then . . .” she says, but she backs off and doesn’t complete her sentence.

I turn and look in her eyes. I want no misinterpretation of what I’m about to say. She sucks in her breath as I pull her against me and bring my mouth to within an inch of hers.

“We’re very much on a date, McKenzie. We’ll leave here and go back to my place, and we’ll wake up in the morning very happy. Very relaxed. Very laid-back. Very *laid*.”

Her face heats and her breathing deepens, but she doesn’t say a word. I wait several heartbeats before I bend and brush my lips against hers. If she’s going to tell me no, it better be now.

The flavor of her lips makes my mouth rejoice, and I pray to anything that will listen that she doesn’t suddenly decide she doesn’t want this. I’m now — more than ever before — ready to leave and take her to bed. The desire I’ve lived with from the moment we first kissed is flowing like molten rock through my veins. It’s been almost a week since I’ve had her,

and my need to possess her is so overwhelming I don't know if I'll make it back home.

“Tell me you're ready to leave, McKenzie.” She licks her lips, making my need for her skyrocket.

“Take me home,” she whispers so quietly I barely hear. But hear I do. I don't waste any more time.

Chapter Twenty-Six

McKenzie

Pleasure and pain, pain and pleasure. They're the same, yet so very different. Byron's lips glide down my throat, circle my peaked nipple, and trail down my body to suck where my throbbing is centered, and I cry out.

The pleasure is to the point of pain — agony and ecstasy. If I don't come, don't have release, I might actually wither, vanish from existence. He makes my body sing as no other man has done for me.

I thought sex was designed solely for men, with no real enjoyment in it for women, but in Byron's arms this is untrue. He's a demanding lover, but he gives much more than he takes. I can't get enough of his touch, his kisses, the power of his lovemaking.

“Let's play, McKenzie.”

“What?” I gasp, not recognizing the sound of my voice.

“I want to play. I want to put your body on display — for me, and *only* for me — and do whatever I want with you,” he says, his lips winding their way back up my body. “Do you trust me?”

Do I trust him? No. I'm well aware he's going to break my heart. But do I think he'll hurt me? No again. I know he won't *physically* hurt me.

“Yes,” I sigh as he sucks my nipple into his lips and scrapes it with his teeth. My back arches into the air. He raises my hands above my head and binds them so I can’t move. Panic fills me and I struggle. “What are you doing?” My eyes shoot open and I look into his passion-filled gaze.

“I’m taking you to a whole new realm of pleasure, McKenzie. Trust me.”

“No, not like this.” I keep wrestling to break free.

“Give me one minute. If you still want your freedom in one minute, I’ll undo you. You can take the reins. You can ride me to your heart’s content. Hell, I won’t object — not for an instant.”

Desire burns in his gaze, but something else too, something I’ve never seen before. If I were a fool, I’d think it’s affection, but I know that can’t possibly be. He desires me, but he doesn’t in any way care about me.

I can’t speak, so I nod, and his mouth descends, his lips ravishing mine as he runs his hands up my sides and cups my breasts, tweaking my nipples with eager fingers, and I cry out again, forgetting about the way he bound my hands.

He licks down my stomach until his mouth is on my core, his tongue moving rhythmically against my quivering flesh. My arousal grows and I nearly explode. As he slides his tongue down my soft folds and slowly draws it up again to the place I want his touch most, he somehow knows each time I’m on the verge of release and backs off.

“Please, please . . .” I wail, but I can’t grab his head, can’t keep him where I so desperately need him to be.

“Not too fast, McKenzie,” he growls, his words vibrating against my thigh.

His mouth moves up my body, and he’s on his knees and rising above me, his beautiful arousal close to my face. “Taste me,” he commands and rubs himself against my mouth.

I eagerly open my lips and circle my tongue around the head of his desire, tasting his muskiness and wanting more. He gives me only an inch, then two, but he refuses to give me all I want. “I’m the one who controls this,” he says, his words strained.

“You want my mouth around you. Admit it, Byron.”

He strokes my breasts while I suck on him as far as he’ll allow. Then he pulls away for only a second, rubs his hands down my body, and suddenly he’s pushing two fingers inside me. He begins driving them in and out at the same speed as he thrusts his erection in my mouth.

This is better, but I want more. I want him buried inside me with his mouth on mine. I want release. I want to make love — yes, *love* — then make love again. This moment can last an eternity and it still won’t be long enough.

Without warning, my body goes up in flames, my core grabbing his fingers and holding them inside as wave after wave of pleasure washes through me. He pulls his hardness from my mouth and his fingers from my heat, and suddenly I’m alone. I nearly fall asleep, but I hear a sound, and instantly my body awakens. I still want more. And I know I’m going to get it.

Byron unties my hands, then rubs my arms from wrist to shoulder and back again. All the while, he's lying with his body pressed up against mine and his manhood pushing against my inner thighs, making me squirm beside him.

He rises up and pulls me from the bed, so both of us are standing. "You're so unbelievably sexy, McKenzie," he murmurs. "I can almost come from nothing more than looking at you." He strokes my naked torso, making my knees nearly collapse.

"I hope you plan to do more than look, Byron. I'm not finished," I say, a throaty groan escaping as he tweaks my nipples with seductive fingers.

"I'll never be finished with you," he tells me, and I wish it were true. I can do this forever.

He turns me around, and I nearly protest, but his arms encircle me and he rubs the undersides of my breasts. As he holds their weight in his palms, my nipples grow painfully hard.

One of his hands drifts up past my throat and slides around to settle on the back of my neck, while the other dips to my stomach and he holds me tightly against him, letting me feel his thickness on the crease of my ass.

He pushes against my back, and I lean forward, arching my *derrière* in the air, his solid erection resting against it. Then he retreats slightly, slipping his arousal down along my swollen folds, and wets his head with my juices. I wiggle against him, wanting him inside me. I'm so ready to feel more of the pleasure only he can give.

“Patience,” he whispers as he bends down and runs his tongue along my spine. He drops to his knees and kisses his way along my backside and down to my thighs before pushing my legs apart and coating his tongue with my heat.

When I’m just about to release again, he stands, and before I can take a single breath, he grips my hips and thrusts forward, forcefully pulling out then pushing back in, deep inside of me.

I explode around him, my legs shaking, my body clenching his massive arousal as I nearly weep with the pleasure of his movements. He’s inside me up to the hilt in this position, and I’m greedy for every single inch of him.

When my pulsations finally die down, he slows his thrusts. For a brief moment I feel both the pain and pleasure of overstimulation. I want to push him out — it’s too much. But I let his hands glide back around my body, and while one finds a breast, the other touches the sensitive bundle of nerves right above where his hardness is penetrating me.

And I feel pleasure building once more. Greed. This is what greed feels like — I want it all . . . and then some. I want him over and over again. With desperation born of greed, I begin pushing back against him to meet his thrusts. The sound of our bodies slapping together heightens my pleasure. He groans loudly, and I reach back to cup his tightened balls and squeeze. He lets out a cry and begins shaking as he pumps convulsively inside me.

With a cry of my own, I shatter again, and our sounds of pleasure blend together as we collapse on the bed. Byron lies on my back, and neither of us breathe evenly. After several

moments, he shifts off me, then climbs up on the bed, pulling me with him, locking his arms around me.

“We’re good together,” he says, his hand in my hair, our bodies sated — for at least the next few minutes. I say nothing. I’m too afraid this moment will end. Yes, we’re good together. But for how long?

Chapter Twenty-Seven

McKenzie

An entire week passes with no word from Byron. Great sex — then nothing.

I've known all along this is how it was going to end, but that knowledge doesn't help. Yet it's ridiculous. Why should I be so upset? It isn't as if I haven't been through worse . . . a lot worse. I've been through hell and back a few times. A guy using me for sex — great sex, mind you — and then throwing me away shouldn't make me feel like I don't know which way is up anymore.

Still, each time I get a text message or the phone rings, my heart skips a beat. Truly absurd. Why does it matter? If he calls or asks to see me, I'll respond with an emphatic *no*. We're done. I refuse to be used by him. By anyone.

At my desk at Seattle Accounting, trying to do my job, I listen to my private cell phone ring and take several deep breaths before answering. I don't care if it's Byron, although I know it isn't . . . and, of course, it's not.

I assure myself I have no reason to care, but I can't get past the ache in my chest each time it isn't him calling. Someday this will stop. Until then, I need to go on living my life, unable to take any more right now. Deciding to call it an early day, I let Zach know I'm leaving, gather my purse and coat, and exit the building.

It's a typical cool autumn day in Seattle and the last thing I want to do at three in the afternoon is return to my empty house. I've loved my home from the moment I walked through its doors once it was all mine. But now it's just another place where I'm alone.

When did being alone become such a burden? I've survived a long time on my own, and I've liked it, but after my fling with Byron — even after the short time it lasted — I'm discovering I don't want to be alone anymore.

I walk two blocks to my favorite gastropub and step through the doorway. The familiar noise, smell, and feel of the place helps soothe my nerves. I move to the back, sit down, and soon place my order. Routine. That's what I need. The more uniform my life is, the more I'll appreciate it. Soon I won't have to think about Byron at all. My life will go back to the way it's always been.

"I hope you don't mind some company, sweet cheeks." I look up with disgust as Nathan plops down across from me.

"I do, actually. What are you doing here?"

"Aww, don't be like that, dollface. I just want to visit with you," he says, his weasel-like smirk in place.

"A smarter man would take a hint and stay the hell away when it's obvious he's not wanted around," I snap.

His eyes narrow, but he leans back and gives me a wide grin. The waitress comes up and Nathan orders a drink before I can tell the woman he won't be staying long.

"I've missed you, McKenzie," he says, reaching across the table and grabbing my hand before I can yank it away.

“I don’t know why you decided to appear in my life again, Nathan. But you were the worst mistake I ever made,” I say. “And that’s saying a lot, since I’ve made a *lot* of mistakes. I don’t want to be anywhere near you. I don’t want you around. If you can’t take my second hint and disappear, I guess the law will help you. Will the third time be the charm?” I tug against his hold, but I’m reluctant to cause a scene in the bistro, and he must be well aware of this.

“I screwed up when we were younger. But we all make mistakes, McKenzie, and I think we can be good together now that we’re both older and wiser.” Bile rises in my throat when he caresses the top of my hand with his thumb.

“Are you listening to yourself? You drugged me and let a man rape me. That’s not screwing up. That’s assault,” I tell him. What a worthless excuse for a human being. I’m thunderstruck at how he can rewrite history.

“Look, I’m nearly broke, and I have nothing and nowhere to go. You’ve done well for yourself . . .” He finally releases my hand and shrugs.

“Yes, I’ve done well, in spite of the way you treated me, of what you did to me, and what more you planned on doing to me. I feel nothing but utter contempt for you — isn’t that obvious? And I don’t want to have anything to do with you ever again. Leave me alone, leave this city if you have any sense, and stay the hell away from me.”

“You’re such a hypocritical bitch. Yeah, I may have drugged you that first time, but you sure snatched up the money quick and spent it on who knows what,” he says, his voice quiet but fierce.

“I did take the money, and I did run, to get as far from you as possible. I don’t care what you do with *your* life, Nathan. I don’t care if you rot in the streets. You’ll never again take advantage of me, and you won’t threaten or blackmail me. Our time is done. If I see you again after today, I’ll simply call the cops. As you damn well know, I’ve done it before.”

I’ve played the victim, and felt like one, for far too long. This man is too weak to be a true threat. And I’ve somehow gained the strength to see that now, and to forget my earlier fear.

I look him in the eyes to show him I won’t back down. I can’t. Men like Nathan need a weak woman to survive; they need easy prey to feast upon. I’m no longer vulnerable. And now that he’s lost his power over me, he’ll cower before me and run away with his tail tucked between his legs.

And as I expected, he slumps against the seat, defeat on his face. “You owe me,” he mutters.

“I owe you *nothing*,” I reply. “Now get out of my sight, once and for all.”

I have nothing but contempt for this man. When he doesn’t immediately move, I pull out my phone. After the incident at my house, I have a restraining order on the man. And he isn’t too out of it yet to have forgotten.

When he sees me scroll down my contact list and start dialing the police he immediately gets up from the table. “Fine, I’m going,” he says, his voice almost a wail.

“And don’t come back.” He nods and walks away.

I lean back after he leaves. My life's far from perfect, but I know this is the last time I'll see him. He's weak and pathetic, and when I show him some real backbone, it's obvious the scumbag will disappear from my life forever.

If only I could show so much backbone with Byron. If only I could tell him I want to be with him, and could make him believe that he wants to be with me for more than a few quickies. But that isn't going to happen. It's over between us, and the sooner I accept this, the quicker I'll be able to heal.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Byron

I watch McKenzie leave her business, and before I can call out to her, she's around the corner. I follow, planning to talk to her, and notice she's entering the small restaurant and bar where I ate with her and Jewell. I'm close behind, but my plans are thwarted when I run into Tyler just inside the door.

“What in the world are you doing *here*?” my brother asks. “This isn't your typical kind of place.”

“I'm meeting someone,” I reply, watching McKenzie seat herself at the same table where I joined her and my sister-in-law.

“Well, have a drink with your little brother first. I haven't seen you in a couple of weeks,” Tyler says.

“I don't have time right now.”

“You don't have time for your little brother?” Tyler raises an eyebrow.

“Let's meet tomorrow,” I tell him, still staring over at McKenzie's table. That's when I see a man approach her and sit. Fury floods me. “On second thought, I have time for a drink,” I say, and take a bar stool next to Tyler. But I keep eyeing McKenzie's table.

“What in the heck are you looking at so intently?” Tyler asks.

Before my brother can focus in on McKenzie, I distract him. “I heard you’re seeing a woman,” I add, and Tyler whips his head around.

“Where did you hear that?”

“I have my sources,” I say. Then fury overpowers me all over again when the man sitting with McKenzie grabs her hand.

I want to go over and stake my claim, tell this man — whoever he is — that McKenzie’s mine, and he’d better keep his filthy hands off of her if he knows what’s good for him. But I turn away and concentrate on my brother instead.

It’s better for me to see this, better for me to accept what she really is. I forced myself not to talk to her last week, tried to tell myself I didn’t need or want her. But then I found myself nearing her office today. Okay, I’ll admit it. I want her. It’s as simple as that . . . if wanting anything, especially a woman, can be called simple.

“Did Blake say something to you?” Tyler asks. This catches my attention.

“What? So you can confide in Blake but not in me?” I’m surprisingly hurt by this revelation.

“No, Byron, it’s not that,” Tyler says. “It’s just that Blake and I have talked some. He’s . . . I don’t know, he’s so in love and easier to talk to and it makes me want something more. Don’t you ever want that?”

My gaze involuntarily turns back to McKenzie, who’s still holding hands with the mystery man, and my heart flares.

“No.”

“I think you’re lying,” Tyler tells me. “I think you want it, but you’re afraid.”

“Don’t feel sorry for me,” I growl. “I can have anything I want. And if it was love I wanted, I’d have it. In a heartbeat.”

“I don’t think so, brother. I think you’re afraid. Afraid because of what our mother was. But not all women are her.”

Before I can reply, someone comes up behind us. “I’m sorry I’m late,” she says, stepping close to Tyler, a clear sign of comfort.

“It’s not a problem,” Tyler replies. “I’ve been talking to my brother.”

“Oh, your brother!” she exclaims, and she turns shockingly bright blue eyes toward me. “I’m Olivia. It’s a pleasure to meet you.” Before I can stop her, she leans in and gives me a hug.

“What ever happened to handshakes?” I ask, and watch a shade of hurt enter her eyes. But she smiles through it.

“Sorry. I’m impulsive,” Olivia tells me.

“We’ll leave you to brood, big brother,” Tyler says. He stands and puts his arm around Olivia, and they walk away.

Apparently I ticked off my little brother. That’s nothing new, but it doesn’t make me proud of myself. The man sitting with McKenzie pushes back his chair, and that’s when I notice the stress on her face. What in the world is going on? Is the man breaking up with her? Things are over with McKenzie and me, but I still need answers. As I watch the man walk out of the bistro, I decide to follow him. The story of my life today.

The guy doesn't make it far. About a block down the street he enters another place and sits. He orders a cheap beer, piquing my curiosity even further. I sit down next to him and order a top shelf whiskey. I notice the guy staring at it like it's gold.

"Hey there," I say in greeting as I down my shot, and the man practically drools.

"Hey," he grumbles as he sips his beer. The fellow doesn't look so good. What is McKenzie doing with a guy like him? He obviously has no money, so what good is he to her?

"Looks like you've had one hell of a day," I say. "Let me buy you a whiskey." I order another for myself and one for the piece of crap next to me.

"Sounds great," the man says, instantly perking up as the bartender sets the glasses in front of us.

I decide I need to stay sober for this conversation, but I want the man drunk. So, while I keep ordering rounds, I quickly dump my own drinks in the potted plant conveniently sitting next to me at the end of the bar. The guy doesn't even notice, he's so focused on his own alcohol fix. After about a quarter of an hour, the man thinks I'm his new best friend.

"My name's Nathan," he slurs.

"Great to meet you, Nathan. What has you in here before five?" I ask as I hold my hand up to order another round.

"Though it's always five o'clock somewhere."

"Women!" the man grouses.

"I hear you there, man. None of them can be trusted," I say to spur him on. The sad thing is that I do feel this way. I can't

trust women, and I haven't been able to for more than twenty-five years. Nathan's eyes light up as he finds himself in the company of another woman-hater.

"Seriously! You try to help out one of those bitches and they turn on you and stab you in the back," the man splutters, getting more worked up with every word he speaks. I get him another drink.

"I've been there. I'd love to put them all in their place," I say, but feel sick even saying the words out loud. No, I don't respect women, but that doesn't mean they should ever be abused. I have Bill to thank for setting me straight on that.

"Yeah, I was just with my bitch of an ex-girlfriend tonight. I helped her out a lot. I gave her the know-how to start a successful career, and how does she thank me? By telling me to get lost, and getting a damn restraining order placed on me," Nathan grumbles.

This isn't what I was expecting, but I don't show a reaction. "Sounds like a typical woman," I say.

"Yeah, typical. Screw that whore!"

"How did you help her?" I casually ask.

"I found her when she was young, real young, and innocent, you know?" Nathan says with demented glee in his eyes.

I instantly tense. I suspect I'm not going to like what's about to come out of this man's mouth. "Tell me," I say, and the man's too wasted to notice I'm no longer as friendly as before.

“Yeah, she was sixteen, all roses and kittens, though her little sister was in some sort of coma or something, and it was messing with her head. All I had to do was play the role of her prince come to save her from a dragon or some shit. She was eating out of my hand within a few weeks,” he says with a wide grin as he thinks back to those days.

“Well, that doesn’t sound like anything new. All women will eat out of your hand if you rescue them,” I say with a scoff. “*Someday my prince will come* and all that sort of crap.” I roll my eyes and make myself sound as if the man’s boring me. That does the trick. Nathan obviously wants to feel important, wants me to see how much power he has. He’s too drunk to realize he’s crossing more than a few lines.

“So I worked for a man who has a special client list. His clients like innocent young things. The guys pay a lot of money for them.”

“Sounds normal,” I say, though I have to prevent myself from gagging.

“McKenzie wanted me, so why not give it up to someone else first for a hell of a lot of money? I knew I could have her over and over after that. I don’t mind sharing my cows, if you know what I mean.”

“Yeah, I know what you mean,” I say. Can I stand to listen to any more of this? I’m not sure.

“Well, the bitch got what she wanted — look, she was sure hot to trot — and then acted horrified when it was done, like she didn’t secretly want it. I know she did. She snapped up the money, my share as well as hers, and went running so fast I didn’t have a shot at catching her.”

“How did you find her again?” I ask through clenched teeth as I motion for the bartender to give the man another drink. I don’t want Nathan to have a chance to sober up now.

“I heard rumors about her having her own business,” Nathan says. “I taught her how to do tricks and then she gives herself a nice little life. Then the little slut acts offended when I come back, acts like she doesn’t want me here. She doesn’t care that I have nothing. All she cares about is herself.” His shoulders sag and he leans against the bar, too drunk to hold himself up.

“That sounds tragic,” I say. I realize I’m not going to get anything else out of this piece of shit. What I really want to do is put my hands around Nathan’s throat and squeeze until the guy’s eyes bulge from his bloated head.

“Yeah, I didn’t even get to taste her goodies, if you know what I mean, and even now they’re some fine goodies. Shit! I made her, so I deserve a piece of her ass.”

I’m done with the conversation. Without another word, I pay the large tab and walk away from the bar. I need to talk to someone I trust, and the list of people is incredibly short. The man’s lucky I don’t leave him lying in a puddle of his own blood. It takes all the restraint I can muster to walk away. But I do what needs to be done. I’m not weak like my father. It takes strength to do what’s right even if in the moment it feels wrong.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Byron

I jump into my car and immediately head toward Bill's house. I need to have some of these cobwebs cleared from my brain. I'm more confused than ever, and there's only one person I truly trust on this earth, someone who has known my brothers and me and my parents and grandparents. This man is my real father, though not my biological one.

As I pull up to the house, I smile. It's modest, and I spent many long and lazy afternoons here as a child. When McKenzie told me I don't know what it's like to live in a small house, I could've corrected her, but I chose not to. There had been no reason for her to know that for a few years, at least, I'd had a somewhat normal childhood in this very home. A home filled with love.

Bill and his wonderful wife, Vivian, made us do chores, taught us in the best way to have a good work ethic. If truth were told, I still enjoy working up a sweat. Hard work is good for both the body and mind. I was still a kid when I learned that from the old guy.

It doesn't take Bill long to answer the door and invite me in. "Hmm. Two visits in a short period, and you're still sporting the same expression I saw on your face the last time. What in the world is going on, my boy?"

"I just . . . I need to talk to you."

“Well, let me rustle up some refreshments. This looks like it could take some time,” Bill says.

Before I can say anything, Bill motions for me to sit at the kitchen table while he searches the fridge.

“I want to know why my dad did it. I want to know why he stayed with my mother when she was destroying his life.”

Bill briefly pauses while the refrigerator door stands open. He finally pulls out a pitcher of iced tea, plus a tub of artichoke dip, sets them on the table, and grabs two glasses and a bag of chips.

The old man sits and looks at me for several long seconds. “Are you sure you should bring up the past and dwell on it? It’s time you start looking forward instead of backward,” he finally says before pouring our tea and leaning back. “I’ve been told it’s no damn good to drive when you’re too busy staring in the rearview mirror.”

“I need to know why he did it. Did my mother hold something over him? Why else would he stay with her when she was so awful and despised him?”

“Even though your mother was a coldhearted bitch, she didn’t start out that way. She turned into one.” Bill looks into his glass of tea for a minute and reflects on things. “I think life shapes all of us into the person we become — you’re a victim of your circumstances to some degree. But you choose how you treat others,” he says with a sigh. “Your father certainly wasn’t a saint, Byron. It’s something I haven’t wanted to tell you, but he made several wrong turns himself. But is that important? I don’t see how any of this can help.”

“My father was beaten down, and she was the one who did it,” I insist. “Of course he wasn’t a saint. He allowed it. He should’ve fought her.”

“He’s the one who started it,” Bill says with a long sigh.

“Wait! What are you talking about? Start from the beginning, dammit.”

“Don’t use that tone on me, young man,” Bill warns.

“I’m sorry, Bill. But please, tell me the truth.”

“Your mom and dad met when they were young. She had high aspirations — she wanted a career, a family, and a lot of money. Nothing wrong with that. But then your father walked in the door. The man you knew wasn’t anything like the young man he used to be. He was full of life, full of confidence — a lot like Tyler, actually. He was good-looking and knew it, and he was the life of the party, with no chip on his shoulder like the ones you and Blake have carried for so long.”

“That’s not fair. I have reasons for this particular chip,” I say in self-defense.

“I’m not saying you don’t. I’m just saying your father was a cocky, fun-loving son of a bitch at one time, and he enjoyed the ladies — lots and lots of ladies.” Bill snorts in disgust.

I prod him. “But then he met my mother . . .”

“He met her at a party,” Bill says. “She was there with friends, a chance meeting, but your father was immediately attracted to her. When he wasn’t able to . . . um . . . bed her that first night, his fascination grew. He chased her. She knew about your father and his reputation. Girls talk, and she wanted

nothing to do with him. That made your father go after her that much harder.”

“I honestly can’t picture my father as a ‘lady-killer.’ He was such a weak guy when I was a child.”

“You reap what you sow, boy.” Bill takes a big gulp of his tea before continuing. “It took him months, and by the time your mother agreed to go out with him, he was completely infatuated with her.”

“And?” I ask when Bill seems to be lost in an unhappy reverie.

“They dated for a few months, and she eventually fell head over heels in love. You see, at one time she did believe in love and romance and what a lot of people call happily-ever-afters. That ended about a year into their marriage,” Bill says with a grim shake of his head.

“Why?”

“Because as soon as your father had her toeing the line, he went back to his wild ways. Of course, he kept it hidden from her until after the wedding. He needed to have a beautiful wife to produce perfect children, but he didn’t want to give up his extracurricular activities. Almost as soon as they returned from the honeymoon, she found him with her best friend in her own bed.”

“Ouch. That had to hurt.” I say dryly, with zero sympathy for what my mother might’ve felt at the time.

“Yeah, it did, son. And your dad didn’t promise to never do it again. He said if she shut up and gave him the kids he wanted, he’d give her the lifestyle she wanted. She was

already pregnant with Blake and knew leaving him would mean a life of poverty and hardship while she tried to raise the child. You see, your father assured her he'd disown the kid and leave her with nothing. She'd signed an airtight prenup."

"How do you know all of this?" I ask.

"I've been around a long time, Byron," Bill says.

"Go on."

"After she had Blake, she changed. Her strength — if you want to call it that — increased, and she gave back to your father what he'd been giving to her. She slept with every guy she could find, and she grew colder. She pulled away from you and Blake. And . . ." Bill stops himself.

"What?" I demand.

"There's more to it with Tyler, but I won't share his secrets," Bill says with another shake of his head.

"I need to know!"

Bill ignores this, but continues his story. "Your father had a minor stroke. Maybe drugs, maybe fate. I don't know. But it changed him. He was no longer such a devil-may-care guy. He'd come face-to-face with his own mortality, and he begged your mother to forgive him. It was her turn to tell him to shut up and do what he was told. That's the man you knew, the man who appeared to be so beaten down."

"Whipped," I say.

"In a way he was, but they each did their part to kill their love for each other. Now I'm not saying what your mother did in the end was acceptable. Far from it. I still can't figure that

one out. I'm just saying when two people set out to destroy each other, there's going to be a very unhappy ending."

I sit back in stunned silence. This sort of thing doesn't happen in real life, does it? How can the two people who'd given me life be so monstrous? How can I ever trust in the idea of love? Hell, how can I trust myself? I don't think I can.

"I know what you're thinking, and you're wrong," Bill says in a very fatherly voice. "Just because your parents made mistakes doesn't mean that everyone is evil — women or men. If you have a chance at love, grab it and don't make the mistakes your parents made."

"It doesn't sound like anyone knows what love is," I slowly say.

"I loved my wife completely, from the first day I met her until the day she died. No. That's not even true. I still love her, and it's been a few years since I was able to hold Vivian in my arms. She was my everything. And because I had her, my life was wonderful."

"You're certainly the exception to the rule, Bill; you're the only person I know who's had a good marriage."

"Your brother has a very good marriage, and soon he'll have a baby," Bill points out. "A second one, if you want to be technical about it."

"Maybe it simply looks good on the outside."

"And maybe you should have a little more faith. Have you ever seen Blake look happier?"

"No, but what guarantee do you have that it will last forever?"

“We’ve finally come to the reason you’re here,” Bill says with a smile. “And I hate to tell you this, Byron, but there are *no* guarantees in life. I couldn’t have said without a doubt that my beautiful wife would love me forever, but she chose to do just that, as I chose to cherish her and love her beyond the grave. When you marry someone — hell, when you love someone — you’re taking a leap of faith. You’re giving something of yourself, and to truly love someone, you can’t expect anything back from them, not even their love.”

“That makes no sense,” I say. I stand up from the table and walk to the window, dragging my hands through my hair. “I need it to make sense. I need it to be black and white.”

“Love isn’t black and white,” Bill tells me. “It’s multicolored, and multidimensional, and it’ll take you on the best ride of your life. But you can’t begin the adventure until you give your heart away.”

Bill becomes silent, and, with my heart aching, I look out the window at the empty field behind my mentor’s house. There’s so much information passing through my brain I don’t know what to do with it.

“You’re in love with McKenzie, aren’t you?” Bill asks.

I shake my head. No. I won’t say that, but I feel a strange sensation in my throat and know I’m in denial. Somehow, against my will, I’ve fallen for this woman and have given her a piece of myself. I’ve given her a piece of my heart. And what really frightens me is I don’t know if I want it back.

I sat there with her scum of an ex-boyfriend and heard what the man said, and without a doubt I know that Nathan’s a liar. The man put her through hell and then some, and this means

there's no way McKenzie can be the monster I thought she was. She's strong and kind, despite some pretty awful things that have happened to her. I don't want to hurt her any more.

"I need to go," I say, overwhelmed with what I've heard and the way I'm feeling.

"I understand. But if you take anything with you today, Byron, take this — if you care anything at all for this woman but can't let go of the demons of your past, you have to let her go, set her free. Don't punish her for mistakes she hasn't made. She's not your mother, and you aren't your father. You're better than that. To love someone is to truly want the best for them — even if that means a painful goodbye."

"I don't know what I'm going to do," I say.

"You'll make the right choice," Bill says. "It's who you are."

As I drive away from Bill's house, I realize the man who stepped in and raised me and my brothers has a lot more faith in me than I have in myself. But I don't know if I can be that man Bill sees. Not even for McKenzie.

Chapter Thirty

Byron

“What are you doing here?”

That’s the question of the hour. I go straight from Bill’s house to McKenzie’s front door, and now I’m standing here without the foggiest idea of what to say to her.

“Byron?” Her blank expression changes to one of concern, and this snaps me out of my trance.

“I want to talk,” I say. “May I come in?”

She looks at me with suspicion for a few tense moments before speaking. “I don’t think we have anything else to talk about, Byron.”

“I met Nathan tonight.” These four short words zap all of the color from her face, and she stares at me in shock.

“I don’t understand . . .” Her voice has grown hoarse.

“I saw you with him at the restaurant we went to with Jewell a little while back. I followed him after he left,” I admit.

“Why would you do that?” she asks, clutching the sleeves of the sweater she’s wearing.

“I was jealous,” I admit.

“Why in the world would you be jealous? You . . . you . . .” She’s momentarily loses her ability to say anything.

“Please tell me what happened when you first met him,” I beg.

She opens the door wider, allowing me in. I don’t question her and follow her into the living room, where she walks to a window and stares into the darkness.

“I told you about the crash, the one that put my sister in a coma when she was fourteen. And you know that my mother blamed me for it . . .” When she pauses, I make sure not to move a muscle for fear she’ll clam up. But she soon starts speaking again.

“After years of my mother’s bitter rages, drinking, and constant blame, I had enough. I felt guilty about being angry at her, at my sister, at the world, but I had to get away. I got a job at a small café, rented a room near the local college, and thought I was doing pretty dang well for myself. I visited my sister occasionally, but every time I did, my anger returned. My life was hell after the wreck, and there were so many times I wished I were the one in that bed, the one oblivious to it all. But those thoughts gave me even more reason to feel guilty, because I at least had a life to live, while she didn’t. No matter what I did, I was wracked with guilt back then . . .”

“You were just a kid, McKenzie.”

“Don’t, Byron. I’ve heard that a million times. If you don’t let me speak, I’m not going to be able to get through this.”

“I’m sorry. Please go on.” I want to reach for her, but I know she’s fragile and I want her to talk this out.

“When I turned sixteen, I met what I thought was a sophisticated, beautiful man. He was fifteen years older than

me, but that was all part of the appeal. He had this smile that seemed to light up an entire room, and he came into the diner for months, flirting with me, and *only* me, even though there were far prettier waitresses working there.”

“I find that hard to believe,” I mumble before shutting up again.

“Even though I was young, I’d been living with trauma for a lot of years. Impressionable years, or so they call them. I never dated — hell, I’d never even kissed a guy at that point. I was shy and didn’t know what to think about all of the attention I was getting from this man. So when he asked me out on a date, I simply nodded yes. I was so overwhelmed it was the best I could manage.”

I feel thwarted when McKenzie closes her eyes. When her eyes are open, I’m able to read her expressions, and I don’t want to be shut out right now.

She continues before I need to prompt her. “We went on several dates over the next two months, and I fell irrevocably in love with the man. Well, *irrevocably* isn’t quite the word, but that’s the way it seemed so long ago. He always walked me to my door, kissed me goodnight, and never tried to push it further than that. We talked about sex, and at first I was terrified to even consider it, but the kisses grew a little longer, and I began feeling things inside I never thought I’d feel — sensations I thought only existed in romance novels. So I told him I wanted to try . . . you know . . . soon.” The words seem to burn her as soon as she speaks them.

“One night he took me to his house, or what I *thought* was his house. It was on the outskirts of town, big, expensive —

the kind of place where real artwork hangs on the walls, not just prints,” she says with a bitter laugh.

“McKenzie . . .” I’m beginning to hate myself for forcing her to take this stroll down the ugliest possible memory lane.

She continues anyway. “We sat down and he poured some wine, very good wine . . .” Another pause. This time there are tears in her eyes when she looks at me. “Then everything went black. When I woke up, I was in a big, horrible bed, lying . . . naked beside a man I didn’t know. My entire body hurt, and I was bruised all over. I felt blood under me on the sheets. I was terrified. I slipped from the bed, found my clothes on the floor, threw them on, then ran from the house. Nathan was waiting outside in his car.

“It turns out Nathan was really a pimp, a guy who made a lot of money at his job. He found inexperienced young women — of course, they had to be virgins — and he wined and dined them, made sure they were a perfect fit, a girl without ties, a girl who no one would ever believe if she cried rape, and matched them with a john who’d pay a lot of money for a night of . . . pleasure.”

“Crap, McKenzie . . .”

“The man I was dating wasn’t really dating me,” she says. “He was prepping me to be his next call girl. When it was the first time, when he had a virgin ready to offer, he got paid a lot of money. After that first time, some of the girls stayed on with him. He paid them more than they made in their pathetic restaurant jobs, and his clients were . . . how do I put this?” She takes a deep breath. “Men with particular tastes, but men who pay a lot for their twisted lifestyles.

“I took the blood money I earned. I *earned* it. And I ran far away. It took me a couple of years, but I saved every dime, made a few very good investments, and vowed to move on with my life, to not let that one moment define me for all time. The man who raped me got away with it. Nathan Guilder got away with it. I vowed to never let another man in my life get away with anything like it again.”

“Sadly, nobody can stop it from happening,” I say with a shake of my head.

“You’re right. I can’t stop it, but I’ve saved other girls.”

“I . . . I . . .” I’m at a loss for words.

“It’s fine, Byron. I get it. You assume I’m like your mother, out to get what I can get. I didn’t exactly make it hard to change your mind when I climbed into your bed,” she says, a humorless laugh escaping her lips.

“You were fourteen when you lost your sister, your mother, and your father. I’m sorry I’ve been harsh with you,” I tell her.

“I needed to contribute to my sister’s care and it wasn’t cheap, so I’ve worked twice as hard as others, but I don’t resent it,” she says with another sigh.

“Why didn’t you let her go when your parents were gone? She’d been in a coma for nearly ten years.”

She looks at me like I’m a monster. “You never give up on the people you love,” she says.

“No, but you can also forgive yourself for mistakes you made as a kid, and for making a mistake with this Nathan guy.”

“That’s easy for you to say, Byron. You were born into wealth and privilege. Life hasn’t continually kicked you down every time you tried to stand up again. In this world, you’re either a winner or a loser. After being attacked, I was determined to never be taken again, to never show weakness again, and especially to never be fooled again.”

“Everything isn’t always as it appears,” I say.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” she asks.

“We all have our pasts, and we all have secrets.”

“I’m sure your secrets are about the maid forgetting to pack your lunch,” she says, instantly putting her armor back in place.

I look at her, sadness filling me. “What made you leave your job and strike out on your own?”

“I had the escort service. I thought if I could teach women to appreciate themselves and to use what they have without being taken advantage of, they’d be better off. I was wrong. It was killing me.” She let’s out another long suffering sigh.

“Then my sister died. Pneumonia. I no longer needed to make as much money, and I wanted to finally live *my* dreams.”

“I’m sorry . . .”

“Don’t. I can’t stand generic apologies or words that mean nothing. They’re spoken so freely, so easily, and they’re never meant.” She looks away again, and it’s time for me to leave. I need to think. I turn and begin walking toward the door. She follows.

“Why did you come? Why did you ask this of me to just turn and walk away? Is it to prove that I’m worthless in your

eyes?” I can sense she’s close to falling apart. I should go to her, but I have to get my head clear. This is all too much.

I turn back around. “I’m glad you told me, McKenzie. Sometimes you have to trust another person.” How ironic these words are coming from *my* lips. What a crock. I’ve trusted no one, and I haven’t for years.

“It’s fine, Byron. Go ahead and leave.”

Pain slices through me at her words, but that’s what I’m doing, isn’t it? I’m leaving. It’s what I do best. Without another word, I slip from her house. I’ve made choices my entire life that affect me — and not in a good way. What’s one more bad choice?

Chapter Thirty-One

McKenzie

I wait until I'm sure Byron's gone before I break down. Everything inside of me hurts. I've warned myself not to fall for this man, but I've done it anyway. Why? Will I ever learn? How can I care about someone who's so cold? I'll admit he's shown me a few glimpses of the real person beneath all the armor. But it doesn't make him honorable, doesn't make him worthy of my love. Maybe that's it. Maybe I'll never feel worthy of love, so it's easier to love a man who can never love me.

I have to remember this is simply one more roadblock on a long stretch of road littered with them. It won't hold me back forever. I simply took another detour. By the time I go to bed, no more tears fall, but I don't get much sleep. My life will never be simple. But who wants a boring life? It's better to have ups and downs than to simply exist. I'll get past this. I have to stay strong. And I will.

When I walk into my office I find Byron instead of Zach . . . and I'm not in the most receptive of moods.

"How did you get in here?" is my only question.

"Zach let me in and then split. I think the man might have a crush on you," he says as if he finds it amusing.

"Is it such a shock that a man might find me attractive?" I ask as I stand three feet from him. Enough is enough. We can

have it out and then be done with each other. I can't keep getting rejected by this man.

"I'd find it more shocking if men *weren't* attracted to you," he offers with a chuckle.

"I don't find you funny, Byron. Why don't you tell me whatever it is you need to say and then get the hell out of my office and out of my life?" My bravery is going to last for only so long before I snap.

"Fine. Just like that?" he asks. "You want me to blurt it out?"

"I don't say what I don't mean," I nearly snarl.

"I'm in love with you, McKenzie Beaumont. I can't sleep anymore without you next to me. I can't get you out of my thoughts. I can't function like a normal human being. I've. Fallen. In. Love. With. You."

This makes no sense. Although I think he's just told me he's in love with me, he's almost yelling. The words and the tone don't match.

"In love with me?" I finally ask, my voice low, as if afraid of spooking him. "Did you say that you're in love with me?" Is this real? Or do I want it so much I'm dreaming it up?

"Before you retreat, or run away, or whatever it is you do when you're getting too close to someone, let me finish. We both spook easily. We both have trust issues. But I know you care about me. I see it in your eyes, and I feel it in your touch, in the way you make love to me. I know we have something, and I think we'd be fools to throw it away because we're scared. I've been a fool and I'm sorrier than words can ever

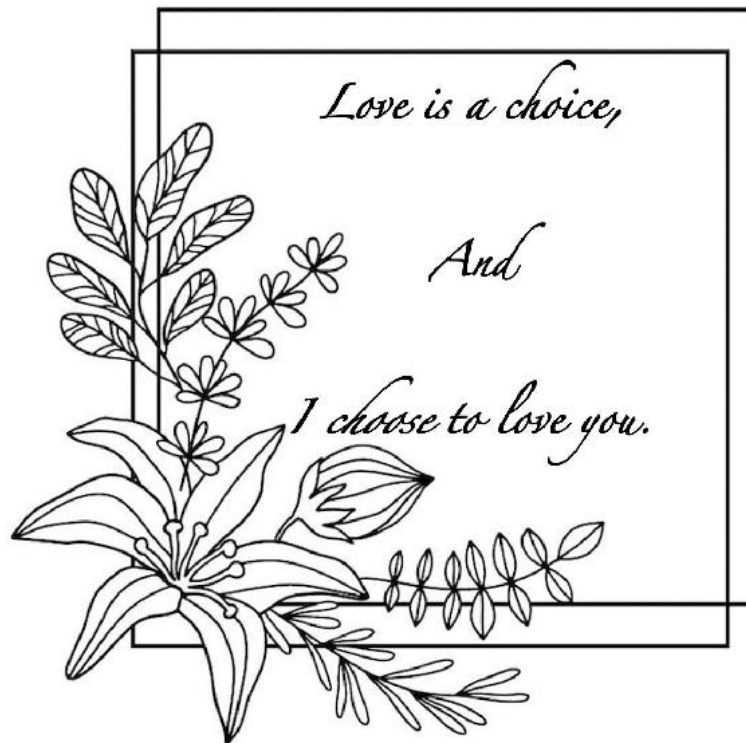
express, but if you give me a real chance I won't pretend to be perfect, but I swear I'll fix my bad habits, and I'll love you for the rest of our lives."

He begins pacing, not looking at me as he delivers his speech. I don't know what to say, how to respond. Not that he's giving me a chance to talk. Every time I open my mouth to say something, he starts speaking again.

"I know I can be blunt, that I come across as cold. But I'm different when I'm with you. I want to laugh, to smile, I want to lie beneath the stars and stay there until we've counted them all. I want to give you the stars . . ." He runs his hands through his hair — he's been doing that a lot. Then he spins back around and moves toward me, determination in his every step.

"Byron . . ." I start to reply, but he reaches me and cups my face.

"I won't be my father. I won't cheat or lie, or abuse. I won't be like my mother. They were terrible to each other, and they turned something that's supposed to be beautiful into hate and ugliness. I thought if I felt love, I'd behave like they did. But love is a choice, and I *choose* to love you."



Tears choke me as I look into his eyes and see the love shining in them. It's the first time I've seen such strong emotion on his handsome face, and I can't speak past the lump in my throat, so instead of trying to talk, I wrap my arms around him, take his lips with mine, and try to show him how I feel.

He pulls me in even closer, folding me into his arms and deepening the kiss for several long heartbeats before he draws back, a mixture of passion and adoration burning in his gaze. It's more than I hoped to see.

"Don't distract me, woman," he says, though he doesn't release his grasp on me. "I need to know how you feel."

"I love you too," I simply tell him. There's no point in playing games or pretending this isn't what I want. "I never thought I could love anyone. I thought I'd locked that part of me away from the world, and then you stormed in and messed up my so-called perfect life." My voice breaks.

“I don’t want to mess up your life. That’s not how this is supposed to go, McKenzie.”

“Don’t worry, Byron. My life has been terrible. I didn’t see it until I met you. I didn’t realize I was living in a world of beige when right around the corner were exquisite colors waiting for me to discover. You make me feel emotions I’ve never felt before — good emotions — and I don’t want to let that go. I don’t want to live my life in fear, or even worse, live my life without any emotion at all.”

“Then we’ll grow together, McKenzie. We’ll learn how to trust and how to love to the fullest,” he promises. “And we’ll do it in each other’s arms.”

“I’ll take you up on that, Byron.”

I gasp when he lifts me into his arms. “What are you doing?”

“We’re going to celebrate somewhere a lot more private than this,” he says, and he starts carrying me down the hall and out of the building.

“Mmm, then hurry . . .”

I kiss his neck as he rushes to his car. After putting me down inside, he circles around quickly, jumps into the driver’s seat, and hauls me back into his arms.

“As long as you never stop doing that, Byron, I’ll be a happy woman.”

“I can only promise forever,” he tells me. And forever is all I’ll ask for.

Part Two

Tyler and Olivia

Prologue

Olivia

Age 10

“We’ll be best friends forever, right?”

Tyler Astor might only be thirteen, but I’ll always remember his silly grin. He gives it to me now, as his eyes meet my ten-year-old gaze, and he raises his eyebrow.

“I can’t be best friends with a girl,” he tells me with his youthful attempt at a scoff.

“You already promised we’re best friends.”

He gives a shrug. “Okay, we’re best friends, but that’s *only* between us. If my brothers find out I’m best friends with a girl, they’ll clobber me,” he says as he kicks a hard clump of dirt in front of him. “Even worse, they’ll tease me forever.”

“That’s not fair, Tyler.”

“Life’s not fair. Get used to it.”

“Why are you being so mean to me right now?” Tears fill my young eyes.

“I’m older now. I’m a *teenager*, and my brothers say girls are for one thing only.”

“Huh? What thing is that?”

He looks away from me as if he’s not quite sure how to answer this question. “You know, the kissing and touching kind of thing,” he says, looking as unsure as I feel.

“Why do girls and boys have to do that?” I ask. “It’s stupid and . . . icky.”

“It’s just what they do, Vivi. See, that’s why we can’t be best friends. You’re too much of a baby.”

“I can kiss!” I insist. “I’m not a baby.”

“Prove it,” he says, and steps closer. What in the world is happening right now? We’re supposed to be climbing trees, not talking about gross stuff.

My heart’s racing a million miles a minute as my best friend, the boy I’ve been inseparable from for five years, is now only a couple of inches away from me and talking about kissing.

“Just do it,” I say. I’m more afraid of losing him than of doing something icky like kissing.

He leans forward and presses his closed lips against mine. Neither of us move; we stand here with our lips touching, our hands at our sides. We don’t have a clue what’s supposed to come next.

He finally takes a step back, and I open my eyes. That wasn’t so bad after all. In fact, I can do it again. He’s my bestie after all. We should do everything together . . . even kissing.

“See, we can still be friends,” I tell him with a bright smile.

“That *was* stupid, Vivi. You don’t know how to kiss,” he says with a look I’ve never seen on his face before.

The tears that have been threatening since his mean comment earlier now spill over. “You don’t either, Tyler,” I say

with an infuriating snuffle.

“Why don’t you grow up before you come around again, little girl?” Who is this boy who’s been my best friend forever? I don’t like him very much right now. I don’t like the way he’s talking to me.

“Fine. I don’t want to be your best friend anyway. I don’t even want to be regular friends. You’re a big jerk,” I tell him before turning and stumbling several steps away. “And *you’re* the one who needs to grow up.” I take off running, refusing to analyze whether I was shouting or wailing when I said these last few words.

“Good riddance,” Tyler calls after me, making my heart break even more.

Boys are nothing but trouble. Unfortunately I’m going to learn this lesson over and over and over and over again as the years continue. If only I could stay this young and innocent forever. This is my first heartbreak ...

Chapter One

Olivia

Age 19

My boss isn't going to be happy with me. I'm about to lose my job, but I have a point to prove: I'm not a piece of meat. I have a respectable quantity of gray matter in my head.

Yes, I need money, but after working at this gentleman's club for the past six months, I realize the tips aren't worth the harassment. I'll make a lot less at any other waitressing job, but my pride's worth more than the few extra dollars I can make by exposing my assets in a uniform that's far too tight and skimpy.

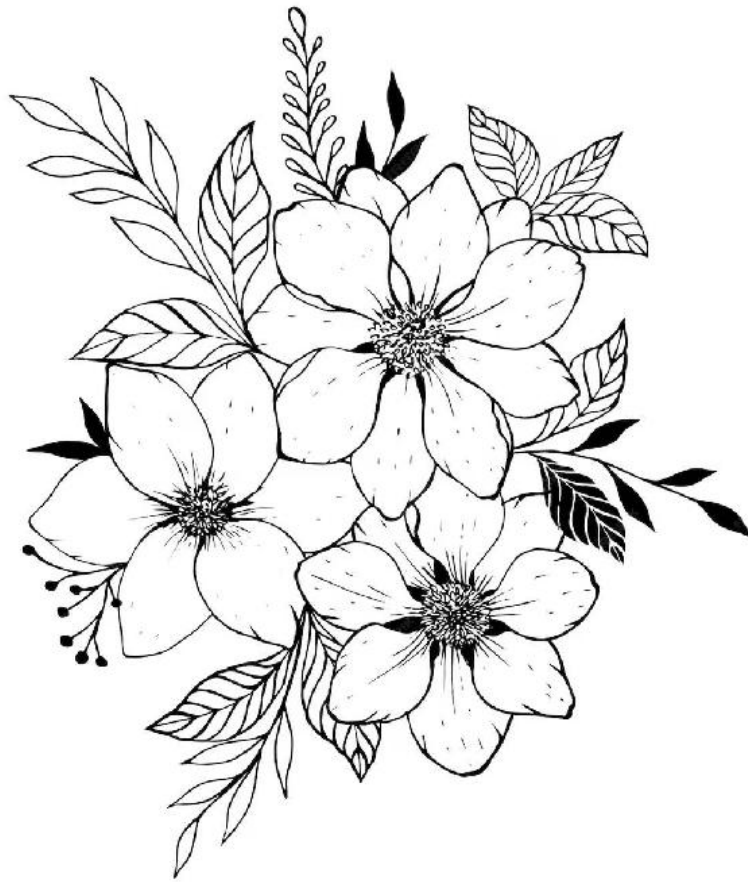
Men don't normally look at me, and they certainly don't lust after me — not unless I'm dressed the way the club wants me to dress. I'm taller than the average woman, standing at five foot eight, and even at age nineteen, I haven't grown into my body. Sadly, at least in my humble opinion, I appear more gangly than womanly. The tomboy curse has apparently pursued me long past puberty.

Looking in the mirror, I push back my long dark hair before gathering it up into a severe knot on top of my head. I actually like my hair, one of the few things I do like about myself.

I know I'm much too thin, but that's genetics. There's nothing I can do about it unless I want to mainline cinnamon rolls. My hips are too narrow, my breasts too small. If it wasn't

for padded bras, the gentleman's club most likely wouldn't have hired me in the first place.

My mother always told me I'm a flower, or rather a beautiful flower bud that someday will bloom. I'm still waiting for this to happen. The only time men give me attention is when I'm dolled up at the club. And that isn't the kind of attention I want.



Why don't I quit this job? Well, I'm going to. But not before making a point. Coming onto the floor looking less than sexy will infuriate my boss. Good. He deserves it. I'm ready. Looking in the mirror at an outfit that's too large, makeup that's practically nonexistent, and a hairstyle that's intentionally disastrous, I'll be lucky to make it past the back room without a confrontation.

After taking a deep breath, I step through the door, looking straight ahead, ignoring the shocked gasps from my co-workers. They're most likely pleased by my appearance . . . more tips for them. But at least tonight my ass won't be grabbed, and the *gentlemen* won't solicit me like I'm their personal call girl. Some of these women will go home with the men. They'll wind up with jewelry, cars, and housing . . . if they play it right. I'm not that girl.

Though I'll never be a trophy wife, the kind of woman a captain of industry wants on his arm, I also know I'll eventually marry a kind man — a regular guy — and have the life I've dreamed of having since childhood. A life completely unlike what I saw at home.

I didn't have a bad life after my father walked out on my mother and me. And my mom was never bitter, never told me not to find my own love. She warned me that the world is full of frogs who can't be transformed by kisses, and I should never settle for someone slimy. If they're all hands, it's because they want one thing. They're sticky, but with no sticking power.

When a group of men fill the club with laughter as they walk in, I glance in their direction. That's when my heart stops beating for a moment. Before it speeds up double time.

Tyler Astor.

If I hadn't decided to come to work tonight, but simply quit as I should have, I wouldn't be going through the heartbreak of seeing my first love. My heart thuds as I look his way. I was only ten when he broke my heart the first time.

I followed him for years through news and entertainment media. Like a kicked puppy, dammit. Why? Because he was my first love, my first best friend, the only person to this day I ever fully opened up with — well, besides my mother and Piper, who have now taken Tyler’s place in the best-friend category. I instantly bonded with Piper two years ago, our freshman year at university.

“That’s your table,” one of the waitresses says before patting me on the shoulder. “Good luck.”

“You take it,” I reply.

“Are you sure? That’s the youngest Astor brother, and that’s the son of a junior senator. You know those tips are going to be big,” my co-worker, Sara, says with hungry eyes. “Humongous.”

“I’m positive,” I tell her. “I think I’ve made a mistake coming in tonight.”

“Yeah, what’s up with the wardrobe and hair choice?” Sara asks.

“Trying to prove a point — that I’m not a piece of meat.”

“Honey, to the men who come in here, that’s exactly what we are,” Sara says with a laugh. “And since they pay for my house and all of the little baubles I’m so fond of, I really don’t give a damn.”

“That’s the difference between us,” I murmur. “Nothing’s worth this degradation.”

“Good luck out in the real world, sweetie,” Sara says before skipping over to the table and taking the men’s orders, giggling and jiggling all the way.

“My office, now!” My manager has spotted me, and he snarls these words in my ear before he moves to the other side of the room.

Keeping my head down, I begin slinking through the room, but I make a fatal mistake. I pass by the group of guys I’m trying to avoid. And they’re already drunk and rowdy.

“Why are you dressed down like this, darling?” One of the men grabs my arm and holds on. “I’ve seen you looking so much hotter. How are we supposed to check out the merchandise when you’re hiding your best stuff under mountains of material?”

Another speaks up. “I want to see your nice set of tatas, babe.”

The rest of the men cackle when the guy who grabbed my arm tugs and makes me fall into his lap. I’m mortified as I struggle to break free. When my eyes connect with Tyler’s for the first time in years, what I see breaks my heart all over again. And his words hit me even harder.

“This place has a much better selection of women to flirt with, Tom,” Tyler says. “Why don’t you let this one go so we can have some fun?” My former friend leans back and smiles at me.

When the group of men guffaw again, my humiliation’s complete. I never should’ve come back to this place, never should’ve put myself through this. Although I have a good poker face, self-confidence has never been one of my strong suits, and I’ve just lost all of my cards.

Yes, I've been trying to prove a silly point — that I'm not a piece of meat — but I also don't need to be discarded like a lame horse. Tom releases me, then slaps my ass as I struggle off his lap.

"I told you to come to my office!" My manager's back. He's less than three feet from the men at the table, who are watching my further humiliation.

"I got mauled on my way," I tell him.

"Are you insulting our guests?" he asks far too loudly.

"I was the one who was insulted."

"Your position here is terminated. I want you out of my club immediately."

Laughter erupts from the group of men who humiliated me. This night can't possibly get any worse. I walk straight to the back room. The game I began is over. I just want to leave.

Throwing a thick coat over my clothes, I wipe away the tear streaking down my face, grab my purse, and slip out the back door. I don't make it two feet before I hear a whistle.

"Where are you off to in such a hurry, babe?"

A tremble runs through me when I hear his voice again. I'm grateful to be in the shadows as I turn to face Tyler Astor for the second time this evening.

"I'm not your babe," I grate out.

"Wait! Don't go. I need to talk to you." Does he know who I am?

The alley's dark, making it impossible to read Tyler's expression. I need to turn and walk away — hell, stomp away

is more like it — but for some reason, I wait. I want to know what game he’s playing. I’m more of a fool than I’ve given myself credit for.

“What do you want?”

“I was an asshole in there. I only did it so my friend would quit pawing at you like that. I could see it was making you uncomfortable.”

“Why should you care? If you have friends like that it says a lot about your own character.”

“Because we’re at a gentleman’s club. We should act as such.” I’m too stumped to know how to deal with this remark.

“You’re drunk,” I tell him. “I suggest you go home.” I turn away.

“Wait!”

I stop again. What is wrong with me? “I really want to get out of here. I just got manhandled by your friend, dissed, and then fired, though to be fair I was aiming to get fired, but not so publicly. I’ve had better days.” He’s suddenly in front of me. I take a step back, and my heart’s hammering in my chest. He’s far too close.

“Come have a drink with me. You can talk about it. I’m a good listener.”

He lifts his hand and trails his fingers down the side of my cheek, making a shiver race through my body. I’m not a little girl any longer, and this isn’t a childhood crush.

“There’s no way I’m going back into that place,” I say. My voice and body are trembling with disgust.

“I have my car right here. Come sit with me and have a drink.”

His voice is mesmerizing, and without much thought I find my hand in his as he leads me to the car. It isn't until we climb into the backseat — it isn't a car, dammit; it's a limo — and I have a glass with amber liquor in my hand that I realize what I'm doing.

“What about your friends?”

“They're going to be busy for a while. They won't notice I'm gone.”

“Is it a special occasion?”

“My buddy's getting married,” he says with a laugh. “We'll celebrate next at his divorce.”

“That's an odd thing to say.” I drink the brandy and don't think twice when he refills my glass. I'm too pleased with the way it helps numb my overwrought emotions after such a dreadful evening. A buzz isn't such a bad thing.

“I don't believe in matrimony,” he begins. “My parents' marriage was a disaster. No, the word *disaster* can't possibly capture the depths of that relationship and the way it turned out. And I don't see the point to a piece of paper. We all make our own paths. I choose to be free. Besides, I'm not very trusting.”

“I'm probably too trusting,” I say with a sheepish smile. “Some people say trust is something that has to be earned. I disagree. I think trust should be given freely until a person proves unworthy.”



“Hmm. That’s interesting,” Tyler says as he moves next to me on the seat.

“What are you doing?” My breathing grows erratic as he puts his hand on my leg.

“I’m going to kiss you now.”

Chapter Two

Olivia

Age 19

I'm paralyzed where I sit. This is Tyler Astor, my childhood love, touching me. And I'm incapable of pulling away from him. Our lips meet and I'm lost. This is my fantasy come true. No other male has ever stacked up to Tyler. But even Tyler hasn't stacked up to my fantasy of him. He'd gone from being my best friend, my lifeline when my father left, to nothing more than another guy who left, just like my father.

Now he's back. And he's kissing me. This is dang bad. It sure as hell — and hell might be the operative word — feels good, though. His tongue traces my lips, and I sigh against his mouth. And then he burns me up. I've been kissed before, but never like this. My body's on fire.

“You're so responsive, babe,” he groans as he pulls me onto his lap, my legs straddling him. Heat pools inside me as he begins undoing my coat. I should stop this from happening. But as my coat parts and he pushes it off my shoulders, I can't seem to say anything. No sound comes from my lips except inarticulate cries of pleasure.

Tyler pushes up against the silk of my panties, and his hardness both frightens and excites me. Maybe he knows who I am; maybe he remembers. Maybe he . . . I can't think anymore. His lips trail down my neck and then his fingers are on the front buttons of my uniform, parting it slowly as his lips follow.

“Why are you hiding these, darling?” he says in appreciation as his tongue grazes across the top of my chest.

With way too much familiarity, he unclasps the front of my bra and fills his hands with my aching breasts. His lips follow as he cups them and sucks first one hard nipple and then the other into his warm mouth.

I push against him. I’ve never wanted a man so much. I’ve actually never wanted any other man. Yet I know this is wrong, and I need to stop it. But I can’t. His mouth skims back up my neck and he’s kissing me again while reaching in and sliding his fingers inside my panties.

“You’re so wet, baby. Do you want me?” he growls against my lips.

I don’t know how to respond. It’s more than obvious that I do. Still, I have to stop this insanity. I have to tell him I’m a virgin. Doesn’t it hurt the first time a woman has sex?

Before I can speak, Tyler answers his own question. “Yes, you do. It’s okay to be a little shy. I’ll take care of you. I’ll take care of everything.”

And then I’m moving. He lifts me from his lap and spreads me out along the seat. He lies on top of me and pulls up my leg so he’s inside the cradle of my thighs. He pushes against me while his lips devour mine and his hands move up and down my body. With a hard yank, he rips my panties off, and presses forward again.

My wet heat is brushing against the denim of his jeans and the friction’s making me crazy. He kisses down my neck again

and feasts on my breasts, making me wriggle beneath him as my body grows tense.

“Mmm, let’s see how you taste.”

Before I can stop him, he scoots down, lifts my skirt, and caresses my womanhood with his mouth. No man has ever done this, and I’m wondering why not. Tyler runs his tongue along my folds and sucks on my clit. He inserts two fingers and pumps. Something inside me shatters as pleasure beyond anything imaginable rushes through me.

“Tyler,” I cry out. He continues licking in slow, steady strokes, and I float back to reality. He moves back up my body. I can only see the outline of his face in the dim lights of the limo, but I don’t care. This is the most miraculous moment of my life. My night has gone from horrible to exceptional in a matter of minutes.

“I want you so much,” he groans. He lifts up and tugs down his pants, and I hear the rip of foil before he settles between my thighs.

“Yes,” I sigh as I feel his tip push inside me. Sensations are already building back up as he leans down and kisses me on the lips again, his mouth hungry and tasting like sex.

Then he surges forward, sinking fully inside me with a hard thrust. I tense as sharp pain erupts inside me. I’ve been warned about this. I hadn’t realized it would hurt so much.

“Are you okay?” Tyler pants as he moves back and then sinks inside me again. He doesn’t wait for a response as he keeps moving in and out, and the pain is overrun by a feeling of building pleasure.

“Yes,” I sigh. *Everything* is okay now.

Tyler leans down, his hand gripping my breast, his mouth worshipping my neck and his arousal plunging in and out of me. He speeds up and unbelievable sensations build within me.

“Yes, yes, yes,” I chant, throwing my head back as he squeezes my nipples with ardent fingers.

“That’s right, baby, feel it,” he cries as he pumps even harder.

And then I explode. The first orgasm had been nearly mind-numbing. This time I see stars behind my eyes as my entire body surges with feeling. My core pulses around his thick manhood, then he groans as his body stiffens against me and I feel him pumping his release.

I run my fingers inside his shirt and stroke his hard, heated skin, feeling utter contentment as he sags against me. I never thought I’d get my best friend back. Until now. This night is magical.

When Tyler pulls away from me, I whimper, suddenly feeling cold. He sits up and straightens his clothes. That’s when I realize he hasn’t taken a single thing off. He simply shifted his clothes around and got down and dirty.

Suddenly struck with embarrassment, I sit up and button my uniform, then pull on my coat. I can’t do anything about the panties. They’re destroyed. I don’t know what to say to him.

“That was great, babe. Do you need a ride home?”

Tyler's words take a moment to process. "What do you mean?" I choke out.

"My buddies are going to come searching for me soon. But I can have our driver give you a ride home before he comes back for us."

My embarrassment morphs into total mortification. I've just given my virginity to a man who has no clue who I am. He doesn't even know my name. He's so drunk he probably couldn't pick me out of a lineup. What in the world was I thinking? Oh, right. I wasn't thinking.

"No. I have transportation," I say. I need to get away from this man before he sees me cry.

"Are you sure? You did have a couple of drinks," he says, though he's still opening the door of the limo.

"I'm not driving," I tell him. I follow him out onto the pavement without any assistance. When I step outside, the streetlight illuminates his face, a face I've dreamed about for the past nine years.

"Thanks again, doll. That was great."

He leans forward and kisses me, a quick kiss. He turns and makes his way back inside the gentleman's club . . . without a look back.

It takes a few moments for my feet to move, and when they do, I feel numb all over. Surprisingly, no tears fall as I walk to the bus, get on, and ride the route home. I don't even cry once I get there.

When the numbness wears off, rage takes its place. If ever there's an opportunity, I'll return the favor of making Tyler

feel like a used piece of trash. He's obviously destined to burn in hell, and I'll make hell come sooner than anyone might expect, if I have my way.

Chapter Three

Tyler

Eight Years Later

“You’ve become boring in your old age.”

A remark like this from my best friend? What’s the world coming to? I shoot the guy a look no one can interpret as friendly, pick up my drink, and down the rest before I bother to reply.

“It’s called growing up, Matt. We all have to at some point.”

“If growing up is so much fun, you can count me out,” Matt tells me before scanning the room.

“I hardly expect you to ever do such a reasonable thing,” I tell him. “I know you too well.”

“You and I are only thirty, Tyler. It’s not as if we have one foot in the grave.”

“There are days I feel like I do, Matt. Work can be draining, all-consuming.”

“If you’d let your hair down once in a while, old boy, maybe you wouldn’t be so damn miserable. All work and no play makes *you* incredibly dull.”

“I can’t win, can I? If I go out on the town too much, the papers label me an effing playboy. If I stay out of the tabloids and devote myself to hard work, I’m a hermit. You can all piss

off,” I say, holding up my hand for a refill. The bartender should be more on top of his job.

“No one ever said life’s easy,” Matt says with a laugh. “Why don’t you find a girl and take her to your room and fu — oops, I mean make love until the morning light breaks through the windows?”

“*Make love?* And they say I’m the romantic one in my clan,” I snicker.

“I’m trying to be sophisticated,” Matt replies. “After all, we’re in a higher-class bar right now.”

“And whose damn idea was that?” I ask, scanning the room with distaste. A good rowdy pub is far more my style, or at least it was until last year, when I decided to try growing up a little more. Or to look as if I’ve grown up.

Maybe I do need to get laid. It’s been a while — way too long. When was the last time I had a woman moaning beneath me? That I have to search my memory tells me it’s past time to *do* something. I need a good lay.

I often fight with my brothers, telling them love is real, that it can be achieved, but my last relationship ended in disaster. Total disaster. I was willing to give the woman a six-carat diamond along with my heart . . . until I found her in the broom closet at my oldest brother’s wedding — with the bellhop.

Byron pointed out to me that night that women can’t be trusted. I’m not ready to go that far, but as far as looking for happily-ever-after . . . well, maybe I’ll simply look for Ms. *Right Now*.

But here's the problem. No one's catching my eye, and I'm growing bored with this bar, so I decide to write this night off as a bust. It's time to hoist myself off this bar stool and get out of Dodge. As I'm getting ready to go, I hear the sound of laughter, and something about it catches my attention. I look around and notice an appealing backside, exposed by a low-slung silky red tank top. Nice!

"Hmm, maybe tonight will be more interesting than I originally thought," I tell Matt.

"What makes you think she'll have anything to do with you?" Matt asks, zeroing in on the woman with the fabulous ass, whose face we can't yet see.

"If I want her, she'll be more than willing to have something — more than something — to do with me."

"If only I could be one of the infamous Astor brothers for a day," Matt mutters.

"Shut up, Matt. Don't even pretend you're humble," I tell my friend, still gazing at the woman, not wanting to miss the moment she turns.

"Compared with you and your brothers, I'm a damn saint," Matt says, the smile obvious in his voice.

"Maybe so, but I'm the nice guy of the three Astors," I tell him.

Matt laughs. "The sad thing is, that's true."

"When you're raised by narcissistic parents who get murdered before your eyes, it tends to make you a little bit . . . shall we say, aloof."

“So how have you been able to stay so positive?”

“I don’t know. I was young when it happened. My brothers got the worst end of that stick. I guess life’s too short to dwell in the past. My philosophy is that a night in the arms of the right woman can heal the most wounded of souls.”

“Then why haven’t you bedded anyone lately?” Matt asks.

“How in the hell do you know I haven’t?” I grumble.

“You’ve been complaining about it for a while,” Matt points out.

“Yeah, I need to learn to keep my damn mouth shut.”

“So why not settle down?”

“I was ready to and failed epically. How in the hell did I make such a bad choice in a woman? I don’t know, man. I think it’s harder than people realize to find that one woman you can’t live without. I love women, love how they feel, how they smell, how they taste. Then their true colors come out, and their claws sharpen. If I could find that woman without a hidden agenda or a tendency to fuck strangers in a closet, maybe, just maybe, I’d do exactly that — settle down.”

“Damn, Tyler. Should I call Oprah now?”

“Go to hell, Matt. Maybe my future wife is right over there in a very appealing red tank top,” I say as I stand.

“Well, go get her, tiger.” Matt signals for the bill.

The woman finally turns, and when she looks up, her eyes meet with mine across the room, and I feel as if I’ve been punched in the stomach.

“Who in the hell is she?” I whisper, though I’m not looking for a response.

“Holy shit, she’s gorgeous,” Matt mutters. “There’s no way that woman’s available.”

She lifts a delicate hand and brushes back her sun-kissed golden-brown hair, the thick strands falling over her shoulders and hanging midway down her back. The bar is dim, but even from twenty feet away, I can see she has light, shining eyes, and her lips — damn, her lips are plump and pink, and they’re calling to me.

I don’t give a flying whatever if the woman’s taken. I know for sure I’m not leaving this bar without her.

Chapter Four

Olivia

“Do you know the man who’s looking at you like you’re dessert?”

It takes several moments for me to realize my friend Piper has spoken, because, yes, I know exactly who’s looking at me. And my gaze is fully captured by the one and only Tyler Astor.

“Hello? Earth to Olivia,” Piper says and laughs as she bumps into me.

Finally, I break eye contact with Tyler and look back toward my friend, feeling slightly dazed.

“Yes . . . um . . . yes, I know who he is,” I say as I lift my drink and take a long swallow.

“Do you care to share?” Piper asks with impatience.

Shaking off the shock of seeing the man who once was my best friend, then humiliated me almost beyond repair nine years later, I’m consumed with anger. How dare this worthless bastard look at me now as if he wants to devour me whole?

A lot has changed since the last time I saw Tyler. I’ve gone from gangly to womanly, with more curves than I care to have. I enjoy wearing a little makeup, and I really enjoy doing my hair, but even so, I’m still the same person on the inside.

I’m still Olivia Truman, and I still suffer from insecurity — hell, insecurities, plural — when it comes to men.

“Okay, let me rephrase this,” Piper says, placing her hands on my shoulders and shaking them to get my attention. “You *will* tell me who he is.”

“He was my best friend when we were children — until he realized he was too cool to play with a mere girl. Then, when I was in college and working . . .” I trail off. This isn’t something I want to talk about.

“You mean when you were going through your geeky phase?” Piper asks.

“Thanks for being so supportive,” I say through gritted teeth.

“Just tell me what happened and I’ll be nice.”

“There’s no time,” I tell her. “It looks like he’s going to walk over. Maybe it’s my turn for a little revenge. Why should he get away with being a complete douche without suffering consequences?”

“I don’t know, Livie. Revenge never ends well.” Piper swivels around and sees Tyler heading our way.

“For the loser it doesn’t,” I say. “It’s all a matter of perspective. Just have my back.”

“I don’t know,” Piper replies. “You’re acting a little crazy right now.”

“I’m fine. I wasn’t expecting to see him — that’s all,” I tell her before taking another gulp of liquid courage.

“I think you’ve had enough to drink, Livie. I also think you should abort this mission right now.”

“I’m fine. I promise,” I say, giving my friend a determined look, but put the drink down on the table.

“Look, Livie, it’s been a lot of years since you’ve seen this guy, right? Let’s try to think through this. Maybe he isn’t the monster he once was. People change.” Piper peeks across the bar. “But you’d better make a decision, and fast.”

“The panic in your voice isn’t helping me right now, Piper. And don’t let his looks or his charm deceive you. Tyler Astor does what he wants when he wants, and he doesn’t give a damn about who gets hurt in the process. There’s no way he’s changed.”

“What in the hell happened!”

“Stop talking about it. He’s almost here. Go to the bar and flirt with the bartender, and more importantly, have faith in your best friend,” I frantically whisper.

“I’ll be watching.” With that Piper walks away.

I only have a moment to compose my features before I feel Tyler behind me. I don’t need to turn to know he’s here. Damn, the man has been blessed with more charisma than any one person deserves. It isn’t right.

He even had it back when we were kids, and later in life, when I was gangly and he was perfection in the back seat of a limo. I hadn’t realized how little, how dismissively, he thought of women. It didn’t take me too many years to figure it out — or to blossom from the long-legged, too skinny, dirt-faced young tomboy I was back then.

I haven’t spoken to Tyler in eight years. This reunion is long overdue, and my dislike of him has grown fierce with

time. His mean rejection early on, his meanness wasn't good enough. No, he had to come into my life once more and humiliate me, take my virginity, and treat me like a whore. In theory, I'd been a woman for only one year by then, but I was shy and awkward, little more than a girl, and he made it so much worse.

Well, this time, Tyler will be the one to feel something other than smugness . . . to be humiliated and left wanting something he can't have.

“Good evening.”

Even the sound of his voice right behind my ear sends shivers through my body. This isn't going to be as easy as I envisioned. But I'm not a quitter. Never have been, and never will be. This is a battle I'll most certainly win.

“Are you speaking to me?” I turn slowly, my eyelids lowered the slightest bit, my lips in a perfect pout. A femme fatale is so not like me. But anyone with a little bit of gumption and a whole lot of will can pull this act off if she tries hard enough. And I'm more than ready to try.

“Would you like to dance?” he asks.

“Do I know you?” I lick my bottom lip so his eyes are drawn there.

“We'll get to know each other while we dance,” he says, holding out his hand.

“I don't think so,” I say, leaning against the high table behind me.

His eyes narrow and something predatory leaps into them before he speaks. “I don't play games.”

With that said, he moves forward, invading my personal space. I want to take a step back — all I can do now is breathe in his scent — but a seductress would never retreat, so I thrust my chin out and move an inch closer to him.

“Neither do I,” I practically purr, hating myself the tiniest bit for doing it.

“Good. Because I’d like to dance with you,” he says before grinning. “And then I’d like to take you home.”

I’m too stunned for a moment to respond. I expected his boldness after my last encounter, but I didn’t expect him to be this upfront about his intentions. What I want to do is slap him across his smug face. I barely restrain myself from doing just that.

“Well, how very subtle of you,” I say with a tinkling laugh. “And what makes you think for even a moment I’m the type of girl who will take you up on an offer like that?”

“We’ve made a connection, even in a room full of other people. Don’t tell me you don’t feel it.”

“Oh, believe me, I feel it,” I say, lifting my hand and tracing a perfectly manicured fingernail down his arm. “But I have standards, sad to say. Here’s one of them — I don’t go home with strangers in the night, particularly ones I meet in a bar.” At least I don’t anymore, I silently add.

“And I told you I don’t play games,” he says, moving another inch closer. My breasts are brushing against his impressively hard chest.

A shudder rushes through me and I know I’m out of my league. I think for a moment to cry mercy and bail out on this

impromptu mission, but then he lifts his eyebrow the way he did the last time he rejected me, and I know I'm not going anywhere. But I also know something about gamesmanship. In fact, I have a degree in it.

"Fine. Walk away, then," I tell him with a careless shrug.

I turn back to the table and lift my drink. If he calls my bluff and leaves, good riddance, but everything inside of me says he isn't going anywhere. When he brushes up against my back, his hands closing over my shoulders, I know I have him, hook, line, and sinker. I've never felt anything quite like this before. The power of knowing for once he's in *my* control.

"You're making me break my rules," he says, his breath whispering across my ear before he turns me around to face him. "Tell me your name."

This is an improvement. He isn't treating me quite like a piece of meat as he did eight years ago when he didn't bother getting my name. He still doesn't know who I am, but at least he wants a name this time.

"Do you always talk as if you're commanding people?"

"I can be laid-back. But not quite yet. And when I want something, I go for it. Tell me your name."

I smile, this time a real smile, and his eyes dilate, making the butterflies in my stomach take flight. "You tell me your name first," I say, my voice a little too breathy.

"Tyler." He doesn't add a last name. He waits.

"Olivia," I finally say. There's no recognition in his eyes. Of course, he always called me Vivi when we were young. But why would I think for even a moment he'd remember me? I'm

simply one more castoff in his life, one in a long line of castoffs.

“Got a last name, Olivia?” he asks after a few moments of silence.

“My last name has to be earned,” I tell him.

It takes a moment, then his face transforms. His lips turn up in a wide smile, and he laughs. A deep-in-the-gut happy laugh that makes me smile.

“I think I like you, Olivia. Let me buy you a drink,” he says. Without waiting for a yes or no, he holds up a hand, and a waitress comes over.

“I guarantee you’ll like me, Tyler.”

“I guess I’m going to have to break another one of my rules, then,” he says as he boxes me in even more.

I wait, but when he doesn’t elaborate, I ask, “And what rule is that, Tyler?”

The smoldering look he sends me has my entire body responding to the man, fully against my will. He leans forward as if he’s about to impart a great secret.

“Let the games begin.” He says nothing more, and I can almost hear the dinging of a bell as round one gets underway.



“I thought you said you don’t play games.”

“As I said, I’m breaking one of my rules. And all in your honor.” Ah. So he’s telling me he’s more than ready to play with me. True to his usual type.

“Yes, Tyler, let the games begin.”

Chapter Five

Tyler

There's something very familiar about this woman. But I've been sitting here with her for over an hour, and I can't place her, so it has to be an illusion. Olivia isn't the type of woman a man can forget. She's certainly a woman a man breaks the rules for.

I can easily walk away from most females who cross my path. Yes, I sometimes speak of marriage and babies and growing up, but the idea of actually doing that terrifies me to the depths of my soul. I still have the diamond ring I bought the last woman, as a reminder of my near escape. And I'm more guarded now.

I've always come on strong. I'm great-looking, rich as sin, and have what one ex referred to as the *ultimate swagger*. I know I'm a catch. Most of the time, I don't have to break a sweat to get a hot babe into my bed.

So why does it seem crucial to my very existence that I stay and talk to this woman, a woman who clearly has some sort of agenda? I have no clue what that is, but I can see it a mile away when someone's playing a game. Olivia has secrets, and I want to figure them out. Is she after money? Fame in the tabloids, maybe to help her jump-start a modeling career? Or is there something deeper? Darker? More sinister?

The idea — the uncertainty — should terrify me. Instead, I'm more turned on than ever. I should blow her off, but

something about her makes me willing to play along, almost willing to get down on my knees and beg her to let me stay in her presence. I'm heading down a dangerous road, and can't seem to look for an exit.

"Are you seeing anyone, Olivia?" I watch her reaction. My question doesn't make her jumpy.

"Not at the moment. I like my freedom," she tells me. "What about you? Any girlfriends about to come out of the restroom and fight me for the privilege of sitting with you?"

She has such quick comebacks, and I love it. "I can't guarantee that won't happen," I reply.

"Then maybe I should change seats," she says.

"Are you afraid of a challenge, Olivia? You don't strike me as the type of woman to run from a fight."

"Oh, I'm not afraid of any woman you most likely date. Let me guess. They're stick-thin Barbie doll types with bigger busts than brains." Olivia says this so casually it takes me a moment to realize she's insulting me.

"Then what am I doing sitting here talking to you? Your bust size is respectable, of course, but are you a ditzy sort of girl?"

She openly laughs at this. "*Ditzy!* Nice word, and especially used with *girl*. It pegs you as a retrograde. I have a college degree — maybe more than one. I don't think I could be called stupid."

"It depends what level and what area the degree's in," I counter.

“You haven’t earned that information yet.”

“That’s the second time you’ve said this. You’re incredibly good at dodging questions about yourself. Is that on purpose, or are you running on automatic?”

She looks down for a moment, and I instantly reach across the small table and lift her chin. I can’t read her if I can’t see into her eyes. This doesn’t work for me.

“I don’t know you well enough to let you inside my head, Tyler. Has anyone ever told you that you’re damn pushy?” She shakes off my hand.

“I’ve been told that a lot. But the thing is, I always get what I want — one way or another.”

“Maybe not this time,” she says, and I see a flash in her eyes that I can’t quite interpret. Fascinating. This witch has me even more intrigued than before. I have to know her story. And I will.

My body’s humming with lust, but more than that, I’m interested in this mystery woman. She somehow compels me to trust her. This is insane. She’s playing me. But what can I do but go along?

“Tell me something real about yourself.”

“I’ve been telling you things about me for the past hour,” she replies.

“No, Olivia. You’ve been holding me on a fishing line just enough to keep me hooked, but not enough to reel me in. Tell me something real.”

She freezes and her eyes fly open with something like shock, but she manages to mask her expression in an instant. She's good.

"You tell me something *real* about yourself first, then I'll do the same," she says.

"Fine. I have nothing to hide." I think for a moment and then grin. "I've never slept with a woman." Her mouth drops open, but after a few moments, she sends me a withering look.

"If you honestly think I'll believe that, you're about the stupidest man I've ever met."

"It's a fact."

"Really?" Her words drip with scorn. "You come over and tell me you want to take me over to your — what? bachelor pad? — but you've never done that before?"

Man, I'm enjoying myself, and I can't help but smile. My buddy Matt is definitely going to have to get another ride, because one way or the other I'm taking Olivia home with me.

"I've certainly done *that* before. I've just never *slept* with a woman."

Her glare turns to confusion. And I'm not going to help her figure out what I said. I want to see how smart she really is.

"Ah, so you're a dine-and-dash sort of guy?" she finally asks.

"No. I always treat my women with the utmost respect. We do what we do together for the same reason — to feel good."

"That's so admirable. But you screw them and then immediately leave. I bet you have all sorts of hotel rooms on

standby for these *special* occasions.”

“I wouldn’t characterize myself quite that way, but I do like a good night’s sleep. Alone,” I say before leaning closer. “And yet I have a feeling you might change my mind about that.”

There’s no need to talk about my last long-term relationship. I never slept over at her place, and she never slept over at mine, but that was mostly due to work schedules, and I must’ve known then that something wasn’t quite right.

Olivia’s silent for several heartbeats before she throws me a smile and leans toward me, our faces now only a couple of inches apart.

“I guarantee you if we were in bed together, even if you managed to stick around for a whole night, you’d have a good time, but not much sleep,” she says in a throaty purr that goes straight to my groin and leaves me aching in a way I haven’t ached since high school.

“Prove it.”

Chapter Six

Olivia

I take long, deep breaths in front of the restroom mirror. I'm in a battle to get my heart to quit racing. Those two words, those exact words he'd spoken to me seventeen years earlier, were too much for me to handle. I was unable to speak so I lurched from the table and ran.

“What’s wrong? What happened? Are you okay? Let me get you a washcloth.”

My friend Piper rushes through the door and is talking a mile a minute and not giving me a chance to answer. But I can't answer yet anyway. I'm too frazzled. Piper hands me a cool cloth, and I press it to my forehead.

“Okay, I'm giving you exactly sixty seconds to pull yourself together and tell me what in the hell is going on. If I need to go kick that guy's ass, I'm your girl. I'm officially a brown belt in karate now.”

The fact that Piper's deadly serious yanks my mood around. For a moment I stare at her in surprise. Then I break into a broad smile and begin laughing uncontrollably.

“I'm starting to get really worried now, Livie. Seriously. If you don't stop laughing and talk to me, I'm going to have to call the paramedics,” Piper says, folding her arms across her chest and impatiently tapping her foot. “Or maybe the guys who will fit you with a straitjacket.”

“I’m so . . . so sorry Piper. You’re the best friend any girl could ever have, and I love you so much. Thank you,” I say between fits of laughter.

“Yeah, yeah, you’re my bestie too,” Piper snaps. “Now, tell me what’s going on. I mean it, Livie. I’m serious!”

“Okay, okay. Things are going fine. I know he wants me, wants me desperately, which is pretty great — all things considered — but then the ass tells me to *prove it* and I lose it and head for the hills.”

Piper looks puzzled. She wants my story. But as a true bestie will do, she doesn’t care what Tyler’s done. She’s ready to kill him simply because I’m upset.

“It’s settled,” Piper says. “I’m going to kick his ass.” She makes one hand into a fist and smacks the other with it.

“No. Don’t do that,” I say, overcome with a fit of giggles again. “You’ve done exactly what I needed you to do. I needed a minute to calm down. I have to end the evening on a proper note. With a proper touch. Or maybe a not-so-proper touch.”

My friend looks at me dubiously. “Then we’re leaving?”

“In a few minutes,” I tell her, and Piper throws up her hands. “I’m going back out there, sweetie, so I can get him hot and bothered, and leave him wanting more. I need you to come out of the bathroom in exactly five minutes and tell me it’s time to go. Then we’ll talk more. I promise.”

“I don’t like this, Livie. I don’t like it at all. And you’re going to tell me exactly what this asshat has done.”

“I know you don’t like it, but because we’ll do anything for each other, you’ll carry through with my crazy plan,” I say

before checking myself in the mirror. “And I promise to tell you all. You’re going to kill me, though, for not telling you sooner.”

I look slightly crazy, but I feel that way too, so it fits. I’m certifiably insane to think I can carry this off. Bring on that straitjacket. It doesn’t matter because I’m doing it, and I’m doing it well — so far, at least. I’m no longer a clueless twenty-year-old who can be used and tossed away like trash.

“Fine. You have exactly five minutes,” Piper warns as she plops down on one of the benches in front of the full-length mirror.

“Thanks. Love you tons.”

With that, I steadily walk ahead, take another deep breath, and swing the door open. When I turn the corner of the short hallway, I find Tyler leaning against the wall. His expression’s unreadable, which is fine by me. I can wear a pretty damn good mask of my own, if I do say so myself.

“Are you okay, Olivia?”

“I’m sorry. My drink hit me wrong, and I got overheated — hot *all* over. I had to cool down,” I say as I slink up to him. His eyes widen when I put out a hand and caress his chest. “I believe you told me to *prove it*.”

I lean against him, circling my hand behind his head and pull him down to me. I capture his lips and open myself up, my hands splaying across his chest, my tongue tasting his excitement. Tyler shakes at my boldness then pins me against the wall as his mouth devours mine.

I was prepared for the kiss, or at least thought I was. But as his tongue traces the contours of my mouth, my stomach tightens and my core grows dangerously wet. I realize no amount of preparation could've clued me in to how good it would feel to be in his arms again, even if I hate the man.

His body's hard and unyielding, and he's running his hands up and down my sides, drawing closer to my breasts with each pass. What he's doing with his mouth — I've never experienced anything like it before.

His touch is searing me, and when a low groan erupts from his throat, the sound travels straight through my veins and pulses deep inside. No, I haven't thought this revenge plot through. Not at all.

“Oh, Olivia, are you as turned on as I am right now?” He leans back only far enough to trail his lips across my jaw and trace the skin at my neck.

“I . . . uh . . . we . . . too pubic . . . public!” I stutter, my embarrassment quickly forgotten, although my hunger has been exposed to the world. My desperate fingers are clasping his shoulders, holding him to me. I'm trying to stop, but my body's rebelling.

“No one's back here,” he says. He slips his hand beneath my shirt and strokes my quivering stomach.

When he reaches the underside of my breasts, I hold my breath. I should call a halt to this right now. This isn't part of my plan, but I wait for what's coming next. He doesn't disappoint me. His hand traces over the lacy fabric of my bra, and his palm cups my nipple, making me moan in pleasure.

“You like my touch, don’t you, Olivia?” he asks. He sucks my bottom lip into his mouth and gently bites down. “Yes, I can feel how much you do,” he answers for me. “Forget about dancing here. Let’s go back to my place where we can *really* dance.” I’m trying to remember why I can’t do this, why I have to say no.

“Um, Olivia . . . Hello!”

I hear my name, know it isn’t Tyler speaking, but for the life of me I can’t drag myself out of the sexual fog surrounding me.

“Go away. Olivia’s busy,” Tyler growls.

“I don’t think so,” Piper grates out.

“Olivia!” My friend’s irritated voice brings me back to reality, and I manage to push, rather than pull, against Tyler’s chest. That’s all it takes for him to take a step back.

“I’m ready to leave now,” Piper says, sending a meaningful look my way, reminding me this is what I’d asked her to do five minutes ago. Five minutes ago seems like eons.

“I’m sorry. Yes, it’s time to go,” I say. I hope no one notices I’m panting.

“Don’t,” Tyler says, panic in his eyes. “I’ll take you home later.”

I’m so tempted, but I need to pull myself together. If I go home with this guy tonight, I’ll be the one losing . . . yet again.

“Sorry, Tyler,” I say, the purr back in my voice for a third time. “I have to leave now.”

After walking a couple of steps away, I whirl back around and pull a piece of paper and pen from my purse, jot down my number, and move back over to him. I slip it into the front pocket of his trousers, and let my hand linger, so close to where I know he's the hardest. Damn, I want to touch him. *Touch* isn't the word I'm really thinking, of course.

"You may call me," I say with just enough sass that a spark lights his eyes. I don't look back at him again. I take my friend's arm and walk away, and I don't breathe until we're outside in the fresh air.

"You're *so* spilling," Piper growls as she hails a cab and slips inside.

"I will. I promise," I say, leaning my head back against the vinyl headrest. "Just not yet. For now, I'm going to close my eyes and try to get my body under control."

"You're in trouble, Livie, big trouble. If you carry through with this, I don't think Tyler Astor's going to be the one getting punished."

"Yeah, I know that too," I say. And then I'm done talking. My friend's right. I'm in trouble — big, huge, monstrous trouble.

Chapter Seven

Olivia

The day's warm, exceptionally warm for May in Seattle. I changed my mind several times in the hour before finally meeting Tyler. How am I supposed to make him want me so badly that it will kill him to lose me if I keep refusing to see him?

He called me before I made it home after the night at the club and continued calling me all week. I've put him off long enough. Now I'm next to his car as he tugs on the tie he's wearing.

"I think I overdressed," he tells me, the knot slipping loose and the satin sliding through his fingers. My focus drifts to his chest, and I chastise myself for my ridiculous hormones. I don't desire him — okay, I don't *want* to desire him.

"I should've checked the weather before leaving the apartment," I say, wishing I'd worn a T-shirt instead of a sweater. I don't have anything beneath the damnable sweater, so I'm most likely going to suffer.

"Climb inside," he tells me. "We're running late."

"Where are we going?"

"One of my favorite places. It's outside the city and quiet."

That doesn't answer my question, but I get in and buckle up. I'm not sure if it's the heat or the man sitting next to me,

but I can't get comfortable. After we ride in silence for about half an hour, we approach one of the ports.

“Are we taking a ferry?”

“Yes.”

We don't have to wait long until we're given the go-ahead to drive onto the ferry. Tyler turns to me as other passengers exit their cars and move toward the stairs, eager to sit on the deck while the boat makes its way to one of the islands near Seattle.

As he looks into my eyes, I know I'm making a foolish mistake. After I made love to Tyler eight years ago — well, to be realistic he'd used me like a cheap hooker — I'd been devastated. The man still doesn't remember me, yet my body's in a constant state of arousal around him. I don't like what this says about me.

I should stop with these plans, get out of his car when we dock, go back to the shore, and find my way home. What I shouldn't do is sit in a hot car with an even hotter man, breathing in his scent, gazing at what can only be described as perfection.

“I have a lot of work to do this weekend, so I don't want to be out late,” I tell him.

“Really? What kind of work?”

I freeze. He doesn't know I'm an attorney, doesn't know anything about what I do. That's how I want to keep it. The less he knows about me, the better.

“I don't want to get into all the boring details,” I say with a false laugh. “Besides, if I start telling you about my work, we

lose the mystery between us.”

“I like mystery, but not lies, sweetheart,” he says, and I shift in my seat. “I spoke to Piper last night when I wasn’t able to get ahold of you, and she said you girls don’t have any plans this weekend except watching movies and eating gallons of ice cream.”

“Piper told you this?” I’m horrified.

“It took some prying, but I’m good at obtaining information.”

“And that gives you a sense of satisfaction?”

“Very,” he tells me. “I see you disagree, but in the business world, you obtain information on your opponents. It’s how you stay on top.” My heart slows as my irritation grows. My infatuation with the man diminishes markedly when he’s ticking me off.

“So you think it’s okay to invade a person’s privacy?”

If I wasn’t so annoyed, I might think my words through. This isn’t the way to seduce a man, especially a playboy like Tyler. But it’s hard to keep my eye on the end of the game when the guy sitting next to me causes so many conflicting emotions to roll through me in such a short time.

“If necessary.”

“Am I your opponent, Tyler?”

“No, Olivia. You’re a challenge. I never give up on a challenge.”

“You’re smooth, Tyler. You always know exactly what to say, don’t you?”

He's so much more sophisticated than I am. My chances of winning this round are slim to none. How in the hell am I going to win the war if I can't even win a single battle?

"I'd say that's an accurate description of me."

"And it doesn't bother you that people might not find merit to your words? After all, you apparently spew them without any serious thought." This makes him pause for a moment.

"You don't mince words, do you, Olivia?"

"No," I tell him. "Granted, I can do it in style. I'm capable of making mincemeat out of anyone or anything. But in general, I find honesty the best way to go." Okay, so I'm being a bit ironic, but what else can I say?

"I do as well. So, in all fairness, I should warn you I plan to share a bed with you very soon."

My heart rate goes into overdrive again. He reaches over and places his hand on my leg. I want to push him away, tell him there's no way in hell that's going to happen, but I stop at the last minute.

"If — and that's a big *if* — I decide you might be someone worthy of sharing a bed with," I say, my voice husky. I'm not acting when the breathlessness creeps in once again. Dammit.

"Believe me, you'll find me worthy. And more than a *big if*. You'll never want to leave once I've sunk inside you."

"Does that come from *long* experience, Tyler? Or have your multiple partners left a thank-you note beside the bed telling you how incredible you are?"

Tyler doesn't even blink. He grabs my hand and brings it to his lips, kisses my knuckles, and brushes his tongue across my palm in a slow caress.

"I know myself, Olivia. I know what I want, and I know when a woman wants me. And, darling, you want me as much as I want you. I'm willing to jump through some hoops to make it to your bed. I have faith that you'll be worth the wait."

Molten heat settles between my thighs as he continues kissing my hand and wrist. I tug, but he isn't letting go. If I fight too hard, this is over. But if I continue letting him kiss me the way he is, I'm going to melt into a puddle. I'm more than wet as it is.

When a horn sounds, alerting us that we're pulling up to the port, I breathe a sigh of relief. If I have to deal with more of his tongue and lips on my skin, I'll be begging him to climb into the backseat of his SUV.

"Saved by the bell," he tells me as the traffic begins moving forward. "For now."

"Are you going to tell me where we're going?" This island he's chosen is a favorite of mine . . . small, quiet, intimate. Now my memories here will be tainted.

"I have a cabin here. I thought we'd do a late lunch," he says with a smile. "And if we choose, we can stay the night."

"That won't happen," I tell him, panic tightening my throat.

"We'll see how it goes. I'm optimistic." The seductive smile he sends me has my body trembling. I can barely handle him; can I handle myself at all?

Chapter Eight

Tyler

I feel as if I'm walking in a field of land mines. But if I don't show my fear to Olivia, I might be able to avoid an explosion. Never let them see you sweat, and pray for the best. This tactic has worked for me so far; maybe it will again.

For a week I've been playing phone tag with this woman. Under normal circumstances, I'd have bailed after the first day. I know when someone isn't speaking the whole truth, and she sure as hell isn't.

What's she hiding? I don't have a clue. She most likely knows exactly who I am and she's hoping to entrap me. Broken condom? Faked pregnancy? Who knows? I've already had a couple of disastrous relationships and there's no chance of that happening again.

Still, there's something about this woman — something familiar. It's almost as if I know her, but that isn't possible. I've already gone over this in my brain. Maybe the whole thing is simply elemental. I need to have her, have to see this thing through to its inevitable conclusion. I'll have her in my bed. And then I'll be done with her. No problem. No pain. And who in the hell wants any gain?

As I pull up to my cabin, I wonder why I'm bringing her to this place. It's my retreat, a place my brothers and I come to when we want to get away from the city and the chaos of our lives. We don't bring women here.

“I wasn’t expecting this,” Olivia says, breaking my reverie.

The water gently lapping at the shore and the birds singing in the trees are the only sounds that can be heard, and the nearest neighbor’s a mile down the road. This is one of my favorite places in the world.

“I enjoy the quiet when I come here. There aren’t a lot of people around, and we count everyone in the area as friends. We also respect one another’s privacy.”

I open the car door on my side before she can respond, and I’m a bit frustrated when she doesn’t wait for me to come around to assist her before she climbs out. I stay beside the car and make a point of shutting her door.

Being a gentleman certainly isn’t something my parents taught me. Bill, the man who raised me, gave me values. I turned my nose up at those values for a few selfish years, but I’m past that now, aren’t I?

I’m not proud of the selfish time in my life, the time I drank too much, made no real friendships, and turned my nose up at people in my life who mattered most. Bill was greatly relieved when I pulled my head out of my ass.

“I’ve always enjoyed these islands,” Olivia says. “They’ve grown more crowded over the years, but you can still find quiet places. Thanks for bringing me here.”

I’m surprised by her genuine enthusiasm for a place that I love. I’m so on guard with this woman I can almost discern her game-playing versus her moments of genuineness.

Once we’re inside the living room, I watch Olivia as she looks at the pictures hanging on the walls and the simple

pieces of black walnut and leather furniture. The home's comfortable with a fireplace, nice stereo system, and plush furnishings. It certainly isn't lavish.

"No TV?" she asks.

"Nope. All of us come here to get away from that sort of noise," I say. "We do, however, enjoy having music. We also have Internet. None of us can get away from that for even a single day without going into withdrawal — the shakes and pink elephants and all of that."

I follow her as she steps outside the back door and the weathered boards of the deck creak beneath our feet. The air is cooler here than it was in the city, which makes it a perfect time to start a fire. I leave her alone while I gather wood and put it together in the stone fire pit I built.

"I hope you enjoy barbecue," I tell her after the blaze is going strong, and I drag out a couple of chairs.

"I'm no vegan, though some of my friends are. My tastes are fairly wide-ranging, and I definitely like a good piece of meat." The hungry look she sends my way has my groin tightening. She confuses me. One moment she's sending me all of the right signals, and the next she's putting on a chastity belt. Without a second thought, I tug her into my arms.

"Dessert should always come first," I murmur.

My lips fasten to hers and I don't waste time gaining full access to her mouth. With a groan, I feast on her, reveling in our first kiss since our night at the bar. When I pull back, I'm not sure what's happening. My hope was the passion between

us was nothing but a fluke. But it's even better than I remember. I need this woman. I have to have her.

"I'll start lunch." She doesn't protest that we're eating here instead of a public restaurant.

I leave her on the deck before heading inside for the steaks I had brought in. The next half hour stabilizes me. I love cooking, and the routine of it eases the ever-pulsing need for her that's wracking my body.

Olivia and I chat while the steak rests and I put together a salad and warm bread. I'd prefer a little wine with our lunch, but I have a pretty good feeling we won't be staying the night — not yet, at least. And I won't drink and drive.

When we finish eating, Olivia looks at her watch. She's nervous being alone with me. Good. She makes me feel all sorts of inexplicable emotions. Throwing her off of her game is a little justice in my book.

I stand. "Let's go for a walk along the shore."

"We should get back, Tyler. This has been wonderful, but I have work to do."

"A small walk to help with digestion. And it's Saturday. Work can wait."

I have to smile. Though I'm not quite the workaholic my brothers are, I don't count weekends as work-free time zones. There are always things that can be done. Sometimes progress is easier when the phone isn't ringing quite as much.

"A walk does sounds good," Olivia admits.

We head down a trail that takes us to the water's edge and stroll along the small beach. The sun's shining, a nice breeze is blowing, and a few boats decorate the water with brilliant colors.

"I think this is where I'd live if I had a choice," Olivia tells me with a happy sigh.

"It's too much of a commute," I say, "and not nearly as nice in the winter."

She manages to walk too far away from me, so I close the gap between us and take her hand. Surprisingly, I enjoy the feel of her fingers in mine. I rub the back of her hand with my thumb, loving how her soft skin feels and the way she shivers next to me. She's certainly as affected as I am.

"Yes, but it would be worth the long commute," she says.

"Why don't you live out this way then, or outside the city?"

"How do you know I don't? We don't know anything about each other. I could have a house on each of these islands for all you know," she says with a laugh.

"We might be a mystery to each other, but I'm good at reading people. You love it here, but it's clear from what you said that you don't have to commute, so you obviously don't live on the islands. My guess is you live pretty close to work — walking distance, or at least a short bus ride."

She doesn't look at me as we move forward, and she takes so long answering that I wonder if she's going to ignore my comment.

"That's a pretty good guess. Too bad you won't find out. At least not today."

“Are you going to share anything about yourself?” Mystery is good. But this is getting a little ridiculous.

As if she can sense me pulling from her, she turns and smiles. “Well, you know about my best friend, Piper. She’s the most important person in my life. I couldn’t live without her. So that’s knowing something.”

“What about family?”

“I don’t have any left.”

“That’s sad. I can’t imagine not having my brothers. We sometimes fight, but we’re always there for each other.”

“I was an only child, and I lost my dad when I was young. *Lost* isn’t quite the word. He decided my mother and I weren’t good enough for him. My mom died several years ago. So now it’s Piper — only Piper.” She laughs as if this isn’t a big deal, but I can hear the pain in her voice. She isn’t as good an actress as she seems to think she is.

“Some people aren’t meant to procreate,” I tell her. “Unfortunately, they do.” It isn’t as if I’m the person to comment on parents. They don’t get worse than the ones I was given.

“I fully agree. But here I am, for better or worse.”

We fall into silence and walk a while longer before I lead her back to the cabin. I want to ask a thousand questions, yet at the same time, I want to respect her privacy. I’m in uncharted territory with Olivia. We step onto the cabin deck and I lead her inside, then slowly back her up against the wall.

“I need to taste you again, Olivia.”

Before she even thinks of uttering a protest, I lean forward and capture her lips in a hungry kiss that shows her how much she affects me. She groans into my mouth before winding her arms around me and giving back as much as she's getting. My fingers dig into her hair as I turn her head, needing, wanting, hoping this is going to lead us straight into the master bedroom.

After I've given her sweet lips a few more lingering caresses, those hands of hers, which have been gripping my shoulders, shift and she runs them across my chest . . . and then pushes.

I lean back the slightest bit, in a daze. "What?" I ask, my hoarse voice surprising me.

"It's time to get me home, Tyler."

Her eyes are filled with passion, her body quivering in my embrace, but she's telling me no. I feel in my bones that I can change her mind. She wants me, even if she feels she needs to wait. Maybe it's a three-date rule or something.

I normally don't date women who are prudish. I like sex, don't like waiting, and don't want to have to stick around when I don't want to. I'm breaking all sorts of rules with Olivia. And so far it seems to be worth it, though I can't figure out how yet.

Chapter Nine

Tyler

“This woman is driving me insane!” I look at my phone for the hundredth time in a thirty-minute span.

“Then,” Blake says, “she’s obviously not the one for you if you’re getting this riled up so soon after you’ve met.”

“Here’s the problem — I can’t get her off my mind. We sent texts back and forth for a week before I finally got her to go to lunch with me. We had a nice time, took a walk, then had a kiss that’s left me hard all week, and now I can’t pin her down for another freaking date.”

“Maybe she’s just messing with you,” Blake says, “and you’re better off to let this one go.”

“I know that!” I’m beyond frustrated. Again I look at my phone. Nothing. Zip. Zilch.

“So why are you storming around your office like a bear?”

“Because I can’t stop thinking about her,” I yell.

“Okay. Then do something about it,” Blake calmly replies.

“What? Kidnap the woman? I don’t even know where she lives.”

“Kidnapping might be a little extreme,” Blake warns. “But I’m sure you have ways of finding out where she is. Find out whether she’s playing games.”

“Oh, believe me, I *know* she’s playing games,” I say. “I just don’t know what the prize is.”

“Then you’d best figure it out.”

“I have no effing idea what she could be after,” I say. “It’s not as if she’s going to get anything out of me.”

“There are a lot of things a woman can get out of you,” Blake says.

“Only if I’m willing to give them.”

Blake laughs. “It seems you’d be willing to give about anything right now.”

“Yeah, I know. And she has me so damn worked up, I’d just about sell my soul to take her to bed.”

“Then she might have you exactly where she wants you.”

“That’s the thing that pisses me off the most,” I snap.

“Seriously, Tyler, you might want to let this one go.”

“Don’t look at me like that, Blake.”

“Like what, Tyler?”

“Like I’m some pathetic sex-starved idiot.”

“You’re sure as hell acting like one.”

“Well, I’m not. I’m doing fine,” I insist. I freeze when my phone buzzes. I will not look. I will not look. *I will not look!*

“Dammit!” I’m practically shouting as I lift my phone and look. Blake says nothing.

I’m close to having a mental breakdown, and I’m very aware I should delete this woman. She’s been trouble since the

moment I approached her in the bar two weeks ago. Since then my world's been spinning off its axis. If I'm this consumed with her before we even make it to bed, I'll most likely be in a hell of a lot more trouble once the deed is done.

Sorry I took so long to reply. I've been working.

“That's it? She takes two hours to get back to me, and she hardly says anything,” I mutter. Thankfully, Blake still remains silent.

Are we on for dinner at the Pink Door? I can keep it short and to the point as well.

The clock ticks as I wait . . . and wait.

Dinner sounds great. I'll meet you at 7.

I'll pick you up at 6 and take you to the restaurant. I want to know where she lives, dammit. And I want her to tell me.

Sorry, but I'm coming straight from work. I'll meet you there.

Should I argue? Nah. It won't get me anywhere. This woman's more stubborn than I am — that's for sure. Maybe Blake's right. Maybe I should cancel. I toss my phone down and walk out of my office without bothering to offer a word of explanation to my brother. What else can I say? At this point, I sound like . . . a pouting baby. And that isn't who I am.

I leave the offices and walk to my favorite coffee stand. After grabbing a hot Americano, I make my way to the small park nearby and take a walk around one of the trails. I've left my phone behind, something I never do. But all week this woman has been playing me. She sends me messages — usually steamy — and like the sap I've been, I reply, probably

too quickly, and then I don't hear from her for hours, or sometimes until the next day.

I remind myself again that I don't play games. I told her that in the bar. Okay, so I might've said, "Let the games begin," but I hadn't meant it. Not really. Not in the actual sense. What makes the entire situation so damn awful is I'm allowing her to game me this way. I know what she's doing, yet I'm not pulling back.

By the time I make my way back to my office, I decide I'm done. I'm going to cancel dinner. It's decided. After all, I'm Tyler freaking Astor. If she isn't going to respect me, I'm not about to waste my precious time on cheap trash like her. The world's full of women who won't jerk me around, and who'll make excellent bed companions. I feel good in my decision. Even force a halfway decent smile to pop up on my lips.

That is until I reach the office and pick up my phone. Once I see the picture Olivia sent while I was gone, my brain's fried. Dinner is most certainly back on . . . and dessert's essential.

Chapter Ten

Olivia

Tucked away in Pike Place Market, and definitely not an easy restaurant to find, the Pink Door is a classic Seattle destination I've wanted to check out for quite some time. Tyler choosing this surprises me. I don't take him for a dinner-and-cabaret type of guy. I step from my cab and walk down the alley toward the restaurant.

I instantly spot Tyler. He looks suave in his custom-tailored suit, which hugs his shoulders to perfection and cinches in at his waist to show how well-built he is. The man's tall, a few inches above six feet, and with his dark hair, blue eyes, and that come-and-get-me grin, he's a fantasy come to life . . . for most women. It's a good thing I'm not most women.

I continuously tell myself this if I intend to spend more time with the man. It hasn't been easy to string him along as long as I have, and I've been doing it from a distance for days. Now, we're getting up close and personal again. I have to remind myself he's a cold, ruthless businessman who doesn't care how many people he ruins on his mission to become the best of the best.

I square my shoulders, and my small amount of guilt flees. I'm going through with this. After all, men like Tyler never feel pain. If the pain I'm able to inflict is minuscule, I hope to do some damage to his monumental ego. Even a dent will be worth the effort.

All of the Astor brothers live by their own rules and take whatever they want whenever they want it. They take and take until there's nothing left to take, then they walk away without looking back. I'm not a fool. I don't believe anything I do will make a huge impact on this man. But if I get a hint of revenge, I can sleep knowing I've done something for the used women of the world.

Tyler spins toward me when I'm a few feet away, and the power of his look makes me stop in my tracks. My stomach tightens as we engage in a stare-off until he's within two inches of me.

"I wasn't sure you'd show," he says, his voice a low rumble that makes my body react in a way I absolutely don't want it to.

"I wasn't sure I'd come."

"Shall we?" He holds out his arm. I don't move.

He raises an eyebrow in question, and I take a fortifying breath before placing my arm in his. Though I'm expecting the electrical shock, it still sucks out my last remaining oxygen. He stops and my breathing quickens.

He backs me up against the brick wall and presses his body against mine. His head descends, and his lips are on mine. I tell myself not to give in to him, but my body betrays me. I grip his arms and my lips fall open.

What starts as tingling flares into a supernova, and I forget all about revenge, all about making this man sweat. *He's* the one making *me* sweat, making me forget where I am — who I am.

“That’s just a taste of what it will be like between us,” Tyler says.

It takes a moment for me to realize he stopped kissing me. I open my eyes and try to focus on his face. When I do, my temper quenches the fire burning inside me. His smug expression tells me more about the man than his words can. He knows he’s gorgeous, knows he’s a fantastic lover, knows he can get or have anything he wants. Well, he won’t have me — at least not again. But he sure as hell will want me.

I move away from him and open the door to the restaurant. I’m not giving him the satisfaction of acting like the gentleman he’s *pretending* to be. The ambience of the restaurant is warm and inviting, with candles offering soft lighting and the tables charmingly set.

We’re escorted to an elevated table with an excellent view of the stage, and soon our waiter brings appetizers and drinks. The food placed before us — oysters, pasta, breads, and cheeses — is too much for anyone to consume, except maybe a football player. Of course when you never go without, the thought of wasting food doesn’t cross your mind. Tyler doesn’t have a problem wasting food while others go hungry.

When the jazz band begins and the soft music drifts around us, I know why Tyler chose this restaurant. The entire scene is foreplay, a place to prepare a date for a romantic night with sex all around. Romantic? I’m old-fashioned enough to believe romance isn’t quite so calculating or cold. He’s good, very good. Smooth. But he can’t fool me so easily again — I won’t let him snare me with the moves he used before.

“I can’t figure you out, Olivia. One minute you laugh with me, flirt, open up. The next, you’re ducking your head, apparently thinking up a storm, but showing nothing of what those thoughts are. What are you up to?”

Tyler picks up his wineglass and takes a sip. I shift in my seat. If he’s this observant already, I’ll never pull this off. I take a drink of wine before carefully choosing a response.

“I don’t date a whole lot,” I admit. “To tell you the truth, it scares me. I’m sorry if it appears I’m not interested.” I hope my reply will throw him off the scent.

“I have no doubt you’re interested,” he says, making me want to smack him. “I can also see that you aren’t too happy about feeling this way.”

“What makes you think you know me so well after only seeing each other a few times?”

“I don’t know what it is about you, but there’s something familiar. Have we met before?”

This hits way too close to home. I don’t want him to know we were childhood friends, and I really don’t want him to know about the limo sex. Not yet, maybe not ever. It’s too humiliating.

“No. I’d certainly remember meeting you, Tyler,” I say with what I hope is a saucy laugh.

“Still, I don’t know . . .” As he trails off, he finally breaks eye contact. Then he smiles. “Let’s dance.” The way he says the words, he might as well be telling me to drop my pants and let him take me right here. Seduction burns in every fiber of

Tyler's being. He pulls me from my chair and leads me to the intimate dance floor.

Tyler doesn't pause as he pulls me close, making me feel like it's only the two of us the moment his arms wind behind my back. The instant sizzle between us should frighten me enough to pull away, but my hands drift upward until they rest on the back of his neck. His breath fans against my ear as he pulls me a little closer.

His arms tighten, one shifting lower as he presses forward, allowing me to feel his hardness against my midsection. He tucks my head against him as he leans down and runs his lips against the edge of my ear, his hot breath sending a shudder rippling through me. His scent, his breath, and his defined muscles surround me, pressing into me, entrapping me while the rest of the world falls away.

When I finally get the strength to draw back, I look straight into Tyler's eyes. Passion. Excitement. Hunger. So much hunger. I don't know who moves first, but suddenly our lips are clasped together and I feel like a person lost in the desert getting my first sip of water in days.

My fingers tighten behind his neck as I greedily sip from his lips, submerging myself in the passion that flows so easily and powerfully between us. I forget he's the enemy, forget I have an agenda. I forget everything except the way he makes me feel. When he breaks away, I whimper, and the passion in his gaze leaps higher.

"Let me take you home," he says, his voice pure silk. It takes a moment for the words to make their mark inside my muddled brain, but when they do, I tense.

“I . . . um . . . not tonight,” I say and pull from him. I’m almost surprised when he releases me. We walk back to the table, but I can’t make myself sit. I need to rebuild the walls around my heart.

“It’s been a wonderful night, Tyler, but I’m getting a headache. I think it best if I go home a little early.”

His eyes narrow for a brief moment, but he recovers quickly. Turning from me without a word, he signals for the waiter, pays the check, then escorts me from the restaurant. The cool night air feels good on my overheated skin. I’ll regroup, figure out my next move, and get this entire plan of mine — which doesn’t seem quite so great anymore — out of the way.

“I’ll take you home,” he says, and it isn’t a question.

“I can get home fine,” I reply.

“I always make sure my date get home safely, Olivia. I take you home or this thing between us is done.” His words aren’t harsh, just matter-of-fact. I want to walk away, to tell him to go to hell. But if I do that, I’ll never have my victory.

“Fine. You can take me home,” I say in a taut voice.

He walks me to his car and opens my door. I give him my address, then sit back and fume. This isn’t going well — not well at all. I thought I was being so smart. I forgot revenge is a dish best served cold, and I’m still far too hot. I need to do something to salvage this situation, but how?

We pull up to my apartment complex, hardly the best place in the city, but far from the worst. He parks and comes around

to the passenger side. I allow him to open my door, help me from the low-slung sports car, and walk me to my door.

I wheel around before I insert my key in the lock. “Thank you for dinner. The place was so much better than I expected. I’ve wanted to go there for quite some time.”

“Thank you for accompanying me, Olivia. I had a wonderful evening.”

“Really?”

“Didn’t you enjoy yourself?” he asks, taking a step closer.

“Yes, but then, you know, the headache,” I say with a nervous giggle.

“Do I make you uncomfortable, Olivia?” he asks before lifting a hand and running his fingers through my hair.

“No . . . no.” Am I stuttering? What an utter disaster. Just kill me now and get it over with.

“I think I do. I think I scare the hell out of you.” He moves the last few inches forward.

“I think you’re awfully full of yourself,” I tell him.

He leans down and speaks against the corner of my mouth. “I’m *very* sure of myself.”

I could push him away, tell him the night’s over, but that isn’t what a seductress does. A woman who wants a man to pant over her the rest of the night grabs him and initiates the kiss. So that’s exactly what I do. I take control of his mouth, kissing him with everything I have.

The kiss has my knees shaking and my body on fire, still I carry on. I run my hands up the back of his neck and pull him

closer. This is much more intimate than in the restaurant because I'm well aware there's a nice comfortable bed only a door — well, two doors — away.

His fingers glide up and down my sides before he cups my bottom and pulls me up. He's so hard. The ache flaming inside my neglected body reminds me it's been way too long since I've felt satisfaction with a man — with *this* man.

The longer he touches me, the more I'm reminded of our night in the limo. It was amazing — that was, until he dismissed me so callously. This situation isn't good. When he pulls back, his eyes are dilated and his breathing heavy.

“Good night, Olivia.”

Tyler shocks me when he turns my key in the door, pushes me inside, shuts the door, and walks away. I don't move for at least two minutes. My breathing takes that long to get under control. If each meeting with Tyler leaves me this off balance, I really should abort this mission. Then again, I've never been a quitter.

Chapter Eleven

Tyler

“Do you want company?”

Olivia chokes on the bite of sandwich she just bit into when I make my sudden appearance in front of her. I quickly pat her back, and she finally manages to swallow and reach for her drink.

“What are you doing here, Tyler?”

“I was in the area and saw you sitting here,” I say. I join her on the bench once I’m sure I’m not going to have to give her the Heimlich maneuver.

“You were in the park, *this* park, on a Tuesday afternoon?”

I smile as I watch her trying to process why I’m here. I’m not one to leave things in the air. It didn’t take me long to figure out Olivia’s last name, and from there to figure out where she works — and where she enjoys eating lunch.

We’ve been seeing each other for three weeks, and I have no doubt she’s messing with me. We’ve only been out a few times. Most of our interaction has been over the phone, and she still shares nothing about herself with me. I should cut my losses and walk away, but I can’t seem to do that.

“Yes, I come here often,” I say. “It’s a great place to run, or to eat lunch. Sometimes I enjoy sitting on a bench to let my mind clear of all of the chaos from a busy day.”

“I . . . um . . . didn’t realize you worked around here,” she finally mutters.

“We’ve never talked about my work, so how would you know where I spend my days?” I can see I’ve flustered her. Does she or doesn’t she know who I am? That’s the mystery.

“I guess that makes sense,” she says, quickly recovering with a forced laugh. Then she places her hand on my leg and gently rubs. Her ploy of touching me so I’ll quit asking questions almost works. I want this woman so badly I’m pretty much walking around with a permanent erection. But it’s my turn to be in control. Though her touch sends flames through my body, I’m also aware that my touch causes her intelligence to short circuit. I grab her hand and wind my fingers through hers.

The problem with all of the physical contact is I’m not sure who it affects more, me or her. Only time will tell. I *will* have this woman, though — that’s something I have no doubt about.

“You must work nearby,” I say, looking out toward a group of office buildings.

“Yes, not far from here. If it’s a nice day, and that isn’t often, I enjoy coming to the park for lunch and a walk. I’m ready for a little exercise,” she says, pulling her hand away and gathering up what’s left of her takeout meal.

“I have time,” I tell her. “I’ll walk with you. Then you can show me where you work.” I once again link our hands together.

“If I take you by my workplace, the mystery will be gone. Things won’t be nearly as exciting,” she says.

“At what point do we simply open up?” I ask, stopping her when we come to a stand of trees. I walk her a little off the trail so we can have some privacy.

“What’s the rush, Tyler? We’re having a good time,” she says.

“I’m not in a hurry, Olivia. I just want to know a little more about the woman I plan on taking to my bed.”

“Do you always know the women you take to your bed?” I’m taken aback by the hostility of this question.

“Since I’ve grown up, I do,” I say with hesitation.

“So not always.” It isn’t a question.

“No, not always. You know what they say about boys being boys,” I tell her with a laugh I don’t feel.

Her eyes narrow the slightest bit before she masks her expression. “Yeah, I guess boys will be boys,” she tells me.

“What’s going on between us, Olivia?”

“That’s still to be seen,” she says and brushes up against me.

“What do you want from me, I wonder,” I say, trailing my fingers down her cheek.

“Why don’t you stop wondering and give me a kiss before I have to get back to work?” She winds her hands behind my neck and pulls me to her. It doesn’t matter how many times our mouths touch, my body explodes with each brush of our lips.

I’ve never put this much effort into being with a woman. I’ve had a few longer-term relationships, including the one

with the woman I was about to propose to, but those started so much simpler, and I definitely bedded all of the others a lot faster than this.

“I want you, Olivia,” I growl, breaking away from her tempting lips. “Tonight.”

She shakes her head, obviously trying to clear her thoughts. I can see she’s as turned on as me. Why is she continuing to stall? Maybe she’s a tease.

“Patience, Tyler. The longer we wait, the better it will be.”

“I’ve waited long enough, Olivia.”

“Then I guess a little while longer won’t kill you,” she says, taking a step back, then several steps more.

“This conversation isn’t finished yet,” I tell her. Reaching down, I untuck my shirt trying to cover the effect she has on me. From the way I’m throbbing, scraping painfully against my jeans, I doubt I’ll manage to be presentable in public anytime soon. The saucy little minx obviously knows it if her grin is any indication.

“Gotta go. See you later.” She turns and practically runs away.

I lean against the tree and take deep, steady breaths. What I should do is march into her office, bend her over, and take her right there on her desk. No, not my style. I’ll wait . . . but not much longer.

Chapter Twelve

Olivia

I smile as I walk down a claustrophobic Seattle sidewalk. I'm in a great mood. The only negative is that I've spent a lot of time with Tyler this past month, and I'm getting used to it, getting fond of his phone calls and of having him around.

After his sneak attack in the park last week, I had no choice but to let my guard down. He was growing too suspicious, and my plan will never work if he's constantly analyzing everything I do. So a couple of days later, when he asked me to dinner, I didn't hesitate.

The problem was the walk through the park after dinner. I'm getting too comfortable with the man, and he's making me laugh much too easily without even trying. Can I go on with this? I sincerely hope so. Or maybe I don't. I stop and stare at the door before me in surprise, and then double-check my phone to make sure this is where I'm supposed to be.

This isn't the sort of place where a billionaire like Tyler hangs out. But it's the address he gave me. And the name stenciled on the front window confirms it: *Nascosto*. It seems to be a bit of a dive, and I'm happy at the thought. Is he human after all?

I walk through the doorway, and find Tyler sitting by the bar with one of his brothers. They both look a little grim. I haven't wanted to run into any of his brothers. Tyler's my only target. The more involved I become in this, the harder it will

be when the walls come crashing down. Scorn one brother and maybe they won't care so much, but scorn them all, and certainly they'll seek revenge of their own. *Billionaires are dangerous. They don't become rich by playing nice.*

But I'm not about to wimp out at the first hurdle. Pasting a smile on my lips, I walk up with an air of what I hope to be utter confidence and drape my arm around Tyler. Let his brother think what he wants.

"I'm sorry I'm late," I say with a rueful glance.

"It's not a problem," Tyler replies. "I was talking to my brother."

"Oh, your brother!" I exclaim, and then wince at my faux enthusiasm. "It's a pleasure to meet you." Then I shock myself when I step forward and give the guy a hug. What in the world am I thinking? My nerves have taken charge and screwed me over.

"What ever happened to handshakes?" remarks Byron, Tyler's brother.

I'm instantly filled with hurt, and don't know why. I barely spent time with either Byron or Blake when I was young, but still, it stings that he too has zero recollection of me. I keep my smile firmly in place — I'm not about to let him know his careless comment affected me in the least. I look him directly in the eyes.

"Sorry, I'm impulsive."

"We'll leave you to brood, big brother," Tyler says. He stands, wraps his arm around me, and leads me away. When we get outside, I want to shake his arm off, still feeling the

sting of Byron's rejection, but somehow manage to keep from showing how much the man hurt me.

"I thought we were eating there," I say when we walk farther down the street.

"We were going to, but with my brother in a bear of a mood, I thought it would be safer to try somewhere else," he says. He ushers me into a parking garage.

"Where are we going?"

"I'm going to surprise you," he tells me, and he flips me a wink before walking up to his car and holding the passenger door open.

"I have things I need to do this afternoon," I say. And I don't step in.

"I won't keep you out late, Olivia . . . unless you want me to." Ugh, I guess there's no more point in arguing.

"Fine." I climb in and wait for him to go around to the driver's side.

He revs his fancy little car, and heads away from the city. The farther we go, the more nervous I become. When we turn off the freeway and near what appears to be a gated community, my stomach dips.

"I want to show you my home, not just my cabin," he says as he pulls up, enters a code, and begins driving down a long fancy road into a gated community. It takes a moment for me to realize it isn't a gated community. It's one estate, *his* estate.

"I'm not so sure about this," I tell him. I'm nervous. Incredibly nervous.

“There’s nothing to worry about. I thought it would be nice to show you my great view of the water,” he says. He pulls into a massive garage attached to a house that makes the word *mansion* sound pitiful.

“I’m sure you have the best view. Isn’t that your style?” I say with a bit of scorn. He looks at me questioningly but doesn’t comment.

I need to tone it back a little. I’m used to him opening car doors, so I wait until he comes around to my side and take his hand as he helps me out. We step into a hallway that leads to an enormous kitchen. A kitchen with the dream equipment of every chef in the world, professional or wannabe.

“Do you cook more than steaks on a grill?” I ask, a little in awe.

“I’m a fantastic cook, which is why we’re here. How do lobster rolls and chowder sound?”

My stomach rumbles at the words. “Fantastic.”

“Do you want the tour first, or are you more interested in food?”

“I don’t need a tour,” I tell him. I pull away and walk over to the adjoining dining room, where large windows show off the excellent view he boasted about. “Impressive,” I have to confess.

“It’s why I bought the property. I love the water. Go on it every chance I get. Maybe after lunch I can talk you into a boat ride.”

“It’s a bit chilly today,” I say. I’d love to take a boat ride, but I remind myself I’m not actually dating this man. It’s all

for payback. Why has the idea of exacting revenge somehow lost its appeal? Am I going soft?

“Seattle weather turns on a dime. Let’s have a bit to eat and see how it feels after. Let me make you a drink. You can either come into the kitchen and watch me work or enjoy the deck.”

He makes an iced green tea with an alcoholic twist, which is both refreshing and has enough kick to help my nerves. I want so much to sit in the kitchen and watch him. But I want it far too much, so I decide to wander to the deck, if only to save my sanity. The cool breeze sends me back inside, though. Nope. No boating any time in the near future.

Sitting at the large kitchen island, I watch as Tyler plays an impressive chef.

“Do you want to eat here or in the dining room?”

“Here’s fine. I like this island. I’ve never seen one quite so large.”

“I like big things; I’ve got a lot of them,” he says as he sets a plate and bowl before me.

I’m praying what he’s whipped up won’t be delicious, because Tyler doesn’t need anything else to make him *seem* even more perfect. But my first bite into the lobster roll ruins this hope. Yummmm.

“Okay, I don’t want to admit it, but you know how to cook,” I tell him as I wipe the corner of my mouth with a linen napkin.

“I get tired of going out, so about ten years ago, I bought a dozen cookbooks and took some classes to teach me. I caught

on fast. Some people like to do it, some don't. I find cooking enjoyable. Calming, in fact."

"A lot of men wouldn't admit to that, Tyler."

"Hey! The best cooks in the world are men," he tells me with a wink. "Like Gordon Ramsay."

"His food is insanely good," I say, a real smile slipping past me.

"When people taste his masterpieces, they don't care about his attitude."

"I want to refuse to buy anything the man makes because he can be so mean, but I admit I cave from time to time."

"You hold a grudge against people you don't find worthy, don't you?" he asks with that analytical look in his eyes again.

I panic. If he figures this out before I carry through on my plan, I'll be left the victim once again. No, no, no. That can't happen.

"Even the noblest of people can hold a grudge," I say with a laugh, "at least on a bad day. But I consider myself mellow."

"I don't know if I agree with that. I need a little more time to figure you out, Olivia."

When we finish dinner, I excuse myself and stand in front of the bathroom mirror for quite some time trying to talk myself out of going through with my plans. But as I look at my reflection, the woman gazing back isn't the same young woman I once was. Tyler stole something from me in my youth and slapped me down again when I was at another vulnerable stage in life. It wasn't right. He deserves to suffer.

Squaring my shoulders, then undoing a couple of buttons on my blouse, I decide it's now or never. "Let the games begin," I whisper, despite the sadness filling me. Then I go to find Tyler.

Chapter Thirteen

Tyler

When Olivia returns to the kitchen, her nosebleed heels click on the tile floor as she saunters toward me. Damn, I love the way her legs look in the sexy shoes, and I love how her hips swing as she moves closer. I can't help but pant like a pathetic dog as she slowly glides toward me.

I don't miss that some buttons are now undone, and my gaze fastens on the bit of cleavage on display that wasn't visible earlier. Something's happening. I see a new purpose in Olivia's eyes, a major change since I picked her up a few hours ago.

I wait as she comes closer and closer. My heart's racing but it doesn't show on my face. I won't give her a victory that easily, not after all she's put me through over the past month.

But dammit, I want her in my bed right this minute. I want her clothes stripped away. I want her writhing and screaming beneath me. I want her fingers on me, and I want it to continue the rest of the day and all of the night.

"Thanks for dinner," she says in a low purr as she lifts a hand and trails her fingers down my arm.

"My pleasure," I say. I fight to keep my cool, but I can't. I snake out an arm and wrap it around her. "What are you doing, Olivia?"

"I'm still hungry," she says, her warm breath blowing against my neck as she leans in and kisses the skin right over

my pounding pulse. This kiss makes my already hard body pulse with the need to sheath itself in her. I curve my hands over her succulent behind, and lean down, brushing my lips against hers.

“I can handle this hunger of yours, Olivia. All you have to do is say the word.” I kiss her with only a bit of intensity.

The low moan traveling up through her throat makes me lose my cool. Way too fast. I’m trying to stay in control here, but how can I with this woman? She’s pressed against me with only a few layers of fabric separating my skin from hers.

“You say you can handle it, but you aren’t doing much to do that.” After leveling this taunt at me, she pushes her hips forward and rubs against me.

With a speed born of lust, I undo the button of her tan capri slacks and lower them so quickly her eyes widen. She doesn’t say a word as I lift her so the slacks float to the floor. Without an ounce of hesitation, I set her down and pull her against me, returning my hands to her nearly naked behind. The panties she’s wearing are hardly a barrier between me and what I want.

“Still hungry, Olivia?”

She’s panting as she looks at me in shock. “Yes,” she moans as I squeeze her firm ass.

Leaning in, she presses hot kisses to my neck as I undo the rest of the buttons on her blouse and part it. The soft blue fabric is a nice frame to her body as she stands before me with only the lace of her bra and panties now keeping me from seeing what I want to see most.

She pulls my shirt free from my trousers, sneaks her hands upward, and runs her fingernails along the taut skin of my stomach and chest. She squeezes my nipples, sending a bolt of sensation through me.

Enough of this! With one hand I grip her head and tilt it. I ravish her mouth, giving her a taste of what I have planned for us in the next hours — hell, the next days.

I release her only long enough to rip off my shirt, then spin her around and lift her, setting her on the island, which happens to be the perfect height for me to grind my hardness against her very wet and barely covered core.

“Damn, you’re responsive,” I gasp. I take a step back and glory in the passionate flush covering her body.

“Hmm . . . I bet you say that to all the women you bring home.”

“I don’t bring women home.”

By the look in her hooded eyes, she doesn’t believe me. Give her time and she will. I’m not an innocent schoolboy, but my house is sacred to me. I don’t like bringing women home, don’t like them invading my personal space. Not after my last relationship. All I want is peace when I walk through my front door. I didn’t plan on bringing Olivia here, but somehow drove in this direction. And with her on perfect display on my kitchen island, I don’t regret the decision.

“Lie back,” I command.

“What? Why?” Olivia’s eyes dart around uneasily. Instead of giving her an answer, I push her back against the smooth

granite, drop to my knees, and feast on the sight of her silk-covered core.

Her protests die as I begin trailing my fingers against the silk, wet with arousal. I slip my finger beneath the thin elastic and, without hesitation, slide a finger inside her tight heat. She gasps, and her legs shake against the edge of the island. Lifting her lovely legs, I place them on my shoulders as I lean forward and run my tongue up the silk of her panties.

“Tyler . . . no . . . we . . . shouldn’t . . .” She stops speaking when I shift her panties aside and encircle her clit with my lips while I flick my tongue over her swollen bud. She’s a quivering mass.

“You taste so good,” I say before swiping my tongue over her slick folds and feasting on her bud again.

“Tyler!” Olivia calls out my name over and over again as I suck and lick her into complete submission.

As her body convulses, nearing the release I desperately want to give her, I slip a second finger inside and begin pumping. Suddenly she screams and writhes on the counter before me, shudders running through her as I draw out the pleasure for as long as she can handle it. Only when she goes completely limp beneath my touch do I pull my fingers from her and move up to kiss her belly. It’s still shaking.

I make my way upward, then kiss the skin between her breasts as her chest heaves. I need to taste her nipples — oh, how I need this. So I unhook the front clasp of her lacy bra and peel it away.

I run my tongue over one peaked nipple and then the other until she cries out again. I pull her to a sitting position and press in closely, loving the way she fits in my arms. It causes me more agony, but I press my arousal against her soaked panties, letting her feel what her pleasure's doing to me.

Cupping one breast, I squeeze as I run my lips along her neck, swirling my tongue against her flesh before gently nipping. She jerks against me and moans while she grasps my hair. When I move up and capture her lips again, I smile. Damn, I'm falling hard for this woman — so hard. Will I ever be able to climb out from under her spell? I don't think I want to.

"I want you in my bed," I say. I lift her off the kitchen island and swiftly walk through my house to the large master bedroom. After putting her down on top of the covers, I immediately pull her against me, damning the trousers I haven't removed.

"I don't think I've ever wanted someone as much as I want you," I tell her. I'm not afraid to hide what I feel right here and now. She stiffens in my arms, and I see her eyes grow wide.

"Oh, I have to . . . um . . . use . . . I have to . . . go to the bathroom," she tells me. I moan in frustration as she wriggles out of my grasp and runs away. It's okay. When she comes back, I'll be more than ready for her.

With speed born out of desperation to sink inside of her, I strip away my clothes and lie on the bed, waiting. And wanting. When she returns, I'm not going to let her leave my bed again, not for at least twelve hours.

Chapter Fourteen

Olivia

He's probably wondering what I'm doing in his bathroom. I've been hiding out for way too long, but it's taking me forever to stiffen my resolve. I scrunch my eyes in the mirror and give myself a stern look. "You knew this wasn't going to be easy, but if it teaches him even the smallest of lessons, you accomplished what you set out to do. Just do it!"

My pep talk isn't motivating me, unfortunately, so I wash my face with cool water and try again. I'm still overheated, still desperate for satisfaction despite all he gave me in the kitchen. All that heat on the cool granite. I want more.

Maybe this *project* of mine is going to end up punishing me far more than it does him. Too bad. No pain, no gain.

I finally step from the bathroom and lean in the doorway, my shirt still unbuttoned but concealing a little more now, open just enough to show Tyler the curves of my breasts but not my still-hard nipples. My panties are back in place, but I can't hide the flush on my cheeks, and as I look at Tyler lying in bed — buck-naked — I'm heating up all over again.

"Come back to my bed," he says, reaching for me.

I look down, then meet his eyes and smile. "Do you want me, Tyler?" I ask, moving a little closer.

"You know I do, baby," he says with a giant smile, while showing me just how much he wants me. He's standing tall. And thick.

“Good. Are you hurting?” I give him my most seductive smile.

“Oh, yeah, baby. I’m hurting,” he says. His tongue comes out and wets his lips.

“Good. Then you’re exactly where I want you to be.”

He freezes, his smile slowly fading at the sudden change in my tone. My friskiness has vanished, and in its place is pure loathing, loathing directed at him.

Tyler’s jaw drops. “What in the . . . hell is going on?”

“Are you confused?” I ask.

“Yeah, a little,” he tells me. He sits up and pulls the blanket over himself. That’s too bad. I’ve been enjoying the view. But, maybe it’s for the best.

“You see, Tyler, I know *exactly* who you are. You’re a spoiled, self-righteous little rich boy who thinks he can have anything he wants. Now that I have you all worked up, you can think about the fact that sometimes even *you* won’t get everything handed to you on a silver platter. Oh, wait. Maybe you billionaires deal in platinum platters.”

Turning around, I smile in victory. I walk back into the bathroom and almost have the door shut when it’s thrust back open. Tyler looks far from pleased, standing there in all of his naked glory.

“Don’t think for even one second that you can make a comment like that and then walk away,” he says, taking a menacing step toward me. My heart lodges in my throat. This game has taken a turn I didn’t plan on. I expected anger and frustration. I didn’t expect the predatory look I see in his eyes.

“I can do whatever I want, Tyler.” I latch the front of my bra and begin buttoning my shirt. He looks at me as if I have two heads. Maybe I do.

“What in the hell is your deal? For the past month you’ve been playing with me, and now this?” he thunders. “I knew something was up, but didn’t expect such a sucker punch. You weren’t looking at me with disgust while I was devouring you on the kitchen island.” As he says this, he takes a step closer, and my heart pounds. I have to go on the offensive, and fast.

“You have no clue who I am, do you?” I snap, poking him hard in the chest. This question takes him aback. He traces my face with his eyes, but no comprehension sets in.

“Dammit, Olivia, if I slept with you before, I’d remember,” he says. “I’ve had more than a few relationships — I’ll admit that — but I don’t forget women I take to bed. What in the hell have I done to piss you off so badly?”

He isn’t letting me get around him in the bathroom, but he isn’t touching me either. I couldn’t handle that right now. His statement crushes me more than I imagined it would. No, he hasn’t slept with me. He screwed me. And then he tossed me aside and forgot all about me.

“You Astors take and take, and when you’re finished doing that, you leave a wake behind you a mile long without once looking back. This might not have been the best plan in the world, but I wanted to make you feel something like loss — at least once in your life. You’re selfish and hurtful and you deserve to want something you can’t have.” I push against him, trying to get past. Tyler grabs both of my wrists with one

hand and holds them above my head as he thrusts me against the wall.

“Explain now.” His voice is deadly calm, which is far worse than if he was yelling.

My voice trembles, but I speak in a rush. “We knew each other, Tyler, but I don’t expect you to have any comprehension of that . . .”

“When did I know you?” I can see the wheels spinning but nothing’s hitting home.

“It doesn’t matter, but there was a time I cared about you, and you so quickly and easily forgot about me. And when we saw each other again you might as well have thrown me to the wolves. Wait! That’s exactly what you did. The person I once knew — who I thought was kind. He was my whole world. I watched you through the years, seeing all of your exploits in the papers. You don’t care about anyone but yourself. That’s how your family operates. You’re just like your father. He must’ve taught you well!”

Thunder rages in Tyler’s eyes as I continue speaking, but they narrow dangerously when I bring up his dad. That might not have been the best move on my part, but none of my moves tonight have been smooth. Anger has made me lash out. Fear makes me say foolish things. And right now I’m feeling both emotions.

“First of all, tell me how we know each other. If I’ve somehow wronged you, I deserve to know how,” he says, the anger in his voice barely contained. He pauses for a moment. “And secondly, I’m nothing like the evil bastard who gave me life. I won’t tolerate being compared to that man.”

I should stop. I know I should stop, but so many emotions are rushing through me and I can't seem to keep my mouth shut.

"Really? I disagree. I've studied you for years." I start choking on my words, and stop before reminding him of our onetime friendship. He doesn't know who I am, and there's no reason to bring it up.

"I want to know who you are right now." He's so commanding, I almost tell him. But somehow I stop myself.

"It doesn't matter, Tyler. I don't want to be here anymore. I don't want to be with you," I tell him.

"I know more about you than you think."

"You don't know anything," I say, far less calmly than him.

"Want to test it?"

"I want you to unhand me, unless you make a habit of forcing yourself on women," I say. Tyler instantly releases me and takes a step back.

"Believe me, I don't need to force myself on anyone," he says before moving to the bathroom door and holding it open. "You can get the hell out of my house."

The coldness of his voice sends a shudder down my spine. I don't say anything more. I skirt around him and run to his kitchen to find my slacks and shoes. I put them on quickly and leave through his front door, shivers wracking my body.

Now what am I supposed to do? He drove me here, and I have no idea where I am. I despairingly trudge to the end of

his driveway, which takes a good ten minutes. When I reach the gate, a cab is waiting.

It looks as if Tyler has sent more than one woman from his house this way if he can get a cab here this fast. I scramble inside, give the man my address, and use every power within me to keep from crying. I've been downgraded, not to mention degraded. Last time he screwed me, he at least offered me a limo ride home. Now, I'm relegated to a stinky cab. It's my choice this time, though.

I've done what I set out to do. It's too damn bad I feel like crap about it. Revenge seemed so satisfying when I initially thought it up. Now, it's leaving me feeling hollow and more alone than I've ever felt before.

Chapter Fifteen

Tyler

“Who in the hell does she think she is?”

My two brothers look on in fascination. They’ve been nearly silent for the past half hour as I ranted on and on about Olivia and her scheme. I can’t stop myself. Finally, I turn and look at them. The two men are sitting in my library with their legs propped up, drinks in their hands, and ridiculously silly grins on their faces. Whatever happened to brotherly solidarity?

“Are you going to silently sit there all night or are you going to give me some input?” I snap.

“Well, considering you haven’t given us two seconds to give any *input*, we thought we’d sit here,” Blake says and takes another swig of his scotch.

“I’m giving you time now,” I shout.

“We don’t know who she is. I met her for about two seconds, but I wasn’t exactly in the best mood or on my best behavior then. I suggest you find out about the little tease,” Byron says.

“What? The two of you are all happy and in committed relationships, so you think my disastrous love life is entertaining?”

Blake guffaws. “Now that you mention it, it is pretty entertaining.”

“This is BS!”

I march over to the bar and snag another beer from the refrigerator. It’s been a month since Olivia’s stunt and I’m still furious. I thought I’d be over it by now. I’m determined to forget all about her. But a month later I’m still dreaming of the wretched woman, still wanting to know what in the hell went wrong. More importantly, I’m trying to figure out why in the world I give a damn about any of it. Screw her. Well, I tried . . .

“Tyler, you’ve gone off every few days about this woman since the moment you met her,” Byron says. “It’s been a few weeks since she walked away from here, and you still haven’t forgotten her. Maybe it’s time you to do something about it.”

“I want to erase her and her effed-up games from my brain,” I say, “but you’re right. I haven’t been able to do that, so I think that might be the wrong choice.”

“Haven’t you always been the easygoing brother,” Blake asks, “the happy one, the one who wants to find true love and live happily ever after?”

“That was before I met the woman before this one, the woman I thought I’d marry. Now I’m confronted with another wreck, more proof that females are deadlier than males,” I snap. “They’re all worthless. Who needs them?”

“Don’t let one woman, or even two, change your identity,” Blake tells me. “Byron and I spent far too many years being testosterone-crazed assholes. You’re a good guy, Tyler. This woman could be a complete bitch, or she could have a story. You’re never going to know if you don’t see this thing through, figure out why she did what she did.”

“And if I find out that it really was her idea of a game, that she’s actually nothing more than a cheap hussy?”

“Here’s what you do if you find out the worst. You don’t let one disastrous encounter — okay, a second disastrous encounter — ruin you for all future women.”

“Weren’t you being a complete douche to McKenzie just a few months ago?” I ask.

“Yeah, I was,” Byron admits with a shake of his head. “And I almost lost her because of it. Don’t be an idiot like me.”

“Or me,” Blake adds.

“Dammit! I want to forget about this woman.”

“Yeah, if life were that easy, there wouldn’t be so many shrinks out there,” Blake says.

“Ha, ha. Very funny,” I snap again.

“Look, bro, all kidding aside, find out this woman’s story,” Blake tells me. “Maybe she has a damn good reason for doing what she did.”

“I can’t see any justifiable reason for someone doing what she did,” I mumble. But my temper’s finally beginning to die down as I begin to plan my strategy.

“You never know, Ty,” Byron says. “In the eyes of the world, you’re not exactly a guy bent on monogamy. You’re constantly featured in gossip magazines as a playboy extraordinaire. We all went that route. None of us gave a damn what people thought about us. But I’ll grant you this — you actually cared about your neighbors, and you’ve sacrificed to

make this world a better place. The same can't be said about Byron or me. We were dicks."

"Hey! I resent that," Byron interjects. Blake simply raises an eyebrow. And Byron smiles.

"Okay, so I resemble that remark. I *was* a dick. But McKenzie's turned me into a better man."

"Think about it, Ty. All I'm saying is look a little deeper," Blake says. "Give peace a chance. You never know what you might find."

"Who in the hell have you guys turned into?" I don't even recognize these men anymore. "Wasn't I always the voice of reason in our trio?"

"Yeah. The right woman happened to each of us. The loves of our lives." Blake doesn't even bat an eye saying this.

I can't help but goad my brothers. "So you've gone soft?" Blake sits up and the look of a warrior springs into his eyes, the same look that can silence a boardroom and make people shake.

"Just because my heart's softened doesn't make me weak. Don't for one second think that's the case. I realized I don't have to be alone and miserable in this world. If someone crosses me, I'm still a force to be reckoned with."

"How do you separate it?" I ask.

"You learn to adjust, to figure out what's worth getting upset about, and what's not," Byron says. "Sometimes you slip up, but you forgive yourself."

“Thank you.” I mean these words. A bit of time with my brothers and I feel much better. We sit for a few more moments before my brothers leave. Maybe they’re right. Maybe I’m a fool, but since I can’t get this woman off my mind, I might as well find out why. The games with one Olivia Truman aren’t quite over yet.

Chapter Sixteen

Olivia

“Olivia, get in here!”

Ugh. Sometimes I hate my boss. He’s arrogant and condescending. Okay, he’s also brilliant, and he brings in clients. And though I loathe him, I need this job. It isn’t easy to get a job with decent pay right out of law school, and every law school grad is in enough debt from student loans to . . . oh, use your own cliché here. I have a long way to go before I can do what I truly love — helping children. I only get to do this on a volunteer basis for now, and with my long hours, time for my passion is incredibly limited.

It’s good that I have a job that isn’t the worst in the world, because the rest of my life is an utter disaster. My revenge plan has left me miserable. I never expected to miss Tyler Astor. I expected to feel triumphant and righteous, but miss him I do. Every single day — and night. Especially night.

We spent time together for a month, a single month, but that time brought the past back like a hurricane. There was a brief moment in my life when Tyler was my best friend, and while I executed my plan, I saw glimpses of the boy I once loved so much. I have to remind myself he’s now a man I despise for justifiable reasons.

Picking up my iPad in case my boss wants me to take notes, I step into his office and wait while he finishes speaking on the phone.

“We have a new client, and he’s requested you. I told him we have attorneys with a longer track record who could do the job better.” I grit my teeth and keep silent. I’m good at my job. I’ve only been practicing law for a couple of years, but I’m dedicated, work long hours, and take great care of my clients.

“Don’t you have anything to say?” my boss asks. “I’m giving you a great case.”

“I appreciate it. Give me the file and I’ll start reviewing it immediately.”

“No file yet. The client wants to meet you face-to-face first and discuss the case. You’ll meet with him tonight — eight o’clock at the Fairmont Hotel, in the Georgian restaurant.”

“Okay, I’ll be there.” It’s unusual not to have notes to go over first. Most clients want their attorneys up and running on a case before they waste their time and money talking. I turn to leave Timothy’s office when he calls out my name. I stop and turn.

“Olivia, give this man whatever he wants. This is a high-profile client with megabucks in the bank and the stock market.” Dammit! I loathe clients like this.

There’s nothing unusual about meeting a client at night, but I hate the ones with a lot of demands. Still, many of our clients are incredibly busy, and my job certainly isn’t an eight-to-five gig. I enjoy some of the dinner meetings with clients at exclusive places I can’t afford. The problem’s finding something appropriate to wear at a restaurant like the Georgian. I’ve become pretty good at faking it and can stretch my dollars better than most.

Work eats up the rest of my day, and not having a file to study up on my client doesn't make me happy, but sometimes that's how a job goes. At home I rustle up a nice black pencil skirt, not too short, and a blue top that matches my eyes. After throwing my hair into a tight bun and touching up my makeup, I nod into the bathroom mirror. With time to spare, I catch a cab to the Fairmont and walk inside. My heels click on the marble floor as I proceed to the Georgian.

When I give my name to the host, I don't have to wait. He escorts me to the restaurant's private dining room, *The Petite*, a room I certainly haven't seen before. As I make my way past the other diners, live music drifts through the room.

I'm a little disappointed we won't be sitting out here where I can listen. But this is a business meeting. I have to suck it up. The story of my life. When I enter the private room, my client hasn't arrived, so I take a seat and order iced tea. I normally have a glass of wine at dinners of this sort, but I know nothing about this client or what he wants.

Normally, this would be fine if I had the dang case file. At least I wouldn't be sitting here doing nothing when the man enters. My firm takes pride, above all else, that we're sought after. Unsure whether to check my phone or sit here pretending to be in deep thought, I begin to grow antsy when the atmosphere in the room suddenly changes. I don't need to turn around, don't need to make eye contact to know who's joined me. Maybe I'm going to need that wine after all.

Chapter Seventeen

Olivia

“You look good, Olivia,” Tyler says as he steps in front of me. He looks good too. He’s wearing a dark gray suit and red tie, his coat pushed open to reveal the crisp white shirt beneath and the hand-tailored trousers showcasing his magnificent hips. His hair’s neat, his face clean-shaven, and a predator’s smile — not unlike the one I saw in his bedroom a month ago — rests on his lips. I don’t want to find him sexy, but it’s incredibly hard not to.

“Thank you,” I grit out, thinking over and over again that I have to be nice or risk losing my job. Tyler knows this and is thoroughly enjoying himself.

“I figured out a lot of things about you in the last month. You should be impressed with yourself. You’ve managed to intrigue me, and that’s more than I can say about most people.”

“Such a self-absorbed remark, Tyler. Should I be impressed?” I ask. “I *wasn’t* trying to intrigue you.”

“What were you trying to do, then, Olivia?”

He sits in the chair across from me. His legs brush against mine beneath the table and I scoot back. He smiles and extends his leg, his foot now toying with mine. I’m going to grit my teeth a lot during this meal.

“It doesn’t matter what I was trying to do,” I say before taking a deep breath. This isn’t going to get us anywhere. “Can

we get directly to business?”

“Tsk, tsk, Olivia. You aren’t being very hospitable right now,” he says. “Especially since we know each other quite . . . intimately.”

I take a few deep breaths and unclench my teeth before responding. “This is a business meeting. Let’s be professionals and focus on *business* only,” I say in my best prim voice.

“Yes, business. How’s Timothy?”

“My boss?” I ask, somewhat confused by the quick change of topic. He nods. “He’s fine. Though I don’t know how you managed to convince him to not give me your name. If I’d been better prepared, we wouldn’t waste your time at six hundred dollars an hour.”

“I’m the client. If I tell your boss I want to keep my name anonymous until I’m ready to give it, that’s exactly what he’ll do,” Tyler says before leaning forward. “As a matter of fact, he’ll do anything I ask of him because he’s a smart man and knows not to antagonize me.”

I gasp at his audacity. “Who in the hell do you think you are?”

“I thought you knew exactly who I am, Olivia. Isn’t that why you decided to come after me with everything you had?” The gleam in his eyes reminds me of a hungry tiger. And I have no doubt that I’m now his prey.

“You’re clearly not a very savvy businessman. Do you even need an attorney, Tyler?”

My shoulders back, I don’t break eye contact. If I show him an ounce of weakness, he’ll go right for the jugular. There’s no

use making his kill any easier by exposing my throat.

“Yes, I have a number of attorneys for a number of purposes. I need a new one.”

“For what exactly?” I ask.

“You’ll find out, won’t you?”

“This is about payback, isn’t it? I played a game with you, and now it’s your turn,” I say.

He’s quiet for several moments and then he smiles, though the expression doesn’t quite make it to his eyes. He’s certainly playing with me, and he isn’t trying to hide it. When he speaks next, I can barely keep up with his change in voice and topic.

“I’ve had a good day so far. I went to a job site with my brother Blake, had a nice lunch, and met with your boss. I’m feeling very relaxed. You don’t want to ruin my day now by making unfounded accusations, do you, Olivia?”

He’s so damn smooth, so cocky. How had I ever thought I’d be able to go up against a man like him and win? It’s impossible. The world’s made up of the haves and have-nots. I’m a have-not. He’s most certainly a have. I was screwed from the get-go.

“I apologize if anything I’ve said or done tonight has made you uncomfortable,” I say, though it takes a lot out of me to say this. How much do I like my job? I can surely work somewhere else, right?

Then again, he’s the sort of man who will simply follow me wherever I go. I’ve ticked the man off and he’s bound and determined to work up his own revenge plot. So I might as

well accept it and hope he grows bored before he makes my life go up in smoke.

“You know you and I will become lovers, don’t you?”

He says the words so casually it takes a moment for my brain to process them. When it does, my cheeks flush, partly with anger and partly with excitement. I had a taste of what being Tyler Astor’s lover feels like, and that taste wasn’t unpleasant. In fact, it was damn good.

“No, Mr. Astor, we won’t be lovers,” I tell him before the waiter approaches. *Not again*, I silently add. How mortifying — the waiter had to hear my unfortunate comment. I can’t look him in the eyes, so I stare down at the menu instead.

“What’s your wine preference?” That Tyler bothers to ask surprises me. I assumed he’s the type of man to make all of the decisions. Or to try to, anyway.

“I like fruity white wines,” I tell him. I don’t add, however, that the bottles I buy cost less than ten dollars. “Though isn’t it taboo to choose a wine before you know what dish it’s to be paired with? Doesn’t that count as an extreme crime against social order?”

Tyler laughs. “Then I guess we’ll rebel against the rules tonight.” He makes his choice from the wine menu and sends the waiter on his way to find the bottle.

“Mr. Astor—”

He interrupts me with his patented quirk of the eyebrows. “I’m *Mr. Astor* now?”

“Yes, you are,” I firmly say.

“Hmm. It’s kind of erotic coming from your lips, Olivia.”

Dammit! It seems I can’t say anything without him answering with some sort of sexual innuendo. Hell, this doesn’t even count as innuendo. Too blatant.

“Really, we should get down to business, Mr. Astor. I don’t want to waste your time or money.”

“*Get down* to business? Nice idea. In any case, I’m not in a hurry,” he tells me. “And I have plenty of money.”

I ignore this. “Why don’t you tell me exactly what you need me for?” The waiter brings our wine and appetizers, briefly interrupting our conversation. When he leaves, Tyler speaks.

“There’s plenty of time for you to figure that out. I’ll say, though, that our work together will last for several months — at least until I don’t find a use for you any longer.” I’m silent for several heartbeats. He’s letting me know in no uncertain terms that we’re playing by his rules now.

“As always, the gentleman,” I tell him. “I’m sure you can easily find a lawyer far more qualified than I am.” I can’t put on a performance for months. No freaking way.

“*You* are the woman I want.” I feel trapped. I’m not normally claustrophobic, and the room, though private, is hardly small, but it seems to be closing in on me. This can’t possibly work.

“Until you get your payback, right, Tyler?” I’m so flustered that I used his first name.

He sits back, his head slightly tilted to one side as he gazes at me with something in his eyes I can’t read. Maybe he

simply enjoys throwing me off kilter. Maybe, just maybe, if I don't react, he'll stop. Maybe.

“Payback? Maybe. Punishment? — that would be a nice idea . . . if I were into bondage. Hmm . . .” He pauses as if to consider it, then shakes his head and continues. “No, I don't need special kinks to get me off.” Tyler lifts his wineglass as if to offer a toast and takes a sip. “I'm enjoying this relationship, I must say.”

“We aren't in a relationship,” I growl.

“I disagree. I think we've been in a relationship since that little episode on my kitchen island,” he says, reaching across the table and taking my hand before I can move it out of the way.

My words become stuck in my throat as he lifts my hand to his lips and begins kissing my palm, then each of my fingers, acting like a lover. Damn if what he's doing doesn't feel incredible. Can a person both loathe and desperately desire a man at the same time? It seems a definite possibility. Hell — more than a possibility.

“So you're bent on destroying me,” I say.

Tyler stops kissing my hand but doesn't release it. I dig my fingernails into his palm, but at first this has no effect. When he finally lets go, all he does is rise from his chair, move to the seat next to me, and quickly take my hand again. A shudder passes through me when he rests our joined fingers high up on his thigh.

“I don't know where this game will end for us, Olivia,” he purrs. “But I'll tell you that my main goal is pleasure —

pleasure you owe me. We *will* finish what we started. And I suspect it will be a hell of a ride.” He leans closer, and his lips are only half an inch from mine. “Kiss me now.” I nearly do exactly this, but stop myself a millimeter before our lips touch.

“I’m not doing this.”

“You *will*, and you’ll enjoy it.”

“You might think I should be flattered that you find me worth your interest, but I’m not flattered in the least. I want no part of this game of yours.”

“Yes, you do, Olivia. I know how much you love playing games,” he says. “And I also know how much you want me. You’re doing a lousy job of hiding it.”

“Look, Tyler. I’m sorry, okay? I should’ve known I couldn’t win. My game was foolish, and I regret it.”

“The game has only just begun, Olivia. You started it, and I’ll finish it. There’s nothing you can do at this point that will cause me to lose interest.”

“I was putting on a show, Tyler. I’m not the girl you met at the bar last month.” I let my hand go limp in his. “That girl doesn’t exist.”

“I can find her again,” he says with a wolfish smile.

I start casting about in my brain for any way to make this guy run off in terror. Then I smile. I’ll simply bore him to death. That can’t be too hard. I’m not as fascinating as he seems to think. I work, spend time with my best friend, then work some more. I devote most weekends to working or volunteering. Piece of cake. Just being myself will drive this man away.

“Do you know the government poisoned alcohol during Prohibition, killing at least ten thousand people?”

Tyler looks at me with confusion. “What are you talking about?”

“And did you know that a hundred acres of pizza are served daily in the United States?” Tyler laughs before he pushes his chair a bit closer to mine.

“It won’t work, Olivia,” he whispers.

“Wh . . . what won’t work?” I gasp as his lips contact my neck. I really hope he doesn’t notice my leaping pulse.

“Spouting random facts, trying to bore me. I can bring out the naughty girl in no time at all. You want me. You can deny it all you want, deny it to yourself and to me, but I’ve got your number.”

Before I can respond, he takes hold of the back of my neck and kisses me, not in a quick meeting of the mouths, but in a kiss that’s full of possession and passion. When he pulls back, my body’s on fire and I’m glad I’m sitting, because my legs have turned to jelly. I’m not going to survive this — certainly not for months. I don’t think I’ll survive tonight. I have no defenses against this man . . . and he knows it.

Chapter Eighteen

Olivia

“ . . . insufferable . . . ”

“ . . . jackass . . . ”

“ . . . low-down . . . dirty rotten . . . ”

I’ve been storming around our tiny living room for the past hour, ranting and raving while my best friend and roommate sits on the couch, occupying herself by munching on tortilla chips. Each time my friend smiles, I shoot her a dirty look, which wipes the smile away, but only briefly. Piper clearly doesn’t understand how serious this situation is.

“Aren’t you going to say anything? I’ve been talking forever and I’m looking for advice,” I say, hands on my hips.

“Oh, is it my turn to speak now?” Piper asks.

“I’ve given you plenty of time to talk. You just sit here with your junk food, not a care in the world.”

Piper laughs. “You’ve been ranting nonstop, darling. I think it’s great, but, no, you haven’t let me speak yet.”

“Well, I’m giving you a chance now.”

“Do you want my honest opinion?”

“Maybe I don’t,” I reply. “The way you asked that question isn’t exactly inspiring me.”

“Too bad. I’m your best friend, and sometimes that calls for tough love,” Piper tells me.

“Fine. Give it to me.” I’m suddenly tired as my rage dims. I sit on the far end of the couch from Piper, though the couch isn’t all that big.

“I think you like this guy — really, *really* like this guy.” I wait for more, but Piper’s silent after saying the stupidest thing ever.

“That’s ridiculous, Piper. I’ve been going off — in great detail, I might add — on what I despise about him.”

“Yeah, sure. But I have a minor remark about that. We don’t usually get so passionate about people who don’t interest us.”

“This isn’t passion,” I say. “This is fury. Fury that he’s forcing me to work with him.”

“You can always tell your boss there’s a conflict of interest with this client . . . because he had your legs wide open on his kitchen counter while he did naughty, naughty things to you with his evil tongue.”

I hit my head violently with one hand. “I never should’ve told you about that. But I don’t throw *your* mistakes in your face, Piper.”

“That’s a lie and we both know it. If we can’t mock the ones we love, who in the hell can we have fun with?”

“Ugh! This has gotten so dang complicated.” I sag down and throw my arm over my face.

“Of course it’s complicated, you drama queen. You tried to punish your old best friend from a million years ago, the guy who also took your virginity several years later. That same man also comes from a wickedly bad family, and he’s now

become a very wealthy man who's sexy as hell. It was complicated the second you decided to carry out a revenge plot after having a little too much to drink."

"Okay, so I'm impulsive and I have a temper. Once I decide on something, I have to see it through, though. You know that."

"Yeah, that's called *stubborn*, darling, no matter how you sugarcoat it. Revenge isn't so sweet after all, is it?"

"You could at least pretend you're on my side," I say.

"I'm always on your side. You know that. If you kill this man, I'm your gal. I'll help you hide the body and give you an alibi."

I finally smile for the first time in hours, ever since that long and awkward dinner with Tyler. "I'd do the same for you," I say.

"Good, that's the Livie I want to hear from, not the crazy girl," Piper tells me. "What are we going to do about this situation?"

"I'm going to quit my job."

"We both know that's not going to happen, so what are you *really* going to do?"

"I don't know. Avoid the hell out of him. Maybe if I'm careful to stay at least three feet away from him at all times, my boneheaded hormones won't take over."

"*Boneheaded?* How Freudian of you. I see where your thoughts really are. You know, you could simply get it over with and stay in bed for forty-eight hours straight. Maybe that

will get him out of your system. In and out of your system, so to speak.”

“Don’t put thoughts like that in my head,” I say. “I hate the man.”

“Are you sure about that? I’m not. I think you want his body so badly that you’re melting down. I’ve wanted a few guys that much. It’s too damn bad I did nothing about it. Now it’s Friday night and I’m stuck at home with you instead of getting down and dirty with some hot stud.”

“Piper, you talk a hell of a game, but you’re about as experienced in the bedroom as I am.”

“Well, I have a much more vivid imagination than you do,” Piper says. “We both know that.”

“Of course you do. You’re a *librarian*,” I tell her with an epic eye roll.

“Which is why I can never meet any hot studs. You know what they say about sex in the stacks? Stirring up the dust and all that? Well, it never happens. I make a point of going there at least once every shift and I’ve yet to get ravished.” Piper lets out an elaborate sigh.

“One of these days I’m going to hire some serious hottie. He’ll be waiting back there with a video camera set up, and I’ll use the expression on your face to blackmail you for the rest of your life.”

“Oh, puh-lease, Livie. If I find a hot stud back there, I won’t give you a second thought. I’d simply rip off my clothes and pounce on him. Jump his proverbial bones. Or bone, but definitely more than once.”

“You’ve been reading far too many romance novels,” I say. “Maybe you should stick with the classics.” Piper smiles. She effectively pulled me from my grumpy mood, just as I knew she would. That’s what friends are for, even if it sometimes takes a while.

“And you need to answer your phone the next time that man calls,” Piper says. She shoots a pointed look at my cell, which has buzzed several times in the last hour.

“Nope. I’m off duty on the weekends — at least when it comes to Tyler.”

“*Comes?* Interesting word choice, as usual. But I thought he’s a primo client that you have to make happy.”

“I’ll say my phone died if I’m asked about it. He never told me I had to be available for anything this weekend. Where’s our bottle of wine?”

“I’m so on that,” Piper says. She leaps up and runs to the kitchen, immediately pulling out a bottle from the refrigerator and filling two glasses.

“Thanks! Let’s get plastered,” I tell her, “maybe eat some popcorn with a lot of butter, and forget all about men, for at least two days.”

“If you can go fifteen minutes without saying a word about Tyler, I’ll believe you hate the guy,” Piper says as she starts the movie.

After another hour and two bottles of wine, I’ve interrupted the film roughly a dozen times to grumble about Tyler. The knowing looks Piper sends my way aren’t reassuring, and

maybe it's time to call it a night. Piper will never believe I don't want Tyler. Hell, I might never believe it myself.

Chapter Nineteen

Olivia

Juggling the drinks and a sack with our sandwiches, I push my way into the library and go to the back, where Piper's waiting for me. When I hear quiet laughter, I stop. That voice sounds familiar, but what in the world is he doing at Piper's workplace? And why is Piper laughing? I stop and gulp in some much-needed air. It's most likely someone who sounds like Tyler. Since the man's constantly on my mind, it has to be my imagination.

Unfreezing, I move forward and turn the corner to find Tyler and Piper sitting at a table in the library break room. Both of them wear silly grins.

"What are you doing here?" My tone isn't friendly.

"I work here," Piper says, deliberately intercepting the question as she rises and grabs the bag from me.

Sending an irritated look my friend's way, I turn to Tyler, who doesn't appear in the least apologetic for being here.

"I had to check out a book and ran into Piper. We've been talking for a while now. Your friend has a vast knowledge of business procedures," Tyler says, and he kicks back in the chair as if he doesn't plan to go anywhere in the near future.

"I'm here now, so you can leave." Tyler's eyes narrow the slightest bit.

“Well, since we’ve managed to run into each other and I haven’t been able to get you on the phone, I think now’s a good time to discuss business.”

“Do you normally stalk your attorneys?”

I don’t want to allow him to set a precedent of showing up any time he feels like it at my stomping grounds. But it appears Tyler, as always, will do whatever he pleases.

“I do business wherever I feel like it. I didn’t become as successful as I have by sticking with convention.” We have a stare-off for several moments, during which I’m pretty sure the library heats up a few degrees.

Then Piper interrupts. “I’m going to have lunch. Are you guys joining me?”

I’m not thrilled my best friend’s entertaining the man who’s driving me insane, but I quickly quash the sentiment. What should Piper have done? Tell him to go away? That sounds much easier than it is. The guy doesn’t listen. He stopped doing that when he hit puberty — most likely before, actually.

“If we’re going to meet, we might as well eat. I’m hungry,” I finally say.

“Good. Me too.” Piper grabs her sandwich and kicks back, pretending she doesn’t notice the tension brewing.

I sit in the seat across from Tyler. At least this table’s too wide for him to play footsies with me. I don’t think I can handle him touching me right now. My nerves are scraped raw.

“I can’t finish this whole thing. Do you want half?” Piper asks.

“Thanks. Don’t mind if I do,” Tyler replies with a smile.

“What do you want to discuss?” I ask while slowly unwrapping my sandwich.

“We can eat first, talk later,” he says, seeming content to munch on the turkey and Swiss.

“Fine by me. I’ve started billing from the moment I sat.”

“Why don’t we call it an even eight hours today? That way you won’t get anxious,” he says, taking a bite and sitting back without a care in the world.

“I’ve got a full schedule,” I point out. “I don’t plan on meeting with you for eight hours.”

“You never know where things will lead,” he says right back. My friend’s whipping her head back and forth between the two of us, and I send her a silent plea for help.

Piper smiles. “Do you need me to leave so you two can get it on right here in the library?” I gasp. Tyler looks thoughtful for a moment before giving Piper his award-winning smile.

“I’ve heard rumors about the stacks,” he says with a wink. I turn red before ducking my head. I don’t know which person I’m more irritated with at the moment — Piper or Tyler.

“You both should keep your voices down. We are, after all, in a library,” I snap.

“Yes, but it’s slow today,” Piper says. “Talk all you want.”

Tyler finishes his sandwich and rises from the table. With wary eyes, I watch him move to the trash can and throw away his garbage before moving back to the table and taking the seat next to me.

“So,” Piper asks, “what have you done that’s making my best friend antsy?” Tyler throws her a smile before shifting in the chair and brushing his leg against mine. I refuse to move. If I show this man the effect he’s having on me, he’ll win. He likes winning. So do I.

The problem is, little fingers of delight shoot through my body where he’s touching me. And from the look my best friend’s shooting my way, Piper clearly knows exactly what’s going on across the table from her. Dammit!

“I plan on being her lover,” Tyler says.

I gasp at his audacity. “You seriously have no bounds, do you, Tyler?”

“No. I figure it’s best to tell it like it is. That way there will be no misunderstandings between us.”

“There’s definitely a misunderstanding between us. I don’t plan to get anywhere near a bed with you.”

“I never said it had to be on a bed, Olivia.”

“And how isn’t this sexual harassment?” I ask with a glare.

Tyler pauses as his lips turn up. Then he leans closer, his breath fanning the side of my face and neck. For once Piper’s silent, though I’d really like it if my friend would speak up and break this tension.

“Do you want to file a complaint? I know an excellent attorney.”

I’m not normally a violent person — lawyers have to be careful, after all — but I have to resist the urge to give some action to my fingernails.

Piper speaks up. “What exactly is Livie doing for you? I mean this in a work-related sense. The rest is obvious.” Tyler turns his attention to my best friend, and I let out the breath I haven’t realized I’ve been holding.

“I have several projects going on right now,” he says. “There’s plenty of work for Livie.” My breath hitches as he repeats my nickname. I don’t say anything. If I give him more power over me, I’ll never get out of this nightmare.

“That doesn’t tell me anything.” Piper isn’t one to mince words. I’m also eager to know what I’m doing for Tyler. Right now, he doesn’t seem to need my services — well, at least not my legal services.

“She’s offered her . . . let’s say . . . impressive skills to help me out,” Tyler responds.

His meaning’s loud and clear, and I feel my cheeks heat. I’m not his personal call girl and I’m not available for the services he’s insinuating I’m here for.

“Hmm. Don’t underestimate my best friend. She’s skilled in more ways than you know,” Piper says with a wink.

I’m so shocked I almost choke. What strange alternate universe have I fallen into? I understand this from Tyler. He’s a dog. But my best friend? Have aliens overtaken her body?

“Yes, I’m quite aware of her skills,” Tyler says. “We dated for a month . . . took a pause, and are now back at it, stronger than ever.”

“She *has* been gone a lot lately. And she’s been secretive. Are you the reason she’s so tired?”

Before Tyler can say anything, I jump in. “Sorry to say this, Piper, but I *have* been home. You’re the one who’s gone so much. Maybe you’ve been hiding some secrets of your own.” If I turn the tables, maybe this inquisition will stop. Please, please . . .

“Your life’s so much more interesting than mine,” Piper says, not falling for the bait. “I’ve been working at the library and helping my brother with his business because he’s short-staffed. Nothing interesting here.”

“How long have you been a librarian, Piper?” Tyler asks.

“Five years,” she says.

He pauses at this. “Well, you’re not like Mrs. Pokey, my old high school librarian,” he says with a laugh.

“And why is that, Tyler?”

I sit back. I want to see how Tyler digs himself out of this. Piper hates it when people put down her job. My best friend’s beautiful, but she’s also brilliant. The girl hates it when people assume she’s stupid because a person can’t have brains *and* looks.

“I picture librarians as little old ladies with big glasses and permanent scowls,” he says.

“Maybe that’s because you’re into stereotypes,” Piper tells him, “and don’t read all that much. I guess you pay people to look things up for you.”

“Not at all,” he says. “I might have to start reading for pleasure again if you’re the new example of librarians.”

Piper laughs, much to my dismay. “You’re quite smooth, Tyler. I think you’re far more bark than bite, though. Do you mean these things you say, or do you simply enjoy getting a reaction?”

“You say what you want, don’t you, Piper?”

“I’ve never found it productive to sneak around words. If you want answers, you’re far better off asking the right questions.”

“Good. Then what will it take to get your best friend in my bed?” This question is followed by a moment of silence. Tyler has shocked Piper, and I’m too horrified to say anything. Finally, Piper smiles, and my stomach sinks.

“First of all, you have to make it past her best friend,” Piper tells him.

“And do you approve?” he asks. She smiles again, and I watch as the two of them bond right in front of me.

“You’re growing on me.”

“Well, neither one of you is growing on me,” I say.

“Tsk, tsk, Livie. It’s not good to lie,” Tyler says.

“I’m done with this.” I rise from the table, shoot both of them a dirty look, and then storm away. This would be so much easier if I really did hate the man. But I don’t. I only want to. And being stuck with him isn’t making my life easier.

Chapter Twenty

Olivia

When my doorbell rings late on Saturday night, I jump and set my book aside. I have no doubt who's at the door. Ignoring Tyler's calls apparently isn't working like I hoped it would. But it's okay. I'll say I went to bed early, apologize for the phone problems, and promise to do my best to help him — when Monday morning comes.

After the disastrous library meeting on Tuesday, I managed to confine our meetings to public places, then Friday night I turned off my phone. I can only take so much of the man.

Ranting and raving about him all week to Piper didn't do me any good either. Piper's convinced I'm lying to myself, and I need to sleep with the man again then either marry him or dump him. I don't know what she's talking about. I ignore the knock, switch off my bedside lamp, and tuck myself beneath the covers, with my head securely under my pillow.

I watched romantic movies all day — stupid move — and then soaked in a hot bath. The way the water glided over my breasts made me think about sex — sex with one Tyler Astor. I hear the front door open and then hear voices. Piper's home early. She was driving for her brother earlier, so I thought I was safe, that no one would answer Tyler's knock.

Footsteps sound outside in the hallway and I hold my breath. I can pretend to be asleep and hopefully the two of them will go away. Heck, Tyler and Piper get along great.

Maybe the two of them can hook up. Why is this thought so incredibly depressing?

“Livie, you have a visitor,” Piper calls through the door.

“I’m trying to sleep,” I call back, which is stupid — now they *know* I’m awake.

“Coming in.” This is my only warning before my door’s thrust open and the light flips on.

“Look who I found on our doorstep. He insisted on seeing you. Since you’re *never* in bed this early, I figured you wouldn’t mind.” Piper gives me a wink behind Tyler’s back, then makes a kissy-face before she turns and leaves. *The traitor!*

“You’ve been avoiding me, Olivia,” Tyler says, moving confidently into my room. He looks around, and I blush as I look to see if anything’s out of place. Of course things are. It’s my *bedroom*.

He moves over to my favorite chair, a dark green stuffed armchair that’s seen better days, but is the most comfortable piece of furniture I own, and picks up the nightie I have hanging on the back. The look he sends me makes me blush and sputter at the same time.

“Don’t touch my stuff,” I snap. I want to jump out of the bed, but the nightie I’m wearing is even more minuscule than the one he has in his hot hands. Not the sort of thing to parade around in front of a man I’m not going to have sex with.

“I like it,” he says. “Do you always wear silky little nighties? And what are you wearing right now?”

“None of your business.” He looks at my comforter as if he can see through it, and this makes me clutch it tightly.

“It smells marvelous in here. Are you burning a candle?”

“I did earlier, but then I decided to go to sleep,” I growl.

“At . . .” He looks at his watch, then looks back at me.

“Nine on a Saturday night?”

“It’s none of your business when I do or don’t go to bed, Tyler. And your presence in my bedroom’s a clear invasion of privacy. You’re trespassing.”

“Do you have any idea how sexy you look right now with your hair ruffled, the top of your nightie dipping deliciously low, and your eyes spitting fire?” Dang. I didn’t realize my comforter slipped down. I tug on it.

“This is so not appropriate,” I gasp. If only I could say this with some sort of force.

“When will you realize there isn’t a question here? We’re going to be together, and that’s indisputable. You have nothing to feel guilty about by wanting me.”

“I don’t feel guilty, and I have no idea why you think I do.”

“You’ve been lying to me since we met, and whether you want to admit it or not, you still are.”

If I don’t stop this now, I’m not sure how far it will go. My raging hormones aren’t doing me a lick of good. Ugh! I don’t need to think about him and licking in the same train of thought.

“Look, Tyler. I told you I screwed up. I’m sorry I got you hot and bothered and walked out. I’m trying to move forward

now, and I won't do anything like that again. Can't you please request another attorney, one who can give you more time?"

"No. I think you're the most qualified person for what I have in mind."

The man has no qualms, no interest in hiding how he feels or what he expects. Yes, this is a clear invasion of privacy, of my professionalism, of my life, but my boss won't care. And what I did with Tyler already — more precisely, what I let him do to me — doesn't exactly put me in the best light.

It takes me a minute to find my voice. "This is insane, Tyler. You have to realize that."

"I don't think so. I like what you started in the bar," he says with a wolfish smile. "And I want to keep on playing. Once you start something involving others, the decision to say when it ends is no longer yours alone."

"What do you expect from me?"

He stands up very slowly, and I forget to breathe when he moves toward me and stands at the foot of my bed, all six-plus feet of him, all breathtaking, all intoxicating male. He leans down, and I scoot back, using the precious few inches I have.

"I expect *us* to see this through," he says. His voice arouses me in ways I didn't know were possible.

"Why?" I gulp. He throws me a look I can't quite interpret, and I'm silent for several heart-stopping moments. Finally, I take in a much-needed breath of air.

"You don't see it, do you?" he says. Now it's my turn to be silent and take a breath. When I speak, I'm not sure he can hear me, my voice is so quiet.

“See what?” He walks around to the side of my bed and gets even closer. Damn, he smells incredible.

“You’re mine, Olivia. I’ve wanted you from the moment we met in that bar. I tried to fight it, but some things are fated. Why are *you* fighting it?”

“I . . . uh . . .” I can’t complete my thought.

“Why not finish this? Neither of us is seeing anyone else right now.” I almost throw off my covers and hold out my arms to him. But the logical side of me knows this has to be a new twist on the game-playing between us.

Is he going for payback? Will he get me aroused and desperate and then turn and walk away? I deserve it. But there’s a big difference between the two of us. He has an ego the size of Alaska, and mine is fragile. I don’t handle rejection well. I definitely didn’t when I was ten or when I was twenty, and I’m not much stronger now. My fears give me the strength to stiffen my spine and throw him a withering look.

“I don’t think so, Tyler. Yes, maybe I do feel . . . some *small* glimmer of something when I’m around you, but not enough to compromise myself.” He smiles — the man actually smiles as he leans back a little.

“You’ll change your mind, Olivia. I guarantee it,” he says. Instead of walking out the door, he sits on the side of my bed.

“What are you doing?” I’m clutching the comforter so tightly my fingers are going to cramp up at any minute. But it’s worth it. It keeps me from reaching for him.

“Giving you something to think about.” He leans down and grips my head. Before I’m able to utter a word, his mouth

covers mine. Tyler traces my lips and then dives in as if he owns me.

Each stroke of his tongue sends tiny messages through my body, begging me to let him give me what I really want. The voice inside my head telling me this is an awful idea is growing farther and farther away. And then he releases me.

“Self-sacrifice doesn’t do you any good. You’ll hurt all night — I guarantee it.” He rises and strides from my room.

It takes me a good half hour before I can control the ache he left behind. He’s right. I’m going to hurt the rest of the night, and maybe a lot longer. I turn off the light, then toss and turn for the next hour. A message comes in on my cell phone, the one I told him was off, but merely was on vibration mode.

I’ll pick you up at six Monday evening — for work. Sweet dreams.

I want to toss my phone across the room and shatter it. I hate him, yes — for sure it’s hate. I want to go yell at Piper for letting the man in. But I decide against it. I’ll prove Tyler wrong and sleep like a baby. I’m wrong. Very wrong. No sleep comes.

Chapter Twenty-One

Olivia

By Monday morning, I'm uber grouchy from lack of sleep. I haven't heard another word from Tyler, but that doesn't mean the man hasn't been on my mind from the time he walked out of my bedroom a day and a half earlier.

I went jogging on Sunday, running through a nearby park until my legs were weak and I barely had the energy to step into the shower and wash the sweat off, but I still didn't manage to nod off for long.

I want him; that much is obvious. But a long line of women have lusted after Tyler for a very long time. Why can't he run off and play with one of those little bimbos? This thought sends a pang through me, though I fight to convince myself I really want an easy way out of this mess.

Amid all of my work on legal briefs and contracts — I'm going at it double-time — I wonder what we're meeting about tonight. If he plans to monopolize all of my evenings through the course of this project, I'll be very cranky by the time it ends. I have to struggle through a boatload of paperwork during the day, and everyone deserves private time. Sure my company gets to bill him for every hour he's with me, but that doesn't change how much I make, which doesn't leave much until I pay off my student loans.

I dash home and change into something more comfortable — this time slacks, because there's no way I'll wear another

skirt around Tyler. My doorbell rings and I reluctantly answer, expecting Tyler. I'm faced instead with a stranger.

"May I help you?"

"I'm here to give you a ride, Ms. Truman."

"I didn't call for a ride," I slowly say.

"Mr. Astor sent me." The guy doesn't look like a serial killer, but how am I to know what a serial killer looks like?

"Can you wait a moment?" I ask. He nods and I shut my door before sending a quick text. Tyler immediately responds that, yes, it's his driver, and that he, Tyler, looks forward to seeing me.

I grab my purse, go back to the door, and follow the driver to the black SUV waiting at the curb. We don't say anything when I get inside the vehicle. I use the drive to calm myself. When the driver pulls up to the gate at Tyler's house, I tense again.

"Mr. Astor can be found this way," the driver says before leading me inside the house and into the kitchen. Of course my eyes are immediately drawn to the damn kitchen island the second we step into the room. When I meet Tyler's gaze after a moment of staring at the kitchen island, I can't miss the victory in his expression. He knows exactly what I'm thinking about.

"I wasn't under the impression we'd be meeting at your place, Mr. Astor."

"This was easier for me. I've been running all day, and the paperwork's here at my place. I'm sorry I had to send my driver. I planned to pick you up myself."

“You’re a busy man,” I say. “Your driver’s very polite.”

“That’s good to hear. Tony’s worked with my family for a lot of years.”

I feel my nerves lessen as I speak with Tyler. It’s hard to be nervous when the man’s in a silly apron with the motto *Builders Only Use Hard Wood*.

“Do you always wear aprons?” I ask with a semblance of a smile.

“Only when I want to get a real smile.” I try to wipe the smile away but it grows instead. Damn him!

“It smells delicious in here. I’m sure you have something planned for later, so we should get business out of the way.” The look he gives me makes it more than obvious I’m the focus of his menu. My stomach jumps.

“I’m not in a hurry,” Tyler says before turning back to whatever he has cooking on the stove.

“It would be helpful if I could study the paperwork before we go over it.”

“I prefer going over things together.” Several moments pass and I begin to grow restless. I’m not the kind of person who sits around doing nothing. It isn’t in my personality.

“Do you need help?” I’m in no way obligated to offer help, but doing something has to be better than sitting here twiddling my thumbs.

“I’d love help. Want to prepare the salad? The vegetables are in the produce drawer in the fridge.”

I get up, move to the refrigerator, pull out the veggies, then go back to the island. Tyler pulls out a cutting board and a ten-inch knife and reaches around me to place it on the island, his body brushing against mine as he pauses for a few seconds too long.

“I’ve got it,” I whisper, hating the huskiness in my tone.

“Thanks,” he replies, and strokes along my side with one hand before he withdraws. My fingers are a bit shaky as I begin tearing lettuce. It’s safer than cutting at the moment. Anything requiring expert knife skills won’t be wise. I need to get the trembling under control first.

Tyler finishes cooking as I put the salad together, then I help set out plates and silverware. This is far too domestic.

“You realize this isn’t a date, right?” I ask as the two of us begin eating.

Tyler looks up, finishes chewing, and smiles. “What makes you say that?”

“This is work, Mr. Astor.” I stress his name to get the point across. “And I *am* billing you for every minute I’m here. We’ve been over this before.”

“We’ll see,” he says before looking down at his plate and picking up another forkful.

“I want to be very clear. You’re being billed for my time. So if you want to waste an hour cooking and eating, you should be aware of that.” He needs to get this. I need to say it out loud to remind myself.

“I’m not worried about it, Olivia.”

I want to shake the man. I have no idea what he's thinking, but I know the way he expects the evening to end — with me in his bed. It won't happen. I barely taste the food and gulp down my wine a little too quickly in my desperation to calm down.

“I don't want to be out too late. I have a case I need to work on tomorrow,” I say, hoping he'll respect this.

“What are you working on besides this project with me?”

“It's nothing you'd be interested in,” I tell him.

“You'd be surprised by what I'm interested in,” he says, and puts down his fork. I think about refusing to answer, but it's childish, so I settle back with my glass of wine and open up.

“The work I'm doing tomorrow is pro bono. The case involves a little girl — only five years old. Her stepfather was beating her, which went on for six months. Her mother worked two jobs and didn't realize what was happening. The girl's been in foster care for almost a year now, and the mom's jumped through a lot of hoops to get her back. She divorced her husband, has taken parenting classes, and has more than proved she loves her daughter.”

“Will she get her daughter back?”

“It depends on the judge. I hope so. I've only been an attorney for three years, but I volunteered for a children's advocacy agency through college, and I can usually tell when parents are lying. I honestly don't think this mother is. I hope she gets full custody of her daughter. Despite all the child has

been through, she's a ray of sunshine. She's a sweet, smart little girl."

"It sounds as if you've gone through a lot of emotional cases," he says, and I'm surprised to hear sympathy in his tone.

"Yes. But it's been worth it. I hope I make a difference."

"There are several sides to you, aren't there, Olivia?" he asks before making sure he has my full attention. "Just like there are a number of sides to me."

His comment derails what I'm about to say. Who is this man? I can't possibly be wrong about him . . . can I? I'm well aware of the old saying about a man being born with a silver spoon in his mouth, and that is Tyler Astor right down to his thousand-dollar loafers. He's the complete opposite of me.

I know he lived in a modest home for more than a few years with his guardians, but his inheritance was sitting there, waiting for him to turn eighteen, and when he did, the playboy lifestyle came on full throttle.

"I've seen one side of you — not the best — plastered all over the gossip rags," I finally say.

"We all have a story. You didn't bother to find mine. You assumed I was an asshole. Do you still think that?" Damn. This man doesn't pull his punches. I don't know how to reply to his question. Should I be honest? Or is this part of his game?

"I guess I'd say yes and no." Tyler sits for a moment and then surprises me when he laughs, true merriment shining in his eyes.

“I enjoy your honesty, Olivia. It’s refreshing, especially in the world I live in, where everyone besides you is constantly kissing my ass. Let’s move to the living room and finish this.”

Without waiting for my assent, he stands, grabs a bottle of wine, and begins moving. I’m left with no choice but to follow. I’m almost eager to see what’s coming next. I might be as bad as he is.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Tyler

I settle down on the couch and put the bottle of wine on the coffee table. Where will Olivia choose to sit? She looks at the couch, then over at the chair, which is about as far from me as she can get. Predictably, she heads toward the chair.

“Join me on the couch. We have documents to look over.” She turns and gives me a skeptical look. “I’m not going to bite, Olivia,” I say with a smile. “Not unless you want me to.”

This comment earns me a contemptuous glare as she stiffly walks toward me and sits so tightly against the arm of the couch that not a wisp of air can slide between her and the leather. I make her nervous . . . which means I affect her more than she wants.

“Do you really want to know why I asked you to be my attorney?” I scoot closer to her. She gulps from her wineglass. “Maybe you should slow down with that.”

“I have a driver — *your* driver — and I’m an adult,” she says, taking another drink.

“Yes, you most certainly are,” I say.

“You were going to tell me why you hired me,” she reminds me, her eyes wary.

“I think about you day and night. I think about the taste of you, about touching you, teasing you, finally making love . . .” Her eyes dilate. She’s so damn responsive. The problem is my

words are also affecting *my* body. I shift on the couch as my jeans become far too uncomfortable.

“I haven’t been able to work lately, and that’s not good — I have a lot of important projects underway. But I can’t focus on anything but you.” I stretch out my hand and rest it on her thigh.

I don’t move my fingers, letting her adjust to my touch. I can take her, no doubt she’ll like it. But I want her to beg me, to need me. She rejected me, and now I want her pleading and begging instead.

“Why me?” she finally chokes out.

“Why *not* you?”

“I can’t think right now. You’re confusing me,” she says, setting down her empty wineglass and holding her head in her hands.

“What’s wrong?” Is this another act she’s putting on?

“I drank too much.” I sigh with frustration. I never should’ve brought the wine to the table. This isn’t how I planned for my night to end.

“Is that an excuse, Olivia, or are you running from me again?”

“I don’t have to run from you, Tyler. I can do whatever I want, whenever I want,” she snaps.

“You want to make love to me.”

She lifts her head so she can glare at me. “It must be nice to be so confident.”

“Why play modest when I know who I am?”

Her sweet lips open in an exasperated expression. I want to close mine around hers and end this debate, but I've never bedded a woman who isn't fully accountable for her actions.

"I think I hate you," she finally tells me.

"No you don't, Olivia. You might want to hate me, but you certainly don't."

"I'm ready to go home now, Tyler," she tells me through clenched teeth.

"I'm not ready to let you leave," I say right back.

We scowl at each other for several tense moments until her expression changes. She leans forward and lifts the bottle of wine — our second bottle, and I didn't have much from the first. She refills her glass and drinks it down before looking at me again.

"What are you doing now?"

"Isn't this what you want, Tyler? You aren't going to leave me alone until you get exactly what you're after, right?" she says. "Me drunk and in your bed. I dared to toy with the rich playboy, so now I need to put out."

She reaches for the bottle again, but this time I stop her. This game changed in a way I don't want it to. She's playing the victim. I don't force women.

"This is absurd. Knock it off."

"Why? You want me, right? So let's get it over with," she says as she leans against me.

"As much as I want you in my bed, I'm not taking advantage of you." She turns quickly, suddenly straddling my

lap and pressing down against the part of me that's throbbing in agony. Honor. Why in the hell do I have to feel it? This is what both of us want — need. But instead of kissing her as my lower brain tells me to, I stand with her in my arms.

“What’s the matter, Tyler? Are you not man enough to go for it now that I’m offering?”

“We can’t do this.” I can barely speak through my frustration.

“Are you not turned on when a woman is forward?” she taunts, acting perfectly content to lie against my chest as I hold her close to my body.

I grab her chin and make sure she’s focused on me. “This isn’t a game,” I say before leaning in and kissing her roughly to get my point across. “I want you and I’ll have you. But not at this moment. It will happen when you won’t be able to blame alcohol the morning after.”

“Your loss,” she slurs.

“You can sleep here tonight. If you still feel the same in the morning, we’ll talk,” I tell her as I carry her through the house, quickly making my way up the wide staircase to the second floor and into my bedroom.

“I don’t want to sleep here,” she murmurs, but her eyes are closing.

“Tough! This conversation isn’t finished, but you need to be sober first.”

I lay her down and she looks as if she’s struggling to open her eyes. Within a minute, she gives up the battle and I groan when I realize she’s already passed out. Even if I’d taken her

up on her offer, she wouldn't have lasted long enough for us to make love. And I'm not the type to resort to the human equivalent of a blow-up doll.

After pacing my room for several passes, I move over to her and remove her shoes and trousers. The sight of her barely-there silk panties sends a new surge of pain through my body. She needs water and I need a break from looking at her to give myself time to get my libido under control.

I leave the room, practically limping from the bulge in my pants. When I return, she hasn't budged an inch. I wake her long enough to make her drink the glass of water, then she passes out again. Sleeping isn't going to be nearly as easy for me.

Why do I have to torture myself further? Obviously because I can't help it. I lie on top of the covers — climbing in beneath them with her half-bare body would prove fatal. When I put my arms around her, she snuggles against me. As I hold her, I remind myself this is a basic instinct, that she could be any woman and I'd react the same way. But as my body pulses and my heart thuds, I wonder if maybe, just maybe, it's only *this* woman I want.

That certainly can't be true. Because if it is, I'm surely damned.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Olivia

Light's creeping through the gap in the curtain when my brain starts to reach daytime speed. I'm fighting to remember the night before. Where am I? How did the night end? How did I make it to bed? My body stills. Feeling a foreign weight on my stomach, I look down and see a man's arm. I know whose arm it is. I glance over and look directly into Tyler's eyes. Damn, this is a powerful way to wake up.

"Good morning, Olivia." This is all he says, yet his words travel through my blood straight to my core. Desire, pure and strong, runs through me. And it's hot and heavy.

"Do you have nothing to say?" he asks, turning us so we're face to face, his arm still around me.

"Where are we?" I croak.

"In my bed," he replies. The pulsing of my heart speeds up.

"Why am I in your bed?" I don't so much as move a pinky finger.

"Because you got drunk, threw yourself at me, then passed out." All the while he speaks, he's caressing my back.

"I see." I close my eyes and the night before flashes through my mind, making me cringe as I remember every little detail, making me wish I could claim ignorance. I threw myself at this man, dammit.

“Have you changed your mind, Olivia?” he asks, pushing my tousled hair away from my eyes. I feel exposed, excited, and unsure of what to do next.

“You won’t quit pursuing me until we have sex?” I can’t keep fighting this, not when I hunger for this man. He freezes beside me, and his hand stops running through my hair.

“I’m not a rapist, Olivia.” The barely leashed fury in his voice tells me to proceed with caution, though I’m not afraid of him. I’m afraid of myself.

“I know,” I say. “But you definitely go after what you want.”

“Yes, I do. I don’t think that’s a bad thing.”

“And you’ve decided you want me, so there’s no stopping you.” If I’m honest with myself, I don’t want him to stop. Lying in his arms doesn’t feel unpleasant. Can I hate him and desire him at the same time? I think I can. Nope, I know I can. I make a decision.

“Well, Tyler, what are you waiting for?”

He doesn’t know this won’t be our first time. I’m more than aware of this fact. Will he remember when he sinks into my body? I don’t think he will. Will this crush me more than I’ve already been crushed? It might. His movements stop as he looks in my eyes.

“Is this what you really want, Olivia. I don’t require sacrifices.”

He presses against me, letting me feel his arousal. Heat surges through me, cementing my choice. I don’t know this new Tyler, don’t really know what kind of man he is, but I

know if I don't make love to him again, I'll regret it to the end of my days.

He was my first childhood crush, my first best friend. He's failed me in so many ways, and I have no doubt he'll fail me again. But why not do what I've wanted to do the whole time even if I wouldn't allow myself to acknowledge this until now?

He's already taken me once, and it isn't like I've been sleeping around with multiple men. This won't make me a horrible person — just human. And they don't make us wear scarlet letters anymore, do they?

“I admit I want you, Tyler.”

“Are you sure? I don't think I can stop once we start,” he says, his fingers tightening in my hair and his body pressing closer to me.

“I'm sure, Tyler.”

He reaches for me, and I hold up a hand. “What?” he asks.

“I'll be right back.” I rush to his bathroom to take care of necessary business. I take exactly five minutes to take a record-breaking shower and brush my teeth with an unused toothbrush I find in his drawer. When I come out, Tyler pulls me into the bed without hesitation and flips me onto my back. His eyes are burning with need.

“I thought you might change your mind,” he says before bending and kissing me.

“No. There will be no mind-changing this time,” I assure him.

Then he presses into me, and I feel the full weight of his body, his arousal pushing against my heated core. It sends waves of desire through my body.

Tyler runs his mouth down my jaw and neck. He growls in frustration at the barrier of my shirt as he moves lower, but this problem doesn't last long. I bask in the feel of him, and my moans mix with his. My fingers trail down his back as he spreads my thighs and rests between them.

He rubs his arousal against me, and I raise my hips, wanting to skip the foreplay and feel him thrusting inside me. I need this connection, need our bodies entwined. But he begins moving, kissing his way down my body, making me quiver with each new place he touches, exploring me, feeding my hunger.

When he spreads me open and his tongue slowly trails up my folds, my back arches from the bed. No, this hasn't been the wrong choice. He's masterfully lifting me to the greatest pleasure. The feelings are so much stronger than eight years before. Yes, it was amazing then, but now, now it's indescribable.

Closer and closer I come to an orgasm, but then he stops, moves to my thighs before drifting back to my little bundle of nerves and circling it with his tongue. I cry out my frustration, but he knows exactly how close to bring me before backing off again, drawing out the agonizing pleasure for what seems like forever.

When he climbs his way back up my body and sucks on my breast while thrusting his fingers inside my wetness and flicking his thumb across my swollen bud, I tug on his hair.

I reach down, needing to feel his silk-covered hardness. My fingers wrap around his erection and squeeze, feeling his groan through my entire body.

He kisses his way up my neck again. “Are you protected, Olivia?” he asks while still pumping his fingers inside me.

“No,” I moan. Do I care? The last thing I want is for him to stop. He turns away from me, and I’m tempted to yell at him. But he pulls out a condom from a bedside drawer and comes back to me.

“Put it on,” he says, turning on his side and showing off what he has to give. Impressive.

“Gladly,” I tell him throatily, grabbing the packet and ripping it open.

I’ve never done this before, and I fumble with the damn thing. I make him groan again when I’m squeezing the tip of his arousal while trying to get the latex on.

“Never mind. I’ll do it.”

“I’ve almost got it,” I say with an urgency I know we’re both feeling.

Though it most likely takes me five times as long as it would’ve taken him, he allows me to finish, and then I run my hand up and down his hardness.

“I’ve got to have you now,” he says and turns me onto my back without delay.

“Yes, now, Tyler!” I wrap my legs around him and trail my nails along the taut muscles of his back. I close my eyes and

wait for him, and when it doesn't immediately happen, I wiggle.

“Open your eyes, Olivia.” His words are a quiet command, and I don't consider disobeying. I stare at him as he fully sinks inside me in one smooth thrust.

I immediately explode, the pleasure growing more intense as my body squeezes around him in hard pulses. He slowly moves, drawing it out as we continue gazing into each other's eyes. *So erotic.*

“You're so damn responsive that it takes my breath away,” he reverently whispers when I feel the last of my orgasm begin to dim.

“More,” I plead. I want to feel this over and over again. He doesn't disappoint me. He begins thrusting fast and hard inside me, and my body surges again and again in ecstasy. I'll never be able to leave his bed after this.

When the sun's fully up on the horizon, his body stiffens, and he lets go, releasing his pleasure while buried deep within me. I grow sleepy beneath him, but the contentment I feel being held in his arms frightens me. He rolls over and pulls me against him.

“You're mine now, Olivia.” His words send both a thrill and terror through me. I know this isn't going to have a happy ending for me — our connection is only temporary.

But why not enjoy it while it lasts? I can worry about the fallout some other day, can't I? At least he isn't sending me away this time. We've already made progress I might've epically failed at revenge, but this is so much better.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Olivia

I sit on Tyler's deck and shudder as a breeze passes by. It isn't the coldest afternoon in Seattle, yet it certainly can't be considered warm. Still, the great view makes up for my discomfort. But I have a larger problem. What in hell am I going to say to Tyler now? He's been sound asleep since I snuck from his bed, took a shower — a long one, this time — and then wandered outside.

The house is nice, not what I expected him to have. Yes, it's huge, much larger than a single man needs, but there are touches that make it more inviting, almost warm.

Pictures of him and his brothers along with the older couple they lived with as children hang from his walls. Throw blankets rest on the back of a couple of comfortable armchairs in the living room, and the coffee table has a fishbowl centerpiece.

"Is something wrong?" Tyler's warm breath on my neck startles me. I was so deep in thought I didn't hear him approach. At his nearness, dangerous cravings build up low in my belly. Dang it. This will never end.

Agreeing to work with this man was foolish — not that I had a choice. Making love with him again has been reckless. How can I separate myself from him emotionally if I continue giving him my body? I can't, but I also don't regret it. I've

covered my need for this man with anger. This is a no-win situation.

“Olivia, what’s wrong?” he repeats.

“Nothing, it’s just a little cool out here,” I lie.

“One minute.” He disappears and is back a few moments later with a thick blue throw. He lifts me then sits down, pulling me onto his lap and wrapping the cover around both of us. I instantly forget about the cold. It isn’t only the throw warming me.

“Thank you,” I whisper, curling up against him.

I can tell myself all day it’s for his body heat, but it’s more for the comfort of being in his arms. This is foolish. How can I think of him as my lover now instead of my enemy after only a few hours pinned beneath him . . . and on top of him . . . and . . . Stop it! I’ve always been logical. Many think having sex while hating their partner is a sin and will not do it. I’m apparently not that type of girl. I’m unforgivably weak, and I want to have sex with him more and more and more, even knowing he’s certainly the enemy.

“I never sleep past six in the morning, and now it’s noon. I feel like a sloth,” he says, each word a whisper on the side of my neck.

“That was just a nap, so you have nothing to worry about,” I tell him. “I have to go into the office today, though.”

“Forget about work. Let’s go back to bed.” As he says this, he unclasps his hands, and slips one beneath the cover, and begins caressing my stomach. My instant arousal tells me he can take me right now without protest. I let out a groan when

his fingers slip beneath my shirt and travel over the mound of my breast.

Before I get too far gone, I pull from him. I need to get away from here and give myself time to think. I certainly can't do that while Tyler's touching me.

"What's the matter?" His fingers still, and when I don't reply right away, he turns my head so he can see my eyes, my mouth only inches from his.

"Nothing's wrong."

"Tell me the truth, Olivia."

"I just . . . this all happened . . . and now . . . I just . . . maybe I should go home and change for work." The words feel as if they're being torn from my throat.

His eyes dilate and his lips compress, and for a moment I think he's angry. But he immediately calms, and I let out a breath of relief. I don't feel like fighting right now. That's all we ever seem to do.

"We make the best decisions when we don't have our guard up," he tells me before clasping the back of my neck and pulling me to him. He captures my lips in a heated kiss. I begin losing the battle with myself again.

When I'm ready to pull his pants down and mine with them, Tyler releases my mouth and leans back, fire gleaming in his eyes, his lips wet from our kiss, making me want to lean forward and kiss him again.

"I could carry you to my bedroom and make love to you over and over again until you don't have an ounce of fight left," he says, his fingers still on the back of my neck, moving

in slow circles that are sending shivers down my spine. “But I’m not going to do that. I don’t want you to say I coerced this. I want you to own it, to love it, to accept that this is where we’re supposed to be.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means that I’m going to be miserable. I’m going to take you home so you can have time to figure things out. And then, when we come together again, it will be that much better.”

There’s so much heat pooling inside of me that the stupid blue throw, which was wonderful at first, is now suffocating me. Before I think twice about it, I lean forward and kiss him, every ounce of hunger I’m feeling conveyed in my response. Every time he begins to let me go, I cling to him. I certainly have no right to play a victim.

“Okay, we’ve already made love, so one more time doesn’t make me dishonorable,” he growls before unzipping my slacks and pushing them and my panties off my hips. “But then I’m taking you home to think.”

There’s no more talking as Tyler pulls his trousers down and shifts me so I’m sitting on top of him. With a hard thrust, he’s inside me, and it’s exactly where I want him to be. I’ll think later. For now I want to feel and make these memories last a lifetime.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Olivia

“I’ll come by to pick you up in one hour.”

“What? Why?”

I’m groggy as I listen to Tyler’s disgustingly alert voice on the other end of the phone. Glancing at my clock, it’s only seven in the morning, and on a Saturday. I’m hardly thrilled.

“It’s time you see my project. Get up and be ready. I’ll bring coffee.”

“When did we decide this?” I ask. I can never be called a morning person, not on the best of days, but the weekends are my time to sleep until at least nine. Tyler’s interrupting this, and I’m not pleased.

“Right now,” he tells me. “I have a call coming in, so get up and dressed. I’ll see you in an hour.”

I hold the phone to my ear, stupefied. He hung up on me. What I should do is turn off my phone, roll over, and bury my head beneath a pillow. No, these tactics haven’t worked before. And yes, he’s still my client, and I need to make him happy. I’ve managed to avoid him since Monday when we made love. I guess my time’s up. There’s no chance I’m getting back to sleep now. Throwing off my covers, I stomp into the bathroom.

After drying off from my shower, I stand in front of my closet stark-naked and wonder what to wear. It’s a weekend,

and that normally means shorts or sweats, depending on the weather.

This isn't an official work meeting, or I don't think it is, so I compromise by picking out a pair of jeans, a nice cotton shirt, and my favorite sweater. I move to my dresser and look in the panty drawer. What if we end up making love again? I don't want to be caught with less than sexy underwear. At the same time, I don't want to make it obvious I'm hoping for or expecting sex.

Ugh! Dating without *actually* dating a guy isn't easy. I decide at long last on delicate lace underwear — not because of him, of course, but for me. Decision made, I drag on my clothes, throw my hair into a ponytail, and brush on a light coating of makeup. I'm finishing when my doorbell rings. Since Piper was gone last night I'm the only one home.

With a little pettiness, I wait until he rings the bell again before I amble to the door and take my sweet time unlocking it. The sight of him standing here with flowers in one hand, coffee in the other, his hair hidden beneath a baseball cap, and an old college sweatshirt hugging his chest takes my breath away. I don't have a chance to give him a standard greeting.

He sweeps past me, sets the flowers and coffee on my table, then comes back and lifts me into his arms. His head descends as my lips form an O of shock and he devours my mouth while his hands grip my butt and squeeze.

"I've missed you. I thought work would never end," he says when he releases my lips and sets me on the floor. I'm dizzy as I try to get my bearings. "I got called to London this week and

was working eighteen-hour days. All I've thought about is getting back and ravishing you.”

Maybe he's toying with me. Still, much to my frustration, his words send a glow through me. I don't want him to get the idea, though, that I'm his for the taking whenever he feels an itch below the belt. So I repress the glow.

“What makes you think you get to have me?” I say, one hand on my hip as I try to give him a stern look. He smiles as he pulls me against him again, knocking the fight right out of me as my breasts tingle and my core heats. He smugly smiles — dammit, the man can't possibly miss the effect he's having on me.

“I told you you're mine, Olivia,” he murmurs against my lips. “And I keep what's mine.”

He stops talking and stops me from replying as he plunders my mouth again. When his hand slips beneath my sweater and skims up my stomach and over my breast, I sigh into his kiss. I enjoy it for a moment, but reluctantly push away from him.

“Didn't you promise me coffee?” I gasp. His eyes dilate, and he groans his disapproval, but he ushers me to the table where he set the flowers and coffee.

“As promised, madam,” he says with a bow that makes me smile.

“Thank you. It *is* the least you can do for waking me up so early on my day off,” I tell him, trying to sound annoyed but not pulling it off.

Taking a sip of the coffee, I sigh in happiness. A mocha latte — just what the doctor ordered. I have no idea how he

knows my favorite coffee, and I'm not going to question it. I can see him calling my legal secretary and asking. Is it because he's trying to please me? This is so confusing.

"I would've never thought of waking you if I didn't plan to give you an excellent day," he says with a wink and picks up his cup of coffee.

"And what are we doing?"

"You'll have to get out of here to find out," he tells me.

"Tyler."

"Yes?"

"Thanks for the flowers. They're beautiful." I've always been a fan of daffodils and lilies.

"Not nearly as beautiful as you," he replies, then gives me his patented mega-wattage smile. If I'm not careful, his smile will drop me to my knees. I'm sure, though, he'd enjoy having me in exactly that place. So convenient.

However, even without the smile, the man can drop me to my knees. My original plan to drop him, even drop-kick him, was foolish, and everything has turned around on me. But the thing that frightens me the most is that I don't care — I don't care at all.

"If you're dragging me out, I insist you tell me something. What is this big project?" He sighs as if dealing with a child. I don't care what he thinks about me. Answers are justified.

"I'm taking you to the Sunriver Children's Camp," Tyler finally says.

“Sunriver Children’s Camp?” I ask. I’ve heard of the place. It’s a hundred-acre plot outside of the city, and a massive construction project’s going on there. “What do you have to do with that?”

“I’m partly building it,” he answers.

“How much of a part?” I ask.

“It’s kind of . . . well, it’s my baby.”

“You? Really? This is *your* project?” I ask. This isn’t something I expected from a spoiled playboy. For a moment he looks hesitant, but soon the look is replaced with his normal confident grin.

“Even assholes do good things once in a while.” I stand in silence. What can I say to this?

I hate this news about Tyler, hate to have something humanize him. It’s much easier for me to resist the man when I think of him as a bastard. To find he has a caring side — is unacceptable, a threat to my sanity.

Then again, don’t wealthy people look for projects as tax write-offs? That’s what this has to be, if only for the sake of my own mental health. I guess I’m about to find out.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Tyler

I'm on edge as I drive to the construction site. Insecurity isn't me at all. But this place has been a dream of mine for years, and it's in the final stages. Soon, the camp will open, and children with disabilities and those who are unfortunate enough to be in the foster-care system will run through the paths and take part in the multitude of activities my team and I envisioned.

I don't understand my anxiety. All I know for sure is that I like this woman next to me. It killed me not to call her, text her, email her, hell, send a carrier pigeon to her, while I was in London. I was giving her the space she demanded. I told myself I could go a week without talking to her. It was a little less than a week, actually, but I was determined I could do it. That I missed her as much as I did isn't exactly reassuring, but what am I going to do?

Apparently, I'm going to buy her flowers and pull her into my arms and kiss her until neither one of us can walk straight. But if Olivia doesn't love the camp as much as I do, I'll be . . . I don't know the word I'm looking for . . . is it *hurt*? No way. I can't be hurt by that — can I?

I don't really know this woman, but in a short time, she's turned my world upside down more than once, and I like her, *really* like her.

The more I learn about her, the more I want to spend a lot more time with her. I didn't think that possible after the last woman — and her affinity for closets . . .

“Wow. I've seen the specs of this place, Tyler, but looking at something on paper and actually *seeing* it are two entirely different things,” Olivia says, breaking me from my reverie. We're pulling up in front of the main lodge —15,000 square feet and three stories, made of logs, with giant picture windows and inviting doors. It's certainly impressive.

“This is the gathering place for the campers. I wanted it to be big and beautiful, and more importantly, I wanted it to be inviting. I want this entire experience to be the best of these kids' lives. Some of them won't have anything else like it.” I open the driver's door and come around to her side of the car. She steps out and walks with me to the lodge. The doors are open and we can hear the noise of power tools.

“We have crews going seven days a week. Summer's around the corner, and I want to be open by July. We have less than a month to go.”

“How much more do you have to do before it's complete?”

“We're almost finished with construction, then we have to decorate, get the special-needs equipment installed, test it out, and wait for the final inspection. I've hired the best of the best, so it's moving along quickly,” I tell her before beginning the grand tour.

We go through the lodge, which has a state-of-the-art kitchen, medical rooms, lounge areas, game areas, and private nooks with desks for children who need a few moments to themselves.

“A lot of autistic children need to have quiet time,” I say, “and we’ve tried to anticipate the needs of all of the children who will be coming.” Olivia listens to me explain how the rooms will be used. After leaving the lodge, we make our way through a maze of trails with clearly marked signs.

There are several sections to the camp, three-sided cabins taking up a huge portion, and some fully enclosed cabins taking up another section. One area has a cluster of yurts, and another area is denser with trees and brush and has places carved out for tents and fire pits.

Each kind of camping experience you could ever imagine is being put into place. The paths are wide and paved so they’re easily wheelchair accessible, and so are the recreation areas, where the kids can shoot bows and arrows, learn how to make a fire, or take part in any number of other camp activities.

When I stop at one of the enclosed cabins and open the door, she smiles as she steps inside. This one has the name “Rocker Hut” on the outside, and it will be a budding musician’s dream come true.

Instruments are painted on the walls, the wooden bunk beds are carved with musical notes, the floor has a drum set etched into it, and the curtains look as if they’re on fire. The closet holds a number of real musical instruments, and in the corner a keyboard sits waiting.

“Did you put this much time into every cabin?” she asks as she touches the camp mattress that’s waiting for bedding to be placed on it.

“We aren’t finished — not even close — but each enclosed cabin will have a theme. The three-sided cabins are all the

same, but through the years the kids will personalize those as well.”

“So you aren’t done with the decorating?” she excitedly asks.

“No, my brothers and I did this one as an example of what we expect. We want each cabin to have its own theme.”

“Have you decided on the themes yet?”

I smile at the look on her face. “No, not yet. That phase is about a week away.”

“May I volunteer, please?” Olivia asks as she leaves the cabin and runs to the next one. I hurry to catch up.

“I’d love that.” This woman awes me.

“And I get to choose any theme I want? Can I do more than one?”

“Yes. Okay, anything within reason,” I say with a laugh. “We wouldn’t want . . . well, you know . . .”

“Thank you for sharing this with me, Tyler!” Olivia runs back to me and jumps up in my arms, her face shining.

“Thank you for caring,” I tell her, suddenly choked up with something uncomfortably close to emotion.

I kiss her hard and she melts against me. But then she wiggles to get down and rushes into the empty cabin in front of us. After scanning the space, she sets her purse on one of the built-in desks and rifles through it for a notebook and pen.

“I’m going to do a princess theme in one cabin. The curtains will be satin and lace, and they’ll have a gigantic crown at the top. And the walls will be covered with drawings

capturing my favorite scenes from Disney movies — the teapot and rose from *Beauty and the Beast*, and the magic carpet from *Aladdin*. We can make dress-up totes for kids of all sizes and have a salon day at the lodge where the girls can get their hair done. A lot of little girls love the idea of being a princess.” She starts scribbling again. I don’t get a chance to say anything. She makes several notes, then flips the page for the next cabin in line.

“This one will be superheroes. I was going to marry Superman when I was a little girl, and my first bathing suit was Wonder Woman. When I realized superheroes aren’t real, I was devastated, but everyone, young or old, loves a good superhero story.”

I lean against a bed and can’t help but grin as more and more ideas pop from her imagination. Heck, I might need to build a few more cabins. I love each and every one of her ideas. We spend an hour in the cabin before she finally stops, then looks at me with a sheepish smile.

“I’m sorry. I’ve been going on for a while, haven’t I?” she says, tucking her notebook into her purse.

“I could sit here all day and night and listen to you. I love that you want to participate in my vision.” Maybe it’s time to drag her off to one of the counselors’ cabins. Am I changing this much? Maybe. As I pull her into my arms, the door swings open. With a grumble, I release Olivia and turn to find my brothers in the doorway, stupid grins on their faces.

“Are you planning on christening the place, Tyler?” Blake asks.

“Sure looked that way to me,” Byron adds.

“Shut up, both of you,” I tell them before addressing Olivia. “Sorry about my brothers.” I can see heat rising in her cheeks as she casts her eyes down in embarrassment. “Don’t worry about them.”

“I’m fine, Tyler,” she says. “Why don’t you spend time with your brothers while I look at the other cabins. Are they all the same?”

“No, a couple have special bathrooms for kids who have a harder time getting around, and some of the layouts are a little different.”

“I’ll go look at them while you visit.”

“I’d rather be with you,” I tell her.

Blake steps forward and holds out his hand. “We don’t want to run you off, Olivia. I’m sorry if we embarrassed you. We’re just ribbing our little brother.”

“Oh, I’m not running off,” she says, looking up with a relieved smile. I realize my brothers intimidate her. Blake’s gesture to speak to her eases her embarrassment.

“It’s nice to meet you,” Byron says. “Wait. We met, at the bistro bar, right? Nascosto?”

“Yes,” Olivia murmurs but she can’t quite meet Byron’s eyes. I think back to that meeting and remember Byron had been in a sour mood.

“That’s right,” Byron says with a smile. He grabs her and lifts her from her feet, causing a gasp to escape her shocked lips. “I remember you like hugs,” he says before setting her back on the ground. Should I say something? Her cheeks color

and a real answering smile appears on her face as she looks Byron in the eyes.

“I do like hugs,” she says with a soft laugh.

“Well, then,” Blake says before scooping her up and hugging her too. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Why don’t you both go hug your wives?” I grouse and possessively slip my arm around Olivia’s waist.

“Any time, day or night, little brother,” Blake tells me.

“You boys. Really, it’s okay. I’m going to look at the other cabins now.” And with that, Olivia slips away.

I turn to my brothers. “Now look what you did. You chased her off.”

“She seems capable of taking care of herself,” Byron says, giving me a pat on the back.

“She’s pretty much perfect,” I tell them.

“That’s a big change from what you said a month ago,” Byron retorts.

“Yeah, a lot can happen.”

Byron nods. “I agree with that.” Yep, a lot is definitely happening here.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Olivia

“I don’t like to admit when I’m wrong,” I say as I sit back and enjoy my s’more. “But I can do it. I might have judged you too harshly for past deeds. We all make mistakes.”

“What does that mean?” Tyler asks.

“It’s nothing.”

“Obviously it’s something or you wouldn’t have brought it up.”

“Why don’t you tell me what made you decide to build this camp?” I really want to get the focus off of me. Tyler’s quiet as he gazes into the fire, the embers casting shadows on his cheeks, making it impossible for me to read anything from his eyes.

“I thought it would be a good project,” he answers.

“Come on, Tyler. I spoke to one of your managers while you were meeting with your brothers. He said this is a nonprofit project, and you’ve donated all of the funds to build it, to get it started, and to ensure that it keeps going. That’s not something a person does on a whim.”

I shift in my seat. Tyler isn’t turning out to be the person I thought he was. Have I become too cynical over the years? I was hoping he was rotten so I could justify hating him. That doesn’t say a hell of a lot about me.

“When I was a kid, life wasn’t always the easiest,” he finally tells me.

I’m taken aback by this response. It certainly wasn’t what I expected to hear. He’s always been wealthy. When I met him, he lived with his guardians in a smaller home, but later I found out who he really was — what he was worth.

Once I found that out, I wasn’t surprised he dumped me as a friend. I wasn’t up to his standard of living. So to hear him say his young life wasn’t easy doesn’t make sense.

“I have a hard time believing you ever had it rough,” I admit.

He turns to gaze at me. “Believe what you need to, Olivia. I know it’s your way of holding yourself back, and I’m not going to convince you I’m somebody other than what you’ve prejudged me to be, but there’s more to a person’s character than first meets the eye.”

“Maybe I’ve made certain judgments, but you have to admit you have the party-boy reputation going for you,” I remind him. Not to mention he enjoys screwing a woman and tossing her out.

“I worked hard to cultivate that image,” he says. “In reality, I’m pretty boring.”

I wait for him to add more. He doesn’t. “I don’t think so, Tyler. No one would ever describe you as boring.”

“I used to get out a lot more, travel the world, go places not many got to go, had no fear. As my life progresses, I have less desire for cheap thrills. Or expensive thrills.”

“That doesn’t mean you’re boring or have one foot in the grave. It means you’re growing up and appreciate what you have, and that you don’t feel the need to desperately seek adventure at every turn.”

“If you despise me so much, why are you trying to make me feel better about my decisions?”

“I don’t exactly despise you . . .”

“You did before you got to know me, but it’s not too easy after you spend time with me. I’m a likable guy.” With this, the cocky smile and naturally vibrant personality come right back to the surface.

“When you say things like that, Tyler, it doesn’t make you so likable.”

“Admit it, Olivia — you can’t live without me.”

The problem with his statement is it’s true. In my short amount of time with this man, he’s becoming a necessity. Dang it, I know better than to get attached. That means certain heartbreak.

But what can I do at this point? It isn’t as if I can distance myself from him. He’s a huge client for my firm and I’m a peon who has to do what my boss says. Still, knowing I have no control over the situation makes me feel a little better about myself. Sure, I don’t *have* to sleep with my client — but I’d rather not think too much about it.

“You aren’t necessarily bad company,” I concede after an absurdly long silence. Tyler laughs before picking me up and sitting down with me straddling his lap.

“Let’s see if I can get an upgrade to *great* company,” he tells me.

Before I can reply, he kisses me, knocking all thoughts from my brain other than how much I want him. His lips caress mine, and I voluntarily open to him, the warmth of the fire on my back, the heat from his body engulfing me.

“I can’t get enough of you, Olivia. Even after I have you — several times — I want you again. Tell me it’s the same for you.” His voice is thick and rough. As he speaks, his hips surge up, his jean-clad arousal pushing into me, making me curse the clothes between us.

“Tell me, Olivia,” he commands before gently biting my bottom lip and sliding a hand up the front of my shirt. He cups my breast, and I moan. I wiggle against him with abandon. Why should I care that he knows the power he holds over me while I’m locked in his arms?

“I want you, Tyler,” I gasp. “I want you all the time.”

My reward’s a renewed assault on my lips while he squeezes my nipple through my bra and rolls it between his forefinger and thumb. This time our lovemaking is different. I feel a desperation in his touch, in his possession of me. I feel as if he’s claiming me — heart, body, and soul. And I love it.

He trails his hand down my back, then moves it between us. He unclasps my jeans and slides his hand inside. I push against his fingers as they find my damp center and begin moving in steady circles around the part of me pulsing with the greatest need.

I don't care that we're outside, in the open. I don't care about anything other than what I'm feeling. Satisfaction is coming; he's building it with brilliant strokes. While his fingers work their magic, he continues caressing my mouth with his lips, and I moan into them. As I reach my peak, I bite down on his bottom lip to keep from screaming and shake in his arms. When the initial waves of pleasure pass, I pull back and look into his burning eyes.

"Your turn," I whisper, enjoying the jolt of hunger I see in him when I say these words. I begin to slip off his lap when a noise stops me. Tyler hears it at the same time, and locks his hands around my back. The sound grows clearer — footsteps approaching.

"Busy, bro?" I'm mortified when I hear Blake's voice.

"I thought you were leaving an hour ago," Tyler growls.

"Got held up at the lodge. We're just coming out to say goodbye," Byron pipes in. "We aren't interrupting anything, are we?"

He knows very well they're interrupting — his mocking tone makes this more than clear. I'm grateful my clothes are in place. They can't see my undone jeans or hard nipples pressing against Tyler's chest.

"No, not interrupting," I squeak before Tyler counters.

"Yes, you are. Go away."

"No prob."

Blake and Byron turn and leave. I'm blushing like wildfire and can't turn to look at the two men as they retreat. After a few moments I struggle to break free from Tyler's grasp.

“We’re not finished, are we?”

“I can’t believe I did that out here. I have no earthly idea what I was thinking.” He lets me go. I jump to my feet and straighten my clothes.

“That you can’t think clearly around me is a good thing, Olivia. Most people aren’t lucky enough to have this much passion between them.” Tyler stands and begins pursuing me.

I keep backing away. “I’m a lawyer, for goodness sake, Tyler. I can’t act this way.”

“Last time I checked, you’re human too. Enjoy the thrill. Enjoy letting go.” I bump into something and realize it’s the wall of a cabin.

Tyler boxes me in against the wall. “I’m living a full life,” I pant, unable to focus with him this close.

“Prove it,” he tells me with a wicked smile.

I should turn and walk away, knowing very well that Tyler threatens my sanity. But he’s right. There’s a thrill in doing the unexpected, of being on a constant high. Without another word, I drop to my knees in front of him, and with shaking fingers undo his jeans. My desire outweighs my fear of getting caught with my pants down — or, more accurately with Tyler’s pants down.

By the time we’re done, I’m very satisfied. I’ve most certainly proven I can bring him as much pleasure as he brings me, and it’s a thrill I’m surprised to feel.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Olivia

I love summer and really love markets full of great things. I shop every outdoor market I can find when the weather warms. Even if I don't need anything.

“Okay, this took some major digging, so you know you owe me big-time, right?” Piper asks as we walk between vendors.

“It's almost not worth the information,” I tell her. “You're going to draw this out as long as you can for your own sick enjoyment.”

“I'm hurt — no, I'm devastated — that you'd think such a thing,” Piper says, a big Cheshire cat smile on her lips.

“Spit it out, Piper. Seriously, it's been a long week, and I'm worn out.”

“Maybe that's from all of the sex you've been sneaking in,” Piper tells me. “The sex you think you're being so discreet about.”

I stop what I'm doing and turn toward my friend in shock. “How in the world do you know?”

“Oh, come on, Olivia. A woman doesn't glow the way you're glowing unless she's getting sex. And not just any sex, but the sort of sex that rocks your body for days to come. And I'm not using the word *come* lightly. I'd almost kill to get that in my life right now,” Piper says with a melodramatic sigh.

“Okay, fine, I’ve had sex with Tyler, and, yes, it’s good.”
Why haven’t I told my best friend about this?

“And you’re waiting for my judgment, right?” Piper asks.

“Yeah. I complained about him for weeks then all of a sudden I’m doing it in every position known to man. Well, maybe not *every* position. I was embarrassed to tell you about it,” I admit.

“You know I’d never judge you, never be anything but here for you,” Piper tells me. “So don’t hold out on me again.”

“Fine. I won’t. Now tell me this mysterious information you’ve discovered.”

“As much as I enjoy holding out, this is too good not to share. It appears your fantastic lover,” Piper says with a long-suffering sigh before continuing, “is also quite the humanitarian. It’s a bit disgusting if you ask me.”

“I don’t follow,” I say. “What does that mean?”

“It means that he serves in Third World countries, taking medicine and food to the needy. He has multiple projects going on here in Seattle, not only donating funds but also working with his own hands — we’re talking hammers, nails, and more. Sweat equity. He builds houses, volunteers at shelters, and even coaches a baseball team of disadvantaged kids.”

“What do you mean disadvantaged kids?” I ask.

“All of this info and that’s what you focus on?” Piper asks.

“One thing at a time,” I say.

“He has a baseball team of kids from eight to ten who are in the foster-care system.”

I don't know how to process this information. How can I keep distance from a man who volunteers far more than I do and seems to love the same causes I do? Especially when this man is also one hell of a lover?

“How did you find this out?”

“I told you it took a lot of digging. But I managed to get chummy with his secretary last night at the bar,” Piper says. “Yes, I stalked her a bit. If this guy is seeing my best friend, I want to know more about him. But I did that because I was able to do some research through an old friend who works for human services. Tyler doesn't allow his name to be used in the media for his good deeds, and to keep him out of it is no small task, but I think the guy honestly does this stuff because he loves to. It's clearly not a publicity stunt, and not simply a tax write-off. This man might actually be a decent guy.”

“I don't understand any of this, Piper. You know about that one-night stand with him when I was nineteen. And I watched him for years in the media. He was always sporting a new woman on his arm, attending the best of the best parties, getting openly drunk and making a fool of himself. We're in split-personality territory here, and how is that possible?”

“I don't know, darling. I just know what I found out. And this guy is pretty much a girl's dream come to life, if you ask me.”

“It doesn't really matter though, does it?” I ask.

“Why would you say that? He obviously worships you, and he’s pretty much perfect. I’d think you’d be elated right now.”

“There’s a big difference between worshipping someone and enjoying sex with them, Piper. Yes, we’re having great sex, but that doesn’t change the fact that we barely know each other. There’s no way this will end with me in a wedding gown. I’m enjoying him, but it’s only until this job is done.”

“How do you know that?” Piper asks. “Maybe this is the man you’re supposed to be with for the rest of your life. If you don’t give it a real shot, you might always wonder what you could’ve done differently.”

“And if I let myself believe this is something more than it really is, I’m going to be devastated when everything goes down in flames.”

“Don’t do that. You haven’t had the best luck with men. But maybe you haven’t because Tyler’s the one you were supposed to wait for. If you’d settled with some guy who made you kind of happy instead of ecstatic, you’d never know what real passion and love feels like.”

“I think you’ve been reading way too many of your library books — from the romance section, of all places,” I tell Piper. “Real love doesn’t exist, sweetie. Good sex can happen, companionship can happen, but I’ll say it again — *real love doesn’t exist*. I’ve seen far more examples of bad relationships than good. Divorce rates are higher than ever before, and if you ask around, even right here on this street, everyone will have a story of a failed romance. I think what you’re looking for is a myth. We can enjoy each other for a while, but we eventually grow bored, or we discover we really don’t have

anything in common after all. Or the eyes begin to stray. Sure, it's amazing in the beginning because the hormones are running rampant, but in the end, our imperfections come to the surface and the epic romance we felt in the beginning is over in a flash."

"You're depressing the hell out of me, Livie. I refuse to believe that real love doesn't exist."

"I don't have to try to prove it to you, darling. You'll see it for yourself when I'm sitting at home eating ice cream because I miss this man. I have no doubt that when it ends, I'm going to get hurt. I'm simply trying to prevent total devastation."

"I'll bet you a hundred bucks you're wrong," Piper says.

"Would you be serious for five seconds?" I sigh.

"I'm deadly serious. On your wedding day to this man, you'll hand me a hundred-dollar bill," Piper tells me.

I smile. "And when he dumps me as soon as he grows bored, you'll hand one to me. At least then I can get a pedicure and soak my sorrows away."

Piper grabs my hand and shakes it. "It's official. Now, no more lying to me. I want all of the sordid details," Piper says. "Especially the size of his biggest tool." I blush hard, though I really don't know why. Of course I'm going to tell Piper everything. It's what friends do.

"You're definitely right. I need to tell you all. It will be good for me. But for now let's stop talking about men."

Piper agrees and we stroll through the market. I started a game Tyler quickly overtook. I can be depressed about it, or I can accept that I'm on one hell of a good ride.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Olivia

Be ready at midnight. This is the text message Tyler sent me, and for several hours I've waffled on whether I'm going to be ready or not. I wrote back asking what we're going to do so late.

No response.

Just that short message and then nothing. When it hits eleven thirty and I'm dressed and pacing my small apartment, I can't fool myself any longer. I'm going because I have to see what Tyler has planned.

His driver picks me up as the clock strikes midnight and I say nothing; I just follow him to the car and climb inside. After a half hour drive the car stops at what appears to be a private flower garden. I know questioning the driver will do me no good, so I wait as he holds open my door and smiles.

"Right this way, ma'am."

The path is marked by lanterns every few feet. Darkness still surrounds me, making the trek slightly spooky, but I know nothing bad will happen. Curiosity moves me forward, my heart thudding in the shadows. Why does this have to be at midnight, and what is the secrecy all about?

"Olivia." His voice is a whisper in the wind, and I stop when I finally see Tyler, another shadow among the trees.

"Tyler, what's going on?"

“I’m glad you came.” He steps up to me, and my heart begins beating at high speed for an entirely different reason now.

“I was too intrigued not to,” I admit. “But I did consider ignoring your summons.”

“You want excitement in your life, Olivia. It’s why we connected at the bar, and it’s why we’re together now. I want to give that to you.”

“I don’t need excitement. I’m perfectly content with my life the way it is,” I counter, though a voice inside me says otherwise. I was merely surviving before I met Tyler for the third time. Being with him, I’m truly living — even if this life is dangerous.

“Come here.” Tugging me into his arms, he connects our mouths with such possession that I think of nothing but responding in kind. He tilts my face up to him, grips my hip with his other hand, and draws me closer. Moaning in pleasure, I melt against him, enjoying the thrill of his hardness pressed against me. When he releases me, I nearly stumble.

“You did all of this for a booty call?” I ask with a chuckle.

“That’s dessert,” he replies with a laugh. He releases me only to take my hand and lead me to a lawn where a large blanket’s laid out with lanterns, wine, fruit, cheese, crackers, and what looks like some good chocolates.

“This is a lot of effort to get me into bed, Tyler.”

“I already have you in my bed, Olivia. This is happening because I realize I like romance again.” Holding my hand while I sit, he joins me and pours each of us a glass of wine.

The burst of alcohol is exactly what I need to calm my fluttering nerves.

“Every time I think I have you figured out, you change the rules and do something like this,” I say.

“We never fully figure anyone out.”

I think about this for a moment. “What happens when I no longer intrigue you, Tyler?”

“I don’t see that happening anytime soon.”

He doesn’t say it will *never* happen. I didn’t miss that. But I don’t want to think about it right now. Looking at this man in the soft lighting, I decide I’ve wasted enough of my life being cautious. I initiate the kiss this time.

The stars shine above us, peeking through the overhanging trees. The evening air has a coolness in it, but with the heat the two of us generate, I hardly feel it. Tyler strokes my neck with work-roughened fingers before he begins unbuttoning my top, trailing his lips down the path he’s opening.

Every touch scorches me. Though the night air doesn’t have the slightest effect on me, his mouth certainly does. With a quick flick of his fingers he unclasps my bra and caresses my hardened peak with the warmth of his tongue. He groans around my nipple, the vibration adding to the sensations coursing through me.

“Tyler,” I sigh as I dig my fingers into his hair and pull him closer.

“The feel of you beneath my lips makes me lose control,” he says before moving to the other breast and giving it equal attention. “The taste of you, the smell of you, the softness. It’s

all perfection.” He moves lower, his lips skimming along my stomach as his fingers unbutton my trousers. I lift my hips to make it easier for him to discard them and my lacy undies. Knowing we’re outside in a park only adds to my excitement. It’s decadent, and thrilling, and I want him even more than the first time we made love.

I grasp his hair. “Take me, Tyler. Take me right now.”

He fans his breath over my hot core. I love the feel of his tongue caressing my folds, but I want more than that right now. I want him sinking within me. Nothing else will do. Feeling my urgency, Tyler climbs up my body, quickly discards his clothes, and settles between my thighs.

“I can’t get enough of you,” he whispers before slowly sinking inside me.

“More, Tyler. I want more.” And I buck up against him, trying to urge him on. He smiles, his features barely visible as he pulls back then slowly sinks within me again.

I wiggle beneath him, pressure building ever higher as he refuses to quicken his movements, continuing to move slowly in and out of me as he caresses my face with gentle fingers.

“So beautiful,” he sighs. He leans forward and kisses me so tenderly it brings tears to my eyes. No. This is wrong. This is too intimate, too personal. This is so much more than sex — it’s making love, and it’s . . . perfect.

“Tyler, please,” I beg.

“Let go, Olivia,” he tells me. “Give me all of you.” He moves a little faster, still caressing my lips with his, then trails his mouth down the side of my neck. All the while his fingers

run through my hair, along my jaw, and down my side. The pleasure growing within me is unlike anything I've felt before. It's so intense, so strong. I feel him in every fiber of my being.

"Let go, Olivia," he says again as he thrusts into me to the hilt, pressing his body all along mine, filling me completely.

And I do let go. I shatter, beyond anything I've felt before. Yes, there's pleasure, more pleasure than I thought possible, but my heart bursts at the same time with love for this man — love so powerful I can't fool myself any longer.

As he groans against my throat, finding his pleasure deep inside me, I wrap my arms around his back and cling tightly. I don't want him to see my face, don't want him to see what I'm feeling. When our breathing slows to something approaching normal, I try pulling myself together, but we're still intimately connected.

"Ah, Olivia, that was exquisite," he says.

"Yes, Tyler, it was," I whisper.

He tries to raise himself up, but I hold on tightly. "Not yet, Tyler. Lie here for a moment longer."

"I have to be crushing you."

"No, you're keeping me warm."

I'm unsure how long we lay together, but the heat from our lovemaking eventually drifts away and the chill of the night gives us no choice but to get dressed. We finish our wine, eat the snacks, and hold hands as we head back to the car.

"What about all the stuff we're leaving behind?" I ask when he climbs inside the car with me.

“I have people coming to pick it up.”

We sit together in silence as his driver takes us to Tyler’s house. I think about asking to be taken home, but my lover will question me too closely if I do. Though I know I’m in love with this man, I can’t tell him, can’t give him my secret. So I accept what he’s giving me, and hope it will be enough. It has to be enough.

Chapter Thirty

Olivia

“Let’s go, Nolan. You’ve got this!”

I sit back and watch as Tyler coaches his Little League baseball team. He wasn’t hard to find once I called his oldest brother, Blake. The man sold his little brother out in an instant.

Why hasn’t Tyler shared this with me yet? Insecurity fills me again. Even though he’s good to me, almost too good, I’m still scared. It’s too good to be true.

This team is obviously important to him so I hide in the corner to watch him coach these young kids. He’s good at it, very good. The boy hits the ball and flies around the bases. Tyler’s out in left field smiling as Nolan scores a home run.

“All right, kids, last batter,” Tyler calls.

I watch in confusion as the young boy to his left begins creeping up behind him. What’s happening here? The kid gets a silly grin on his face as he tugs on a loose string hanging from Tyler’s shirt.

The batter connects with the ball and the kids run for it while the batter rushes, base by base, toward home. Tyler looks at the boy who’s finding such amusement in pulling on the string, and he ruffles his head. The kids are dashing back to the dugout when Tyler’s eyes connect with mine. Letting his assistant coach begin packing the equipment, he jogs over to me.

“What was that about?” I ask, embarrassed at getting caught. “I mean with you and that little boy.”

“That’s Albert,” Tyler replies. “He’s been fascinated with the string on my shirt all day.”

“You seem to enjoy coaching.” He’s quiet for a minute, looking as if he wants to say something, then one of the children runs up to us with a gigantic smile.

“Coach Astor, I got my report card today,” the boy says, holding out the piece of paper and waving it.

“How did you do?” Tyler asks, kneeling down.

“Only one B. All the rest are As,” the boy burbles.

“Nice job, Bobby.” Tyler high-fives the kid. The rest of the team members pull out their report cards. After a chaotic few minutes, Tyler bestows a brilliant smile on the members of his team.

“All of you are not only passing but also on the honor roll. Do you know what this means?” he asks.

“Yes!” everyone shouts.

“Pizza time,” Tyler tells them, and the kids begin rushing toward the two vans waiting in the parking lot.

“Pizza time?” I ask. Tyler looks a little uncomfortable when he answers. “They get a reward for doing well in school.”

“You’ve changed over the years haven’t you, Tyler?”

He looks puzzled, and I bite my tongue. I don’t want to reveal my humiliation of that life changing night to him. Finally, he speaks. “You’ve made a lot of assumptions about me. Lots of people make those same assumptions, but

everyone changes as they grow up. We have to be a little bad for a while so we know how to be good.” Then he winks and moves in closer, his words quiet so no one else can hear. “However, if it’s an asshole you want, I can be that too.”



“Oh, I know you can be that, Tyler. But I didn’t say that’s what I want.”

“Sometimes I don’t know what you expect from me.”

“I don’t either. But you’re no longer a spring chicken, unlike the children you coach, so I guess I should cut you some slack. Midlife crises can be the worst, I’m told.”

“Coach, coach, we’re waiting for you,” one of the boys call.

“We’re heading out, Leo. Load up on the bus.” The kid follows the rest of the team and I’m alone with Tyler.

“Would you like to join us?” he asks.

I desperately want to go with him, but I’m overloaded for the day. If I keep doing these activities with him, I’ll believe we’re in a real relationship that can last forever. I’ve stopped

fighting being with him, but I still have some armor in place. If I lose it, my heart will be too shattered to recover.

“I need to get some work done. Go enjoy your team,” I say, turning to leave. He grabs my arm and stops me.

“Why’d you come, Olivia?”

“I wanted to see you coach.”

“Why?”

“What do you mean?”

“What made you want to see me coach?” he asks.

“I’m trying to figure you out.”

“Have you yet?” There’s a long moment of silence, too long, since he really does need to get going.

“No,” I admit.

“Maybe you should try harder.” With this, he turns and walks away.

I slowly move to my car and wait a while to start it. Tears press against my eyes. There’s zero doubt I’m in love with this guy. Maybe if I stop fighting the feeling, I can find a hint of happiness with him, even if it only lasts a few days, weeks, or months. Isn’t it better to have loved and lost than to never have loved at all?

Chapter Thirty-One

Olivia

Walking through the garden where I made love to Tyler a month earlier, I wonder why I want to torture myself by returning to this place.

“You’ve been quiet an awfully long time,” Piper says.

“I know. I’m trying to gather my thoughts, trying to figure out how to tell you what I need to tell you. Nothing’s easy anymore.”

“You know you can tell me anything, Olivia. That’s what best friends are for. We’re supposed to talk to each other, share, and be there with a shoulder to lean on.”

“I messed up, really messed up.”

“Okay, Olivia, tell me what in the world’s going on,” Piper demands.

“I’m pregnant.” My words are followed by a long silence. The two of us stop on the trail we’ve been walking.

“How far along?” Piper asks.

“About a month. I think this is the place I got pregnant,” I say with a sad sigh.

“You got pregnant in a public park?” Piper asks, sounding the slightest bit jealous.

“It was spectacular sex, but as with all good things, there are consequences.”

“Do you want to keep the child?” Piper asks.

“There’s no question about that. I’m scared, but I already feel a connection with the life growing inside me.”

“Have you told Tyler?”

Of course my friend doesn’t bother asking who the father is. Neither of us are the kind of women to have any doubt about parentage. We don’t screw around.

“No, I haven’t said anything yet. I don’t know how to tell him.”

“You will tell him, won’t you?”

“Yes. He has a right to know,” I say. “But I’m worried. We’ve never talked about feelings. He makes these over-the-top statements like I belong to him, and he desires me. That’s the extent of it. We can’t raise a child together just because our sex life is spectacular.”

“No, you can’t get married because of a child. You might have a few months or even a few years together where everything’s okay, but if you aren’t in love, eventually you’ll grow to hate him, and he’ll hate you. That’s not good for either you or the child.”

“I love him,” I quietly say.

“I know you do,” Piper says, placing her arm around me.

“Does he love you?”

“I don’t think so. I know he wants me. I know he appreciates me. And I know he’s not the monster I once thought he was. But I don’t think love factors into his basic set of emotions.”

“He loves his brothers, doesn’t he?” Piper asks.

“Yes, I believe he does.”

“Then we know he’s capable of love. Maybe you should just come out with it and tell him you love him.”

“I can’t do that,” The very thought of it makes my heart race.

“Would you rather wonder what could’ve been?” Piper asks. “Or dive in with both feet?”

“I think we already dived in with both feet. I’m carrying his child.”

“True. But anyone can make a baby together. To spend a lifetime with another human being takes a special kind of magic. You have to tell him how you feel or you’ll regret holding back. You need to know how he feels about you before you tell him about the baby or you’ll always wonder.”

“When did you get so dang smart?”

“I read a lot,” Piper says with a laugh.

“I guess that’s an occupational hazard.” Joking with my friend helps lift my spirits . . . marginally. I have to tell Tyler the truth, have to share with him that we’ve created a child. But I’m terrified.

“Why don’t we spoil ourselves at the day spa, then have a wonderful dinner and make some baby plans. If you focus on the miracle growing inside of you, you can’t possibly be stressed,” Piper says as she switches directions and drags me with her.

“I haven’t had a lot of time to focus on the *miracle* of being pregnant,” I tell her as my hand trails to my flat stomach. “I’m going to be a mom.” Terror and warmth fill me at the thought.

“And I’m going to be an aunt. It’s certainly a day to celebrate.”

“I’m glad I told you,” I say as we reach our car.

“I’d be crushed if you didn’t.”

I don’t know how I’m going to talk to Tyler, but at least I’ll never be alone, not with my best friend right here by my side. It will all work out for the best in the end.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Olivia

“You’ve been unusually quiet this evening.” I sit across from Tyler in his living room and smile, though it takes a lot of effort to do so.

“I don’t feel all that well,” I say.

“You’ve actually been quiet all week,” he says. “Why?”

“I have a lot on my mind right now. It’s no big deal.”

“I’ve discovered its best to let you speak when you’re ready. I’ll let you tell me about it when you want to.” Several long moments pass with only the sound of the antique clock ticking. Drawing my knees up, I clutch my legs to my chest, a protective gesture. I’ve been in this room several times, but as I look around now, I feel as if I don’t belong. I focus on a picture and vaguely remember the couple with three young boys in front of them. I was so young back then when I met them.

“Did you love your guardians?” I ask. Tyler looks over to the picture that’s drawn my attention. He seems to be thinking over what he wants to say.

“They were very good to us,” he finally tells me.

“So you didn’t love them? You just appreciated that they took care of you?”

“No. I wouldn’t say that. If I had to pinpoint it, they’re the ones who taught me what love is. They loved each other so

much that when Vivian died a few years ago, Bill was devastated. It made me wonder if I'd ever want to put myself through that."

"Put yourself through what?" I'm so fascinated with what he's saying that I loosen my grip on my legs.

"Through the pain of loving and losing someone."

"Without risk, there's no real life to be led."

"There are different levels of risk, Olivia. I think it's one of the reasons I sought adventure for so long. I enjoyed all of the risk, all of the excitement. Kind of like watching horror flicks. But after a while, I found that seeking thrills becomes boring."

"Then what exactly are you looking for?"

"Why all of these questions, Olivia?"

"I'm trying to understand you a little more," I tell him. "What made you believe your guardians were in love?" He's thoughtful for a moment as he gazes at the picture of what looks like a perfect family. Three smiling boys with a couple most would assume to be their grandparents. A truly loving family has been everything I've always wanted.

I know how hard it must've been for young boys to lose their parents. But this picture leaves me with a sense of longing. At least the brothers had people to replace their lost parents. My father left when I was young, and no other family was around to fill the gap.

"I guess it's the way he touched her. There was no thought to it — just instinct and true affection. He was simply driven to seek her out no matter where they were. He could be talking to someone, to anyone, but he knew the moment she

approached. He'd move slightly, his hand fluttering to her side, his leg brushing hers. It was subtle and intimate."

"You noticed this at such a young age?" I ask with surprise. "That sounds pretty romantic for a young boy."

"It was Blake who pointed it out. But I was pretty observant even that long ago. I liked to watch people and how they interacted. I don't know why."

"Do you still like to do that? Watch people, I mean."

"Yes. I still try to figure out people's stories. Everyone has one, you know."

"I agree. I'm quickly learning in life and in my career that everything isn't always as it seems. There's so much beneath the layers of protection people build around themselves."

"What layers do you have protecting you, Olivia?" This makes me pause. Should I be honest with this man? He appears to be opening up to me.

"I don't want to be hurt. I've had ups and downs like everyone else. I have abandonment issues as most children who lose a parent at an early age have. And I've never fallen in love before, though it's something I want. It would be wonderful to have someone touch me without thinking, to need me so much."

"And what about living in the moment?" he asks.

"I think living in the moment is good as well. Seize the day and all that. But there's a time when we have to grow up and strive to find what really makes us happiest in the long run."

"Are you happy now, Olivia?"

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, do I make you happy?” Tyler asks.

This is a loaded question, and again I wonder if I should tell him everything. Knowing that I’m carrying his baby and not knowing how he’ll feel about this makes me afraid to reveal too much. I need to know whether he cares about me before I tell him about the child. I’ll tell him — there’s no question — but I want to know how he feels first.

“I care about you, Tyler.” My heart races as I tell him this.

“I feel the same about you,” he says with a smile.

“Why are you still unmarried? Do you prefer brief relationships?”

He’s silent for several moments as if really thinking about what he wants to say. We’ve talked about sex, about chemistry, about living in the moment. But we haven’t discussed something as loaded as a future.

“Sometimes I’m almost addicted to being alone. Long-term relationships make that impossible,” he says.

“What’s the longest relationship you’ve had?”

“Last year I seriously thought about asking a woman to marry me. That was until I found her in the broom closet with another man at my brother’s wedding.”

This shocks me. “You don’t seem too upset about it.”

“I was upset for a while. I didn’t have a mental breakdown or anything, but it made me a little wary of the opposite sex. It made me prefer being alone.”

“One person screws you over, so everyone who looks like her must be bad? Is that your opinion?” I think I’m projecting here. Tyler screwed me over eight years ago and I’ve had a vendetta ever since. I don’t say this.

“Once burned, twice shy. What can I say? Then the next woman I pursued played games with me.” His eyes connect with mine as he makes this statement.

“And you didn’t play any with her?”

“Turnabout is fair play, Olivia.”

“It’s easy to judge when you’re in the driver’s seat,” I say before going for the gusto. “And how did that relationship go?”

He sets down his drink and moves over to me. “I don’t know. I’m still trying to figure that out,” he says before grasping my hands.

Maybe it’s the dimly lit room, maybe it’s the way he’s looking at me, and maybe it’s because I’m in love with this man, but as he cups my cheek and looks deep in my eyes, I let go of my fears. He leans forward and pushes me back on the couch, stretching his body over mine, moving slowly, intimately. It nearly brings me to tears.

He bends and traces the seam of my lips with his tongue. A sigh opens my mouth to him, inviting him inside. My core quickly warms. He tastes dark and rich, sweet and spicy. He explores my mouth, his touch seductive and dark, as if he’s barely keeping a leash on his hunger. I writhe beneath him. As he takes ownership of me, I know I might not have his love,

but I certainly have his attention. I'll tell him about the baby tomorrow. I need tonight to be about just the two of us.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Olivia

Walking in a bit of a daze, I'm not sure what to think. I knew I was pregnant, not only because of the stick showing a plus sign, but because I can feel the small changes in my body — the nausea, tender breasts, and abnormal need for chocolate.

But walking from the room in the hospital where they confirmed my pregnancy, I'm deep in thought. This is real. There are no more excuses to delay telling Tyler. Still as the shock begins to dim, a tender smile lights my face. There's a baby I'll be responsible for in seven and a half months, a baby who will hopefully have Tyler's eyes and determination, and my smile and love.

As I head for the exit, I'm not paying attention to where I'm going and run smack dab into what feels like a brick wall. Before I'm able to catch myself, I fly backward, and feel a sharp pain shoot through my ankle when I land on the floor.

Tears instantly spring to my eyes as my hand instinctively cradles my flat stomach. "My baby," I gasp, ignoring the pain in my foot.

"Your baby?"

I freeze as my head slowly tilts. I know this voice. This isn't how I planned to tell him. I wanted to go to his house, sit down, and talk. My eyes drift along Tyler's solid thighs and hard chest as he looks at me in shock.

“I didn’t see you there,” I gasp before looking around. No one is anywhere near us. “Why are you here?”

“I was going to ask you the same thing,” he says before his eyes shift, zeroing in on my hand, which is still cradling my stomach. I quickly shift to try to rise, but pain slices through my ankle again. Dammit! I don’t have time for an injury right now.

“I asked you first,” I say, deciding I rather like where I’m at.

“You said the word *baby*,” he practically snarls.

Silence is probably in my best interest right now. This is neither the time nor the place to have this discussion. Certainly not while my brain seems scattered and my foot’s throbbing.

“Can you stand, Olivia?” he asks, finally taking his gaze from my stomach to where I’m testing out my ankle. When he kneels down and runs his large hands along my tender ankle, I can’t prevent a squeak of pain from escaping.

“Obviously not. You’ve hurt your ankle.” He answers his own question.

“I’m fine. Go away and let me get my bearings,” I say. Not that I think these words will do me any good. He doesn’t appear to be going anywhere. Before he can say anything, a nurse comes around the corner and spots us.

“Is everything all right?” the man asks.

“No. Ms. Truman hurt her ankle. Can you get a wheelchair?” Tyler asks before I’m able to tell the man I’m fine.

“It’s not that bad,” I say, but the nurse is already turning to do Tyler’s bidding. Tyler has that kind of effect on people.

“You’re obviously not fine, Olivia. We’ll get your foot looked at and then you’ll tell me what you mean about a baby,” Tyler demands.

The nurse is back in a flash, and before I can protest further, Tyler’s lifting me from the floor and depositing me in the contraption. He walks next to me while the nurse pushes me straight back to an examining room like the one I recently vacated.

Tyler’s silent as the nurse disappears, assuring us the doctor will be right with us. I refuse to look at him. If I pretend he isn’t here, maybe the man will disappear, giving me time to think. That doesn’t happen.

A knock sounds on the door, and the same doctor who examined me fifteen minutes ago walks in. I hold my breath, hoping he isn’t going to say something to make this situation worse.

“Ms. Truman, the nurse said you had a fall in the hallway,” Dr. Ortega says, taking a seat in front of me.

“Yes, I’m sure it’s nothing, but my ankle’s a little tender,” I tell him.

He feels my ankle, making me cringe. “It feels like a sprain, but we’ll order an X-ray to make sure. I’ll do an ultrasound to make sure the baby wasn’t injured. They’re pretty protected inside you, but it’s better to be safe than sorry.” My luck isn’t with me today.

“Yes, an ultrasound will be good,” Tyler says. There’s no inflection in his voice to give me any clue to what he’s thinking. And I’m too scared to look at him to try to read the expression in his eyes.

“Are you the father?” the doctor asks.

“No,” Tyler says. “We ran into each other in the hallway.” My heart shatters at his words. He’s acting as if we’re strangers.

“I’m sorry about that. We’re going to examine her, so you can wait outside,” Dr. Ortega tells him. I still don’t look at Tyler. If I do, I’m going to fall apart.

“I’ll be outside,” Tyler says.

I don’t look up until I hear the door close in the most final sounding click I’ve ever heard. Why would he bother waiting? He doesn’t think the baby’s his, and he obviously decided our relationship’s over.

“Lie back and we’ll get started.”

Time stops having meaning while my stomach and ankle are checked. My foot will heal fine. They wrap it, and I’m able to slowly move despite the minor sprain. But the fall — at least that’s what the doctor thinks — has caused my blood pressure to spike to dangerously high levels, so he wants to keep me in the hospital overnight.

I try to argue, but when he brings up the safety of my baby, I give in. As much as I want to go home and curl up with some ice cream and a lot of tears, I’m not about to put my baby’s life in danger.

The upside of being admitted is that it takes a while to get me moved to a room. I'm hoping against all hope that Tyler will grow impatient and leave. That will give me time to pull myself together. Because our next words to each other aren't going to be pleasant.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Tyler

I pace the waiting area as I try to figure out what in the world is going on. When I called Piper to find out where Olivia was and she told me she was at the clinic at the hospital, I panicked, and immediately searched for her. What I just found out isn't what I expected.

She's pregnant. This thought stumbles around inside my mind. Is it my child? I don't take her as a cheater, but still . . . I'm always careful, always use protection. Except that one night. We used nothing at the park.

If she's pregnant, why didn't she correct me in the hospital corridor? The only explanation I can come up with is that she knows it isn't my child, knows a DNA test will prove this. Otherwise, wouldn't she tell me the moment she knew, wouldn't she be trying to get me to marry her and get a nice healthy sum of money? That's the only thing that makes sense.

So I should be thanking my lucky stars. This should end my obsession with this woman. I'm too hooked on her, too infatuated. Since she's pregnant, she hasn't been faithful to me.

But pregnant by who? And when would she have had the time? None of that matters, though. A baby changes everything. It's over between us. So why am I still pacing in the waiting room like an expectant father? Why haven't I left yet? Because Olivia still holds power over me. Maybe I want

to hear it from her lips that the child she carries isn't mine. That has to be what it is.

When too much time passes, I discover she's being admitted to the hospital overnight. I try to tell myself it isn't worry I'm feeling; it's simply a case of loose ends. I wait longer.

I almost call my brothers. Almost ask for their advice. But I don't want them to know about this, don't want them to see what this woman has done to me. They already know I'm obsessed with her. To add this icing on the cake is unacceptable — they'll never let me forget it.

Nothing lasts forever. Didn't I learn that at a young age? My parents were worthless. They screwed up my brothers for years. I only escaped that fate because I was too young to understand at the time what was happening.

Bill and Vivian stepped in and offered a great example to us of what good people are all about, but one couple doesn't change what a person sees all around them.

Dammit! If only a Magic 8 Ball really worked, I could find one, shake it, and have all of the answers I need. Hell, with my luck, I'd probably get *Better not tell you now*. Finally, Olivia has a room. I immediately seek her out.

"Are you okay?" I stop at the side of her bed.

"I'm fine. You should've left. There's no reason for you to wait for over an hour."

"You ran into me in the hallway and you're hurt, Olivia. I wasn't leaving." My voice is filled with exasperation.

“You’re not helping my blood pressure by snapping at me,” she says, staring daggers at me.

“Are you going to tell me about this baby?”

Her skin grows even paler, though I didn’t think that possible. I want to take the words back. She’s obviously injured, or the physician wouldn’t have admitted her for an overnight stay. Maybe I should give her space.

“I was going to tell you about the baby tonight, Tyler. I’ve known for a couple of weeks but it wasn’t yet confirmed.”

“What exactly were you planning to tell me tonight?”

I can’t seem to back off. There are so many emotions running through me, and rage is the one closest to the surface. Why has she ruined this thing, whatever it is, that we have between us?

She looks away from me, and my rage somehow intensifies. How in the hell can I read her expression if she won’t make eye contact? She seems to do this a lot. Showing a gentleness I didn’t think possible in this moment, I place my hand beneath her chin and raise her face so she has no choice but to look at me.

“I’m owed an explanation, Olivia.”

“I don’t owe you anything, Tyler,” she says, a hitch in her voice.

“So did you go straight from lying beneath me, from screaming out my name, to fucking another man?” This question makes her eyes blaze with anger. She thrusts my hand away from her.

“You’re disgusting, Tyler. I want you out of my room,” she snaps. The monitors at the side of her bed begin beeping. “And I want you out of my life.” I lean down, my own temper high. I wait until I have her full attention.

“I’ll get answers, Olivia. Don’t doubt it for a second. I’m neither weak nor pathetic, and I don’t like anyone making a fool of me.”

“Sir, you need to move out of the way. I have to check on my patient.” A very irritated nurse moves to my side and pushes me back. I could resist, but I’m not in the mood to fight with the hospital staff.

“I’ll be back.” Great. I’m now using dialogue from *The Terminator*. With this, I storm out of the room. I need a strong drink. Or three. I need to be anywhere but in this hospital. I’m a mess and I’m not sure I’ll ever be whole again.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Olivia

Crying myself to sleep wasn't a good idea, because I wake up to a marching band in my head, and it's breaking every noise regulation in Seattle. Pain radiates from me in waves, and I can't prevent a whimper from escaping. There's no way I'm opening my eyes. I feel around for the call button. Medicine. I need painkillers *stat*.

“What do you need, Olivia?”

My pain ratchets up another notch at the sound of Tyler's voice. He's the reason my head's pounding and my ankle's throbbing. This is definitely not the first thing I want to hear this morning. Until yesterday, I'd quite enjoyed waking up to his resonant voice.

I should've called Piper. If I had, my friend would've stayed by my side all night and not let Tyler into my room. She would've attacked if he tried to get past her. That's what best friends do. She might've let him in before, but if she knows I'm truly hurting, knows I need space she will defend me to the death. We will do that for each other.

“Does your head ache?”

“Yes,” I murmur.

“I'll shut the blinds so it won't hurt you to open your eyes.”

His footsteps seem to slam against the floor as he moves to the window, and the squeak of the blinds as he draws them together makes my head pound even more.

The nurse comes in, bringing me pills before disappearing again. Tyler remains surprisingly quiet at my bedside. After about fifteen minutes, the pounding hasn't disappeared, but it's lessened enough that I can finally open my eyes. But I'm not sure I want to take such a radical step.

"You were restless as you slept. Normally, you don't move a muscle, but for the past couple of hours, you tossed a lot."

"What are you doing here, Tyler?" I croak. "Nothing's changed from last night." I push the buttons on my bed, raise it to a sitting position, and reach for the water glass on my hospital table.

"I told you I'd be back so we could talk," he replies. I wait for him to add something, but he just sits next to my bed, his expression showing nothing. Why in the world am I expecting anything different?

Tyler Astor's still the boy who abandoned me as a child and then took my virginity and walked away when I was nineteen. I'm nothing more than property to him, and now he has a perfect excuse to break ties with me. I'm not going to be a sex goddess while sporting a huge baby bump.

With a sigh of frustration, I throw off my covers and slowly edge myself out of the bed. It takes several moments, and though my ankle hurts, I manage to stand.

"What are you doing?"

"Using the facilities," I say, before staggering slowly into the bathroom and firmly shutting the door. My first glimpse in the mirror makes me wince. I look like hell in a handbasket. My hair's a mess, with pieces sticking out in every direction,

probably from running my fingers through it five thousand times, and my face is colorless and sickly. Damn. I hoped when our relationship ended, I'd at least look great. It figures!

When I come out of the bathroom, Tyler's right here, offering his arm. "I've got this," I tell him, terrified of feeling his fingers on me right now. I need to stay strong. If he touches me, that isn't going to be possible.

My progress is slow. And once I manage to climb back into bed, a nurse comes in with my breakfast and checks my vitals. I don't mind the interruption.

"The doctor will be making rounds in the next hour, but your blood pressure has gone down significantly. I don't see a problem with him releasing you today." The woman breezes back out.

"Olivia, it's time we talk."

"Fine. What exactly do you need to know?" I ask, pushing aside my breakfast. Nothing looks appetizing.

"I think you know the answer to that," he quietly says.

"You know I'm pregnant, Tyler. So do you want me to say it out loud? Yes, the child is yours, though I'm insulted I even have to tell you that." He studies me the way a child with a magnifying glass might look at an insect.

"I don't believe you." I stare at him in shock. After a few heartbreaking moments, I compose my features and wait to reply until I'm sure my voice will come out clear.

"Why don't you believe me, Tyler?"

He pauses as he gives me another once-over. “I think it’s a ploy to gain a wealthy husband.” I fight tears. How in the world could I have fallen in love with this pitiful excuse of a man?

“Why don’t you tell me exactly how you feel?” I say, not trying to hide my sarcasm.

“I’m just calling it as I see it. Do you have a better explanation for what’s going on?”

“No. I don’t. I guess you figured me out, Tyler.” I turn away, unable to look at the man I gave my heart to.

“Dammit, Olivia. I’m trying to understand. If you give me even a small reason to trust you, then maybe . . .” He trails off. I might as well tell him everything. What does it matter anymore?

But it isn’t easy to speak with a lump in my throat the size of a softball. “You used to be my best friend, Tyler. Years ago.” He was about to say something, but my remark stops him in his tracks. He gazes at me with mistrusting eyes and waits for me to say more. I stay silent; I want my words to have time to truly sink in.

“Explain now!”

“Do you think that yelling at me or trying to intimidate me is the way to get me to talk, Tyler? Seriously?”

“I’m frustrated. Tell me how we know each other.”

“You called me Vivi. You dumped me when I was ten because I didn’t apparently kiss you the way a real girl does. I went by my dad’s last name then too, Smith. I got it legally changed when I was an adult. I wanted nothing to do with the

man.” Wow, so much bitterness. Maybe I wouldn’t be feeling it now if he wasn’t rigidly standing here with hostility shooting from his eyes.

“Vivi?” he finally asks, his brow wrinkled as he thinks back to his childhood. When he says my old nickname, it tortures me, and a few tears slip from my eyes.

“I think I’ve made a mistake,” I choke out. “You aren’t that boy I once knew, and I’m not Vivi anymore. That little girl faded a long time ago.”

He’s silent a while longer, and the look he sends me makes chills travel down my spine. He seems to despise me at this moment. I don’t think my heart can possibly break further.

“You sought revenge on me for something I did as a stupid child?”

“I was drinking, and it happened,” I say.

“That’s your only excuse?”

“That wasn’t the only time you hurt me. You did it again when I was nineteen.”

“Come on! I didn’t meet you until we met in that bar a few months ago,” he roars.

“That’s not true!” I yell. Then I stop and take a calming breath. “It doesn’t matter, Tyler. It was a long time ago. I’m sorry. Would you please leave now?” This isn’t getting either of us anywhere.

He thoughtfully looks at me for a moment. “Did you know that when I was a teen I tried to find you, but you no longer lived in that house. Then I went through a period of my life

where I was selfish and didn't think of anyone. By that time, our friendship was long gone."

"You searched for me?"

"Yes. My best childhood memories are from the time we ran around together, playing until nightfall, and laughing for hours on end. I knew I hurt you. But I was an adolescent boy. An idiot. For you to blame me for almost twenty years for that is wrong."

"You hurt me," I defend, feeling foolish.

"So you held onto a grudge and didn't give me a chance to right a wrong?"

"Are you telling me you don't hold any grudges, Tyler? You always forgive and forget? I don't think so."

"Well . . ."

I break in again when I get my voice back. "It wasn't just that," I say. "I saw you again when I was nineteen."

His expression still shows me nothing. So I don't know what he's thinking about. "And what did I do?"

"I was working at a gentleman's club as a waitress. I was still a bit gangly and very unsure of myself. You were there with a group of men who were less than gentlemanly, and you . . . you made me feel about two inches tall."

"There's no way . . ." he insists.

"You lured me into your limo and fed me a couple of drinks. We had sex that night, Tyler. It was the first time for me. And you immediately walked away when it was finished."

Silence greets this statement. I'm holding my breath as I wait for even a moment of recognition.

"I'd remember that . . ." He isn't sounding as sure now.

"Then maybe I'm making the entire thing up so I can guilt you into giving me fifty percent of everything you have."

I say these words coldly, hoping I'll make him walk away. I can't do this anymore, can't even stand to look at the man, let alone talk to him. Every insecurity I've ever had is rising to the surface, and it's painful . . . as I knew it would be.

"Yeah, maybe you are," he says before looking at the exit like it's an open door to the nearest chocolate factory. "If you have anything else to say, now would be the time."

"I guess I do have something to say," I tell him, smiling as sweetly as possible. "Go straight to hell and never come back."

He looks at the floor and then at the ceiling, but doesn't look at me again. And he's once again walking out on me. I'm used to seeing his back, so I don't know why it's breaking my heart into a million pieces.

No. That isn't true. I know exactly what's happening. It's what I knew would happen from the moment I decided to have sex with him again. He's leaving with a part of me as his own personal souvenir.

I close my eyes and count to a hundred, cutting off the last tears I'm going to allow myself to cry over Tyler Astor. I knew he'd end up with my heart — he's always had it. I'm actually amazed he left me with anything, especially with his child. I'll

survive. I'll be okay. This had to happen. Now I can finally heal. Now I know who he truly is.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Tyler

I gaze out my office window and sigh in frustration. It's been a month since I walked away from that hospital room, a month since I've seen Olivia. I've been telling myself I'm better off, that she's a liar and she played me.

So why do I feel like hell? Why do I hurt every time her name flits through my mind? It doesn't matter how many times or in how many ways I tell myself she fooled me; I still feel the same ache.

Standing up so quickly that my chair flies across the room, I glare into the sunny blue Seattle skyline. Even the weather's mocking me. I want clouds and gloom, but the world goes on its merry way, indifferent to my pain.

People sail on the water, my camp is open and children frolic and laugh there. My brothers revel in their lives with their lovely wives, showing off their children — they're pictures of perfect domesticity, damn them. Earth keeps spinning in its usual way, while I'm spiraling out of control. I feel weighed down, depressed, *grave*.

Will she get married, settle down, have a dozen kids, and star in a reality TV show? Is this everything she's ever wanted? To find a weak man? That isn't who Olivia is. She's mine, dammit . . . but I walked away.

I dig my fingers through my hair and rub my chest, where a permanent ache seems to reside. This is ridiculous. I should've

forgotten all about this woman by now. But what if the child's mine?

Sagging against the window, I put my hands out and the ache only grows. What if the child isn't mine? Do I even care? Am I willing to raise a child who isn't mine? Of course I care. I've been cheated on before. It's what women do. My mother sure as hell didn't know how to stay faithful, and it cost her and my father their lives.

But my sisters-in-law would never cheat. Just look at them. They're in love, happy, and devoted. Isn't this what I've always wanted?

Before I have a clue of what I'm doing, I'm in my car and heading down the road. As I fly across the city, I watch the sun set. Of course it's beautiful, lighting the sky with purples and oranges. Even nature mocks my misery.

After pulling up to Olivia's apartment building, I sit in the car and look up at her window. What am I doing here? What do I plan to say to her? She certainly won't welcome me inside. Not after the last words we exchanged, the mistrust between us. I should call off this mission and drive away. It's what's best for both of us.

Instead, I climb from my car and walk to her door. Whether or not I'm ready for this, my fist lifts almost of its own accord and knocks loudly.

The door opens and I see surprise on Olivia's face. I can see she's trying to decide if she should slam the door shut or let me in. A myriad of emotions flutter across her face, and I watch her mask it into polite boredom. It's the worst expression she can give me. As if I mean nothing at all. My

eyes drift from her face to her stomach. It's still flat, but inside it grows a child. Is it mine? Again, do I care? Of course I care.

“Hello, Tyler. What are you doing here?” Her voice holds no emotion; it's level and lawyery.

“Invite me in, Olivia.” Do I look maniacal? Probably. I'm definitely acting that way. I hold my hand against the door in a gesture that assures her I'm not going in any direction but forward.

“Now isn't a good time. I'm working on a case file and . . .” She doesn't bother saying more. We both know she's making up an excuse. Why expand on it?

I move forward and she takes a step back. If it was fear on her face, I'd be horrified. But it isn't fear, not of me anyway. She can't hide her reaction to me. She's afraid of my touch, afraid of what it will do to her, but she's not afraid of me. Well, I'm afraid. Because I can't seem to live without this woman.

“It's incredibly rude to leave someone standing in your doorway.” I brush past her, walking inside her place. “Where's Piper?” I don't stop until I make it to her living room. I hear the front door close and then her footsteps as she stomps after me.

Damn, I've missed her. I've missed her laughter, her fight and drive, her smell, the way she tastes. I've missed each moment of each day I've spent with her. I don't care what happened between us, don't care that each of us have hurt the other. All I care about is that I want her in my arms — and I don't want to let her go again.

“It’s also incredibly rude to barge into someone’s house, Tyler. You weren’t invited, and I have a lot of work to get done,” she tells me, her cheeks flushed in anger.

“Yes, I was brought up badly, Olivia — you know my history. What have you been doing this past month?” She looks at me as if I have two heads. Maybe I do. I’ve certainly made enough wrong choices in my life to claim a split personality, at the very least.

“What are you doing, Tyler? Why are you here?”

“I’ve missed you. I want to know what you’ve been up to. Isn’t that what people ask when they haven’t seen each other for a while?”

Her mouth gapes open. “You need to leave, Tyler. I can’t . . . can’t do this,” she says, and much to my horror tears appear in her eyes.

As quickly as they appear, though, she blinks, and she’s shooting fire at me. The tears give me hope. The fire makes me glad. She isn’t a weak woman. She can’t be broken. And damned if I haven’t tried. What a fool I’ve been.

“Are you expecting someone else to stop by?” I ask, trying to sound casual.

“What in the world are you talking about?” she replies.

“Are you with anyone, Olivia?”

“With someone? How?”

“Do you have a man in your life?” It almost chokes me to say the words. Her mouth drops open and her eyes blaze with far more heat and outrage than I’ve ever seen before.

“Yes, Tyler. Of course I’m expecting a guy to drop by. Any minute now. So I’d really like you to leave. I have to rush off to the kitchen, shed all of my clothes, drape my body in nothing but Saran Wrap, and open the door to my lover. He’ll peel the plastic off. Slowly? Quickly? Who knows? Who cares? We’ll get it on right against the freaking door.” This image fills me with rage. It makes me shake, and I have to calm myself before speaking again.

“I can’t stand the thought of you with anyone else, Olivia.” How can I admit this? Am I another weak man, like my feckless father, who was duped so disastrously by my mother? She looks at me, confusion dominating her face.

“Are you . . . jealous?” she sputters.

“No, of course not!” I snap as I rise and step closer to her. Then I calm down. “Maybe,” I add, reaching for her. She steps back and I follow until she has nowhere else to go.

“Don’t touch me, Tyler.”

I can see her panic. “Why not, Olivia?” I lean closer, but don’t touch her.

“I can’t handle it, Tyler. Please, you have to leave me alone.”

“I messed up, Olivia. I can’t go a single day without thinking about you. The thought of any other man coming near you makes me go insane. We both played games, but it can’t be too late for us. In the beginning of all of this, I admit that all I wanted was a good time in bed, but then it changed. I didn’t realize it was changing. I don’t give my trust easily — I’ve told you some of the reasons — but I need to let those go. My

life's only half full without you in it. Forgive me. Please." I don't touch her, don't move back, just wait for her to respond.

"What about the baby?" she asks.

"It really doesn't matter. If she's your child, I'll love her."

I mean this. I'll love the child for no other reason than I love her. And anything that's a part of her I'll cherish. Why has it taken me so long to figure it out? Why have I been such a disaster? Why have we tried to damage each other so much? Because we're both broken. But maybe together, we can heal.

"I don't understand this change." She has every reason not to trust me. I've been far from trustworthy.

"She's mine."

"Wait. What?"

"I decided on the drive here that I don't care if she's another man's, I don't care what you did during our relationship, because I want you that much. But now I know you weren't with anyone else. You aren't that way. This is my child."

"Is that what this is about, Tyler? You figured out this child is yours and you don't want to miss out on raising him or her?"

"No, Olivia. What this is about is that I love you. And because I realize how much I love you, I know this child is mine. But even if she, or he, wasn't, I'd still love you. If we just met today, I'd still fall in love with you. Because you're my other half, and fate has brought us together another time in our lives. Why else would we keep finding each other?"

“Do you remember the gentleman’s club?” she asks.

“Yes. After you said what you said at the hospital, I did some soul searching. I ran through my mind all of the shitty things I’ve done in my life. I remember a waitress, I remember your face and I remember my friend being a dick, and the way I laughed. I did that because I wanted him to leave you alone. I didn’t defend you because I was an asshole. That group was a bad group. That was my last night out with them, if it makes any difference.”

“What about the limo?” I don’t want to admit to this. It shows who I was back then, and I wasn’t a good man.

“I was drunk for a year straight then. I did some horrible things. But yes, I remember. I tried to block that time out of my life. I didn’t know you were a virgin. I didn’t even see you back then. But now that I know, I hope you’ll forgive me.”

I wait for her verdict, afraid of what she’ll say next. I seem to be afraid of everything right now. But most of all, I’m afraid of losing her. If I can gain her love, everything else will work out.

“You’re in love with me?” she finally whispers.

“Yes, Olivia, so in love with you.” I lean forward and gently kiss the corner of her mouth, then skim my lips across hers, my touch soft. “I love you so much I hurt,” I add as I pull her close. And I nearly jump for joy when she melts against me. Picking her up, I move to the couch and cradle her in my arms.

“I thought I was happier alone . . . if I didn’t give you my heart, there was no way to get hurt again. But it wasn’t my

choice whether to give it to you or not. It's always been yours, from the time we were kids. I should slow this down, tell you we're moving too fast," she murmurs against my neck. "But I can't find it in me to deny you. I've missed you so much. I hurt without you too." Her tears warm my skin.

"I'm so sorry I've hurt you," I tell her as I caress her back.

"Don't do it again, Tyler."

"I swear I won't," I say before moving away — just a little — and holding her face so she can see into my eyes. "We'll marry and you can teach me every day how to be a better man."

"That's your idea of a decent proposal?"

"What's wrong with it?" I ask.

"What makes you think a nice girl like me will marry a man like you?"

"Should I have added the words *If you'll have me?*" Olivia laughs before leaning forward and kissing me, this time long and slow. When she breaks away we're both breathing heavily.

"We have a lot of healing to do, but I believe in the end we will marry. I think we're destined to. That's what Piper says anyway." Her words come along with more tears. I cup her cheek.

"I'll ask you every single day until you give me a definitive yes," I warn.

"Then maybe in a month or two I'll believe this is more than just a fairy tale, that it's real," she says.

“That’s a start,” I say. I lift her and carry her to the bedroom. As much as I want to make love to her, I simply cradle her in my arms. I’ve put her through hell. I’ve put myself through hell. We have a lot of healing to do, but I’m a better man with her, and I can’t ask for more than that.

I’m going to get a happily ever after. I don’t know how I got this lucky, but I’m not going to waste this chance again, not when I have the woman I love in my arms. I’ll kiss her every single night at the setting of the sun and every single morning at the crack of dawn. And then maybe, just maybe I’ll make up for the sins of my past. Maybe together we can become whole. Maybe the three of us can be a family. Maybe my brothers and I aren’t destined for hell.

I think this just might be true because we’re finally allowing our hearts to be open, we’re finally allowing our pasts to be put away. We aren’t our parents. We’re ready to move forward onto the next adventures in life.

I pull Olivia a little bit closer and I vow to never lose her again.

Epilogue

Piper Covington

“Don’t speak to him, don’t make eye contact, and don’t leave the car.” I stand here listening to the security man, who’s wearing an earpiece, and I have to bite my tongue.

Who in the hell is this client I’ve given up my Friday night to drive around? I have no idea. Some ultra-wealthy asshole with more money than brains, I’m sure. My brother owes me big-time for this. If he doesn’t get new drivers — and soon — he’s going to be up a creek without a paddle, because I’m done dealing with men like the one I’m giving up my weekend for. I’ve already worked more than my forty hours at the university library, and I’m tired as sin.

“You need to acknowledge me, Ms. Covington. Now.”

“Got it, chief.” This comes through gritted teeth.

“If you have an attitude, this isn’t going to work,” he tells me.

“I’m not going to change my personality. But I do know how to follow rules. If your boss leaves me alone, I can certainly leave him alone.”

“What’s going on here?” A shudder travels down my spine at the deep baritone voice right behind me, sounding far from pleased.

“I’m sorry, sir. I wasn’t expecting you out so soon,” says the wretched man who’s been chewing on my hide for the last

fifteen minutes.

Ignoring his employee, the man steps in front of me, and my first look at him leaves me speechless. That isn't easy to do — I love to talk. After all, I spend my life with books, with millions and millions of words.

Towering over me, with dark hair and nearly black eyes, the man before me doesn't look pleased. His chiseled jaw is locked tightly together, his firm lips in a frown. I don't bother looking down at the rest of his body. I can guess what I'll see. Just his head alone is a cliché from a romance novel cover.

That is until I remember I'm not supposed to make eye contact. I rip my gaze away and stare at his chest. It's covered by a tailored shirt that hides nothing. Hard. The man is hard. Hard-bodied, that is. And probably hard in almost every other way. *No, not that way . . .*

“Who are you?”

“Piper Covington. I'm filling in as your driver this evening.”

“What happened to Jared?”

“He has the stomach flu.”

“Hmm.” I don't know if this word, or, more accurately, this sound, is good or bad. So I say nothing.

“We'd best get going then, shouldn't we, Ms. Covington? It's going to be a long night . . .”

*All of the couples (including Piper)
will have their final adventures and
their happily ever afters in the last
book of the series.*

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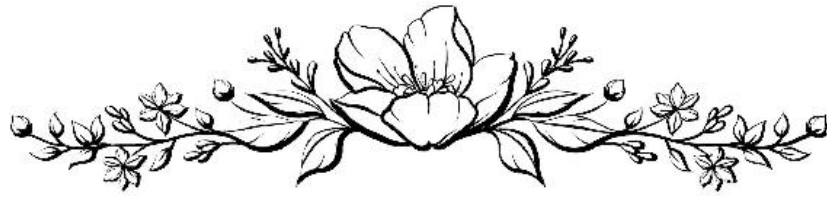


Looking for your next book?



I have series that are lighthearted, dramatic,
and in between. I have brief comments
about each of the series listed below.





For a lighthearted feel, this series will go on and on starting with three brothers and the infamous Joseph Anderson who decides to play matchmaker. It then goes into his twin brother's children, and then they find a lost triplet that makes it super fun. Each story has a happily ever after, but characters will appear in the other stories.

The Andersons

[Wins The Game](#)

[The Dance](#)

[The Fall](#)

[The Proposal](#)

[The Blackmail](#)

[The Runaway](#)

[The Final Stand](#)

[Unexpected Treasure](#)

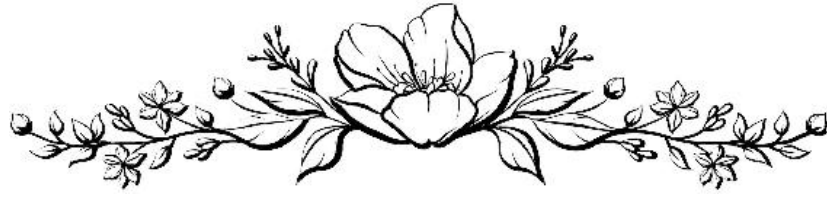
[Hidden Treasure](#)

[Holiday Treasure](#)

[Priceless Treasure](#)

[The Ultimate Treasure](#)





The Anderson Heirs came about, because it's time those in the stories above grow up. So these are the stories of their children all grown up and falling in love. These are all lighthearted and fun stories.

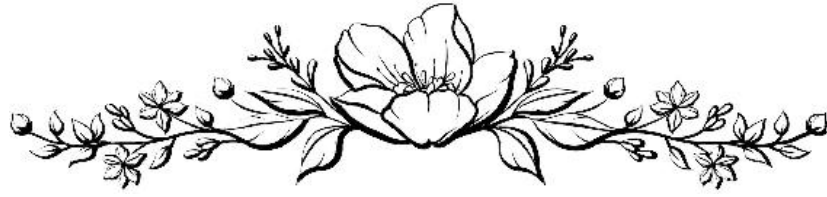
The Anderson Heirs

[Book One: Sweet Noel](#)

[Book Two: Jacob's Challenge](#)

[Book Three: Jasmine's Homecoming](#)





This series is super fun and full of action. I co-wrote it with a buddy of mine. The men in this series are based on real people he worked with while he was in the military or doing contractor work. Smoke is by far my favorite character of this series. You also see Jasmine growing up and having quite the attitude which leads to her own series listed below.

ANDERSON SPECIAL OPS

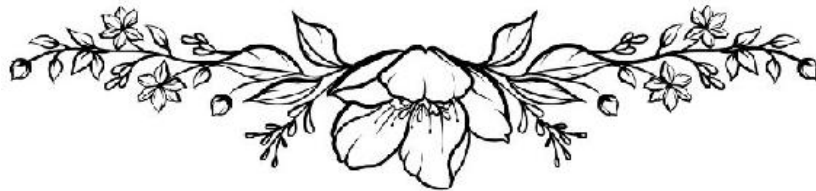
[Shadows](#)

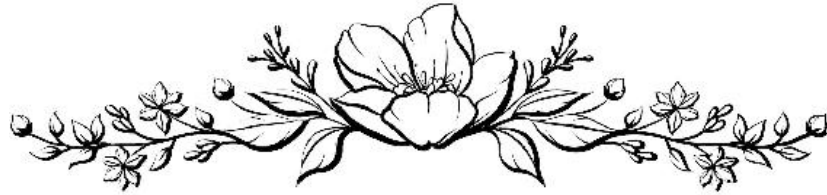
[Rising](#)

[Barriers](#)

[Shattered](#)

[Reborn](#)





This is a spin-off branch of Andersons that are again a fun group of men in a new town. It's lighthearted and fun, and I really loved writing the series.

THE ANDERSON BILLIONAIRES

[Finn](#)

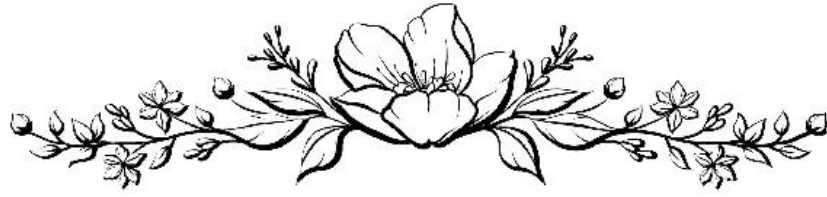
[Noah](#)

[Brandon](#)

[Hudson](#)

[Crew](#)





Now, we're coming to more of my dramatic writing. I LOVE, LOVE, LOVE this series. This story came about while I was driving with my husband to a camping spot. We were talking about what would make someone get married multiple times and we came up with this series together. I completely lived vicariously through Charlie (different from Derek and Emmy's Charlie) and all of the adventures she takes in this series. I love how it all comes around, and I personally love how it ends. The adventures she goes on in the middle, though, are so much fun. Please let me know what you think of this series because it's one of my favorites I've ever written.

TWELVE HORIZONS OF CHARLIE

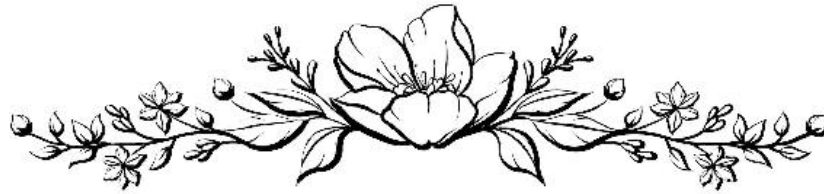
[Diamond](#)

[Sapphire](#)

[Opal](#)

[Emerald](#)





This is certainly my most erotic series. But I'm well-known for my "clean" sex scenes. They are descriptive, they are sexy, and some of them are long, but I don't use crude language in my scenes. I use words like steel, core, heat. I personally get grossed out when crude words are used so I get creative in my writing. My hubby might have blushed a bit though when he read one of my books for the first time.

He certainly was ready to try out some of the scenes he read. He doesn't mind helping with my research ... not at all. I love this series, though. It's sexy, but of course it has siblings because family means the world to me, and I can't write anything without family. I love the bond between the siblings and parents. I love how sexy it is, and I love the three storylines. I hope you do as well.

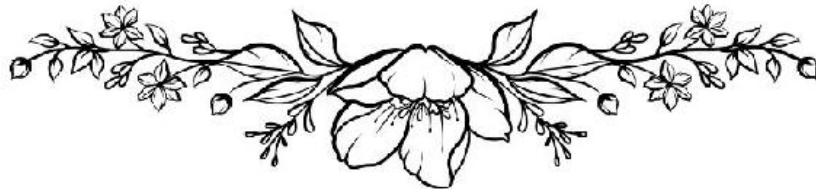
SURRENDER SERIES

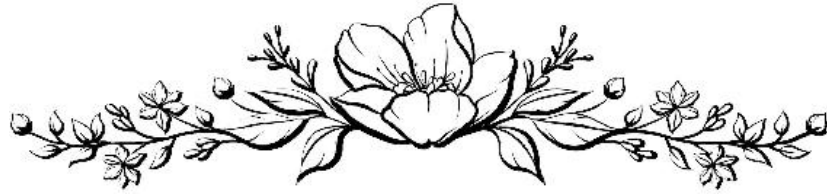
[Surrender](#)

[Seduced](#)

[Scorched](#)

[Saved](#)





And we're back to contemporary romance. This is another Anderson-type series with brothers and is fun and lighthearted with alpha men and sexy, confident women. Each story finishes but you'll want to read the entire series because you'll love all of the brothers.

UNDERCOVER BILLIONAIRES

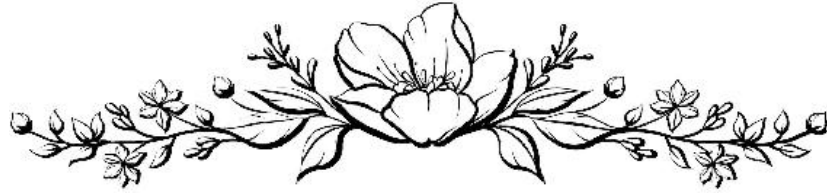
[Kian](#)

[Arden](#)

[Owen](#)

[Declan](#)





This is another series I love. It's different from my other works and again co-written with my friend. This isn't romance, though there is romance in it. It's about Jasmine Anderson and the adventures she takes away from home. You'll see some of your favorite characters in it and meet some new people. This is more high adrenaline and crime fighting and it was super fun to write.

TRUTH IN LIES

[One too Many](#)

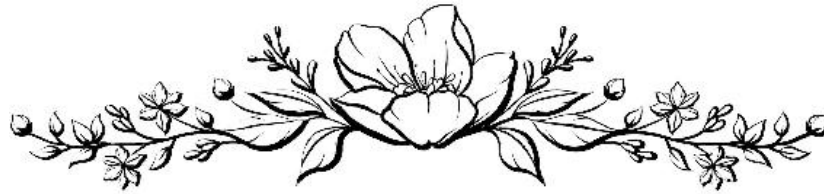
[Two Secrets Kept](#)

[Three Outs](#)

[Four Seconds Gone](#)

[Five Goodbye's](#)





I love this series because I have a total thing for pilots. There's just something hot about a man who can control a plane. I worked for the airlines for about 10 years and it was one of my favorite jobs. These are 4 brothers that are fun, sexy, and each story is unique. Ace is my fav, because he's such an ass for so long ... but we all know how fun it is to take these kinds of men down to their knees.

BILLIONAIRE AVIATORS

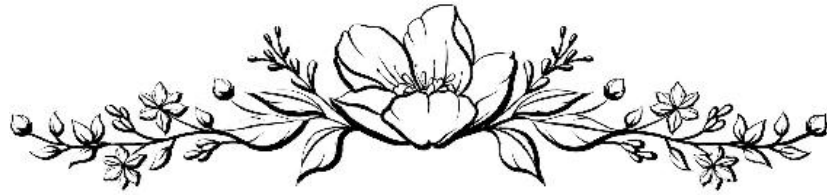
[Turbulent Intentions – Book One \(Cooper\)](#)

[Turbulent Desires – Book Two \(Maverick\)](#)

[Turbulent Waters – Book Three \(Nick\)](#)

[Turbulent Intrigue – Book Four \(Ace\)](#)





I love this series too. It's again contemporary romance with alpha men and the women they think they deserve. This time it's cousins. It's one of my early series and it's lighthearted fun reading. They are certainly alpha but none of my men cross the line into irredeemable.

The Titans

[The Tycoon's Revenge](#)

[The Tycoon's Vacation](#)

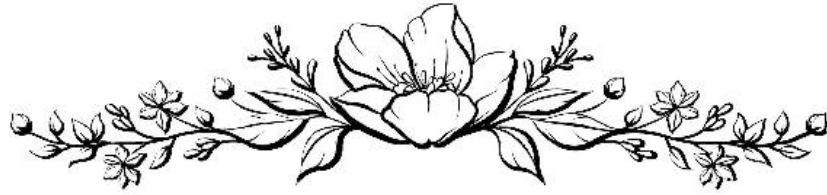
[The Tycoon's Proposal](#)

[The Tycoon's Secret](#)

[The Lost Tycoon](#)

[Rescue Me](#)





This was my first series that was sold in stores and I was like a child at Christmas when I walked into the bookstore to see a book on the shelf with MY NAME on it.

What a thrill for a girl who was raised in low-income housing and a single-wide trailer. I will never forget the thrill of that moment. I will never forget seeing it in

People Magazine. I love this series. It's fun, lighthearted, and of course, Joseph Anderson comes and visits. If you want a great beach read, this is the series for you.

HEROES SERIES

[Safe in his arms – Novella](#)

[Baby it's Cold Outside](#)

[Her Unexpected Hero – Book One](#)

[Who I am with you – Book Two – Novella](#)

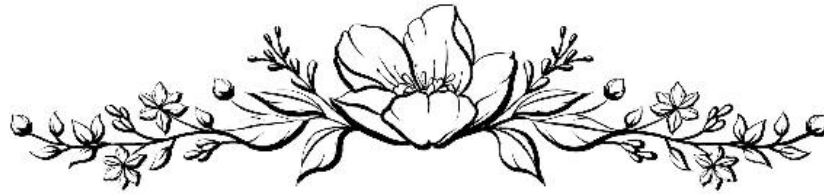
[Her Hometown Hero – Book Three](#)

[Following Her – Book Four – Novella](#)

[Her Forever Hero – Book Five](#)

[Her Found Hero – Book Six](#)





Okay, so this series came about at a romance conference where Jan, Ruth, and I were drinking WAY WAY WAY too much. We started chatting and decided billionaires were far too overdone. We were sitting there with a crew from Amazon and started talking about kings that had to kill the woman if she didn't fall in love. We thought it was hilarious. Alcohol might have fueled this. Then one of the reps said, "and then he kills her." We were drunk, but not stupid. We had to explain to the Amazon rep that we can't *actually* kill a heroine in a romance book. He told us then people will know how the story will end. By the end of the night we'd come up with Taken by the Trillionaire. We each wrote a novella, and we loved it! So we had to do a second set of princes because why the heck not? Next, we're going to have to do a third set, maybe set in America. A fun, silly night turned into some super fun stories. I love these two authors who will be lifelong friends. Here are our brilliant minds (fueled by a lot of free alcohol) in a series that will make you laugh and sigh.

TAKEN BY THE TRILLIONAIRE

[#1 Xander – Ruth Cardello](#)

[#2 Bryan – J.S. Scott](#)

[#3 Chris – Melody Anne](#)

[#4 Virgin for the Trillionaire – Ruth Cardello](#)

[#5 Virgin for the Prince – J.S. Scott](#)

[#6 Virgin to Conquer – Melody Anne](#)