



Kismet

**CARLY
PHILLIPS**

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Kismet

The Serendipity Series

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Carly Phillips

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Chapter One

ON A MISSION, Elisabetta Gardelli walked into Consign or Design, a small shop off Main Street in downtown Serendipity known for high-end outfits bought on consignment and unique items created by the owner, April Mancini. The bells rang over Lissa's head as she entered, and the yapping bark of a small Yorkshire terrier greeted her.

“Hey, Lucy.” Lissa bent down to pet the head of the small dog, whose little tongue licked her, showering her with undying affection.

“Can I help you?” April walked out of the back room. “Oh, Lissa! Long time no see.”

Lissa waved a hand and rose to her feet. “I know. Until now, I've been able to make do with the clothes in my closet.” She hadn't had the extra money to splurge on herself.

April smiled. “That's because you're a good mom and give everything you can to your gorgeous daughter.” She tucked her vibrant, layered red hair behind her ear.

At the mention of Olivia, Lissa smiled. It was true she'd rather spend her hard-earned money on her ten-year-old than on herself.

“I still think you should have taken Bradley to the cleaners,” April muttered, speaking of Lissa's no-good, cheating ex, whom she'd married right after high school graduation.

“If I could have proven he had access to his family's money, maybe I would have.”

Throughout their marriage, it had looked like they had money. The Banks family had all the superficial things covered—a nice house, a Lexus to drive, all the things that looked good to the town. In reality, Brad earned a salary at his

father's dealership that paid for the bare bones of what they needed to live, and he'd kept her on a tight budget. Meanwhile, his parents had financed any extracurricular activities Brad wanted, including his country club membership and expenses.

Lissa had been the stay-at-home wife and mother Bradley had married out of obligation while he'd continued to live a single lifestyle. Even knowing he had affairs, she'd stayed so her daughter could have a stable childhood with two parents living under one roof. But as Olivia grew up, Lissa realized that if the rest of the town was aware of her husband's mistresses, it was only a matter of time until Olivia discovered the same. Lissa didn't want her baby subjected to gossip, nasty comments, or having people laugh behind her back at school. Finally, enough had been enough, and Lissa had walked out.

The good news was that their daughter wanted for nothing. Grandma and Grandpa Banks saw to that. At least Lissa had been smart enough to obtain her online college degree. Between colic, feedings, and toddlerhood, a BA in journalism had taken her more than five years. When it came to the divorce, she'd received exactly half of what Bradley earned, which had only been enough for her to put a down payment on a house for herself and Olivia. She lived on what she earned. The child support went for her daughter.

These days, she only wanted to reach for the goals she'd shelved when she'd stupidly gotten pregnant as a senior in high school. Though Lissa wouldn't trade Olivia for the world, she'd done a one-eighty since her divorce, determined to teach herself and her daughter about self-respect.

"Well, I admire you," April said, unaware of the direction of Lissa's thoughts. "You're proof that hard work pays off. I read your interview with Faith Harrington in the *News Journal*. And I'm sure things are looking up for our resident big-time journalist now," April said warmly.

Lissa marveled at the description. She still thought of herself as a small-town coffee-server-slash-obit-writer, not a

legitimate newswoman. But ever since Faith Harrington had given Lissa the interview every newsperson on the planet coveted, Lissa had arrived in her chosen field.

“Things are definitely looking up. I’ve been hired to do a series of interviews for the *News Journal*. Thirty Under Thirty, they’re calling it—about men of Fortune 500 companies and entrepreneurs who’ve made their mark at an impressively young age.”

“You go, girl!” April pulled her into a huge congratulatory hug.

Lissa wasn’t a warm and fuzzy kind of person, but April was—and in this store, April’s rules applied. Lissa allowed the embrace for as long as she was comfortable, then stepped back.

“So what can I do for you?” April asked.

Lissa was supposed to meet her friend Kate Andrews for this shopping expedition, but as usual, Kate hadn’t yet arrived. Lissa glanced at the items hanging from hooks on the light green walls. Though Lissa couldn’t afford a new couture suit, she knew April would be able to put together the perfect outfit at a reasonable price.

She’d just have to start without Kate. “I need a kick-ass designer suit in order to make a good impression,” Lissa said.

“On one of those Fortune 500 guys?” April asked hopefully.

Lissa drew a deep breath, still unable to believe the subject of her first interview. Just the thought of him set her nerves tingling. “One guy in particular,” she murmured.

“Anyone famous I’d know of?” April asked.

Before Lissa could answer, the bells over the door rang again and Kate came bursting through, out of breath. “I’m here. Sorry I’m late, but I’m here.” Kate’s long hair was in wild disarray, her cheeks flushed pink.

“Let me guess. You overslept?” Lissa laughed, knowing that wasn’t the reason.

Kate exhaled long and hard. “I had to stop by my mom’s, and she started talking, and I just—”

“Lost track of time,” they both said together.

Kate couldn’t manage to account for her time and was chronically late, but Lissa could never be mad at her. Kate was one of the good people in this world. They’d both grown up in Serendipity, gone to the same elementary, middle, and high schools—and had never spoken to each other. Oh, they glared plenty, Kate being one of those girls with money, like Faith Harrington. Lissa had been a townie without.

To her shame, Lissa had carried that attitude into the present, at least where Faith was concerned, and she cringed at the memory of how badly she’d treated the other woman when she’d returned to town. Even though Faith’s father had been convicted of running a Ponzi scheme that rivaled Bernie Madoff’s, Lissa had thought Faith’s life had been easy. How wrong she’d been.

Thank goodness Faith had seen through Lissa’s bitterness about her own life and given her a chance despite her attitude. Faith had taught Lissa the meaning of generosity and of rising above it all. Lissa was more grateful for that hard lesson than for the actual interview.

April clapped her hands, capturing her attention. “Lissa was just about to tell me why she needed a kick-ass designer suit. And which Fortune 500 guy she wanted to impress.” April lifted one perfectly penciled eyebrow.

“Well? Are you going to tell her?” Kate asked. “It’s Trevor Dane!” she said, blurting out the news before Lissa could do it herself.

April’s eyes opened wide. “Trevor Dane. Your... I mean...”

“My high school sweetheart,” Lissa said. The only man she’d ever truly loved and the one she’d hurt beyond reason.

The *News Journal's* list of interviewees was set in stone. She had no choice but to face Trevor again for the first time since telling him she was pregnant with Bradley Banks's baby ten years before. Although Faith Harrington had been given a second chance with Ethan Barron, another man Lissa would be interviewing, she already knew she had royally screwed up any shot with Trevor Dane a decade earlier.

She didn't deserve another.

And to put an exclamation point on that old statement, Trevor had gone away to college. He lived in Manhattan, and though he'd visited Serendipity and his family over the years, when it came to Lissa, he'd never looked back.



"*NEWS JOURNAL* MAGAZINE wants to interview you," Alexander Wittman, president and CEO of Wittman Financial Management and the son of the firm's founder, said as he walked into Trevor Dane's corner office.

Trevor didn't turn. Instead, he stared out at the streets of Manhattan from the luxury high-rise office building on Broad Street, wondering how a kid from the wrong side of the tracks had arrived at this point. Brains, hard work, and a helluva lot of luck. That and a burning desire to get out of his hometown of Serendipity, New York, and rarely go back. It'd be *never* if not for his family, Trevor thought wryly.

"Did you hear me?" Alex asked.

Trevor pivoted to face his boss and mentor. "I was just taking it in. *News Journal*, huh?" Like *Forbes*, the magazine was a must-read in the business world.

"You're an up-and-comer," the man said proudly.

"Thanks. I owe it to you." A decade older than Trevor, Alex had been his mentor since he'd interned with him one summer. "My secretary gave me a schedule of events the reporter will be attending with me. Apparently, she wants to follow me around even during my off hours," he muttered.

She was even supposed to attend the annual charity gala the firm was sponsoring on Friday night at the Waldorf. Though Trevor wasn't pleased, it did save him the hassle of finding a date, the need for which he'd been ignoring.

"The price we pay," Alex said with a chuckle. "Maybe she'll be a beauty."

Trevor raised an eyebrow. "I'm not about to get us slapped with a sexual harassment suit by hitting on the reporter."

"You know what your problem is?" Alex asked.

"Wasn't aware I had one." Trevor folded his arms across his chest. "Care to enlighten me?"

"You're all work and no play. You don't want to end up old and alone, not when the alternative is so much better." Alex ran a hand through his thick black hair and eyed Trevor with a knowing look that meant he wouldn't drop the subject easily. The man was always after Trevor to look harder at the women he dated and give them more than a couple of chances before he decided to break things off.

But Alex had married his college sweetheart and hadn't looked at another woman since. Trevor wished he'd been so lucky. Every woman he dated left him cold because no one could live up to the memory of the one who got away—breaking his heart and ruining him for anyone who came after her.

"Give me a break. You like how much money I bring in, and that takes up all my time." Trevor walked around his desk and placed a hand on the other man's back. "So it's time for you to let me do my thing before the reporter arrives." In fact, she was due any minute.

"Fine. Subject dropped. For now. But Emma insists you come to dinner Saturday night at our penthouse. She said she won't take no for an answer."

"As long as she's not trying to set me up with one of her friends," Trevor said, accepting. He loved Alex's wife and wouldn't deny her a thing.

“The fact that you’re free on such short notice just backs up my point. You need—”

“To get to work,” Trevor said. “Tell Emma I’ll see her on Saturday.”

Before Alex could depart, a knock sounded on Trevor’s office door. “Come in.”

His secretary, Collette, opened the door. “Mr. Dane, your nine thirty appointment is here.”

Trevor nodded. “Show her in, please.”

“I’ll just stay and say hello to the reporter,” Alex said, puffing out his chest a bit.

Trevor grinned. The man did love publicity.

“Right this way.” Trevor heard Collette say before she stepped back in. “Mr. Dane, Mr. Wittman, this is Ms. Elisabetta Gardelli from the *News Journal*.” Collette stepped aside.

And the woman who’d haunted his dreams for the past ten years took his middle-aged secretary’s place in the doorway.

“Hello, Mr. Wittman.” Elisabetta nodded at Alex. “Hi, Trevor.” Her husky voice had only grown deeper, sexier.

He immediately found himself sucked into those green eyes, the color of freshly cut grass. Just the sight of her was a sucker punch to his stomach as memories that still had the power to gut him swept over him like a tsunami. “Oh no. No fucking way.”

Lissa paled at the words that slipped from his mouth.

Alex stepped back, his expression full of stark disbelief. Trevor was sure the man had never heard him speak that way.

“You two obviously know each other,” Alex said.

“From high school,” Lissa said, her voice not as steady anymore. “It’s been a while.” She met his gaze, giving him time to adjust to the shock.

He tried to find his composure but surprise made it impossible. Since she blatantly stared at him, he returned the favor. Here in a professional capacity, she wore a simple black dress obviously meant to give her a professional yet elegant appearance, but her body outshone any dress, and her cropped jacket showcased her full breasts and indented waist. Time had brought changes to the girl he'd known—and they were good ones.

Curves he'd felt in his hands as a teenager had only blossomed over the years. Glossy hair he'd once wrapped around his fingers fell over her shoulders, while her face had filled out in a way that highlighted her cheekbones and full lips. She was still beautiful. And there was no way he could deal with her on a professional level and remain immune. No way he could let her trail after him for days and go back to his solitary life afterward.

"I can't do this," Trevor said into the uncomfortable silence. He didn't care how juvenile or unprofessional he sounded.

"You two obviously have some things to work out," Alex said. "But Trevor, I don't need to remind you how important this interview is to you and to the firm." With that parting shot, Alex inclined his head to Lissa and stepped out of the office, pulling the door closed behind him.

Trevor pulled in a deep breath. "Some warning would have been nice."

Lissa had the good grace to duck her head in embarrassment. "I didn't think you'd see me if I put my name on the proposal. And I'd have been right."

"So you ambushed me."

"This interview is important for us both. We're adults now. Can't we find a way to get through it?" she asked.

Trevor knew he didn't have a choice. Alex had implied as much, and Lissa knew it, too. Now that the shock was wearing off, he realized what an ass he'd been. Completely

unprofessional—and if Trevor prided himself on anything, it was his professional demeanor.

“Fine. Have a seat,” he said, gesturing to a chair.

She’d had time to think about this meeting, plan for the occasion, and prepare. He hadn’t. In return, he intended to unsettle her as much as she unsettled him. So instead of retreating behind his massive cherry desk, he settled himself on the corner of the desktop, directly across from Lissa and definitely in her personal space.

“So how have you been?” he asked, shifting so his pant leg brushed her bare one.

Her cheeks flushed in response. “I’m good. And yourself? Is life in the city as fun as I imagine?”

“More,” he lied. It was cold, lonely, and filled with work—not that he’d give her the satisfaction of that truth. “So. The *News Journal*? I’m impressed.”

He’d been rocked when he’d read her interview with Faith Harrington last month, surprised to see her name after all these years. He’d also been proud of her, at least until painful memories replaced the warmth he’d been feeling.

“Thank you. After my divorce, I didn’t think I’d get beyond writing obits for the *Serendipity Gazette*, but Faith Harrington changed my life.”

Trevor couldn’t get past the word *divorce*.

His family, his mother and sister in particular, filled him in on *Serendipity* gossip, but they’d both learned long ago not to feed him information about Lissa. Their phone calls were more enjoyable that way.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “About the divorce.” Another lie. His heart hadn’t stopped pounding in his chest since he’d realized she was free.

“I’m not. It was a long time coming.” She glanced down, then looked at him again. “It wasn’t love, Trev. It never was.”

Her honest words startled him. From the minute she'd told him she was pregnant with Bradley Banks's baby, all he could think about was that his greatest fear had come true. Lissa had gone out with Brad, the high school quarterback and rich boy, and after they'd broken up, Trevor had made his move on the girl he'd always wanted. Though they'd fallen in love and made plans for the future, he'd still been insecure about his place in her life. Back then, he hadn't been able to give her what Brad could, the things she deserved that money could buy.

Not that she'd ever asked for or coveted them, he realized now.

But his inadequacies had always marked him. It was the way of things in Serendipity and his dad, bless him, was the high school janitor. It didn't make Trevor's life easy. So when he and Lissa had a stupid teenage argument, they'd broken up. And when she'd turned back to Brad, even for one night, all Trevor could think was that she'd proven him right. And when she'd ended up pregnant, all hope of fixing things came to an abrupt and ugly end.

Trevor met her gaze. She'd waited quietly as he processed her words. "It's in the past," he said gruffly.

But was it?

"So you'll do the interview?" she asked, hope shining in her eyes.

While he'd been rehashing the pain, she'd been worried about her career. Okay, that made sense. It wasn't like she was here for a personal reason. "Yeah. I'll do it."

"Thank you!" she squealed and impulsively jumped up from her chair, throwing her arms around him in gratitude. In that instant, she was the Lissa he remembered, the full of life, go for the gusto, happy girl he'd fallen for.

And when she pulled him into an embrace, he buried his face in her hair and allowed her familiar scent to envelop him. Desire licked at him, scorching him from the inside out. He

remembered how good they'd been together and suddenly knew what that empty hole was in his life. He missed her, the girl he'd told all his dreams, hopes, and secrets. Since Lissa, he'd never let anyone get that emotionally close, afraid of experiencing that kind of pain and loss again.

She pulled back with an embarrassed flush on her cheeks. "Sorry. I got carried away, but this series of interviews means so much to me. I mean, I didn't think I'd ever get to stop slinging coffee for a living and now..." She trailed off. "I'm rambling."

He laughed for the first time since she'd walked in. "You think?"

He couldn't stop thinking about her words. Serving coffee? Didn't Banks have so much money that after any divorce settlement, she should be able to sit back and eat bonbons if she chose?

Clearly, Trevor had a lot to catch up on, and suddenly, he wanted to. Now that he'd seen Lissa again, his curiosity was piqued, and he wanted the information he'd deliberately ignored over the years. Thinking back to the schedule his secretary had handed him first thing this morning, he figured they had time. Because if Lissa was going to pump him for information about who he was and what made him tick, damned if he wasn't going to do the same thing to her.

"So when do we get started?" he asked her. "On the interview."

Her eyes opened wide. "Right now, if you're ready. I'll do a combination of observing you at work and, when we're alone and you aren't busy, asking questions and talking."

"Now is fine," he said, suddenly revved up and exhilarated. "Did Collette give you a copy of my schedule for the next few days?"

"She handed me a sheet of paper when I walked in. I haven't had time to go over it."

He nodded. “You might want to. There’s a formal event on Friday night and a dinner party Saturday,” he said, deciding that wherever he was going, so was Lissa.

She paled visibly. “Formal events and dinner parties?”

“All a part of the life you need to write about,” he reminded her. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s just that...” She drew a deep breath. “I didn’t bring those kinds of dress clothes with me. But I’m staying at the Marriott on Broadway, and this is Manhattan, right? I’m sure I’ll find something.” Her voice trembled, but he didn’t understand the cause.

“You sure?”

She nodded, putting on a bright but clearly forced smile. He still knew her well enough to pinpoint that.

“I’ll just leave after lunch and go shopping.”

“Okay.” He narrowed his gaze, knowing that as soon as she left, he’d be on the phone with his mother to find out exactly what had gone on in Lissa’s life that he deliberately hadn’t wanted to hear.

Now he wanted to know everything.

Trevor didn’t understand his sudden turnaround, not completely, but one thing was clear. Their forced time together would provide him with a way to get Lissa out of his system and allow him to move on with his life.

One way or another.

Chapter Two

LISSA CHECKED INTO her hotel room, needing time to regroup after this morning. No matter how well she thought she'd prepared herself, the meeting had been worse than her most awful nightmare. She'd pictured their reunion often over the years, sometimes in wistful daydreams, more recently since Trevor had become her assignment. In none of them had his explosive reaction been part of the scenario.

She'd accounted for the anger, but one look at his disgusted expression had Lissa's knees nearly buckling and tears threatening. Somehow she'd held herself together. Then he'd surprised her again, going from "no fucking way" to all in—and she had to wonder why.

But she couldn't worry about his motives now. She had a full schedule ahead of her. After their initial reunion, Lissa had sat through a typical morning in Trevor's life, which consisted of nonstop phone calls, paperwork, a few confidential meetings for which she'd had to step out of the room, and more phone calls. As a result, she'd had plenty of time to observe him and view the man he'd become.

Of course Lissa had researched her subject. She'd read about Trevor's basic background, much of which she already knew: scholarships to Columbia undergrad and business school, where he'd worked his way through, earning the rest of his way while maintaining stellar grades; internships at the top financial firms in Manhattan; and a job waiting for him when he graduated.

The man was brilliant—something she'd always known—but what he'd accomplished on his own was simply amazing. She was proud of him. So proud, she couldn't stop the warmth fluttering through her even now. But she'd known all about his golden accomplishments and understood his inner drive to make things happen. As a kid, the arrogance he projected had

been an act, a cover for insecurities about where he'd come from.

Trevor Dane no longer needed to pretend. An earned confidence had replaced the old cockiness. Sexiness had taken the place of what she'd thought of as hunky hotness.

As for his looks, well, she'd seen recent photos on the company website, but nothing had prepared her for his impact in person. He was gorgeous, the force of his personality magnetic. At a glance, the changes in him were obvious. With his jet-black hair in an expensive cut, a power suit, and a red tie, he radiated confidence. His blue eyes were still as piercing, his knowing gaze as raw. His face was leaner, more chiseled, and if possible, he was even more handsome.

She had no doubt women lined up to date the eligible, wealthy bachelor—something she figured she'd discover firsthand the more time she spent with him. Pain shot through her heart at the thought, but she had no one to blame but herself. No matter how much she was still drawn to him, they were history.

Even after he'd overcome his shock at seeing her, wariness remained between them. Still, he insisted she accompany him, not just for his daily business but on all his after-hours appointments as well.

Beginning with dinner tonight, a formal event on Friday evening, and a dinner party on Saturday. That meant she needed a formal gown and another dress for Saturday night, none of which she could easily afford. She'd tried to cover her surprise and dismay and knew she'd failed miserably... but at least she'd salvaged her pride and hadn't let her lack of money slip.

No doubt Trevor assumed she'd received a nice settlement to end her marriage. She wasn't about to inform him how hard she'd had to scrape for life's little luxuries. Her marriage and its aftermath were none of his business. She didn't want or need his sympathy—if he'd even afford her that, given their history.

She'd left his office at three in order to pull herself together, check into her hotel, and then go shopping. Since she didn't know any places like Consign and Design in the city, she'd have to pay full price at a department store. At least her parents were watching Olivia through the end of this school week, and then her baby would stay with her father and his bimbo.

Make that Brad's soon-to-be wife, who was all of twenty-two years old and who possessed more money than even Brad's family. Lissa cringed. But no matter how much Lissa resented Brad and his behavior, she knew Olivia was safe and cared for while with her father, giving her the freedom to be in the city and take care of business.

She grabbed her purse, made sure she had her credit card in her wallet, and started to leave when a knock interrupted her. A look through the peephole showed her someone in a hotel uniform, so she opened the door.

"Can I help you?" Lissa asked the younger man.

"Are you Miss Elisabetta Gardelli?" he asked.

She nodded. Every time she heard her full name, she was glad she'd reclaimed her maiden name after the divorce. Olivia was still a Banks, but Elisabetta no longer desired to be one.

"Special delivery for you." He gestured to the rolling cart Lissa hadn't noticed before.

She shook her head. "I'm sorry, but I didn't order anything."

The man looked at the paper in his hand. "From Saks Fifth Avenue, for you. May I?" He inclined his head, indicating he wanted to come into the room.

"Umm, sure." Confused, Lissa let him enter and lay out garment bags on the bed, along with shoeboxes and shopping bags.

He'd started to push the cart back out of the room when her brain kicked back into gear. "Wait, please." She went to her wallet and pulled out some bills to tip him with. "Here. Thank you."

"No, ma'am. It's all taken care of, but thank you."

"I don't understand," she said, her legs beginning to shake as she realized only one person knew she needed clothing.

"A Mr. Trevor Dane is downstairs. He asked me to get your permission to share your room number with him?"

Mutely, Lissa nodded. "Send him up," she murmured, lowering herself onto a corner of the bed, knowing her legs wouldn't hold up much longer.

Nothing about this interview and reunion with Trevor was going as she'd envisioned. She'd known being with him again would be challenging, but she'd hoped it would be cathartic. She'd never quite gotten him out of her system and after seeing him today, she was coming to the conclusion she never would. She thought she'd be resigning herself to that throughout this long, torturous weekend.

But now she was facing this... thoughtful, caring gesture from a man who ought to hate her. He should be doing everything he could to make her time with him as painless for himself as possible—by spending as little time with her as he needed in order to get the article written. Yet he was sending her expensive clothing from Saks and showing up at her hotel room in the middle of his workday to... what?

She had no idea, and that scared her.



AS TREVOR RODE the elevator to the thirty-sixth floor, he figured he'd lost his mind. He had no other explanation for doing something so out of character as leaving work in the middle of the day. No doubt about it, though, his phone call with his mother had shaken him badly.

For years he'd assumed that once Lissa had gotten pregnant and Brad had done the right thing by marrying her, she'd lived a charmed life as Bradley Banks's wife. The money, the country club, all the things that, at the time, Trevor could never be sure he'd be able to provide. And once she'd had Brad's baby and married him, whether or not Trevor succeeded in life no longer mattered. He'd had a decade to build a picture in his mind of how good her life had been without him. Regardless of his professional success, Trevor still felt hollow inside.

It had taken no time to have his illusions—or rather, delusions—shattered. According to his mother, Lissa's married life had been a decade-long embarrassment. The bastard had married her in name only, doing the so-called “right thing” by his child. Not by the baby's mother. When Lissa finally had enough and walked out, her settlement had been paltry, and she'd been forced to take a part-time job serving coffee at Cuppa Café while writing the obituary column for the *Serendipity Gazette*. She lived in a small house on her original side of town, and though their daughter's future was secure thanks to Brad's parents, Lissa worked for everything she had.

No wonder she'd nearly passed out when he'd mentioned a formal affair and a dinner party this weekend. Not only couldn't she afford those kinds of clothes but she probably didn't even own them. Trevor had misjudged her, the life she'd lived, and who she'd become. And though nothing could change what had happened in the past, he damn well respected her choices now.

He should have known better. If he could have gotten past his hurt and anger sooner and let his mother fill him in, he'd have known how unhappy her life had to be. Would it have changed anything? Would he have gone back for her, married or not?

He'd never know.

On that thought, a mechanical voice announced he was on the thirty-sixth floor, and the elevator door opened in front of

him.

Well, whatever was in the past, Lissa was here now, and Trevor had this one chance to see what might have been. What could be. Either way, when this interview process was over, he'd have the one thing that had been missing all these years.

Closure.

And he'd also have Lissa one more time. He refused to accept any other outcome.

Trevor reached Lissa's room and found the door partially open. He walked in to find her sitting on the edge of the bed surrounded by bags of clothing.

"Hi," he said to capture her attention.

She glanced up, meeting his eyes with a wide-eyed, wary gaze. "What is all this? And don't say *clothes*," she said before he could do just that. "Why didn't you just let me go shopping?"

Trevor ran a hand through his hair, embarrassed. It wasn't like he went around ordering clothing for women. "It wasn't hard to figure out that I was putting you on the spot with the formal affair and the dinner party."

"And I said I'd go shopping."

"You also mentioned something about serving coffee, and you literally paled when it dawned on you that you'd have to buy new things. I realized I knew nothing about you now." He stared up at the ceiling, knowing he had no choice but to admit the truth. "So I called my mother, and she filled me in."

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LISSA FELT HER face flush hot with embarrassment and awkwardness. "So you found out all about my life and realized I couldn't really afford a new wardrobe for the weekend. You felt sorry for me and sent these clothes over?" Her voice rose along with her mortification.

“Hey, that’s not it.” He sat down beside her, close enough so their legs were touching. “It’s more like I got a shocking lesson in making assumptions.”

She swallowed hard. “You thought I lived well off the Banks money.”

“Well, I assumed that if the guy was doing the right thing by marrying you after he—” He caught himself before saying *knocked you up*. “After he got you pregnant, then he would treat you right after he split up with you, too.”

“You know what they say about someone who assumes things,” she muttered.

To her surprise, he laughed. “Yep. And an ass certainly describes how I acted today. So maybe the clothes were an apology, too.”

Lissa didn’t know what to do with this kinder, gentler Trevor, and part of her wondered if that wasn’t his intention. To keep her off balance, guessing, unsure of herself during the time she was with him. To her dismay, she realized she didn’t know him all that well anymore.

“I’m sorry things have been so hard for you.”

She forced a smile. “I managed.” She’d also put herself in the position of having to marry Brad, but it didn’t seem smart to get into the specifics of their past right now. “Thank you, though.”

“You’re welcome.”

“And thank you for these.” She swept her hand toward the bags surrounding them on the bed.

“That was my pleasure.” His smile warmed her straight down to her toes.

She was trying really hard not to think about the fact that they were sitting in a hotel room alone on a king-sized bed, but it wasn’t easy. Trevor’s pants-clad thigh touched her bare one, and she could swear she felt the heat of his skin through the

material. When she inhaled, he smelled deliciously male and need rose quickly.

It had been so long since she'd had a man's arms around her, a man who made her feel good and wanted. Unlike her ex, Lissa had remained faithful in her marriage, and her one short relationship afterward had left her cold and wondering whether she'd ever feel real desire again.

Well, now she knew. She ought to be surprised that it was Trevor who'd awakened her long-dormant hormones, but she wasn't. Not really.

Lissa pulled in a deep breath and forced herself to continue the conversation. For all she knew, she was the only one feeling the heat, and she didn't want him to think she'd misinterpret a kind gesture for anything more. She knew how he felt about her.

His first unguarded reaction had shown his true emotions, and though he was trying to be nice now, she knew the resentment still lurked below the surface. She couldn't let herself think anything else was at play, or she'd be risking her heart. She was sure Trevor's was locked up tight, at least to her.

"How did you know my size?" she asked.

He shrugged. "I asked my secretary to guess. Some of the things will have to be returned."

She nodded. "I look forward to trying them on."

"I look forward to seeing you in them." His gorgeous eyes sparkled at the thought.

"What time should I be ready tonight?"

"I'll pick you up at seven."

Lissa shook her head. "I'll meet you there." This wasn't a date; it was business. She couldn't let him play the gentleman and go through the motions. It would only make her want things she'd never have.

He scowled. "I don't mind picking you up."

"There's no need for you to treat me like a date. I'm a journalist writing your story," she felt compelled to remind him. Or maybe she needed to say it out loud for herself. "The Waldorf, correct?"

He nodded, but she could see from the stiffness in his shoulders he wasn't happy with her suggestion.

"Great," she said, rising from the bed. "I'll see you there."

He rose and stood way too close. "You'll see me, all right," he murmured too enigmatically for her liking. Reaching out, he placed his fingers beneath her chin until she looked directly into his eyes. "We have a lot to catch up on."

He tipped his head, and her stomach did a nervous roll as his lips came closer to hers. A yearning the likes of which she'd never felt before rose up to greet him. But instead of touching his mouth to hers, he placed a kiss on her cheek, his touch too short to make any promises yet too long to mean nothing.

He stared at her for a long while afterward as if studying her.

She curled her hands into fists at her sides, her heart pounding, her body responding in ways she'd long forgotten. Her breasts grew full, her nipples peaked, and dampness pooled between her thighs.

"See you later," he said in a deep voice, gruffer than before.

"Bye," she whispered, unable to form a coherent thought. And though he hadn't really kissed her or touched her at all, heat licked at her from the inside out.

Oh boy, was she in trouble.

Lissa spent the rest of the afternoon pulling herself together. She tried on the variety of dresses Collette had sent over, surprised to find each one fit. It was up to her to decide

which to wear and which to return. The answer came down to one question.

How sexy did she want to be?

She luxuriated in a scented bath and took an amazing amount of time getting herself ready. She hadn't primped so much on her appearance since high school. Sadly, that had been the last time she'd truly cared about impressing someone, and she had to admit it felt too good to make the attempt now.

Though she knew she ought to eat and had ordered something light, she merely picked at the salad and fruit, too nervous for a full meal. Still, at least she had something in her stomach so that she could nurse a drink and not feel tipsy. Something told her she'd need to be in full control of her faculties this evening when dealing with Trevor. Not to mention, she wouldn't be taking notes on the people she met and on Trevor's interactions, so she'd need to rely on memory when she wrote up her interview notes later.

Finally, gown and shoes chosen, she gathered her evening bag—another smart choice by Collette—and headed downstairs to hail a cab. Except when she reached the lobby, she found Trevor waiting for her.

Standing against a pillar, clad in a perfectly tailored tuxedo, the man exuded confidence and sex appeal. She was so surprised to see him, so affected by his masculinity, that she nearly tripped in her high heels as she made her way over to him.

"I thought I said I'd meet you there," she said.

"And I told you you'd see me. I just didn't say where." His gaze raked over her, hot and heated, devouring her with its intensity. "You look gorgeous."

"Thank you. Collette chose well." She managed to speak, though her mouth was bone-dry.

"It's not the clothes, Lissa. It's you," he said gruffly. "Do you know how many times I wished I could afford to buy you nice things?"

He was talking about ten years ago.

She smiled. “I never wanted them,” she murmured. She’d only wanted him. She shook her head, shaking off the memories they couldn’t change.

“Ready to go?” he asked, placing a strong hand against her bare back. “The limo is waiting.”

Surprised, she opened her mouth, then closed it again. “Limo?” The word sounded like a squeak, and he grinned.

“Your article is supposed to document who I am and how I live, correct?” She nodded. “Don’t worry. It’s not a full limo. It’s a Town Car with a driver.” He chuckled, probably at her shocked expression.

“Lead the way,” she said, raising her chin in a futile attempt at nonchalance.

The man was riding roughshod over every one of her good intentions, and damn if she wasn’t enjoying having someone else take control for a change.

Not that she’d give him the satisfaction of telling him that. All she had to do now was get through the rest of the night without succumbing to that charm he seemed so determined to lavish on her.

But that was the sensible Elisabetta talking. The old Elisabetta—the one who would follow Trevor’s lead to hell and back, the one who was enjoying the feel of his heated palm against her back—urged her to stop thinking and enjoy. Not that she’d forget why she was with Trevor or that she had an article to write when her time with him was through, but for now, the devil on her shoulder insisted she relax and see where this night and these sparks between them would lead.

And she wondered which Lissa would win.

Chapter Three

FOR TREVOR, NOTHING about tonight was work-related. His firm believed in this fundraiser, so attendance was mandatory, but nobody conducted business at these events. Most attended with their husbands, wives, or significant others, and it was as much a chance for people to catch up personally as it was to raise money for the charity. Normally, Trevor hated these things. He'd have to dig up a date, either a woman who bored him to tears or one who thought she could be the one to catch him when no other woman had been able to before.

At first, he'd questioned why this was on the reporter's schedule of events, but he realized Alex wanted to showcase both Trevor and the firm's commitment to altruistic causes. He'd resigned himself to sucking it up because at least he'd be with a woman who had no expectations. Once he'd discovered the reporter was Lissa, and after he'd made the deliberate decision to let go of the past for this short time they were together, he'd begun to look forward to the evening.

As for her insistence that she'd take a cab? Letting her think she'd gotten her way was easier than arguing. And it had been worth the waiting time in the lobby to get his first glimpse of her uncensored expression the moment she'd laid eyes on him as she walked out of the elevator. Pure, unadulterated pleasure lit her gaze, along with a definite dose of female appreciation, before wariness shuttered her emotions. And her skin glowed radiantly, her emerald eyes twinkling with delight she tried hard to hide.

It was enough for him to know he'd gotten to her the same way she affected him.

Only then did he allow himself the full pleasure of viewing her in all her glory. Dressed in a gold gown, Grecian in design, that draped over one shoulder and hugged her curves in all the right places, she looked like a princess. The back dipped

enticingly low, giving him a glimpse of her olive skin and affording the perfect place to settle his palm possessively against her back.

They made the ride to the Waldorf in silence, and Trevor let her squirm. He knew she was questioning his motives and what he wanted from her. He liked her nervous and a bit wary. That was when she'd be most unguarded, letting little things slip.

There was much to revisit, much still unsaid, and though they had a limited amount of time together, most of it would be one on one. Just not right away.

As soon as they arrived at the hotel and walked into the ballroom, all eyes turned to look at them. Trevor understood. Lissa, with her Mediterranean olive skin, jet-black hair, and green eyes, made an impression. She had a regal look, and he was proud to have her on his arm.

"I'm the envy of every man here," he said, escorting her toward the bar.

"Flatterer. Have you seen the other women here? They're at least twenty pounds lighter and have much tinier waists," she said, laughing without seeming uncomfortable.

"I hadn't noticed. I can't take my eyes off you." He drew a deep breath. "Would you like a drink?"

She nodded. "A glass of white wine."

The bartender had heard her, so Trevor merely added, "And a scotch on the rocks for me."

A few minutes later, they had their drinks in hand. "Let's walk," he said, steering her into the crowds. The sooner they did the obligatory meet and greet, the sooner Trevor could dance with this woman and take her to bed. They passed the next thirty minutes talking to the important people at Wittman Financial and other people in the industry. Trevor was careful to introduce Lissa to the movers and shakers by both name and company affiliation, knowing that despite the personal nature

of their time together, when all was said and done, she had a job to do.

“Trevor, Ms. Gardelli, I’m so glad you could make it.” Trevor turned at the sound of Alexander’s voice. “I see you two have worked out your... differences?”

“It’s a pleasure to see you again, Mr. Wittman,” Lissa said, extending her free hand.

Instead of shaking it, Alex lifted her hand and placed a courtly kiss on top. “You look ravishing.”

Lissa blushed.

“I was just telling her the same thing myself,” Trevor said, unable to hide his pleasure at being with her.

Over the years, as Trevor had escorted various dates to these types of evenings, he’d been jealous of Bradley Banks, thinking the man was taking Lissa to country club events, showing her off and then taking her home and making love to her.

Trevor’s stomach turned at the thought even now.

How much time had he wasted by not finding out the truth of how her life had been?

Which reminded him, he had some crow to eat. He turned to Alex. “I already apologized to Lissa, and now it’s your turn. After all these years, I was shocked to see her and let my emotions cloud my judgment. I was rude earlier today, and I apologize.”

Trevor wasn’t a man prone to saying *I’m sorry*, but in this case, he owed his boss and mentor one and intended to prove he understood his mistake.

“I don’t know what happened between you two in the past, but to have such an explosive reaction means great passion was involved.”

A small hiccup came from Lissa, a clear sign of shock.

“Alex...” Trevor said in warning.

The other man waved away Trevor's concerns because, in Alex's world, people were meant to be paired off. He was a romantic to the bone.

"Speaking of passion, Emma sends her best, but she's home with a headache. She wants to make sure she's better for tomorrow night's dinner party. Which means I'll be leaving early," he said with regret.

"I hope she feels better," Lissa said. "I'm looking forward to meeting her tomorrow."

Trevor stepped closer to Lissa and slid an arm around her waist. She stiffened for a moment before managing to relax. "Please send Emma my best wishes. And we'll see her tomorrow," Trevor added.

"She's looking forward to it, as am I." Alex nodded. His perceptive gaze locked on Trevor's possessive hold on Lissa and a smug grin settled on the man's face. "I'll see you two later," Alex said and headed off to finish making his rounds.

Trevor gave Lissa a few minutes to enjoy her drink in silence and take in the ambiance in the ballroom. He finished his and turned to face her.

"Dance?" he asked.



DID LISSA WANT to dance with him? "Sure." Lissa handed her wineglass to a passing server and steeled herself to spend the next few minutes in Trevor's arms.

It was hard enough to see the heat and appreciation in his eyes whenever he looked at her. Harder still to make herself believe he meant it. She didn't doubt he wanted her. She desired him just as much. It was how she felt about that look in his eyes that frightened her. As he wrapped his arm around her waist and pulled her close, the warmth of his body and the thrill his touch inspired scared her even more.

Yet when he looked down and into her eyes, she practically melted on the spot.

“This feels familiar,” he said as he slowly moved to the strains of the music.

She laughed, remembering their junior prom. They hadn’t made it to their senior. “As I recall, we were more awkward then.”

He shrugged. “Practice makes perfect.” He stroked her bare back with his thumb, and she shivered.

“Do you come to these things often?” she asked.

“It’s part of the job. There are charitable galas, holiday parties, things like that.”

“And that’s where you got all your practice. Who were your partners?” she asked, forcing a smile while they talked.

“Is that on the record? Or more of a personal question?”

She tried to pull away, but he tightened his hold, continuing their glide around the dance floor. “Well?”

“I think you know.”

He nodded. “I do. And the answer is nameless, unimportant women.”

Her heart stopped beating. “All of them?”

Again, he nodded.

“Why?” she asked softly, unable to believe they were having this conversation.

“Are you sure you want an answer?”

Was she sure? Ten years of wondering if Trevor ever thought of her. Lonely nights of imagining him taking other women to bed, falling in love, and eventually marrying one and having children. Jealousy had eaten away at her even as her rational self knew she had no right. She was the one who’d turned to someone else. She’d had another man’s baby.

She met his gaze and nodded.

“Okay, but once you get it, there’s no turning back.”

She couldn't suppress a smile. Because she had the sense there was no turning back anyway. "I'm sure."

His dark eyes smoldered with need. "They were all nameless, unimportant blurs because they weren't you."

"Oh, Trevor," she said as his words wrapped around her heart.

His grip on her waist tightened, his large hand cupping her so hard she thought he'd leave marks. The thought of him marking her in any way aroused her beyond reason. So did the hardened erection pressing into her belly, telling her how very much he wanted her.

That was what she could believe in. The only thing.

The feelings behind the desire? Those were emotions she no longer let herself trust.

"I need to get out of here," he said gruffly.

Lissa nodded. She'd never wanted anything more. Another night with Trevor was more than she'd ever imagined—and now it looked like they'd have at least two before she went home to Serendipity and the life she'd chosen so very long ago.



INSTEAD OF GOING to Lissa's hotel as she'd expected, Trevor gave the driver his Upper East Side address, which for some reason made this next step seem all too real. To see where he lived, what his life was like... She shivered.

"Cold?" he asked from his seat beside her in the car. She shook her head. "Ah. Then you're thinking too much."

She smiled, amazed he could read her so well after all these years.

"Guess I'll have to remedy that." He reached up and slid his fingers beneath her hair, cupping her neck and pulling her close. Then, without wasting any time, he sealed his lips over hers.

His instincts had been correct, she thought. At the sizzling connection between them, all coherent thought stopped.

He'd always been talented with his mouth, and that hadn't changed. His lips slid back and forth over hers, taking her for a blissful, mind-numbing experience that quickly turned hot and arousing when he grasped her hair in his hand and deepened the kiss.

The slightly aggressive move was somehow erotic too, and her body liquefied with the tug against her scalp. With a moan, she returned each swipe and thrust of his tongue with equal fervor and need, wanting nothing more than to crawl into his lap and get as close as possible, given the barrier of clothing.

When he suddenly pulled back, her entire body protested the loss of his mouth over hers. "What's wrong?" she asked, feeling dazed and unfulfilled.

"We're here."

Lissa looked out the window. "Oh." She was shocked to see the car had stopped in front of a building.

He grinned and slipped his hand in hers. "Thank you, Tony," he said to the driver.

Lissa blushed and ducked her head, embarrassed they'd been making out with the man right in front.

"He's paid to be discreet," Trevor said, laughing, making Lissa wonder if he made it a habit to seduce his dates on their way home.

She didn't want to know if he did.

More sober now, she followed him inside, aware of his arm around her waist but not feeling as relaxed as she had earlier. Which was ridiculous, all things considered.

He lived in a building with a doorman, which meant another stranger to nod to as she and Trevor passed by on the way to the elevator. They stepped off on the twenty-first floor and headed down the long, lit corridor to the end of the hall.

He unlocked the door and motioned for her to step in ahead of him. He'd left lights on, so she was able to look around immediately. He tossed his keys on a shelf in the entryway before taking her hand and pulling her into the main living room. A wall of windows overlooked the glittering Manhattan skyline.

"The view is incredible," she said as she walked to the windows.

In fact, the entire apartment was a thing of masculine beauty, with its heavy, rugged furniture facing an oversized wall-mounted television, shelves with books and other decorator-chosen pieces, and picture frames. It was the photographs that gave the place a lived-in, homey touch, and at a glance, Lissa recognized the various photos of Trevor's family—his parents, his sister and her husband, and their new baby.

"The view is the reason I chose this place. There's no high-rise to block my visibility or give anyone an unobstructed look into my private space. I can leave the shades open most of the time." He stepped up beside her, and she immediately felt his body heat.

"Do you miss living in Serendipity? The wide open spaces?" she asked, wondering if she could give up small-town living for Manhattan.

"I miss some things more than others," he said in a deep voice.

Taking her off guard, he moved around her and wrapped his arms around her waist. His front pressed into her back, and he cuddled her in his embrace, a feeling that made her feel so safe and secure that warning bells went off in her head.

But she couldn't bring herself to heed them. His warm breath fanned across her neck while his impressive erection pulsed against her backside, as together they looked over the brightly lit city.

God, she'd dreamed about this.

About the day he'd come back for her and make everything right in her world. Except she'd been a naïve young woman then, despite her pregnancy, and still too much of a teenager to understand what she'd done to her life. She was a woman now and knew better than to put stock in adolescent dreams, but for this one night and maybe tomorrow, he could be hers again. Nobody would begrudge her some new and better memories to keep her company on lonely nights.

Not wanting to waste a second more, she turned, looping her arms around his neck and looking into his eyes. "Kiss me." She decided to take what she desired—and what he obviously wanted as well.



TREVOR HAD BEEN worried she'd come to her senses and change her mind, so he didn't need a second invitation. Cupping her face in his hands, he backed her against the plate glass windows and kissed her long and hard, so deeply she couldn't mistake his desire. He swept his tongue inside her mouth, and everything in his world righted itself once more. He teased her, brushing his tongue back and forth, relearning her touch, her taste, her scent, the way she felt.

Back when they were kids, they'd spent hours kissing as though nothing else mattered, and they had all the time they'd ever want together. Though he knew better now, he could still kiss her for hours. Only her.

With other women, he'd rush through the foreplay and get to the deed because, ironically, he'd always found the preliminaries more intimate, more telling about someone's feelings. Post-Lissa, knowing he'd closed his emotions off, he'd made it his mission to arouse his partner quickly and leave her satisfied, but with no question that he wasn't lingering before or after. The women he was with knew the score. It was a reputation he'd perfected, and though he wasn't proud of it, at least he was honest.

He was equally so now. He began to thrust his tongue deeper into her mouth, mimicking the act his hardened body

craved with near desperation. Lissa moaned and hooked one leg around his, arching her pelvis into him and pulling him tighter against her. The small circles she made with her hips drove him insane, and the barrier of clothing nearly killed him.

While still kissing her, he reached for the side zipper of her gown and eased it down as far as he could manage. With his other hand, he yanked the silky material off her shoulder.

She wiggled her upper body, and the entire gown pooled around her on the floor. Needing the visual, he finally broke the kiss and stepped back to admire her, but no sooner had they separated than she reached up to cross her arms and cover herself.

“Nuh-uh.” He grabbed her wrists and pulled them away from her body. “Keep them down there,” he said in a voice he barely recognized.

She’d always had gorgeous, voluptuous breasts, and that hadn’t changed. He brushed his thumb over her already distended nipple, and she let out a sound—a half sigh, half groan—as it hardened even more beneath his fingertip. Then he did the same to the other breast. With a brief touch, it, too, puckered for him.

Trevor grinned. “Still so damn sensitive.”

“Yet you’re taking your time and torturing me,” she said in a shaky voice.

“I’m savoring you.” Her entire body trembled, but he wasn’t finished. Before she could react again, he cupped her full breast in his hand and lifted it to his waiting mouth.

Her skin smelled like peaches, and she tasted sweeter than he remembered. He savored one nipple thoroughly, nipping, teasing, blowing cool air over the puckered tip before moving to the other one and giving it the same care. By the time he was finished, her head was thrown back against the window, her hips bucking forward seeking relief.

His dick felt as if it would shatter at any moment, and for him, this part of the foreplay was over. “Bed, sweetheart?” He

held out his hand.

She looked at him with glazed eyes and nodded, placing her hand inside his. He helped her step out of the dress surrounding her and realized she still wore high-heeled crystal-looking sandals, a matching pair of panties... and nothing more.

Her stomach, while not flat, fit with the rest of her curves, and he wondered how he'd gone so long without feeling her surrounding him, becoming a part of him.

He led her to the bedroom, aware she was naked and uncomfortable but doing her best not to show it. As soon as they reached the bed, he stripped off his clothes, not wanting to wait another second to feel the heat of her skin flush against his. But when she reached to remove her sandals, he shook his head.

She narrowed her gaze. "Seriously?"

He grinned. "What can I say? It's been a fantasy of mine to fuck you while you're wearing nothing but endlessly high heels."

"You fantasized about me?" she asked, sounding well and truly shocked.

His heart nearly stopped, but the admission was out there. "Nobody else has ever done it for me the way you do."

When she opened her mouth, he used the opportunity to settle his naked body over hers and stop any further conversation. They'd have to talk, but it wasn't happening now.

He let his weight ease against her, gritting his teeth as he came into contact with her damp heat. "Oh, baby." He cupped her hips in his hands and ground himself against her.

"You don't play fair," she murmured, her arms coming around him.

"Why? Because I don't want to talk anymore?" He braced his hands on either side of her and buried his face between her

neck and shoulder. At first, he merely kissed her, then using his teeth, he tugged hard until she moaned and bucked beneath him.

“I don’t want to talk, either.” She bent her legs, making room for him. “I need you inside me.”

He lifted his head and looked into her eyes, dying for exactly the same thing. “Do I need protection?”

She shook her head, her pretty green eyes wide and glassy. “I’m on the pill.”

His body trembled at the thought of entering her bareback.

“You?” she asked.

“I’m safe. I’ve never had sex without one,” he assured her. He’d only asked now because it was Lissa, and more than anything he wanted to feel all of her when he was finally inside her again.

She drew a deep breath. “Well you don’t have to worry about me, either. It’s been so long I’ll be lucky if I remember how,” she said, forcing a laugh he knew she didn’t feel.

He brushed her tangled hair off her cheek. “Nobody since your divorce?” he asked her, surprised yet oddly pleased.

She bit her lip before finally speaking. “Nobody since not long after my marriage.”

Trevor ignored the thrill the admission brought, knowing it was selfish to be happy she’d been so alone, yet pleased she hadn’t been with anyone but him and the ex he refused to think about.

Lissa sighed. “After the divorce, I dated one guy—you might remember Russ Mason—but I couldn’t bring myself to be with him that way.”

Trevor hated talking about other men, but he knew it was necessary. He cocked an eyebrow in question.

“Just no desire.” She blushed, but he appreciated her honesty and kissed her cheek. “Anyway, the relationship

ended quickly after that. Russ thought I was frigid, and frankly, I didn't care." She lifted her shoulder in a delicate shrug.

Unable to hold it in, Trevor barked out a laugh.

"What's so funny?" She frowned at him.

"Any guy who thinks you're frigid must need lessons. You're so hot you're burning me alive," he told her, meaning every word. "Watch."

Dipping his head, he licked one nipple at first, then the next. Those rosy peaks were quickly becoming his favorite part of her because she was so damn responsive. One touch and she grew immediately slick and wet, which he intended to show her. As he reached down and slid his finger through her moist folds, her hips arched up and into him, seeking deeper penetration.

"Soon," he promised her. First, he came up with the proof to back up his claim. "See? So not frigid."

Her genuine smile nearly undid him. Her words finished the task. "It's you, Trev. It's always been you."

Unable to hold back any longer, he raised himself over her. "I can't promise slow and easy," he said, apologizing ahead of time.

"Then it's a good thing hard and fast suits me just fine." She clasped his erection in her hand, rubbing her fingertip over the moisture pooled at the tip.

He gritted his teeth, nearly coming from the intense pleasure of her touch as she guided him toward her slick heat. Only when he was poised at her entry did she release her hold so he could ease his aching shaft inside her.

She was tight and hot, and he tried desperately to at least start slowly.

"You promised you wouldn't take it slow." She rocked her lower body and snapped the last of his self-control.

It hadn't been difficult to do. Even though he'd tried not to let himself remember them or consciously think of her, he hadn't lied when he'd said she was and remained his greatest fantasy.

Chapter Four

LISSA DIDN'T DO sex without emotion. Even the one time when she'd conceived her daughter, she'd been an emotional mess because she was seventeen, turning eighteen in a few months, tipsy, hurt, and filled with the knowledge that Brad wasn't Trevor. Though she often came off hard and edgy to the outside world, on the inside, she was one big mush afraid of being hurt.

Despite the easy banter with Trevor, despite her self-made promise to hold on to her heart, the minute he entered her, filling her body in the way only he ever had, he broke down her walls, and she knew she'd have one hell of a time putting them back up.

“Okay, sweetheart?” He paused to let her body accommodate him, the strain of holding back showing on his face.

So did the play of emotions in his expression telling her he felt it too—the fusing of their bodies with no barrier between them. He was marking her, and she feared she'd never be the same.

“I'm good,” she said, concentrating on feeling, not thinking. And he felt incredible, hot and thick inside her. “You won't hurt me.” To encourage him, she lifted her head and pulled his earlobe into her mouth, teasing and tugging with her teeth.

With a groan, he released the hold he'd been keeping and began a steady thrust inside her. Her mind fogged. Her body pulsed, a wave of pleasure rose inside her, and she reached out to grab it, to meet and match his rhythm, but the shoes and their spiked heels held her back, preventing her from digging her feet into the mattress for purchase.

She moaned in frustration, her body in desperate need of more than the delicious glide of his hard erection deep into her. She needed to feel him slam into her, to make her his.

As if he knew and understood, he changed his position slightly and adjusted his motion, twisting his hips each time his body connected with hers. That did it. Every thrust brought his pubic bone down hard against just the right spot, and he took her higher with each successive plunge deeper inside her. Braced on his arms, he stared into her eyes, watching her as he possessed her—body, mind, and soul.

Frantic to hold on to some semblance of self, to hold something back from him, she closed her eyes and—the delicious movement ceased.

He stopped moving altogether.

Lissa cried out, digging her nails into his shoulders, urging him on.

“Not until you look at me,” he said, his tone harsh.

She forced her eyelids open and met his dark, sexy gaze. “I hate you,” she muttered.

“No, you just wish you did.” And then he began to make love to her once more.

He played her body as though he knew it intimately, taking her higher as he grew impossibly bigger and harder, powering into her with deep, heavy thrusts. She was wet, she was needy, and he satisfied every craving she had, the waves of desire rising higher in her body.

Yeah, she’d had self-induced orgasms over the years, but they paled in comparison to having this man in control. He slowed when she neared completion, letting her body wind down only to hammer home harder again, building her need and promising a spectacular climax he kept just out of reach.

She whimpered, raising her hips, clenching him tighter inside her, holding him until the slick moisture of their

connection sounded in the room, an erotic accompaniment to the music they were already making together.

Warmth, heat, and a sweet bombardment of sensations swept through her at lightning speed, growing in intensity, the ultimate prize almost within reach.

“Come, sweetheart, because I sure as hell am.” With that, he thrust deep and up high, twisting his hips and taking her exactly where she wanted to be.

Lissa came right then, her body so in tune with him she exploded on command. She screamed, bucking against him as the most amazing sensations rocked her world. Suddenly, he tensed above her and shouted her name, his muscles clenching, his hips continuing a pump and grind that sent her body into another round of mini detonations that seemed never to end.

He collapsed on top of her, breathing hard, and she savored his weight and the warmth of his damp skin. “I may never recover,” she said, only half joking.

“Me neither.” With a grunt, he rolled over, and she felt the loss of contact too keenly. He leaned over and pressed a quick kiss on her lips before rising and heading into the bathroom.

She rid herself of her sandals just as he returned, not giving her a chance to decide whether to dress and get out quickly or succumb to the urge to wrap herself in his arms and fall asleep.

Still naked, he climbed in beside her and pulled her into his embrace. That answered that question, she thought and snuggled in. Neither spoke and to her amazement, she didn't feel the need or the absence of conversation. His actions spoke volumes, and she wanted to enjoy the time she had left.

Not wanting to dwell on the inevitability of their parting, she forced herself to operate as she always did when falling asleep. She turned her mind to work and deadlines. As far as Trevor was concerned, her story was nearly complete. She had already researched his background beyond what she knew personally. And between watching him in the office, spending

an evening with him at a fundraiser, and then being given a firsthand view of his apartment, she possessed a broad glimpse into other facets of Trevor as a man. A few more specific questions would fill out the missing pieces.

As she went through things in her mind, she was acutely aware of his breathing and knew the minute he fell asleep. His hold on her loosened only slightly, his breaths coming deeper and more evenly. She relaxed into his rhythm, letting exhaustion claim her.

Her body was sated, her eyelids were already growing heavy, and her last thought before drifting off was of how easily she could get used to falling asleep in his arms.



TREVOR COULDN'T BRING himself to move. An early riser with no need for an alarm clock, he had never put in blackout shades, preferring to wake up on his own or, on the occasions he slept in, with the warm sun on his face.

This morning, his internal clock woke him. He immediately became aware of two things: Lissa was in his bed with her warm, naked body draped over his and it was Saturday. There wasn't any place he had to be. Nothing to interrupt something he'd dreamed about since he was sixteen.

Waking up with this woman in his arms.

He was hard and couldn't attribute it to a typical morning. Not when one female thigh was slung over his and the scent he now associated with her filled every breath.

He nuzzled beneath her jaw and licked the skin along her neck. She moaned softly, coming awake slowly, so he continued to nibble at her skin, taking his time as she became aware.

"Trev?" she asked in a sleepy voice.

He raised an eyebrow. "Expecting someone else?" he asked, laughing.

She didn't lift her head or meet his gaze. "You feel good," she murmured.

"So do you." He closed his eyes, wondering how to make this last longer than the course of the interview.

He didn't bring women home often, and when he did, they didn't sleep over. It didn't matter whether he had to drive them home; he never wanted to wake up with someone he'd have to politely get rid of the next day.

When it came to Lissa, he never wanted to let her go.

Before he could continue that train of thought, a noise sounded from the other room, muted but still clear enough to be heard. "Mom. Mom. Mom. Mom. Mummy. Mummy. Mum. Mum..."

"What the hell is that?" he asked as Lissa popped out of his arms.

"My cell," she said. "It's my daughter's text message alert. It's Stewie from *Family Guy*."

Nude, she rose from the bed, distracting him from the obvious—the reminder of her daughter. But suddenly, she glanced at the uncovered windows and then at him, her cheeks red.

Personally, he could look at her all day. "I have a T-shirt in the top drawer." He gestured to a wooden chest, and she shot him a grateful look.

A few seconds later, her gorgeous body was covered in an oversized white shirt that was sheer enough to allow him a thrill but made her more comfortable as she headed into the other room, returning with her small purse.

And that quickly, reality resurfaced. He was no longer in the solitary bubble he'd created for the two of them, and for the first time since laying eyes on her yesterday, the old wounds and sharp pain sliced him in the chest once more. But he also reminded himself that the pain was a decade old, and that was a first.

She pulled out her phone. “Olivia—I call her Livvy—is at her father’s for the weekend,” Lissa said as she hit some buttons, obviously looking at the text message. “Or not.” She let out a groan.

“What’s wrong?” Trevor asked.

“Her text says *Have a cold. And At Grandma’s*. I need to call my mother.”

“How do you know she didn’t mean the Bankses?” Trevor must be growing up because here he was, suddenly curious about her relationships and family dynamics.

“Because Livvy calls Lyla *Grandmother* Banks.” Lissa wrinkled her nose at the formal term.

Trevor agreed. “What a bunch of assholes,” he muttered, rising to his feet.

Before Lissa could react or reply, she gestured to the phone. “Hi, Mom. It’s me. Livvy’s with you?”

While Lissa was busy, Trevor escaped into the bathroom to wash up and regroup while he was at it. He splashed cold water on his face and brushed his teeth, stalling while he pulled himself together. Talk about being in complete denial for the past twenty-four hours. While he’d been losing himself in Lissa, thinking he’d found the missing pieces of his heart, he’d somehow managed to completely block out the thing that had broken them up to begin with.

Her daughter.

Brad’s daughter. He shoved that thought away before he could dwell on it too long.

The fact that she lived in Serendipity, and he lived here.

Hell, if he kept thinking, he was sure he’d come up with many more things that could keep them apart.

Trevor stepped out of the bathroom in time to hear, “Hey, baby.”

Lissa spoke into the phone, her tone warm, sweet, and filled with pure love. A tone Trevor had never heard from her before, and despite himself, he was intrigued.

He grabbed a clean pair of underwear and jeans, dressing while she finished her call. “No, baby, I’m not coming home until tomorrow. You have a cold, and Grandma’s going to take good care of you, okay?” She grew silent, then said, “I love you, too. Bye.”

Clearly bracing herself, she straightened her shoulders and met his gaze. “Sorry about that.”

Trevor shook his head. “No need to apologize for reality,” he said. “Kids need their mothers.” And their fathers, which brought up another question nagging at him. “If she has a cold, why didn’t Brad just keep her with him?”

She frowned. “My guess? Sunny doesn’t want to catch it. That’s Brad’s fiancée. She’s twenty-two and more of a child than Livvy,” Lissa said with a roll of her eyes.

“Does Livvy look like you? Or her father?”

Lissa blinked, obviously startled at his question. So was he. But he wanted to know, even as he knew the answer might hurt.

“My mom thinks she looks exactly like me.”

The vise squeezing his chest eased. “Then she must be beautiful.”

“She is.” Despite the obvious awkwardness of the subject, her eyes glowed with pride and happiness over her daughter.

Her pleasure was contagious, sparking a flame to life inside him. One he wanted to squelch and fan at the same time. But he’d come this far. He’d made love to her. If he turned back now, he’d never know what could be.

“Do you have a picture?”

She nodded. Reaching for her purse once more, she pulled out her phone and showed him the background photo. A

beautiful girl with Lissa's green eyes, black hair, and olive complexion stared back at him with her mother's wide smile, squeezing something inside his chest.

"She's gorgeous," he said, his voice thick.

"Thanks. I think so, but I'm biased." She closed her phone and slid it back into her bag.

"Lissa?"

"Hmm?" She looked up, a curious expression on her face.

"Do you remember what we argued about that last time?" he asked, bringing up the subject they'd been avoiding. The breakup that had led to the end.

Lissa's eyes filled with tears, and she turned away. "I remember you being in a foul mood, and I was just so tired of it. I knew school was hard for you, what with football practice and games, and you working at the gas station when you had free time. Still, we had a fight and agreed to take a break."

She wrapped her arms around herself and walked to the window. "Actually, I suggested the break, hoping you'd tell me I was crazy. Instead, you told me it was a good idea."

Trevor closed his eyes, remembering that argument clearly. As usual, her ex-boyfriend Bradley Banks had gotten under Trevor's skin. The captain of the football team and supposedly all-around good guy from the right side of the tracks, Banks was really a bastard beneath his moneyed looks. He'd always played on Trevor's insecurities, doing things like deliberately spilling a drink, then laughing and telling the rest of the team that Trevor's dad, who was the high school janitor, would clean up his mess.

"I'd bought you a necklace for your birthday." He vividly recalled the gold-plated heart with rhinestones around the edge.

"I still have it, tucked away in the back of a drawer," she admitted.

He'd wondered if she'd forgotten all about him over the years. Now he had his answer, and his heart pounded harder in his chest.

Trevor looked over her shoulder and out the window, the glorious view a complete one-eighty from the small house he'd grown up in. The side of his house practically butted up to another home. When Trevor looked out his bedroom window, he could see the O'Reillys' back porch, so he'd had to keep his shades shut tight. Maybe that explained why he'd been drawn to this view, he realized now.

Lissa remained quiet, obviously waiting for him to continue. She stood alone, wearing his big shirt, as lovely and vulnerable as he'd ever seen her. But she still wasn't looking at him.

Well, this wasn't any easier for him, but it had to be done before they could ever move forward. If they could ever move forward.

"Do you remember what was bothering you that day?" she asked him.

He'd never told her.

He expelled a harsh breath. "Brad was giving me shit in the locker room, telling the guys I bought you a piece of junk at Sears, and it was just a matter of time until you'd get sick of my poverty and be back with him."

Though Lissa also lived on the "wrong" side of Serendipity, with her gorgeous face and luscious body, Brad had always seen her first as a prize, then as a challenge.

She turned around, eyes wide and angry. "That son of a bitch. Why didn't you tell me?"

He rolled his stiff shoulders, managing a shrug. "Because it was the same song, different refrain. The guy was a broken record, and I have to admit that after a while, it got to me."

The man Trevor was now knew how stupid he'd been, but back then, he'd been humiliated and overwhelmed. "I guess I

just needed to get away from the pressure for a little while.” He stepped up beside her and pulled her into his arms. “I never meant I needed to get away from you, but I let it happen.” She tipped her head back, leaning against his chest. “I figured out what an ass I’d been and tried to call you all weekend.”

“But I didn’t take your calls because I’d already...” Her voice trailed off, both of them knowing the end of that sentence.

“Melissa Mayhue’s parents were away, and she had a party. I was upset, and Brad and his friends were there. He passed me drinks, and I took them. Can’t blame him for that,” she said, too much self-hatred in her voice. “And when I went to get my things to go home, he offered to drive me.”

He stiffened, drawing on everything in him not to get angry and pull away so he could smash something and pretend it was her ex. The bastard had preyed on her vulnerability and taken advantage of her being upset that night. Then she’d gotten pregnant. Neither of them had been old enough or mature enough to understand it back then. It was still hard enough to accept now.

As much as he wished things had played out differently, he couldn’t change the past. And it drove him crazy knowing that though Trevor thought Banks had done the right thing, in reality, he’d merely given the Banks family the best public face while privately making Lissa as miserable as possible.

“I’m sorry,” she said in a broken voice.

“I know you are.” He turned her around, forcing her to look at him. “And so am I, sweetheart. So am I.”

She sniffed. “Really?”

He nodded. “We share the blame for what happened. Hell, I realize now I bear most of it. If I hadn’t agreed to split up, you’d never have been with him.” Trevor knew that now as well as he knew his own name.

Her eyes shone with surprise and gratitude. “Thank you for that,” she said, yet she moved out of his embrace. In front of

his eyes, she mentally and emotionally pulled herself together, internalizing the emotions she'd allowed to surface. "I'm glad we finally talked about this. I'm glad we had... closure."

Trevor blinked in shock at her stark words and suddenly cool tone. He'd thought he needed closure, too. No longer. Yet somehow, she'd decided they'd wrapped things up between them in a nice bow.

But as far as he was concerned, things were even messier now than they'd been before. Because Trevor knew what meaningless sex was like—and what he and Lissa shared was a hell of a lot more. No way was he willing to let her just walk out of his life as if last night meant nothing.

"I don't know where you got the idea that last night was about closure," he said, folding his arms across his chest as he faced her down. "News flash, sweetheart. We're not close to over."



LISSA BLEW OUT a long breath and stared at him as if he'd gone mad. "So... what? We're going to be together for another twenty-four hours, torture ourselves with what could have been... and then what? I'll go back to Serendipity, to my daughter—to Brad's daughter," she said bluntly. "And you'll stay here. Why prolong the agony?"

Trevor couldn't deny she had a point. When it came to obstacles, they had plenty. Nor could he say he was ready to deal with everything her real life had to offer, including her daughter, her ex, and Serendipity.

"I don't have all the answers," he told her honestly. "The only thing I do know is that if it's going to hurt that much to walk away, it means there's something meaningful there to begin with." He held out his hands and waited, holding his breath.

"Dammit, Trevor," she muttered, and walked into his waiting arms.

He held her close, and suddenly, her stomach growled. He heard as well as felt the vibration and laughed.

“I’m hungry,” she said.

“Let’s go out and get breakfast.”

She stepped back and gestured to his see-through shirt and her bare legs. “I have this and a formal gown,” she reminded him.

“Personally, I like this.”

She wrinkled her nose at him, and he laughed. “Fine. Go shower. I’ll give you a heavier shirt and a pair of sweats and socks to go back to the hotel in. You can change and then we’ll go for breakfast. Better?”

She nodded. “Thanks.”

A few minutes later, she’d shut herself in his bathroom and turned on the shower while he lowered himself onto his bed and groaned, running a hand through his already messed-up hair.

He meant what he’d said a few minutes earlier. He didn’t have any real answers for the future, but he’d just bought himself twenty-four hours with Lissa.

For now, that was enough.

Chapter Five

STILL STUNNED BY their heart-to-heart and the fact that Trevor wasn't letting her just leave, Lissa found herself sitting across from him at a small crepe place he said he enjoyed. She ordered an apple cinnamon crepe, and they ate in an oddly companionable silence, considering the safe world she lived in had crumbled around her. She was facing interminable heartache, yet here she was, sitting across from him anyway.

“So what are your immediate job plans?” he asked.

She patted her mouth with the napkin and met his gaze. “Well, after I interview you, I have to go home and get to work on Ethan Barron. Do you remember him?”

He nodded. “My sister told me he came back to town after ten years, bought the Harrington estate, married Faith Harrington, and surprised the hell out of everyone in town by being a millionaire.”

“After his parents died and he disappeared, everyone thought he'd end up in jail... or worse.”

“Helluva story for you to write, though,” Trevor said. “Then what?”

Lissa shrugged. “So far, it's been freelance. I'm hoping something permanent will come up, but even this way, I'm making more money than I was at Cuppa Café and writing the town obits.” She lifted her coffee cup and took a long sip.

“Which means you aren't committed to staying in Serendipity because of your work?” he asked.

Her hands began to shake, and she grasped her coffee cup for something to hold on to. “Serendipity is my home,” she said hoarsely. It was her security. “My family is there. My friends...” Hard-earned friends, she might have added.

Because Lissa didn't let people in easily. In fact, she was better at driving them away. "Livvy's life is there."

Trevor shot her a knowing look, one that said he knew she was panicking. "Who are your friends these days?" he asked, smoothly changing the subject.

She didn't know why, but she was grateful not to have to think beyond right now. "You're really interested?"

Again, that knowing yet patient look crossed his face. "How else can I get to know you again?" he asked.

She sighed and shook her head, unable to deny him even the simplest of answers, even if he wouldn't like what he learned about her. "For a while, I was lucky I had friends," she admitted. "I was unhappy, Trevor. I put up a good front around Livvy, but when I wasn't? I was a raving bitch to most people." She couldn't meet his gaze, not proud of the woman she'd become for a while.

"Unhappiness can drain you."

He sounded like he understood, but she still couldn't look at him. "I'm lucky Kate Andrews decided she liked me. She'd come into the coffee shop, buy herself something, and hang out at the counter, talking to me when it was quiet and I wasn't serving."

"Kate..." he said as if trying to place her.

"Long, reddish-brown hair, best friends with Faith Harrington," she said to jog his memories of their high school days.

He nodded. "I remember her. She was always outgoing. Nice."

"And persistent," Lissa said, wrinkling her nose at the memory. "She insisted I leave Livvy with my mom and come to Joe's with her and her friends on Wednesday nights. It's still Ladies' Night. Soon Wednesdays became a ritual, and so did book club once a month. We rotate houses." She shrugged. "After spending most of my time holed up in the house, I

eventually had friends again.” She smiled at the thought of her small clique. “There’s Kate and some other girls from high school, Stacy Garner and Tanya Santos.” And now she even considered Faith Harrington one, too.

“And then Faith came back, and your career took off...” he said as if reading her mind.

Lissa shook her head. “It wasn’t quite that simple.” Drawing a deep breath, she recounted to Trevor how god-awful rude she’d been to Faith on her return to Serendipity.

“When Faith got together with Ethan, I took great pleasure in reminding her that though he could wrap a woman around his finger, he didn’t know the first thing about sticking around.” She winced at the reminder, knowing she’d said far worse to Faith—and God, she regretted it.

“Are you trying to scare me off?” Trevor asked, reaching across the table and grasping her hand.

His heat seared her skin, but the warmth in his eyes undid her, crumbling defenses she’d tried so hard to build. “I just want you to know who I am so there are no surprises.”

He grinned. “You forget I’ve seen you at your worst. I also know you only act out when you’re feeling jealous or threatened.”

Lissa’s cheeks flushed with embarrassment. “Yeah, well, maybe I was jealous. From the outside, it seemed like Faith had it all. Even with her father in jail, she came back and opened a business, immediately fell back in with her old friends... and things were so difficult for me at the time...” She trailed off, thinking about Faith’s story. “I didn’t know how hard it had been for her until the interview. Not that anything excuses my behavior.” In fact, she’d punish her daughter if she ever treated anyone the way Lissa had Faith.

“Maybe you were afraid that since Faith had returned, she’d take Kate away from you, and you’d really be alone?”

Trevor’s perceptiveness took her off guard.

She was mortified he'd homed in on the one thing she'd never admitted out loud—or even to herself. Faith's return home had threatened the life she'd built, but how had Trevor known? It was so scary how well he got her, yet he wasn't running away as fast as he could.

She didn't understand it. Her life never went the way she wanted, so she couldn't begin to trust this fragile thing they were building. Yet Trevor was persistent—with his words, his understanding, and his gentle touch. Even now, he maintained contact, his thumb rubbing circles over her wrist.

"I'm guessing that didn't happen?" he asked gently. "Kate stuck around?"

Lissa managed a smile along with a nod. "Of course Kate ripped into me for how I treated Faith, and she was right, too. But Kate's persistent. She just kept including me and including Faith. We even did karaoke together at Joe's."

Trevor grinned. "I'd have paid good money to see that."

Lissa grimaced. "Not something I want to repeat."

His expression sobered as he said, "But Faith gave you that interview when she could have called on any well-known reporter who'd have killed for her story. There must have been a reason."

Lissa shook her head, still dumbfounded by that. "To this day, I don't know why, but I'll be forever grateful that she did. Faith taught me about humility and forgiveness and so many other things."

Trevor treated her to a warm smile. "That's what I admire about you—your willingness to admit when you're wrong. Sometimes it takes a while, and you come around kicking and screaming, but you do it, and that takes guts." He cleared his throat. "So does having a baby at eighteen and living through a hellish marriage."

Lissa blinked in surprise, a lump forming in her throat. "Don't go canonizing me. I'm still no saint," she reminded him.

“Especially not in the bedroom,” he said, his eyes darkening. And that quickly, serious conversation was over.



LISSA AND TREVOR parted ways after breakfast. Trevor decided to head into the office to get some work done while Lissa went to her hotel room to begin working on the article about him. In truth, Lissa suspected he needed time alone as much as she did.

Time to remind herself that despite how easily they fit together when they were alone, life wasn't about living in a bubble, and they had too many obstacles to think about a future. Back in her hotel, she settled in with her laptop and began writing about Trevor Dane. The boy who'd pulled himself up and out of Serendipity to become one hell of a man.

By the time the evening approached, Lissa had accomplished more than she'd hoped for, considering her state of mind. She'd even managed to take a nap. She luxuriated in a warm bubble bath, then pulled out the simple black dress Trevor's secretary had chosen for the dinner party.

From what Trevor had said and her research had indicated, Alexander Wittman was a big part of Trevor's life, his mentor, and his friend. For that reason, Lissa wanted to make a good impression—and not just as a reporter doing a story. Though it was silly, if Trevor was going to bring her as his date, she wanted him to feel proud. Last night had been easier. Dressed in a ball gown and feeling like a princess, she'd almost been able to believe she belonged at the event.

But now, as Trevor helped her out of the limousine, nerves assailed her. Though he hadn't taken his hungry gaze off her and clearly approved of the way she looked, her insecurities came rushing back. After all, if her husband, the man whose baby she'd borne and who'd married her, hadn't seen her as country club material, why would Trevor's business associates and friends see her any differently?

When she'd attended as Trevor's reporter/date, she had been able to put those feelings aside, but now that he was looking at her possessively, she was petrified she'd fall short and embarrass him.

Unaware of her inner turmoil, he placed a hand on the small of her back. "Ready?" he asked.

She let out a deep breath. "Of course." She walked toward the waiting doorman, who opened the door for them.

"Good evening, Mr. Dane. Mr. and Mrs. Wittman are expecting you," he said, nodding politely to Lissa and acknowledging her with a smile.

"Thank you, George. See you on our way out." Trevor steered Lissa away from the bank of double elevators and toward a separate single lift down the hall. "This way," he said.

Once they were alone outside the small elevator, Trevor turned to her. "What's wrong?"

She shook her head and forced a smile. "Nothing. Why?"

"You're uptight, and your spine's so rigid I'm afraid it'll break," he said, grasping both her hands in his. "Are you nervous about meeting Emma? Don't be. You'll love her."

Lissa shook her head, feeling stupid, but if she didn't let out her fears, she'd definitely screw things up even worse. "I don't belong here," she said on a rush.

"What?"

"The private elevator, a dinner party where we're dressed nicer than any dinner I've ever been to..." She shook her head and swallowed over the lump in her throat. "If you were bringing me here as the reporter to cover your story, it would be one thing, but—"

He squeezed her hands tighter, forcing her to meet his gaze. "But what?"

Just say it, a small voice in her head insisted. “But my own husband didn’t want to be seen with me at formal events. These people you love so much are going to take one look at me and know I’m so far out of my league—” She cut herself off, horrified by the truth she’d blurted out.

She’d meant to be honest. Just not that honest.

An angry muscle twitched in Trevor’s jaw.

“I didn’t mean to upset you.” She was making a mess of a night that meant a lot to him.



TREVOR TOOK A minute to breathe and let go of the rage simmering inside him. “You didn’t upset me. That asshole you married did,” he finally said.

No matter how opulent the apartment, he and Lissa came from the same world. He’d had the same insecurities, probably more so as he’d had to navigate alone. She had him by her side.

“I’m sorry Brad made you feel inadequate in any way. You are spectacular, and the people upstairs will know it the second they lay eyes on you. Because they’re real and nothing like the Bankses of the world.” Speech finished, Trevor cupped his hand around her cheek and pulled her in for a kiss.

One light enough not to ruin the makeup she’d obviously spent so much time applying, but one sincere enough to make his point. “Do you believe me?” he asked.

Eyes wide, she merely nodded.

He hoped she meant it because he sure as hell had. “Ready?” he asked her.

“Ready,” she said, her voice hoarse.

Trevor nodded. “Good.”

The night went better than Trevor could have hoped. Alex and Emma clearly liked Lissa and made her feel at home, as did their small group of guests. By the time ten o’clock rolled

around, Trevor was ready to get her out of there and be alone with her when Alex waylaid him.

Together they walked to a private corner. “She’s something special,” Alex said.

Trevor inclined his head. “That much I know.”

“But? I sensed tension from her earlier tonight.”

Trevor nodded. Alex had always been perceptive. It was why he’d done so well in business. He was good at reading people. “She doesn’t think she belongs here,” he said, frowning at the notion.

Alex raised an eyebrow. “Did anyone say something to make her think that?” he asked angrily.

“No. It goes back a long time,” Trevor said, not wanting to divulge Lissa’s personal insecurities. “She thinks we live in different worlds now.”

“I see.” Alex nodded knowingly. “She does have a valid point.”

Narrowing his gaze, Trevor glared at his friend. “What exactly does that mean?”

“Breathe, boy.” Alex laughed and gestured toward a passing server to bring them each a drink. “Serendipity isn’t exactly Manhattan. Can you blame her for feeling a little out of place? I’m sure she’ll adjust in time.”

“Only if she wants to.”

“You both have to want to,” Alex said.

Before Trevor could respond, the server returned with two glasses on his tray. “Scotch on the rocks,” he said.

Trevor accepted a glass, as did Alex. “Thank you.” The server nodded and walked away.

“They’re hitting it off,” Alex said, his gaze drifting toward the corner of the room where Emma had pulled Lissa away for a private chat.

Trevor was grateful the other woman was making an effort at helping Lissa feel more comfortable, but he didn't plan on leaving her alone for too long.

As always, Alex's gaze softened as he looked at his wife. The man, a shark in the boardroom, was a marshmallow at home. "Relationships are a two-way street, you know."

"I'm trying," Trevor said. Hell, he was doing his damndest to convince her they could make a go of it. "It's only been two days..." His voice trailed off, knowing time didn't mean a damn thing. They'd known each other for too long.

"But there are ten years to get over," Alex said. "Not to mention a lot's happened in that time. You've been a confirmed bachelor, while she's a mother."

As always, the reminder felt like a physical punch in Trevor's gut. "I know."

"Do you?" Alex asked, putting a hand on Trevor's shoulder in a fatherly gesture.

"What are you saying?" Trevor asked.

"Just this. Before you ask her for anything, make sure you can handle her life and everything that comes with it. It's not fair of you to ask her to let you into her life unless you're sure you want all of her, including her child."

His stomach cramped and he suddenly felt the weight of responsibility he hadn't thought of before. "We haven't discussed it," Trevor said.

"And you haven't given it much thought because you've spent the weekend in bed," Alex said, guessing correctly.

Trevor broke into a sweat. He wasn't sure whether to thank Alex for making him face the truth, or to deck him for bringing it up.

"One thing is for sure—no matter how you come by them, children are a lifetime responsibility and when they're stepchildren, so are their biological parents," Alex said. "Now,

I know I've given you a lot to think about. Let's go join the women."

With a new weight on his shoulders, Trevor followed Alex over to Lissa, suddenly panicked, knowing he couldn't possibly jump into the idea of being her daughter's father overnight.

Alex was right. Either Trevor was all in or he bailed before either of them got hurt.

And deep down, he feared it was too late for that.



TREVOR WAS SILENT on the way home. Too silent, and Lissa couldn't help but fear his thoughts. For the past two days, she'd been telling herself this weekend was all they had—but inside, she couldn't deny there was a flicker of hope. She wanted more, and he'd done his best to indicate that he did, too.

But ever since he'd returned from talking to Alex earlier, Trevor had been more withdrawn. "Would you mind if we went back to my hotel room?" she asked, knowing that even if they spent tonight together, it would be easier on her if he left in the morning. That way she could just fall apart instead of having to be the one to walk away.

"Sure." He sat by her side in the Town Car, but unlike their last few rides, he kept his hands to himself.

Another bad sign.

She fingered her small bag, her nerves getting the best of her until the driver finally pulled to a stop in front of the hotel. A doorman immediately stepped up and opened the car door, then stood back and waited.

Lissa exhaled a long breath and turned to face him. "Thank you for taking me with you tonight. It was a pleasure to spend time with Alex and Emma since they both mean so much to you."

The evening had also filled out her article in immeasurable ways, but she wasn't in the mood to bring up business.

He smiled at that. "When I was younger, they helped me feel welcome, Alex in business and Emma on the social side."

She nodded in understanding, then reached for his hand. "Trev, I'm so glad we had this time together." It was more than she'd ever dreamed of and less than she wished for deep inside.

"Does this mean you're not inviting me up?" he asked, his voice gruff.

She swallowed hard. "I wasn't sure you'd want to come."

His blue eyes darkened. "I probably shouldn't, but I'm selfish enough to want more. I want tonight," he said, his voice hoarse.

Oh, he was definitely preparing for the end, she thought. A far cry from the man who'd faced her earlier. But she wasn't ready to ask questions she didn't want the answers to yet. So though she knew she'd hate herself for prolonging things, she met his gaze and nodded.

"I want that, too." She slid out of the car before she could change her mind and held out a hand, indicating he should come, too.

The next few hours were the most beautiful and the most painful of Lissa's life. Trevor held her hand as they made their way upstairs to her hotel room and locked the door behind them.

He undressed her slowly, taking his time because they had all night. What they didn't have was a lifetime, and that was the only thing that would satisfy the yearning inside her. Still, she wanted these last moments, and she made sure to recall each and every one. His strong, tanned hands gliding over her skin, his dark hair as he bent over her, his mouth taking her breast and suckling and teasing, torturing her until her need was so great, she thought she'd come from that alone.

He worked his way down her body, making love to her with his tongue, worshipping her in the way only a man could, replacing memories of them at seventeen with those of a night stolen out of time. One that belonged to them alone.

And by the time he lifted his body over hers, poised for entry, she'd already come more times than she could count, yet she still hadn't had enough of him. She never would.

With his gaze fused to hers, he nudged at her opening and slowly eased his way inside, making sure she felt every last inch, every ridge, every thick hard part of him. Only when he thrust home, so deep she knew he was touching more parts of her than he'd ever reached before, did he lose control.

"Lissa." Her name a groan, he pulled out and thrust back in, her own moisture creating a slick haven for him to pound in and out of her, bringing her up higher and higher.

She tried her best to hold back her emotions, to take the ride and just feel everything inside her and process later, but the tidal wave of feelings he created was too great.

"Trevor." His name came out on a sob, triggering his release.

He didn't hold back either, murmuring words of love and caring, words she absorbed into her heart and her soul, sensing this was the last time she'd hear them out loud.

And as he took over her body, coming inside her, he carried her up and over with him. Stars exploded around her, inside her, shattering her heart in the process.

When their breathing slowed and he pulled out, separating their bodies, he curled himself around her and held her tight. Neither said a word, Lissa holding back sobs but letting the tears fall. And later still, when hours passed, he'd made love to her one more time before she fell into a fitful sleep.

Lissa awoke to the feel of him sliding away from her and out of bed just as the sun began to creep through the window.

She knew her options. She'd weighed them each time she woke in his arms during the night—remain silent, pretend to be asleep, and avoid a painful goodbye; or get up and fight for what she wanted.

She'd spent yesterday telling herself it was better for them to separate now, but the more she thought about it, the more she had to ask herself why. Fate had brought them back together at a time when they had no obstacles in their way unless they put them there. This time, there was no pregnancy and no other man.

True, Lissa had a child, but why couldn't Trevor get to know Livvy and accept her as Lissa's little girl, and eventually as his own? Many men accepted other men's children. Even with their intertwined pasts, they should be able to do this.

She owed it to herself to at least reach for what she wanted. Heart pounding, Lissa pulled herself to a sitting position in bed, lifting the sheet to cover her naked body. "Trev?" she asked softly.

He turned. The only light in the room came from the sun filtering through the drapery. "I didn't mean to wake you," he said.

"Were you going to just slip out without saying goodbye?" She brushed her tangled hair off her face.

"I would've left a note." He sounded as sheepish as he ought to feel, Lissa thought.

"Don't go yet." She patted the space beside her, but he remained standing and shook his head.

"I thought... I think we should make this as easy on ourselves as possible."

She raised her eyebrows. "Says the man who insisted this wasn't closure? That if it hurt, it meant there was still something between us?" she asked, throwing his own words back in his face. "I admit I'm the one who was ready to throw us away, but I was wrong. What changed on your end?" She

hated how her voice trembled, but she had to know what happened.

“I thought about what you said yesterday. About the things that separated us. And I thought about something Alex said.”

Uh-oh. Lissa’s heart began to thud against her chest in a painful beat. “And what was that?”

Trevor reached for his slacks, pulling them on before speaking. “He brought up more things than just the distance between New York and Serendipity and the disparity in our lifestyles. He said I shouldn’t push you for anything until I was sure I could accept everything your life involves.”

And at that moment, Lissa knew exactly what Alex had said. “You aren’t sure you could accept Brad’s child as your own,” she said dully, the pain hurting so much more than she could have planned for.

He spread his hands in front of him while he so obviously searched for the words to explain. “It’s more than that. It’s whether I’m ready to be a father. To be honest, I gave up that dream when I lost you. I dove into college, work, and making a life for myself.”

Lissa nodded slowly as she digested his words, believing part but dismissing the rest. “Let’s be clear, okay? This has nothing to do with whether or not you want to be a father. Whether you can adjust your bachelor life. This is about me having Brad’s baby and you having to face that every time you look at my daughter.”

He jerked as if she’d struck him, but to his credit, he pulled himself together.

He rolled his shoulders back and met her gaze. “I don’t know. Maybe that’s it. But could you blame me?” he asked, his voice rising. “Could you really blame me for having a tough time with it?” He sucked in a breath, then muttered a low curse. “Shit. I didn’t mean it that way.”

He sure as hell had, Lissa thought. She closed her eyes, and only when she was sure she could speak calmly did she

look him dead in the eye. “Not only did you mean it, but I have an answer to your question. Yeah, I sure as hell *can* blame you. Not before yesterday, but after. After you looked me in the eye and told me we weren’t over. Now this?” She shook her head, devastated beyond words. “Just go,” she said, wanting him to leave so she could be alone when she cried.

She turned her head and waited. She felt him standing there staring at her, and she held her breath, wondering if he’d crawl onto the bed, pull her into his arms, and say he’d made a mistake.

Instead, she heard him dressing and getting himself together. After an interminably long time, the hotel door shut behind him, leaving her alone.

She turned and rolled into the pillow that smelled like him and sobbed for what felt like hours before dragging herself out of bed and into the shower.

She had a daughter she adored and a life to get back to. There was no way she could go home with swollen eyes because her perceptive little girl would ask her why Mommy had been crying.



TREVOR WAITED UNTIL he was alone in the elevator and slammed his hand into the metal wall, grateful for the pain throbbing in his knuckles. Better to focus on that than the pain searing his heart.

He hadn’t walked out on Lissa easily or lightly, but he’d done it based on the main thing Alex had said that made sense. *Before you ask her for anything, make sure you can handle her life and everything that comes with it.*

Was Trevor sure he could handle dealing with Brad Banks as Lissa’s ex-husband and her daughter’s father? Could he be a stepfather to a little girl who probably adored a man Trevor hated?

He didn’t know, but he’d better figure it out soon—before he lost Lissa for good.

Chapter Six

IT WAS AMAZING what one could accomplish with a broken heart, Lissa thought not for the first time since her return from New York. When she'd finally pulled herself together and showered, she'd found a note slipped under her door in Trevor's handwriting. "I'll always love you."

At the time, she'd thought it was a sweet but pointless gesture, so she'd tucked the paper into her bag as one last memory of the weekend. Now, two weeks had gone by. Life had gone on. Lissa had baked cookies for Livvy's bake sale at school, she'd helped her daughter with her homework, and she'd argued with Brad about canceling his next weekend with Livvy. He'd promised to take his fiancée to Cancun and wanted Lissa to break the news to their daughter. When Brad refused to change his plans, she informed her ex-husband he could damn well disappoint his daughter himself. Lissa wasn't doing his dirty work for him.

In the meantime, the *News Journal* had been so happy with her article on Trevor that they'd made her a permanent job offer. Thanks to the beauty of computers and the Internet, she could work from anywhere, and she'd eagerly accepted. The magazine had gone on to print the interview with Trevor and was on newsstands now. She'd made sure to overnight a copy to Trevor, but she hadn't signed a note of her own.

She'd interviewed Ethan Barron and discovered just how hard his life had been, how much he'd had to overcome, and how he'd done it all on his own. He'd returned to his hometown to face the wrath of the brothers he'd left behind and fix his life. Along the way, he'd discovered a teenage half sister he didn't know he had, and he and Faith were raising her together. No, it wasn't easy, but being together with the woman he loved made it simpler.

That was when Lissa lost her “star-crossed lovers” point of view and got angry with Trevor for not being willing to try.

Her doorbell rang, and Lissa opened it. She’d been expecting Kate to come by.

“Ready for the game?” Lissa asked, referring to the annual homecoming football game between Serendipity High School and their crosstown rival.

Kate nodded. “You?”

“No. But I’m going anyway.” Lissa wasn’t in the mood for big crowds and people, but she knew she was better off getting out of the house.

“Where’s the munchkin?” Kate, the schoolteacher who loved kids, looked over Lissa’s shoulder, looking for Livvy.

“Olivia Rose, let’s go!” Lissa called out.

Livvy came bouncing down the hall in the Serendipity colors, maroon and white, with a streak of white on her nose. “Aunt Kate!” she called happily when she caught sight of her favorite nonrelated grown-up.

“Hey!” Kate pulled her into a hug. “What’s that you’ve got on your nose?”

“Mommy put face paint on!”

“She’s in the spirit,” Lissa said by way of explanation.

“At least one of you is,” Kate said, her serious gaze on Lissa.

“Go get your coat. It’s a little chilly out,” Lissa said to her daughter. She waited until Livvy was out of earshot. “I’m fine.”

“You look pissed off,” Kate said, too observant as usual.

“I’m just hurting,” she admitted. “I’ll get over it.”

Kate tugged her into a hug. “I’m sorry. I wish things had worked out for you and Trevor. He has no idea what he’s missing.”

Lissa managed a smile just as her daughter bounded back into the room with her coat in hand. “Can we go now? Can we? Can we?”

“You’re right. He doesn’t.” She gave her daughter a loving look. “Everyone ready for the game?” Lissa asked brightly, smiling for Livvy’s sake. No need to dull her enthusiasm.

They piled into Kate’s car and soon found themselves at the high school for the big game. As usual, whenever Lissa came by the school, memories assaulted her, some good, some bad. Today was a true mix loaded with might-have-beens.

But unlike in years past, when Lissa would wonder what would happen if she and Trevor met up again, this year, she knew. All that was left now was to come to terms with it and put him behind her once and for all.



TREVOR HADN’T BEEN to a Serendipity High School football game since his senior year. And he wouldn’t be here now except that he was on a mission. Two weeks ago, he’d walked out on the woman he’d always loved and hadn’t had a good moment since. What he had had was time—time to regret, time to mourn, and time to think.

He regretted how he’d handled things that last morning. He’d let Alex’s talk of children being forever and Livvy being Brad’s daughter put him into panic mode. He should have taken a deep breath and talked things through with Lissa. No doubt that was what Alex had intended with his father/son-like talk. Instead, his words had sent Trevor running.

He’d mourned the years they’d lost and used the time to think about whether he would let old insecurities hold him back from the future he’d always wanted. Brad Banks had managed to destroy Trevor’s past, but if he lost Lissa again, Trevor would only have himself to blame for his future.

When he’d decided to make a spur-of-the-moment trip to Serendipity, he’d planned on heading directly to Lissa’s. But his sister had informed him that today was the annual

homecoming football game, and Trevor knew everyone in town would be there, Lissa included.

Well, if he wanted to make a statement, this football game was the place to do it. How Lissa reacted would determine the rest of his life, and Trevor's stomach was in knots the entire ride home. He hoped she'd be relieved to see him, but then again, after he'd walked out on her, he figured he'd have more of a challenge on his hands. No matter what, his weekend with her and then his time alone had convinced him she was worth it.

They were worth it.

He arrived at the field and immediately saw his old friend Nick Mancini. Grateful for a familiar face, Trevor called out to him.

"Hey, buddy. How have you been?" Trevor slapped the other man on the back.

"I'm hanging in there," Nick said. "Keeping busy despite the lull in new construction. How about you? I saw the article Lissa wrote about you. So you're still making it on Wall Street?" Nick grinned in approval.

Trevor nodded, not wanting to discuss the article or the messengered copy he'd received from Lissa, no personal note included. If that wasn't a kick in the gut, he didn't know what was.

"Yeah. I got lucky," he said to Nick. "Somehow, I rode out the massive wave of firings a couple of years ago, and my company bounced back big."

The two men turned toward the field. Trevor braced his arms on the fence and watched the play. "Looks like the team's got a chance this year," he said.

When Nick didn't reply, Trevor turned and realized the other man wasn't paying attention. Instead, Nick was focused on two women and a little girl in the distance.

Lissa and her daughter. Trevor's mouth went dry at the sight of them and an auburn-haired woman who he thought was Kate Andrews.

Nick couldn't tear his gaze away from them, and Trevor narrowed his gaze. "What's got you so distracted?" he asked, accenting his question with a shove to get his attention.

"Women," Nick muttered.

"Which one?" Trevor asked, not needing Nick interested in Lissa on top of everything else.

"This you won't believe."

"Try me," Trevor said.

Nick groaned. "Kate Andrews."

Trevor released the breath he'd been holding.

"The woman is going to be the death of me," Nick said, unaware of Trevor's thoughts.

"You? And Kate?" Lissa hadn't mentioned Kate seeing anyone.

"Is it that odd?"

Trevor shook his head. "I thought you went for blondes."

Nick shrugged. "It took me by surprise, too, but after Faith and I agreed we were in the past—"

"You picked up with Faith Harrington again?" Trevor remembered Nick and Faith being a couple back in high school and her breaking up with him.

Nick shook his head. "Never had another shot with her with Ethan Barron in the picture. But the truth is, Faith and I are just friends. Whatever chemistry we had is in the past." He glanced over at the women once more. "But Kate thinks she's my rebound girl while I'm getting over Faith."

"Is she?" Trevor asked.

"Hell no."

Nick frowned, looking like a man truly in distress, and Trevor couldn't help but take pity on him. "So why are you standing here with me when the woman you're interested in is over there?"

When the woman Trevor wanted more than his next breath stood with her.

"Good question," Nick said, and before Trevor could blink, Nick headed off in the women's direction, calling out Kate's name.

Both of them turned, and Lissa's gaze locked squarely on Trevor, her shock evident. Following Nick, he headed over, hoping that having Kate around would ease the conversation at least until he could get her alone.

He glanced at the little girl jumping up and down beside them and talking to her mother and Kate, and reassessed. *If* he could get Lissa alone.

"Ladies," Nick said first, tipping his head in acknowledgment. "You're looking good today, Kate."

"Funny, Mancini." Kate smirked, her moss-green eyes, darker than Lissa's, narrowing in distrust.

"That hurts, Kate." Nick placed a hand over his heart. "See what I mean?" He turned to Trevor. "She doesn't take me seriously."

"Any reason I should?" Kate asked.

Nick straightened his shoulders, meeting her gaze. "Because I'm me. And I never say what I don't mean."

Trevor had known Nick for years, and he'd never heard him more serious.

But Kate merely rolled her eyes.

Lissa shook her head, and Trevor tried not to laugh. The poor guy obviously had his work cut out for him if he wanted to get Kate to believe in him.

“Hi, Lissa,” Nick said, turning his attention away from Kate.

“Hi, Nick,” she said, obviously aware of Trevor beside him.

“Hi, Lissa,” he said, his voice gruff.

“Trevor.” She treated him to a tight smile.

Kate glared at him, obviously well versed in their recent past.

“Who’s this beautiful girl?” Trevor bent down so he was at eye level with Lissa’s daughter, well aware this was his one and only first chance. He got this right, or he went down in flames.

As he looked into green eyes so much like her mother’s, Trevor nearly lost his breath. “I bet you’re Olivia,” Trevor said, holding his hand out to her.

Laughing, she put her smaller hand inside his for a grown-up shake. “My friends call me Livvy.”

“Well, hi, Livvy. My friends call me Trevor. I’m an old friend of your mom’s.”

She tipped her head to one side and looked him over, obviously judging him. He actually held his breath while Lissa, who’d moved closer to her daughter, did exactly the same thing.

“Does that mean I can call you Trevor, too?” she asked, looking up at her mother.

Lissa clenched her jaw, obviously torn and not knowing how to answer.

“Livvy, want hot chocolate?” Kate asked, holding out a hand.

“Yes! Mommy, can I get hot chocolate with Aunt Kate? Please, please, please?” Being Trevor’s friend was forgotten in favor of a special treat.

Trevor straightened.

“Sure, baby. Go on,” she said, giving her daughter’s hair a ruffle before sending her with Kate.

“Let’s go, Nick.” Kate shot a command at the man.

“Drinks are on me, ladies.” Clearly clueless about the underlying dynamics between Lissa and Trevor, Nick was just happy to be included and headed off with Kate and Livvy.

“She’s going to make him work for it,” Lissa said, watching the trio until they disappeared into the crowd.

Trevor shrugged. “Seems to me he’s more than willing to do whatever he needs to in order to make her believe in him.” He met Lissa’s gaze, hoping she understood he was also talking about himself.

“Lucky her.” Lissa shoved her hands into her oversized sweatshirt.

She’d worn her long hair pulled back into a ponytail with very little makeup, and she looked, in a word, tired. As though she hadn’t been sleeping well, either, Trevor thought.

“Lissa—”

“Trevor, look, we’re bound to run into each other from time to time—which is weird since ten years have passed and we’ve managed to avoid each other—but that’s life. If you could do me a favor and stay away from Livvy, I’d appreciate it. She doesn’t need mixed messages in her life.”

“I couldn’t agree more.”

“Good. Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me just yet. I agree she doesn’t need mixed messages. But my message isn’t mixed. Not anymore.”

Lissa’s expression went from neutral bordering on stiff to clearly nervous. She looked around, noticing the people passing by and catching sight of them, some whispering, some pointing.

Serendipity was a small town, population approximately 2,500, yet it seemed like everyone knew everyone else. In this case, the fact that Trevor and Lissa were breathing the same air was news. Just as he'd known it would be.

And clearly, she was just now realizing it, too. "We can't talk in front of all these people," she said in a sharp whisper.

"Yes, we can. Because what I have to say can damn well be said in front of an audience." He hadn't planned things this way, but now he realized it was his one shot at making her believe in him.

In them.

"I screwed up."

Her cheeks flushed pink. She folded her arms across her chest and raised an eyebrow, but she stood still. She was listening.

"I shouldn't have walked away two weeks ago. I thought about you and me and the past... and I panicked."

"And now you're fine? Now you can handle the fact that the daughter I love more than life itself is also Brad Banks's daughter? How does that work, exactly?" she asked, staring him down even as tears streamed down her face.

He reached out and took her hands. They were shaking.

"It works because I say it does. Because I lost you once for ten long years. And because instead of talking to you about my fears, I left you a second time—and I'll be damned if I'm that stupid again." Trevor's entire life flashed in front of his eyes as he laid out his feelings for Lissa—and at this point, half of Serendipity—to hear.

She pulled one hand back and ran her sleeve over her damp eyes. "Dammit," she muttered. "You as much as agreed you couldn't look at my daughter and not see a constant reminder of what went wrong." Her other hand shook inside his.

“I was an idiot. When I looked into that little girl’s eyes, I saw you and only you.”

“Brad gets Livvy every other weekend,” Lissa said, her voice trembling. “And when he shows up, he comes to the door, I let him into the house, and he picks her up. We’re civil for our daughter’s sake.”

Trevor saw exactly where she was going with this. “I can do that, too. I’m just wondering if it can be done from Manhattan instead of from here. Of course, Serendipity is only an hour from the city, so if you insist on staying, I can also adjust to the commute.”

“I got a job with the *News Journal*,” Lissa said, addressing the only thing that seemed real to her at the moment. “They’re located in Manhattan.”

Trevor’s grin held both excitement and pride. “We’ll talk,” he assured her, obviously not making snap decisions for her.

She still wasn’t sure she could take it all in. She supposed that was due to the fact that she wasn’t sure she could hear correctly with all the noise. Her vision was blurred with tears, and she just hadn’t expected him here. As for his sudden turnaround... could a girl get that lucky?

“Sweetheart, I said I can be civil to your ex. As long as we don’t have to invite him for holiday dinners.” Trevor cocked an eyebrow.

Yet she still didn’t understand, and until she did, she couldn’t accept. “You walked out on me in New York.” She addressed the thing that kept her up at night and threatened to choke her during the day.

He held her hands in front of him and squeezed her tight. “I’m sorry I let you go without a fight the first time. I’m sorry I didn’t step up and offer to marry you despite you being pregnant with his child. And I’m really sorry I walked out in New York. But I’m not going to lose you again.”

★ ★ ★

LISSA'S THROAT WAS full, her heart was pounding so hard she could hear it over the crowds, and she was still scared she'd wake up and discover this was all a dream. After all, the past ten years had been a lonely nightmare. "Trevor—"

"Wait. There's one more thing I want to say before you speak, okay?"

She managed a nod, grateful for a few seconds to pull her thoughts together.

He reached into his pocket and then suddenly went down on one knee. "Elisabetta Gardelli, will you marry me? I'll wait as long as you want, spend all the time in the world getting to know and love your beautiful daughter and proving myself to you, but in the meantime... will you wear this ring? And promise you'll marry me eventually?" he asked with the most endearing grin on his handsome face.

But his expression was more serious than she'd ever seen it, and his hands weren't steady as he knelt before her and the entire town of Serendipity, ring in hand.

And what a ring it was. Though blurred by her tears, Lissa knew that sucker was huge. But she didn't care about the size or the shape or anything more than this man proclaiming his love for her and promising to love her and her daughter.

"Till death do us part, Lissa. What do you say?"

"Yes! Yes." The words had barely passed her lips when he grabbed her and swung her around in his arms.

"You'll never regret it, sweetheart. I'll make you happy every damn day for the rest of my life."

Lissa wiped her happy tears as he put her down long enough to slip the ring over her finger.

Suddenly, she noticed her daughter standing beside Trevor, looking at him with wide, curious eyes. He bent so they were at eye level. "What is it, pretty girl?" he asked.

Her look was a combination of wariness and childlike curiosity. "Now do I get to call you Trevor?" she asked.

Lissa grinned and nodded.

And the crowd around them erupted in applause that had nothing to do with the score of the game.

Lissa wasn't sure she deserved such happiness, but she was definitely going to enjoy each and every minute. After all, it wasn't every day a girl got a second chance with the only man she'd ever loved.

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DESTINY EXCERPT

NASH BARRON MIGHT be cynical about life and more recently about love, but he usually enjoyed a good wedding. Today's affair had been an exception. The invitation had requested the presence of "close friends and family." Nash wondered if he was the only one in the group to notice the irony.

The groom's two brothers, Nash included, were a step short of estranged, and they'd only known the flower girl, their newly discovered half-sister, Tess, for six weeks. The bride's father was in jail, which left her flamboyant decorator friend to give her away. Her mother spent the afternoon downing wine and bemoaning the loss of her beloved home, which just so happened to be the site of the wedding. The landmark house on the hill in their hometown of Serendipity, New York, was now owned by the groom, Nash's brother Ethan.

Come to think of it, the irony of the situation might be the only thing Nash had enjoyed about this day.

That and Kelly Moss, the woman sipping champagne across the lush green grass of the backyard.

Tess was Nash's half-sister, a product of his father and Tess's mother's affair. Kelly, Tess's half-sister on her mother's side, was a sexy woman who by turns frustrated him, intrigued him, and turned him on. Complicated yet simple enough to be summed up in one sentence: Kelly Moss was a beautiful woman, and they were in no way blood related.

That didn't make his desire for her any more acceptable. A simple acquaintance-like relationship seemed the safest route, yet Nash had been unable to find comfortable ground with either Kelly or Tess in the time they'd been in Serendipity. Nash had no idea why he couldn't connect with his fourteen-year-old sister, who seemed determined to freeze him out.

As for Kelly, Nash first blamed his frustration with her on the fact that she'd unceremoniously dumped Tess, a sister the Barron brothers knew nothing about, on Ethan's doorstep back in August. She'd demanded he parent the out-of-control teen. Nash hated to give Ethan credit for anything, but he had to admit his older brother had turned the wildly rebellious kid around in a short time. But Nash still had issues with Kelly's methods. So when she'd resurfaced and moved to town, he'd been both understandably wary and shockingly attracted. And she'd been getting under his skin ever since.

Nash turned away, and his gaze fell on Ethan, his brother whose luck seemed to have done a one-eighty since he'd abandoned his siblings ten years ago. He had chosen the perfect day for a wedding. Though early October, the temperature had hiked into the low seventies, enabling him to have the wedding outdoors. Ethan stood with his arm around his wife, Faith, talking to their youngest sibling, Dare. Even he had forgiven Ethan for the past.

Nash couldn't bring himself to be so lenient.

He glanced at his watch and decided his time here was over. The bride and groom were married, cake served, and bouquet thrown. He finished what remained of his Ketel One, placed the glass on a passing server's tray, and headed toward the house.

“Leaving so soon?” a familiar female voice asked.

“The festivities are over.” He turned to face the woman who’d hijacked his thoughts just moments before.

Kelly, her hair pulled loosely behind her head, soft waves escaping and grazing her shoulders, stood close beside him. Her warm, inviting lemony scent enveloped him in heat.

Nash was a man who valued his personal space. Kelly was a woman who pushed past boundaries. Yet for a reason he couldn’t fathom, he lacked his usual desire to find safer ground.

“The band is still playing,” she pointed out.

“No one will realize I’m gone.”

Or care. His leaving would probably ease any tension created by his presence.

“I would.” She gazed at him with perceptive brown eyes.

Her intelligent chocolate-colored eyes seemed to see beyond the indifferent façade he presented to the world. One he thought he’d perfected in his late teens, when his life had been turned upside down by his parents’ deaths, followed quickly by Ethan’s abandonment of both Nash and their younger brother, Dare.

“Why do you care?” he asked even though he knew he’d be smarter to walk away.

She shrugged, a sexy lift of one shoulder that drew his attention to her soft-looking skin.

“Because you seem as out of place here as I am.” She paused. “Except you’re not a stranger to town or to this family.”

Out of place. That one comment summed up his entire existence lately. How had she figured him out when no one else ever could?

“I need to leave,” he said, immediately uncomfortable.

“What you need is to relax,” she countered, stopping him with one hand on his shoulder. “Let’s dance.” She playfully tugged on his tie.

He glanced to where the rest of the family gathered next to the dance floor. “I’m not really interested in making a spectacle.”

“Then we won’t.” She slipped her hand in his and led him to the far side of the house beneath an old weeping willow tree.

He could still hear the slow music, but he could no longer see the dance floor, and whoever was out there couldn’t see them. She tightened her hold on his hand, and he realized he’d better take control, or she’d be leading him through this dance. He wrapped an arm around her waist, slid his other hand into hers, and swayed to the sultry sound of the music coming from the band.

A slight breeze blew through the long dripping branches of the tree. She shivered and eased her body closer to his, obviously in need of warmth.

He inched his hand up her bare back. “Cold?” he asked in a gruff voice as her body heat and scent wrapped around him.

“Not anymore.”

He looked into her eyes to discover an awareness that matched his own, glanced down, and caught sight of her lush lips. As they moved together to the music, warning bells rang in his head, but nothing could have stopped him from settling his mouth on hers. The first touch was electric, a heady combination of sparkling champagne and sensual, willing woman. Her lips were soft and giving, and he wasn’t sure how long their mouths lingered in a chaste kiss they both knew was anything but.

His entire body came alive, reminding him of what he’d been missing in the two years since his divorce. That this woman could awaken him both surprised and unnerved him. It made him want to *feel* more. He trailed his hand up the soft

skin of her back and cupped her head. With a sweet sigh, she opened for him, letting him really taste her for the first time. Warmth, heat, and desire flooded through him.

“Oh, gross! Just shoot me now!” Tess exclaimed in a disgusted voice.

Nash jerked back at the unwanted interruption. “What the hell are you doing?” he asked, the annoyed words escaping before he could think it through.

“Looking for Kelly. What are *you* doing?” She perched her hands on her hips, demanding an answer.

Wasn't it obvious? Nash shook his head and swallowed a groan. The kid was the biggest wiseass he'd ever come across.

“You found me,” Kelly said, sounding calmer than he did.

Like that kiss hadn't affected her at all. A look at her told him that unless she was one hell of an actress, it hadn't. She appeared completely unflustered while he was snapping at Tess because the hunger Kelly inspired continued to gnaw at him.

“Ethan and Faith want to talk to you,” Tess muttered in a sulking tone.

Obviously, she didn't like what she'd seen between him and her sister. Unlike Nash, who'd liked it a lot.

Too much, in fact.

From the pissed-off look on Tess's face, kissing Kelly and biting Tess's head off had resulted in a huge setback in trying to create any kind of relationship with his new sister. And to think, if asked, he'd have said things between them couldn't get any worse.

“Why don't you go tell them I'll be right there?” Kelly said patiently to Tess.

The teenager now folded her arms across her chest. “How about not?”

Kelly raised an eyebrow. “How about I’m the one in charge while Ethan’s on his honeymoon, and if you don’t want to find yourself grounded and in your room for the next two weeks, you’ll start listening now.”

With a roll of her eyes and a deliberate stomp of her foot, which wasn’t impressive considering she was wearing a deep purple dress and mini-heels from her walk down the aisle, Tess stormed away.

“Well done,” he said to Kelly, admiring how she’d gotten Tess to listen without yelling or sniping back.

“Yeah, I did a better job than you.” She shot him an amused glance. “But I can’t take any credit. You saw what she was like before Ethan took over. This change is due to his influence, not mine.” Her expression saddened at the fact that she’d been unable to accomplish helping Tess on her own.

He knew the feeling. “Don’t remind me about Saint Ethan.”

She raised her eyebrow. “There’s always tension between you and Ethan. Why is that?” she asked.

He definitely didn’t want to talk about his brother or his past. “Is asking about my life your way of avoiding discussing the kiss?” He deliberately threw a question back at her as a distraction.

An unexpected smile caught hold of her lips. “Why would I want to avoid discussing it when it was so much fun?” she asked and grabbed hold of his tie once more.

Her moist lips shimmered, beckoning to him as did her renewed interest, and he shoved his hands into his pants pockets. Easier to keep them to himself that way.

“Kelly! We’re waiting!” Tess called impatiently, interrupting them again and reminding him why he had to keep his distance from Kelly from now on.

“Coming!” Kelly called over her shoulder before meeting Nash’s gaze. “Looks like you got a reprieve.” A mischievous

twinkle lit her gaze.

A sparkle he found infectious. She had spunk, confidence, and an independent spirit he admired. His ex-wife had been as opposite of Kelly as he could imagine, more sweet and in need of being taken care of. Kelly could obviously hold her own.

And Nash didn't plan on giving her the upper hand. "I don't know what you're talking about," he lied.

She patted his cheek. "Keep telling yourself that."

He would for as long as it took to convince himself this woman would only cause him and his need to have a relationship with Tess boatloads of trouble.



PIPPA

KELLY MOSS STOOD at the bottom of the circular stairs in the house that was nothing short of a mansion and yelled up at her sister. "Tess, let's go! If you want to have time for breakfast before school, get yourself downstairs now!" It was the third time she'd called up in the past five minutes.

"I said I'm coming!" Tess replied grumpily.

Ethan and Faith had left yesterday morning for their honeymoon, one week on the beautiful, secluded island of Turks and Caicos, where they had their own villa complete with private butler. *Talk about living the life*, Kelly thought. Hers wasn't so bad either since she got to stay in this huge house with her own housekeeper while they were gone.

Tess's door slammed loudly, startling Kelly back to reality as her sister came storming out of her room, then stomping down the stairs.

The old days, when Kelly had been raising Tess alone and doing a god-awful job at it, came rushing back, and Kelly clenched her fists. "What's wrong?" Kelly only hoped it was something easily fixable, not a problem that would lead Tess to turn back to running wild.

“This!” Tess gestured to her school uniform of a navy pleated skirt, white-collared shirt, and knee socks. “I hate it.”

Kelly knew better than to say it was better than the all-black outfits the teenager used to wear, including the old army surplus jacket and combat boots. “You’ll get used to it.”

Tess passed by Kelly and headed for the kitchen. “It’s been a month, and I still hate it.”

The clothes or the school? Kelly wondered as she followed her sister. “Is it the skirt? Because you didn’t mind the dress you wore at the wedding.” In fact, she’d looked like a beautiful young lady.

“It’s the fact that I *have* to wear it. I hate being told what to do.”

“Tell me something I don’t know,” Kelly muttered, having been Tess’s primary caregiver for longer than she could remember.

“I heard that.”

Kelly grinned. Tess really had come a long way, thanks to Ethan Barron. Kelly shuddered to think of what might have happened if she hadn’t taken drastic steps.

Tess and Kelly’s mother, Leah Moss, had been a weak woman, too dependent on men and incapable of raising Tess. She’d been different when Kelly was young, or maybe that was how she wanted to remember her. Or perhaps the influence of Kelly’s father had made Leah different.

Kelly would never know because her father had died of a heart attack when she was twelve. And Leah had immediately gone searching for another man to take his place. Her choice was a poor one. Leah struck up an affair with her married boss, Mark Barron. Yet despite how wrong it was, for Kelly, her mother’s years as his mistress had been stable ones, including the period after Tess was born. But with Mark Barron’s passing ten years ago, Leah had spiraled downward, and both Kelly and Tess had suffered as a result.

She'd immediately packed up and moved them to a seedy part of New York City, far from their home in Tomlin's Cove, the neighboring town to Serendipity. Leah said she wanted them to start over. In reality, their mother had wanted an easy place to search for another lover to take care of her. But Leah never found her next white knight, turning to alcohol and a never-ending rotation of disgusting men instead.

Since Tess had only been four years old at the time, a sixteen-year-old Kelly had become the adult, juggling high school, then part-time college with jobs and raising Tess. Fortunately, her mother had moved them into a boarding house with a kindly older woman who'd helped Kelly too.

But last year, their mother had run off with some guy, abandoning her youngest daughter, and something in Tess had broken. Angry and hurt, she'd turned into a belligerent, rebellious teenager, hanging out with the wrong crowd, smoking, drinking, and ultimately getting arrested. Desperate, Kelly had turned to the only person she remembered from their years in Tomlin's Cove, Richard Kane, a lawyer in Serendipity who'd put her in touch with Ethan Barron.

Kelly's heart shattered as she basically dumped her baby sister on a stranger's doorstep and ordered him to step up as her brother. But it was that, or heaven knew where Tess would end up. So here she was months later, starting her life over but still rushing Tess out for school, grateful things were finally looking up.

She and Tess ate a quick breakfast, after which Kelly dropped Tess off and headed to work. Another thing for which she owed Richard Kane was her job. She worked for him as a paralegal in downtown Serendipity.

She stopped, as she did daily, at Cuppa Café, the town's version of Starbucks. Kelly had worked hard all her life, and she'd learned early on to save, but her entire day hinged on that first cup of caffeine. It had to be strong and good.

Kelly stepped into the coffee shop, and the delicious aroma surrounded her, instantly perking her up as if she had inhaled

the caffeine by osmosis.

She was pouring a touch of milk into her large cup of regular coffee when a familiar woman with long, curly blond hair joined her at the far counter.

“You’re as regular as my grandma Emma wanted to be,” Annie Kane joked.

Kelly glanced at her and grinned. “I could say the same for you.”

“Good point.” Annie laughed and raised her cup in a mock toast.

Small-town living offered both perks and drawbacks. Running into a familiar face could fall into either category. Kelly and Annie frequented Cuppa Café at the same time each morning, and they’d often linger and chat. If pressed, Kelly would say Annie was the closest she had to a real friend here if she didn’t count Faith Harrington, Ethan’s wife.

Annie was Richard Kane’s daughter, though from the pictures on Richard’s desk, Kelly noticed Annie looked more like her mother than her dad. From the first day they’d met at her father’s office, Kelly had liked this woman.

Kelly took a long, desperately needed sip of her drink.

“So what’s your excuse for being up so early every day?”

“Routine keeps me young,” Annie said.

Kelly rolled her eyes. “You *are* young.” She looked Annie over, from her slip-on sneakers to her jeans and light cotton sweater. “I bet we’re probably close to the same age.”

“I’ll be twenty-seven next month,” Annie said.

“And I’ll be twenty-seven in December.”

Annie raised her cup to her lips, and Kelly couldn’t help but notice her hand shook as she took a sip.

Kelly narrowed her gaze but didn’t comment on the tremor. Instead, she dove into cementing her life here in

Serendipity. “Listen, instead of quick hellos standing over coffee, how about we meet for lunch one day?” She was ready for a real friend here, someone she could trust and confide in. Kelly adored Tess, but a fourteen-year-old hardly constituted adult company.

“I’d like that!” Annie said immediately. “Let me give you my phone number.” As she reached into her purse, her cell phone rang, and she glanced at the number.

“Excuse me a second,” she said to Kelly. “Hello?” she spoke into the receiver.

Kelly glanced away to give Annie privacy, but she couldn’t help but overhear her end of the conversation.

“I’m feeling better, thanks. Yeah. No, you don’t need to stop by. I called the plumber, and he said he’d make it to the house by the end of the day.” Annie grew quiet, then spoke once more. “I can afford it, and you don’t need to come by. You weren’t good with the pipes when we were married,” she said, amusement in her tone.

Some more silence, then Annie said, “If you insist, I’ll see you later.” She sounded more annoyed than indulgent.

She hung up and put the phone back in her bag. “My ex-husband,” she explained to Kelly. “He thinks because I have MS, I need his constant hovering.”

The admission caught Kelly off guard, and she felt for Annie, being diagnosed so young. Richard liked to talk about everything and anything when he was in the office, but he’d never mentioned his daughter’s disease. Kelly didn’t blame him for omitting something so personal. In fact, she was surprised Annie had mentioned it at all.

“I’m sure you noticed my hand shaking earlier, and if we’re going to be friends, you might as well know,” Annie said as if reading Kelly’s mind.

Kelly met Annie’s somewhat serene gaze. Obviously, she’d come to terms with her situation. “Thanks for telling me.”

“Hey, if I go MIA one day, at least you’ll know why.” She shrugged as if the notion were no big deal.

Kelly didn’t take the other woman’s confidence or situation as lightly. “Well, if you ever need anything, just let me know.”

Annie smiled. “Thanks. But I think my ex will always be around to handle things,” she said through a lightly clenched jaw.

“That could be a good thing,” Kelly mused. “Having someone at your beck and call when you need something.

“Not when you’ve told them you want to be independent,” Annie muttered. The frustration in the other woman’s voice was something Kelly understood.

Like Annie, Kelly didn’t need or want a man who felt the need to take care of her. She was determined to be smart and self-sufficient, the opposite of her mother in every way. No matter how many obstacles life threw in her way. And unfortunately, there were more to come. Utter humiliation loomed in the not-so-distant future courtesy of a man she’d once loved. The affair was long over, but the fallout was not. Kelly could handle the mess. Her younger sister could not. And Kelly did not want Tess exposed to gossip and innuendo just as the teenager was doing well and making better choices. Kelly only hoped the distance between Manhattan and Serendipity would spare Tess when trouble hit.

“Men just don’t get us women, do they?” Annie asked, a welcome interruption from Kelly’s troubling thoughts.

Kelly shook her head and sighed. “No, they do not.”

“Firsthand experience?” Annie asked.

“Unfortunately, yes.” Kelly frowned, the memory of spending the past year getting over having her heart and trust betrayed still fresh.

“I’m sorry.” Annie blew out a long breath. “I don’t know about yours, but my ex means well. He just takes the word

‘responsibility’ to the extreme.”

Kelly swallowed hard. “And my ex-boyfriend took the word ‘commitment’ way too lightly.”

“Excuse me,” an older man said, indicating he needed to get to the counter so he could pour milk into his coffee.

“Sorry.” Kelly stepped out of the way and walked toward the exit with Annie.

“So how about I call you at my father’s office later today, and we’ll exchange phone numbers and make lunch plans?” Annie asked.

Kelly nodded. “Sure. That’s fine.”

They parted ways, and Kelly headed toward Richard’s office in the center of town. The buildings stretched along the road, stores on the main level, small apartments above, like hers over Joe’s Bar. The small town appealed to her, coming from the overcrowded city with tall buildings and too many people.

Using her key, Kelly walked into the office of the man she credited for helping to save her sister and her family. “Richard?” she called out.

No answer.

The small office was empty. Obviously, she’d beaten him here, which was unusual. Richard was an early-to-the-office, late-getting-home kind of man, though his wife had been trying to get him to work fewer hours and maybe take in a partner to lighten his load.

Kelly settled in to her desk in a small room with a window that she appreciated. She already knew which case she had to work on and what she needed to do today, but she pulled out her calendar anyway. As part of her work routine and a way to make sure she never forgot an assignment, Kelly glanced at today’s date and the list she’d made on Friday before leaving work for the weekend.

Seven P.M.—parent-teacher conference for Tess.

Which she was attending with Dare, since Ethan was away. Better Dare than the other Barron brother. The one she'd deliberately put out of her mind since the kiss on Saturday.

And what a kiss it had been.

Kelly prided herself on her poker face, but she still wasn't sure she'd pulled off being nonchalant after Tess interrupted them. Her sister had sulked all the way home but hadn't mentioned what she'd seen, nor had she brought it up the next day. If Tess wasn't going to discuss it, neither was Kelly.

And considering she hadn't heard a word from Nash, neither was he. Which bothered her. A lot.

Sure, she'd been a little tipsy and a lot aggressive, but she'd felt his body heat and obvious reaction firsthand. He'd obviously liked the kiss, but he'd been hard to read afterward.

She told herself she shouldn't care what Nash thought or felt. She'd learned from her mother's choices and her own past not to rely on anyone but herself. So though she might be attracted to Nash, his feelings on the subject didn't matter. Even if he was equally interested, a brief affair would be disastrous because it would hurt Tess. And short term was all Kelly would let herself believe in from now on.

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NY Times, Wall Street Journal, and USA Today Bestseller, Carly Phillips is the queen of Alpha Heroes, at least according to The Harlequin Junkie Reviewer. Carly married her college sweetheart and lives in Purchase, NY along with her crazy dogs who are featured on her Facebook and Instagram pages. The author of over 75 romance novels, she has raised two incredible daughters and is now an empty nester. Carly's book, *The Bachelor*, was chosen by Kelly Ripa as her first romance club pick. Carly loves social media and interacting with her readers. Want to keep up with Carly? Sign up for her newsletter and receive TWO FREE books at www.carlyphillips.com.