



PERFECT

Strangers

CARLY
PHILLIPS

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Perfect Strangers

Serendipity's Finest Series Novella

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Carly Phillips

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Table of Contents

Title Page

Copyright Page

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Excerpt from Going Down Easy

Want even more Carly books?

Carly's Booklist

About the Author

Chapter One

JOE'S BAR. FAMILIAR stomping grounds for Alexa Collins, yet everything about the night felt off. First, the bar's owner and his new bride were on their honeymoon, so Joe wasn't serving. Alexa's normally happy friend, Cara Hartley, sat morosely stirring her drink, staring into the glass for answers, but the man who'd caused the problems was nowhere to be found. Alexa couldn't relate to guy problems, considering she lived a hectic life, spent hours in the hospital ER, and had no time for a relationship, let alone hot, stress-relieving sex, though it was something she could definitely use. For the past couple of weeks, she'd been suffering from a definite case of the blues, the strain of her life beginning to wear on her.

No wonder she was in a funk.

The music blasting through the speakers gave her a jolt akin to a caffeine kick, and Alexa perked up at the sound. Rising from her barstool, she glanced at her friend.

"I feel like dancing," Alexa announced.

With a disinterested sigh, Cara shook her head, but Alexa wasn't taking no for an answer. Cara needed to have fun and forget about Mike Marsden, the man who'd broken her heart.

Alexa jerked her head toward the dance floor. "Dance. Now."

Cara groaned but complied, standing up on command.

Alexa looked at the third woman in their trio. "Liza?" Liza and her husband, Dare Barron, had joined them for a night out along with some friends who mingled around the bar.

Liza swayed her hips in time to the beat of the music. "Why not? I could use some letting go."

An upbeat tune reverberated as they headed to the dance floor near the jukebox and Alexa closed her eyes, allowing

herself to get lost in the moment. Her body moved to the beat, her entire being consumed by the tempo and the sounds pulsing around her.

When she opened her eyes, she noticed she wasn't the only one attracted to the upbeat music. The crowd had grown, everyone on the floor pumping their fists, swiveling their hips, and dancing.

Dare had joined Liza, wrapping himself around his wife in a heart-melting embrace. Alexa looked away to avoid the obvious intimacy between the couple, and her gaze met that of a man who sat alone at a table near the dance floor. A sinfully sexy man with shaggy-blond hair and an unwavering stare.

He watched as she moved, his heavy-lidded scrutiny focused on her as he sipped at his beer. His demeanor seemed casual, his stare anything but. Thinking of how down she'd been lately and how great this music made her feel now, she was unable to resist the impulse to crook her finger his way.

A glance told her that her best friend wasn't watching, which was good, considering Cara wouldn't know what had gotten into Alexa. And she would be hard-pressed to explain. All she knew, all she felt, was a bone-deep loneliness that reached into her soul, and this man's intense and interested stare provided her heart with a jump she hadn't felt in too long.

A slow smile lifted his lips, and her pulse skyrocketed as he stood and made his way toward her, his swagger indicating self-confidence. Alexa experienced that same kind of self-assuredness in medical settings, though she normally fell short in other areas of her life. Still, she'd called on that attitude when beckoning him over, and she was glad she hadn't stopped to think it through.

He joined her on the wooden floor, immediately picking up the rhythm. He danced close enough for her to smell his woody cologne that both surrounded and aroused her. As they moved, their bodies spoke for them, their synchronicity startling for two people who'd never met. And when the music

turned sultry, he was all too willing to join her for some dirty dancing. He ground his hips against hers, the swell of his erection pressing deliciously against her—too intimately for strangers, but too good to deny.

So she didn't.

Instead, she let the heat of desire crackle and spark between them, and fire licked at her veins.

Cara eased closer and looked from Alexa to her partner, her eyebrows raised, a concerned expression on her face. Alexa ignored her. She needed this sense of freedom, the release this man provided. She hadn't realized how badly until now.

Pure enjoyment and fun.

When was the last time she'd allowed herself the luxury?

Her dance partner's hands slid to her waist. She'd worn black leggings and a cream cardigan, which she'd unbuttoned to show both cleavage and the barest hint of her lace cami underneath. She reaped the benefit of her clothing choice now and trembled at the rasp of his calloused palms caressing her sensitive skin.

A sexy grin lifted his lips, and he continued the dance along with the erotic assault on her senses. She could have lingered in their intimate embrace all night, but from the corner of her eye, Alexa caught sight of Cara's ex-boyfriend, Mike.

He strode up behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist. Cara jumped in surprise but soon settled into the embrace. Alexa figured Cara thought it was one of her guy friends joining her for a dance because no way would she allow Mike that kind of privilege. Not without him doing some serious groveling first. Worried about her friend, Alexa kept an eye on the couple, prepared to step in if needed.

"You okay?" her dance partner asked in a Southern drawl. It was the first time she'd heard him speak, and the sexy voice fit him perfectly.

She nodded and smiled, her gaze roaming over his handsome face. Dimples etched either side of his perfect mouth and full lips, and a faded scar sat above his left eyebrow. But even as she admired the view, she never lost sight of her friend, knowing Cara would do the same for her.

Mike pressed his front against Cara's back in a more intimate move. Before Alexa could even wince, Cara whirled on her ex with a surprised, then furious spark in her eyes.

The music was too loud for Alexa to hear, and she inched closer, remaining vigilant and on call.

"What are you doing here?" Cara asked, her voice tinged with the pain Alexa knew she'd suffered ever since Mike's abrupt departure.

"I'm back." His gaze never left Cara's.

"Good for you," she said with deliberate sarcasm.

He appeared as worn and ragged as Cara had earlier, before Alexa had forced a makeup session on her friend.

Cara perched her hands on her hips. "And you thought you could wrap your arms around me and pick up where we left off?" she asked, her voice rising.

Oh, go girl! Alexa thought, stopping short of clapping because Cara wasn't greeting Mike with open arms. As a cop, Cara could handle herself in any situation, but as a woman, she was more fragile. Yet she wouldn't let any man, including this one, walk all over her, and Alexa was proud of her friend.

Serendipity, New York was a small town and Mike was the former police chief whose sudden departure had sparked many wagging tongues. Add the now loud discussion between exes and sure enough, Cara and Mike were attracting stares from the crowd. Alexa knew they needed closure, but they didn't have to do it in front of an audience. Time to put an end to the show, Alexa thought.

Figuring she'd buy her friend some time to handle this on her own terms, she tapped Cara on the shoulder. "Are you

okay?” Alexa asked.

“Yeah.” But the hurt in Cara’s blue eyes told another story.

“Can we go somewhere and talk?” Mike asked her.

“Seriously?” Cara blinked in obvious shock. “Let’s get something straight. I don’t know why you’re here or for how long, and I don’t care. But I will not be your booty call every time you come back to town.”

Behind Alexa, she sensed her former dance partner was still there, watching the scene unfold, and Alexa spared a moment’s regret for having to ditch him this way. But he was a momentary diversion while Cara’s friendship was forever. And no self-respecting woman abandoned a friend in need for a man.

“Cara—” Mike reached for her, but she pushed him away, shoving at his shoulder.

“No.” Cara jerked out of his reach.

Alexa moved closer. “I’m going to the ladies’ room,” she said, tipping her head toward the back of the bar. The silent, do you want to join me, was implied.

Mike whispered something Alexa couldn’t hear in Cara’s ear, but Cara shook her head.

Alexa turned, shooting a regretful glance at the man she’d never actually met. “Sorry. Friendship calls.” She smiled at him, wishing they’d had more time.

He nodded in surprising understanding and gestured with a sweep of his hand. “It was a pleasure,” he said, the words dancing along her nerve endings, similar to the way his touch had branded her skin.

She held his stare for a few more precious seconds before breaking eye contact and focusing on Cara. “Let’s go,” she said, and steered them through the crowd toward the restroom, leaving her sexy dance partner behind.



LUCAS THOMPSON WATCHED the intriguing woman walk off, her hips swaying, her delectable ass displayed to perfection in her tight black leggings. He liked what he saw. Hell, he'd liked what he'd felt even more. She wasn't too skinny, unlike the NFL groupies who usually followed him around back home, her waist felt soft and generous in his hands.

He groaned and headed to the bar, ordering a beer. A cold drink would cool him off before he went to his friend's house somewhere in this small Upstate New York town. Luke was here for a visit, but his ex-teammate, Cole Sanders, wouldn't show up till later. He was busy getting his father settled into an assisted living facility. Cole's plan was to stick around, fix up his dad's house, and put it on the market. Since Luke had planned to be in Manhattan for meetings with his agent, he'd taken Cole up on his offer to stay with him instead of in some sterile hotel. As pro football players, they both had enough of empty rooms when they were on the road. Lucas figured he'd help Cole out for as long as he was in town.

Luke had seen Joe's Bar and pulled into the parking lot, planning to grab a beer and maybe some wings. Dancing hadn't been on his agenda. Then again, neither was the russet-haired woman who'd captured his attention. She'd been a surprise in many ways, the most pleasant being that she hadn't recognized him as the tight end of the Texas Titans.

Either she wasn't a sports fan, or she was more into her hometown team, the one to which Cole had recently been traded. Which meant her invitation to dance had been based purely on mutual attraction. Even before he'd seen her up close and taken in those sea-green eyes and the smattering of freckles on her nose, his gut told him the woman was more wholesome than any who'd crossed his path in way too long.

He'd been watching her shake those hips with undisguised interest, and when she'd crooked her finger his way and his cock had jumped in delight.

"Want to keep a running tab?" the bartender asked as he set Luke's soda on the counter.

He shook his head. “I’ll settle now.” He’d had a long day of meetings. Between his agent and the potential sponsors the man had lined up for Luke to meet, then the hours’ drive here, Luke was beat.

Before taking off, he looked around for *his woman*—he hadn’t learned her name, so the term seemed to fit. He found her standing on the other side of the room, deep in conversation with the same guy who’d been hassling her friend earlier. The woman, a pretty brunette, was nowhere in sight. Apparently, Lucas’ dance partner was mediating a dispute between the two.

Luke shrugged, tamping down the disappointment. At a glance, she didn’t strike him as a one-night stand kind of woman, although the way she let him grind against her on the dance floor, who knew where the night would have ended if they hadn’t been interrupted.

Unfortunately, he’d never know.

He set a twenty on the counter and waited for the bartender to make his way back to his end of the bar, which took a while since the place did steady business.

Finally, Luke got his change, left a tip, and started for the door at the same time someone ran inside shouting. “Alexa! Get out back now. Cara needs a doctor!”

To Luke’s surprise, his one-time dance partner turned and bolted toward the rear exit.

A doctor. Something about the information made him grin.

Luke couldn’t stop the impulse to follow the crowd out back. Alexa—he knew her name now—knelt by her friend, the woman she’d been so protective of.

“What happened?” he asked the man next to him.

“Cara was attacked.” The guy, who appeared about the same age as Luke’s thirty-three, suddenly eyed him warily. “You’re not from around here, are you?”

He hailed from a small town himself, where everyone knew everyone else, so this man's distrust didn't surprise him.

Luke shook his head. "No, sir. Here to stay with a friend." He wasn't about to mention Cole's name, not wanting to draw any attention to himself as a pro athlete while he was here. "But I was dancing with Alexa earlier," Luke said, more to reassure the man he wasn't a part of whatever had gone down here.

"I see." The man slowly nodded, seeming to take Luke at his word. "Well, she's the best doctor we have. She'll be running University Hospital one day when her father steps down." Before the man could continue, a siren sounded in the distance, the noise growing closer and making it impossible to continue the conversation.

The paramedics arrived, and things got even more hectic. They loaded Cara onto a stretcher, and Alexa went in the ambulance after insisting the ex-boyfriend meet her there in his car. Alexa had been too preoccupied to even realize Luke was in the group of people surrounding them. Soon, the ambulance doors slammed shut, and the vehicle sped away. The crowd slowly dispersed, the fun gone from the night.

Luke climbed into his car and turned on the engine. The directions to Cole's place were in his GPS, yet instead of turning it on, he picked up the southern route on the highway he'd taken here and exited at the signs for the hospital. The same exit he'd passed on his way to Serendipity.

He parked near the Emergency Exit and scratched his head, asking himself what the hell he thought he was doing. The woman was a stranger to him, but she intrigued him on a level no woman ever had. And that was saying something, considering the smorgasbord of choices laid out for him over the years. He'd enjoyed it when he was younger, but he'd be thirty next month, and he was over the lifestyle that came with the fame. The booze, the women, the occasional bar fight. So. Over. It. His teammates called him an old man. So be it. Luke knew he could take each one in a fight and still have energy

left over. He just knew there was more to life than partying, and he was ready to find it. Whatever *it* was.

Right now, *it* was Alexa.

He'd first seen her as a sexy woman with haunting green eyes and a hot body to which Luke was damn attracted. She'd transformed into a loyal friend who'd given up a sure thing—since Luke couldn't see himself turning her down if she wanted to hook up—to look out for a pal. Then later, she'd morphed again, this time into an in-control doctor, capable of putting away her emotions and treating her unconscious friend.

In the span of thirty minutes, Luke discovered Alexa was not just beautiful but multifaceted, and as a result, she'd captivated him completely. He couldn't leave without finding out if her friend was okay and how she was doing after the night's crazy events.

Although, as he walked through the sliding ER doors, Luke had to ask himself if he wasn't a little crazy himself for pursuing a perfect stranger he'd never really met.

Chapter Two

ONCE ALEXA HAD checked Cara over and had tests run, she'd diagnosed her friend with a concussion and a bruised trachea. The abusive bastard who attacked Cara had done so because he'd blamed her for his wife leaving him, not only because Cara was a police officer but because she was a human being who'd cared enough to take the woman under her wing. Now he was behind bars and denied bail, so Cara was safe from the man. As for Mike, Alexa had stuck around to make sure his presence didn't upset Cara, but with the sedative, she was out cold. And Mike had sat by her bedside all night, never leaving. Alexa snoozed in the on-call room, waking up to check on things before allowing herself more sleep time. By the time eight o'clock rolled around, she'd all but forgiven Mike, knowing he would do anything to repair his relationship with Cara. Alexa had no more reason to stay.

She stopped by the nurses' station and wrote down discharge instructions, then ran through them with the nurse assigned to her room. "And now, I'm leaving. Call me if something urgent comes up. Otherwise, I'm indisposed."

She stretched her arms over her head and yawned. "I need a good meal and a couple of solid hours of uninterrupted sleep." Though at this point, she didn't know which would happen first. She might fall facedown before she ever ate.

Emily, an older nurse who'd been on staff when Alexa's father was first starting out, shook her head. "Honey, you need more than that if you're going to get a glow back in those cheeks. Do you even know what the word vacation means?"

Alexa laughed. "Not really. The chief of staff here drives me pretty hard, you know."

Emily frowned. "That father of yours is going to work you into an early grave, and for what? To keep a Collins in charge

of this hospital?” A buzzer sounded, distracting the older woman, and she glanced down. “That’ll be Mrs. Evans in 211. I swear she’d better need more than her pillow fluffed, or I’m going to scream.”

Alexa laughed as Emily walked away, but her words lingered. During these weeks of Alexa’s discontent, there had been many issues she couldn’t verbalize, even to herself. Simple things in life that other people took for granted, things that Alexa just didn’t have time for, like a regular social life, dating, or even a relaxing night with a friend.

She gathered her jacket and purse and headed for the elevator. With her mind clear of worry about Cara, Alexa’s thoughts immediately strayed to the sexy stranger who’d danced with her last night. The man who’d given her more in thirty minutes of dancing than she’d had in years. Her body tightened at the reminder of that too short yet carefree moment. Serendipity didn’t get many strangers passing through, so chances were she’d never see him again. The sad fact was, even if they did cross paths, Alexa had no time for sex. But if their chemistry was any indication, he’d be so worth her making the time.

Which brought her thoughts full circle. No time for sex, no time for a future. That was what she’d been trying so hard not to dwell on. But the sad truth was, the longer she accepted her father’s mantra—that *a Collins always puts work first*—along with his plans for her future, the less likelihood there would be of her ever getting married. Having children, a family. And Emily was right about working herself to death, even if the other woman didn’t mean it literally.

Some days, Alexa barely remembered crawling into bed at night. She was so exhausted from being on her feet at the ER.

Exactly how she was feeling now.

She stepped out of the elevator and pushed through the doors of the waiting room that led to the exit, when she heard her name spoken in a sexy drawl that could only belong to one person.

One man.

“Alexa,” he repeated.

She turned to stare into a pair of golden-brown eyes, which were focused on her once again. “You’re here,” she said, sounding as shocked as she felt. “Are you sick?”

He shook his head. “Just waitin’ for you.”

She blinked in surprise.

He grinned. “I was beginning to think you’d gone out another door, but the guard there assured me you’d have to pass this way.” He folded his arms across his broad chest. “So I waited.”

“You’re here for me?” A wave of pleasure rolled through her, so strong and unique she almost didn’t recognize it.

“Are you the pretty lady who danced with me last night?”

A hot flush rose to her cheeks, and she managed a nod.

“Same one who ditched me in favor of a friend?” he asked, teasing her. Before she could reply, he added, “I admire loyalty, by the way.”

“I—”

“I’ll take that as a yes, that was you. And by your scrubs, I’d say you’re the same woman who turned out to be one hot doctor. Which means, yes, I’m here for you.”

Alexa felt flattered and steamrolled all at the same time. “Why?” Why would he stick around all night and wait for her this morning?

“Been asking myself that same question between zzz’s. The best I can come up with is that you intrigued me. We clicked, and I wanted to know if your friend was okay—”

“She is.” And he was sweeping her off her feet with very little effort. “You cared about my friend?”

“I cared about you.” He shook his head. “Yeah, I know. Short time, crazy thing. I’m guessing after pulling an all-

nighter you need breakfast?”

Whatever exhaustion she'd been experiencing had since disappeared. “That would be great,” she said. “Breakfast I mean.”

He grinned, obviously pleased. “Since I'm not from around here, you'll have to recommend someplace.”

There was only one diner in Serendipity. “There's a place called The Family Restaurant on the edge of town.” Unfortunately, she'd left her car at Joe's and though she wanted to have breakfast with this man, she didn't think getting into a car with a stranger was all that smart. “Listen, I don't really know you so I'm not going to get into your car.”

He immediately extended his hand. “Luke Thompson.”

“Alexa Collins,” she said, aware of how much smaller her hand was as she placed her palm against his. Instant awareness sizzled along her nerve endings at their handshake, telling her that last night's electricity hadn't been a fluke.

They were chemically compatible. Now if she could make sure he wasn't a serial killer or stalker, she'd be all set, she thought wryly.

“I'm a friend of Cole Sanders. Does that help?” he asked.

A small town was a small town. “The football player,” Alexa said, nodding.

“I'm staying with him for a couple of days to help clean out his father's house.”

She recalled her father mentioning something about recommending retirement homes. “Did Mr. Sanders move to assisted living?”

“Yesterday,” Luke confirmed. “So you know them?”

“I know the family,” she murmured.

“Good enough of a reference for me to drive you to breakfast?” he asked.

She couldn't stop the smile he inspired. "Well if you're a friend of the Sanders, I guess you're safe enough."

He let out a laugh. "Darlin', I don't know many people who'd call me safe."

And with the way his hot gaze devoured hers, she couldn't say she felt safe, either. The Alexa she'd become didn't take chances, didn't date, and she certainly didn't give up sleep for a meal. She didn't crook her finger and invite a sexy stranger to grind with her on the dance floor, either. But the Alexa around this man apparently did all those things . . . and looked forward to doing even more.



LUKE LIKED A woman with a healthy appetite, something he rarely saw unless he was home with his mother and sisters. Alexa ordered a serious meal of scrambled eggs, two pancakes, bacon, a large glass of orange juice, and coffee. He wasn't sure what he enjoyed more, eating his omelet or watching her devour her breakfast. She didn't seem the least bit concerned about what he might think and by the time they'd finished their food, he had yet another reason to like this woman.

"Oh my God, I was starving," she said, wiping her mouth with a napkin and finally coming up for air.

He grinned. "Feeling better?"

She nodded, eyes sparkling. "Definitely got my second wind."

Her words hit him in the gut. He could think of a lot of things they could do to make use of that newfound energy. Instead, he did the unexpected, even to himself, and settled in to get to know her better. "So your friend's okay?"

Alexa's gaze softened. "Yes, thank God."

"And things better with her guy?"

"Probably not yet, but if Mike has his way, they will be." Alexa spent the next few minutes explaining to him how Mike

had what she called “sticking” issues, but that she’d never seen him so intent on making things right. “So I’ll give him that chance. But if he hurts her again, I’ll remind him I’m an expert with a scalpel.”

Luke made a mental note to remember that too. “Bloodthirsty?” he asked.

“Just not squeamish. I’ve been around medicine since I was born. My father’s a doctor too.”

He nodded, enjoying this glimpse into who she was. “And you followed in his footsteps?”

“It was mandatory,” she said, taking a sip of her freshly refilled coffee. “Especially after Mom died and I had no one to stick up for what I might want,” she admitted.

“How old were you?”

“Ten.”

He winced, unable to imagine his sisters getting through their teenage years without their mother’s steady influence. “I’m sorry.”

“Thanks. How about you?” she asked, clearly deflecting. “Parents? Siblings?”

“Hmm. Both parents still alive and married and three sisters.”

She opened her mouth, then closed it again. “And you came out a jock anyway?” she asked, laughing.

He grinned. “My dad was the high school football coach, and I was the eldest. All pretty much worked in my favor.” His mom got her girls to fuss over, and his dad worked hard kicking Luke’s butt and nurturing his talent.

“You were lucky,” she murmured.

“Yeah, I was.”

“Did you always know you wanted to play football?” she asked, leaning closer, clearly interested in him and his answer.

He nodded. “Pretty much. It came naturally, and I always loved it. Still do. Not just the playing but everything about the life. How about you, Doctor?”

“The idea of being a doctor? Yeah, that I wanted. A lot. The reality?” She shrugged. “It’s been a lot tougher than I thought.”

“The actual work? The hours? Or what?”

She leaned back in her seat with a full-blown sigh. “I love medicine. I love to treat people, kids especially. But my path hasn’t been pediatrics. Ever since I came back to town, my dad pulled me into his practice, his hospital, grooming me to be his successor as chief of staff. So I work the ER, I help out with the administrative duties, and I oversee doctor and nurses and shifts and OR schedules. And because I don’t want to lose touch with medicine, I keep hours at the office with patients.”

“Doesn’t sound like you have much time left for you.”

“You caught that, huh?” She laughed.

Even knowing her for less than twenty-four hours, Luke knew the sound was forced. “You were out dancing last night.”

“That was an effort to get Cara out of the house so she’d stop thinking about Mike. I had to get someone to cover for me in order to do it.”

“Doesn’t the hospital have enough doctors to give you more normal hours?” he asked, understanding that the weariness in her expression obviously came from more than being up all last night with her friend.

“Not if I don’t want someone else to usurp the position my father’s been grooming me for.”

He noted she didn’t say the position *she* wanted. But it wasn’t his place to say so. She was a big girl, and if her life made her unhappy, she’d change it. “You looked like you were enjoying yourself last night. Before the excitement went down,” he amended.

“I made time to go out for Cara’s sake, but once I hit the dance floor, I realized how much I needed the break. And then I caught sight of you.” Her voice dropped, the slightly breathless hitch catching him off guard, as reassuring in some ways as it was sexy.

She studied him intently, making Luke wonder what was going on in that beautiful head of hers. And she was beautiful. Even without much sleep, little makeup, and in hospital scrubs, Alexa Collins, with her gleaming chestnut hair, creamy skin and intelligent eyes, stood out. But it was more than her looks, though he liked staring at her. He enjoyed talking to her, too. And thinking back on their dancing had him itching to get his hands on the body he’d barely touched the night before.

“What happened when you caught sight of me?” He pressed her to continue because she’d invited him onto the dance floor. Because she’d let him get close enough to turn them both on. And because she’d agreed to have breakfast with him this morning.

The server had just set the check on the table, and Luke knew where he wanted them next. He just wasn’t sure she’d be on board. Then again, she’d been staring at him on and off throughout the meal, her interest as obvious as his. The chemistry was still there, alive and brewing with an intensity he’d never experienced, not in an ordinary setting like this diner. Hell, not in any place at any time. Something different was happening between them, and he wondered if she felt it too.

She bit into her lower lip, making him wonder if that fleshy portion was as soft as it looked. If she’d taste sweet like the maple syrup on her pancakes.

“When I looked at you, everything around me disappeared,” she said softly, her words more sugary than he’d hoped.

She reached out and placed her hand over his. “Come home with me?” she asked.

He hadn't expected her to be so blunt, but she'd described her life as hectic without much time for herself. If she wanted something, she'd have to reach out and take it when she could. She obviously viewed him as her break, an escape from daily living, and the irony of it was, that was exactly what he wanted to give her.

“Darlin’, I’d like nothing more.”

Chapter Three

A GROWN WOMAN, Alexa knew what she was doing when she invited Luke home. She just couldn't believe she'd done it. She blamed her lack of sleep and the fact that he'd gotten her to talk about herself, her career and lack of personal time. Not only had her guard been down, but she'd been reminded of all that was missing in her life. Sitting across the booth from the hottest guy she'd seen in her lifetime, one who looked at her like she was something special and wanted to eat her up . . . how could she not allow herself this one indulgence? She certainly wouldn't be working today whether Luke Thompson, a pro football player, joined her in bed.

Although she hadn't changed her mind about her invitation, she experienced a twinge of awkwardness as she gave him directions to her house, a small three-bedroom she'd bought from the bank when the owners foreclosed and moved out of state. She might not spend much time here, but it was home, and she'd done all she could décor-wise to make the house her own. Having grown up in one of the larger mansions in the wealthier part of town, in a place her father had turned into an art-showcase after her mother died, Alexa focused on homey touches instead. White walls, lavender trim, real plants that needed watering, something she made time for each week.

As Luke followed her into her house, Alexa was acutely aware of him taking in his surroundings.

"Pretty place," he said as she set her bag and keys on the foyer table.

"Thanks." She didn't turn to face him, wondering if she should invite him up to her room. Into the kitchen for a drink first? Her gaze fell to the clock on the wall.

Ugh. It was ten o'clock in the morning. No drink.

She'd been at the hospital all night and felt grimy. How could she have thought to ask him here? And now that she had, how did she begin? Did she just jump him in the hallway? Dating with a colleague, she'd done that on occasion. Bringing men home? Not ever. She was so out of practice at this sort of thing, it wasn't funny. Her thoughts were all over the place as were her nerves. And now she couldn't stop her mind from going at one hundred miles an hour.

Suddenly, she felt him step up behind her, his body heat warm against her back as he pushed her hair off her shoulders. "Relax," he said in a deep voice that melted her bones. "We've got all day, and you're wound tight. Why don't you go up and shower? I'll still be here when you're through."

How did he know exactly what she needed?

"Okay," she said softly.

"It's going to be so good," he promised, then settled his lips against her neck and nibbled on her skin.

She curled her hands around the edge of the table and bent her head forward, giving him better access. He nipped, licked, and soothed with his tongue. Nerves forgotten, she trembled, desire licking at her from the inside out.

"Better go," he said, his hand cupping her behind. "Unless you want to start this right here."

With a pained groan, she stepped aside. "Meet me in my bedroom." She ran for the stairs and headed up to shower.



LUKE WATCHED ALEXA walk up the few steps in her split level house, his eyes on her ass. Her body was well hidden in the generous scrubs and he found her appealing anyway. With a groan, he shifted his gaze and looked around, not surprised the woman he'd begun to know had an honest-to-goodness house with a white picket fence. The color scheme was a soft white and light purple, the whole place radiating warmth. She was everything—and nothing—like he'd expected and unraveling

her layers was as exciting to him as a new playbook each season.

Speaking of plays, giving her time alone had been a strategic move designed to make her more comfortable. Yeah, she'd have time to think too much, but she'd also be able to pull herself together. And he sensed a woman like her needed to feel good about herself in order to get into bed with a man. He had sisters, and though he refused to think about them having sex, he still knew how nice girls thought. Alexa reminded him of his sisters, girls willing to take a walk on the wild side, but who didn't do it often. Good girls.

The kind he'd want to see again.

And now he was getting ahead of himself. So with a last look around the house, which was pretty but was missing personal touches like family photos—which his mom filled both her house and his apartment with—he headed up to find her bedroom.

The sound of running water alerted him to the right room, and he stepped into an ultrafeminine area, draped white curtains, too many frilly pillows, and of course, purple touches everywhere. He grinned at her consistency. When the shower water shut off, his cock immediately hardened. Next, he heard her moving around, picking things up and putting them down. He kicked off his shoes and settled onto her bed.

He didn't have to wait long before she stepped out of the bathroom. A scent he didn't recognize but would forever associate with this moment seeped out of the bathroom along with the humid air. One look at her and his breath literally fled. Her hair, which had been pulled back earlier, was now damp and fell around her face in tangled waves. Wet, the long strands appeared darker, her green eyes standing out against her pale skin even more. She wore a deep purple robe—no surprise—but the rich silk material clung to her curves and parted in a seductive v that showed more than a generous hint of cleavage. Ending mid-thigh, he realized she had long, toned legs. Sexy legs. And her pretty, makeup-free features gave him

his first glimpse of the real woman beyond the seductress from the dance floor and the competent doctor who'd taken over in an emergency.

A woman he wanted beneath him immediately.

He extended his hand and she walked forward, no hesitancy in her step though he definitely saw nerves flickering in her eyes, and she paused by the foot of the bed. "C'mere, darlin'."

She eased herself onto the edge of the mattress. "Your Texas accent's stronger when you turn on the charm."

"I'm not turning on anything. I'm already there," he said, hiding nothing in his words. And if she looked at his jeans, she'd have proof. Very hard proof.

Her lips parted on what sounded like an eager sigh. Taking that as his cue, he reached out, hooked an arm around her waist, and rolled her on top of him. She felt good and smelled better. He positioned her over him, her legs draped around his hips, her body above him, ripe and ready for taking. He wrapped his arms around her waist, which had the added bonus of her pressing her warm heat over his aching erection.

Her eyelids fluttered closed, and she arched her back, rocking once, then twice against him, her entire body trembling like she was already on the edge.

Damn.

"Need something?" As he asked, he thrust his hips upward.

She whimpered something he couldn't understand.

"Say it again," he managed, gritting his teeth and forcing himself to hold on to the last shreds of his control, and it wasn't easy. Not since high school had a woman gotten him this hard, this fast, and ready to go off while still fully dressed.

She opened her eyes but didn't meet his gaze. "It's been so long for me," she said, her cheeks pinkening at the admission.

He swallowed hard, not wanting to think too deep on that. “Then I’d better make it good for you,” he said before finally kissing that gorgeous mouth.

Her lips touched his and immediately parted, the kiss going from zero to one-eighty in seconds. She fit against him perfectly, kissed like a dream, and drank from him like she’d been starving for a taste of him for years.

He held her head in position and took everything she was willing to give. And she gave plenty, her tongue twirling against his, her lower body in motion, and soon, they were going at it like kids in the back seat of a car. He slid his hand beneath her robe, expecting a silken barrier. Instead he found heaven. Warm, wet heat greeted him, and he slid his finger inside her wet pussy.

She groaned and kissed him harder, her hips grinding in insistent circles against him while he thrust his fingers deeper. She stiffened and cried out, coming apart around him, over him, and completely overwhelming him with the intensity and swiftness of her orgasm.

Her body trembled for a while after, and he held on until she rolled off him, propping herself up on one elbow.

Her gaze was soft on his. “That was amazing.”

“Glad you liked it.” He made quick work of the robe, peeling the silk off her shoulders to reveal her body to him for the first time.

Luke might be a jock, but he was never at a loss for words. This glimpse of her did it. Pale from lack of sun, her skin was porcelain-like in sheen, gleaming with a mixture of dampness and moisturized beauty. “Perfect,” he said, stroking his finger over one dusky nipple.

She moaned, and he dipped his head for a taste. Her fragrant scent surrounded him, providing an added sensual high, as if he wasn’t already feeling enough. Luke’s tongue swirled around her nipple, laving over her breast. The tiny bud tightened, and a shudder hit her hard. So damned responsive,

he could watch her come over and over again without getting bored.



ALEXA HAD NEVER felt so much. A lick, a touch from Luke and she felt the pull from her nipple to her core, becoming fully aroused all over again.

Wonder overwhelmed her, and she arched against him, seeking more. She was a one orgasm a night—or in this case day—kind of woman. She usually didn't think much of it, but the steady beat between her thighs made her hope that just maybe she wasn't finished yet. She liked the thought.

She also appreciated that he'd made her come first, which had the effect of relaxing her and making her more comfortable around him. And completely ready. She wanted more of him, wanted him inside her, but she wasn't selfish.

Aware he was doing all the giving, Alexa levered herself up onto her knees. "Your turn," she said in a husky voice she barely recognized. "Undress."

His golden-brown eyes met hers. Without hesitating, he sat up and pulled off his shirt, giving her a glimpse of tanned skin, muscles that showed how hard he worked on his physique, and a sprinkling of light-brown hair that covered his sexy chest.

She swallowed hard, her gaze never wandering as he reached for the button on his jeans. He stood, shucked them off, and returned to bed gloriously naked, completely erect, and so very, very male.

He took her breath away, and hesitantly, she reached for him. He grasped her wrist and placed her hand against his chest. His heart beat out a rapid rhythm that she knew was all for her. She added her other hand, soaking up his hard heat.

"It's your turn," she said, trailing a path downward with her hand.

"I'm not keepin' count. That said, I'm not going to argue, either." He pulled her against him, and she got lost in another

kiss that shot her ability to think to high heaven.

He surrounded her with his lips, his body, his scent, and when he eased her down to the bed, all she could do was feel his strength—and his impressive erection at the juncture of her thighs. She sighed at the brief contact, flesh against flesh, the tip of him merely grazing her most sensitive parts.

“Condom,” she managed.

“Shit.” He raised his head. “I was going to buy them in the hospital store, but I figured you’d think that was too cocky.”

“I have some,” she murmured. But not for the reasons he probably thought. “I’m sometimes a guest speaker at the high school, teaching sex ed. Gotta have condoms if you want teenagers to get the safe sex talk.”

He tipped his head back and laughed. “Damn, I’d have liked to learn sex ed from someone who looked like you.” He chuckled some more before sobering. “Where are they?” he asked.

“My purse.” She pointed at the dresser across the room.

He rose and returned in a flash, handing her her bag. She dug through her things and handed him a foil packet. He tore it open and covered himself by the time she’d tossed her purse onto the floor.

Then he was back, his big body over hers, staring into her eyes at the same time as he thrust deep, penetrating her hard and fast.

She sucked in a breath, and he stilled.

“Breathe, darlin’. And relax.” His warm voice reverberated through her.

“It’s been a while,” she said, repeating herself.

He stroked her cheek with the back of his hand, and she responded instantly, her entire body easing, growing accustomed to him.

“That’s it,” he murmured.

Just the sound of his voice had her responding, and soon, he was able to move inside her easily. His eyes darkened and he picked up his rhythm, gliding in and out as if he were made to be there, arousing her body with every perfect thrust until the amazing sensations took her back to the peak. She met his eager thrusts, sought out harder, deeper penetration, and he complied.

His hips pumped faster, hitting just the right spot, and just as he groaned and came hard, Alexa joined him, sparks flying as she came—again—harder than she ever had in her entire life.



LUKE WOKE UP in an unfamiliar bed. He took stock and realized immediately he wasn't drunk, thought back to yesterday, and grinned. He was in Alexa Collins's bed in her pretty purple bedroom. Normally, waking up in a one-night stand's place would bother him, but Alexa wasn't his typical hookup.

In fact, she didn't feel like a one-nighter at all. They'd spent the day in her bed, ordered in Chinese for dinner, ate, had more sex in her living room, followed by another round in her bed, before he fell asleep with her cuddled against him. He woke up this morning feeling pretty darn good.

Luke didn't understand it, probably because he'd never experienced anything like it—anyone like *her*. He might not get it, but he knew one thing for sure—he wasn't finished with the good doctor just yet.

He rolled over, only to find the other side of the bed empty.

He patted the sheet and groaned. Not just empty. Cold. She'd obviously been up and gone a while. Well, wasn't that a kicker? The first time he wanted more from a woman, she obviously didn't care enough to wake him to say goodbye.

He rose from the bed and discovered a note on top of his clothes, which Alexa had folded and placed on her dresser.

Thanks for last night. Emergency at hospital. Let yourself out. A.

Well damn.

Chapter Four

“**A**RE YOU SURE your father wasn’t a hoarder?” Luke asked Cole as they lugged yet more boxes of admitted crap from the basement to the curb.

Cole dropped his box with a groan. “No comment.”

The day had dawned, sunny and hot for a July morning in New York.

“You know what’s in these things?” Luke asked as he wiped the sweat from his forehead with the back of his arm.

“Fishing magazines. Now can we talk about something else? Like where the hell you were all night?”

“When did you become my goddamn mother? I already called to tell you I wouldn’t be here till later this morning.”

“You also said you met someone. Then you walked in here this morning and not a word about it. Serendipity’s a small town. Chances are I know her. So tell me more.”

Luke had no intention of standing around and gossiping like a girl. Ignoring his buddy, he headed back to the house for another load of trash.

“Was she any good?” Cole asked, pushing for answers.

Not that he blamed him. In the past, they’d never hesitated to share information if they picked up a hot chick after a game or out of town. The thing was, it’d been a long while since Luke had been on that path. Cole either. So maybe that explained the other man’s interest.

“What’s wrong? Dry spell so bad you have to live vicariously through me?” Luke teased as Cole caught up to him inside the house.

Cole opened the fridge and tossed Luke a Vitamin Water, taking one and chugging it down before meeting Luke’s gaze.

“Touchy and secretive about a hookup with a tramp who doesn’t mind doing you not twenty-four hours after meeting you.”

Luke clenched his teeth and silently counted to ten, reminding himself that this was Cole’s way of provoking him into replying. Cole wasn’t Mr. Sensitive, but he wasn’t a jackass about women, either.

“Not going there,” Luke said.

He wasn’t in the right frame of mind to talk about Alexa. Truth be told, he was pissed she’d left him alone in her bed. The least she could’ve done was wake him before she headed out. The sad thing was, he’d done it to many women in the past, never thinking how shitty it would feel to be on the other end. And maybe some women could handle it. Hell, if certain females had left his bed before he woke up, he’d have been one happy man. Not that he’d tempted fate by letting them stay. He knew better than to set up expectations. And maybe that was why he felt so crappy now. One-night stand or not, he liked her enough to see her again. Clearly, she didn’t feel the same and that sucked.

“Hey. I’m serious. Who is it? Obviously, she got to you, and if I know her, maybe I can help.” Cole hopped onto the counter.

Now that Cole realized Luke was really bothered, he’d cut the bullshit. And that was the friend Luke would talk to. “Alexa Collins,” Luke finally said.

Cole’s mouth opened wide. “No shit? The doctor?”

“One and the same.”

His friend let out a slow whistle. “You don’t mess round. Class all the way. No wonder she got to you.”

Luke downed half the bottle of Vitamin Water and let it stand as his answer. Cole was right. Alexa *had* gotten to him, and he didn’t know what to do about it. “Do you know her?”

“Her dad’s my father’s doctor, and he spent a lot of time with my old man in the last couple of months. When I was around, I picked up things.”

“Like?” He propped a hip against the counter and waited.

“She’s an all work, no play kind of woman. Doesn’t seem like you’d have much in common there.” Cole raised an eyebrow.

“Then you’d be wrong.” They’d hit it off. Everything about her interested him. “From her perspective, it sounded more like her father had pushed her in the career direction she took. It’s expected of her, but I’m not sure she’s that happy with the result.”

“Her old man says she’s taking over as chief of staff at University Hospital when he retires. She’s a shoo-in with the board. And to keep herself there, she has no playtime. Hell, man. I don’t think she knows how to play.”

“Oh she knows how,” Luke muttered.

Cole laughed hard at that. “I take it you would know.”

“Not goin’ there,” Luke repeated.

“Yeah, protective and silent. She got to you. So what are you going to do about it?”

Luke tipped his head back and stared at the ceiling. “If I were smart? Nothing.”

“Nothing because . . . ?”

“I live in Texas, man. She’s from here. I ought to leave it as a one-night stand.” The thought made him want to puke. That right there was a sign.

“But you won’t.”

Luke shook his head. “No, I won’t.”

“Got a plan?”

Only what had been kicking around in his head since Cole told him Alexa was known as an all work, no play kind of

woman. Luke shrugged and replied, “I’m gonna teach her how to have fun.”



ALEXA BOUNCED THROUGH her rounds of patients in the morning, her meeting with hospital administrators and she was still bouncing when her father caught up with her right before lunch. She knew the reason for her bounce. Her body still tingled in all the best places. Long neglected places. Places that were now happy and thanking a certain football player for making them come alive.

“Alexa, what’s this I hear about you treating children at the youth center downtown?” Aaron Collins was a good-looking man who had dark brown hair with only a hint of silver and distinguished features. Unfortunately, his perpetual scowl and all-business attitude turned many people off and prevented them from seeing some of his finer qualities.

Considering he’d raised her alone and though he’d directed her life, she’d never doubted that he loved her. She’d certainly seen those qualities when she was a child. She just hadn’t been the recipient of them recently. Her father had lost his ability to enjoy life, something else he was trying hard to pass onto his daughter.

“Well?” he asked when she didn’t answer right away.

She placed the stack of folders down on the top of the counter at the nurses’ station.

She should have known he’d get word of her activities last weekend. “Strep was going around. Some kids weren’t feeling well, so I offered to take a look.”

“Did you use hospital supplies to do it?” he asked.

She straightened her shoulders. “No, I did not. I paid for those supplies with my own money, and how dare you suggest otherwise.”

“Did it not occur to you that you could treat paying patients with your time?”

A steady pain began to throb in her temple. “Then sick children would go untreated.”

“Their parents could take them to their pediatrician and pay there.”

Those same parents sent their kids to the youth center so they could work, even on the weekends, not that her father would understand. “I don’t have to account to you for my time off.” She turned to the nurse behind her who was blatantly eavesdropping. “Can you please make sure you mark down all the medication changes I made so my patients get their correct doses?” She patted the charts she’d finished with.

“Yes, Dr. Collins.” The other woman picked up the folders and walked away.

Alexa turned back to her father. “Now, as I was saying—”

“If you have enough time to treat gratis, perhaps I could give you more hours in the E.R.”

She clenched her jaw and breathed in deep, deciding to ignore his bluster and call him on his complete lack of emotion when it came to the important things in Alexa’s life. “Did you happen to hear who I spent the day before yesterday treating?”

Her father blinked. “I haven’t checked the roster of patients.”

“What about town news? Did you hear that Cara was attacked?”

“Cara?”

“Hartley. My best friend,” she reminded him.

Since Alexa was from the wealthier side of town and Serendipity kids tended to run in cliques, Alexa hadn’t grown up hanging in the same circles as Cara. But when she’d returned to Serendipity after med school, she and Cara had gotten reacquainted and become close. Not that her father paid attention to his daughter’s friends.

“An abusive asshole almost strangled her behind Joe’s. I spent all night treating and worrying about her, and all you can talk to me about is that I treated sick *children* as if there’s something wrong with that?” Alexa asked, her voice rising.

“Alexa, darlin’, glad I found you,” a familiar voice said.

Luke.

She glanced away from her father only to realize Luke must have come over while they were arguing, and she hadn’t noticed. She’d been too busy making a spectacle, something that Luke, from the pissed off look in his eyes, had obviously noticed.

“Am I interrupting something?” he asked.

“Who are you?” Her father eyed Luke warily.

Alexa swallowed over the answer that came to mind. *Dad, meet the hot guy I picked up at Joe’s, took home for wild sex, then left sleeping in my bed this morning.* She had no doubt what Aaron Collins would think about the way his daughter had chosen to spend her day off yesterday. Or the night that followed.

He wouldn’t appreciate her choice any more than she’d figured Luke would appreciate the note she’d left him, one she’d deliberately kept brusque enough so he wouldn’t think she was a clingy female. She’d tossed in a little white lie about having an emergency so she’d have an excuse for slipping out and avoiding the awkward morning after. Her plan seemed sound since she hadn’t expected to see Luke again. Even if she’d thought about running into him, it wouldn’t have been here in the hospital and definitely not so soon after the best, most explosive night of her life.

“Luke Thompson,” he said, extending his hand toward her father.

“Dr. Aaron Collins.” The two men shook hands. “Which still doesn’t answer my question. Who are you, and what do you want from my daughter?”

Alexa groaned. She was over thirty years old and her father was acting like he had a right to ask. Jesus. “Dad, Luke’s a . . . he’s a friend.”

She caught his sizzling gaze and was happy he accepted that description and kept his mouth shut. “And we’re going to talk. In private.”

“You have patients to see,” her father said, inserting himself into the conversation.

“No, I have lunch to eat.”

“Great! Because I came to take you out. I have a picnic basket in the car.”

“It’s winter!” Alexa whipped her head toward him and looked, really seeing him for the first time. He wore a cream sweater that made his tanned skin even more appealing, and his golden eyes sparkled as if he had some plan in mind.

“And you eat in the cafeteria so you can be around if you’re needed.”

Luke scowled at her father. “I know it’s winter, darlin’. I’m freezing down to my Texas bones. But if I learned something in the past twenty-four hours, it’s that you need to loosen up and have fun. So we’re getting out of here and having a picnic lunch somewhere private. Then you can come back and work.”

Her father stared at Luke as if the man had lost his mind.

Alexa was sure she’d have been doing the same thing—if she wasn’t so tempted by both his offer and the man himself. He hadn’t been put off by her note. He’d sought her out. Planned something special. And then there was the little fact that the vein in her father’s head began throbbing—the one that pulsed harder when she did something he didn’t agree with.

The devil on her shoulder wanted to stick it to Aaron and do something that Alexa wanted for a change. But more importantly, the woman inside her that Luke had awakened last night wasn’t going quietly back to sleep.

She glanced at Luke, hoping to convey both her gratitude and the desire he'd re-ignited in one quick look. "Let me get my coat," she said.

His grin—and the fire in his eyes—assured her he'd definitely gotten her meaning.

"Alexa, we aren't finished with this conversation," her father said.

She straightened her shoulders. "I'm sure you're not, Dad. But I am. At least for now." But one thing she knew for sure, the argument and his pressure would be waiting for her when she returned.



NOW LUKE KNEW what Alexa was up against when it came to her father and her career. The man was a bastard, and though she stood up to him, it was no wonder she had no time for a social life or any kind of fun. That made his mission all the more worthwhile. Cole thought Luke was insane, but he'd recommended a place where he could take Alexa for privacy. He agreed that The Family Restaurant was the best place for him to pick up sandwiches and chips, and he had another surprise for her in the back of his truck, but for that one, she'd have to agree to spend more than her lunch hour with him today. If not, he hoped to make use of them tomorrow. Luke was in town for a couple of days, and with Alexa, he intended to make good use of them.

He drove her out to the lake at the far edge of Serendipity. He parked the vehicle and led her to the cabin on the lake owned by Cole's father. The Sanders men used the place for summer fishing, but Cole assured him all he had to do was turn on the heat, and the boiler would kick in.

Alexa had been silent on the drive, and he had no doubt she was angsty over leaving work, the argument with her father, and now being alone with him. He hopped out and headed to her side in time to help her out of the high truck.

“Thank you.” She glanced over her shoulder at the rustic cabin behind them. “Whose place is this?”

“Cole and his dad own it.” Luke clasped her hand and led her toward the door. “Let’s get inside. I’ll turn the heat up and go back out for the food.”

“You really thought this through,” she murmured as he toyed with the thermostat, and thankfully, the loud rumbling noise indicated they were in business. “You left me with plenty of time to do it,” he said, referring to when she’d abandoned him the morning after.

“I had an emergency,” she said, rubbing her hands together but not meeting his gaze.

“Did that emergency involve getting the hell out before you had to face me?” he asked, wanting to clear the air before the lie went any further. Luke was a light sleeper, and if her phone alerts had gone off, he’d have heard them. If she was scheduled to be at work, she’d have just said that. And Luke had used deception often enough in similar situations.

Again, he just wanted to think they were different. And right here, right now, he intended to find out.

Chapter Five

LUKE CALLED HER on her deception, and Alexa reared back in shock. No man had ever questioned her motives or truthfulness before, not in a relationship and not on the job. In fact, she was so used to people respecting her word—well, everyone except her father, and because he respected nobody’s word, he didn’t count—she couldn’t believe this man had seen through her and called her on it.

It humbled her.

It embarrassed her.

She forced herself to face him. “You may be a pro at one-night stands, but I’m not. I thought it would be easier for us if I just left.”

He blinked, obviously startled she’d opted for the truth without trying to bluster through.

Well, one thing she taught her interns, if you make a mistake, better to own up to it and face the consequences. She could do no less in her personal life.

“I may have been a pro at it once, but it’s been a long time since I pulled a stunt like that.”

It was her turn to blink. “Really?”

He grinned. “Yep. You’re not the end of a long line, darlin’. Not by a long shot.”

“At least not lately.”

He laughed. “Exactly.”

She wondered why not and decided not to ask. “Yet despite my leaving, you came after me anyway.” She bit down on her lower lip, pondering that fact. He’d done a lot more than just come to talk, too, she thought, taking in the bags

filled with food on the counter and the cabin he'd appropriated the keys for.

"You're an eye-opener," he said, answering her unspoken question. "I've been on the doing end, never on the receiving end of waking up alone, and I didn't like what I learned."

She winced. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be. I'm a man who likes to learn a good lesson. And if I thought you left 'cause you weren't interested, I wouldn't be here now."

She couldn't stop the smile his words inspired. "So you think I'm interested?"

A dimple formed in one cheek. "Don't think it. I know it."

"Cocky." She liked the hint of ego in him and figured it fit his sports persona. Oddly, the display of conceit made him even more appealing.

Not that she'd let him know it so easily.

She folded her arms across her chest and narrowed her gaze. "Whatever gave you the impression that I'm still interested?" she asked.

"I could either count the orgasms you had or point out the pink flush in your cheeks when I showed up to ask you out today. Your choice."

She just couldn't bring herself to be offended and burst out laughing instead. "Okay fine. You win. So what's in the bags?" She swept her arm out toward the packages he'd brought in from the car.

"Don't change the subject. I want to hear you say it." He stepped forward, and she inched away, the dance continuing until her back hit the wall.

"Say what?" she managed, this despite the fact that he loomed over her, a large, imposing, sexy male who smelled as good as he looked. At his nearness, her breath hitched and

memories of him surrounding her in other ways rushed through her.

“I need to hear you say I still tempt you,” he said, his mouth hovering over hers.

She caught the hint of mint on his breath and sighed into him. He had her, and he knew it. “I’m tempted,” she murmured.

A pleased gleam flickered in his gaze at the admission, but he still didn’t move, studying her instead of kissing her senseless like she wanted. Needed. Craved.

“I only have an hour or so for lunch,” she reminded him.

He muttered a soft curse and sealed his lips over hers. He swirled his tongue with hers in a way that had her body heating, which was saying something since her jacket already had her roasting. And she kissed him back for all she was worth, wrapping her arms around his neck and getting lost in the moment.

Until he broke their connection with a harsh groan.

“What? Why?” she asked, disappointed and bereft.

“Because you only have an hour or so and need to eat.” He stepped back, shrugged off his jacket, and began to unpack the bags. “Is there any chance I can convince you to play hooky this afternoon?”

She looked into his hopeful gaze, and for the first time in her adult life, the thought of doing something other than work was actually tempting. “I wish I could, but I have a meeting with the parents of one of my younger patients.” Disappointment filled her and she wished her afternoon consisted of something she could cancel.

“But you considered it.” He stared at her for a beat, his expression . . . pleased. Then he turned and began to unpack food, pulling out saran-wrapped sandwiches on plastic plates, complete with chips. Real silverware came next, followed by two large thermoses.

“What’s in those?” she asked.

“Hot chocolate.”

“Oh yum, my favorite!”

“I know.”

She wrinkled her nose. “How?”

“I made friends with Gina Donovan, pumped her for your favorite orders, and asked her to pack everything up for me.” He shrugged and began to peel the wrap off the food.

She ought to help but remained frozen in place, stunned by the lengths to which he’d gone to make this picnic, as he’d called it, special. For her.

No one had ever considered her favorite foods or gone out of their way to make her feel important. She hadn’t had her mom to do it. She barely remembered her mother, and her father’s mother, who’d moved in to help him out, had about as much of a soft streak as he did. Forget the men in her life. Even the ones she’d dated on occasion knew she didn’t have time or wasn’t giving them 100 percent, so they didn’t bother with an attempt to win her heart anyway.

In an insanely short time, Luke Thompson had made her feel cared for and treasured. And she didn’t know what to do with that.

“Luke?” she softly called his name.

He turned from his task. “What’s up?”

She swallowed over the lump in her throat, the words escaping before she could think them through or stop them. “I can’t play hooky this afternoon, but can I have a rain check for tomorrow?”



WHEN ALEXA ASKED him for a rain check, elation had soared through Luke as strong as after any touchdown he’d scored. He knew how difficult it must have been for her to concede to

herself that she'd take time off from work. That she'd do it to be with him, well, it blew his mind.

"You've got yourself a date," he'd promised her.

Afterward, they'd enjoyed their lunch at the cabin, cleaned up, and made out a little bit. He grinned at the memory of them sitting on the old, beat-up couch, kissing and groping each other like teenagers. He'd ended up aroused to the point of pain, and she'd ended up grumpy and annoyed, but he'd left her hanging, reminding her that good things come to those who wait.

Then he'd driven her back to the hospital, walked her to the big sliding doors at the entrance, kissed her in front of he didn't care who, and sent her back inside with a goofy grin on her face. Not that he'd told her that. He figured Dr. Alexa Collins wouldn't appreciate knowing she'd returned to work well kissed.

Laughing, he'd driven back to Cole's and helped his buddy, who'd rented a dumpster to get rid of the garbage his father had accumulated. That night, he and Cole had shared a couple of beers, watched a movie, and now, the following morning, Luke was implementing the next phase of teaching Alexa how to have fun.

"Where are we going?" she asked as he helped her into his truck.

He glanced at her, discovering yet another facet of her personality. She looked like a happy, young woman, not a sexy siren, an uptight doctor, or even the tense daughter he'd seen yesterday. Today, she had on a pair of jeans and boots pulled over them, a sweater and a puffy down jacket, her long hair pulled into a ponytail that hung down her back. She was, in a word, breathtaking.

"Back to the lake," he said, controlling his emotions.

She clapped her gloved hands together in excitement, and again, he experienced a wave of passion so strong it nearly

drowned him. He'd given her that rosy flush in her cheeks from just these plans alone.

“Another picnic?” she asked.

“Among other things,” he said, being deliberately vague and teasing. It wouldn't do to reveal his intentions. A part of having fun involved spontaneity, something else he sensed she hadn't had much of in her well-organized, routinized life.

“How about a hint?” She curled her legs under her and turned toward him as he pulled out of her driveway.

He laughed. “How about not?”

Her phone rang, and she pulled it out of her pocket, glanced down, and hit send. The next ten minutes, or basically the entire ride to the cabin, consisted of her talking to someone at the hospital about medications and various patients.

He clenched his jaw and tried not to let his annoyance get the better of him. He respected her job. Hell, who wouldn't? But they'd planned for this. He didn't have a huge temper, but he was finding he was impatient when it came to anyone or anything cutting into his limited time with Alexa. He had to head home on Friday, in time for his sister's daughter's birthday party on Saturday. He had only a few days with a woman he wanted way more from—he knew it already.

Most people would call him crazy. Most, but not his mother, who'd met his father and knew immediately he was her person. They'd married quickly, stayed together and had been happy. Besides, it wasn't like he was a kid. His sisters were younger than him, and they were all married with kids by twenty-seven.

He'd dated and lived through enough life to know he wanted to test some serious waters with her. How, with her living in New York and him in Texas, he had no idea. But for now, every minute counted.



LUKE PULLED INTO the gravel drive of the cabin and parked.

By the time he climbed out, Alexa was waiting by the truck bed for Luke to open it up and reveal his surprise. She hopped up and down, excitement filling her, wondering what he had planned for them today.

“I can only imagine what you’re like at Christmas,” Luke said.

“Christmas was never like this,” she said, more to herself than to him.

He turned, one hand propped on the tailgate, eyeing her with a serious look. “Talk.”

She sighed, knowing that once again, she’d be revealing something more about herself. “Dad didn’t have time for a tree, and his mother didn’t care. Hence . . . no tree.”

Luke stiffened. “No tree.” He sounded appalled, his expression disgusted.

“Okay, now you know. A family of Scrooges.” She ducked her head and avoided his gaze. “So if the bloom’s off this rose, you can take me back home . . . ” she said, wanting to give him an out.

“Hey.” He touched her arm. “I wouldn’t take you home just because you never had a Christmas tree! What do you take me for?”

She managed a laugh. “I was more worried about what you’d take me for. But I can assure you that *I* have a Christmas tree. Even if I’m not home much to enjoy it, I make sure I put one up.” She was rambling from embarrassment. “So what’s in the trunk?” she asked too brightly.

He stared at her for an uncomfortable minute. It was probably just a second or two, but it felt like a full sixty. “Something else I’m now thinking you didn’t get to experience.” He reached in and pulled out a pair of ice skates.

Brand-new shiny white skates with purple laces.

“Oh my God.” She didn’t know what got to her more, the gesture or the purple laces. “My favorite color.” The lump in

her throat grew bigger.

He just laughed. “Can you skate?” he asked.

“I used to go with a friend when I was younger until my dad found out and made me stop because it was too dangerous. *What happens if a blade cuts your hand? How will you ever operate? Be a doctor?*” she said in a perfect imitation of her parent.

“How old were you?” Luke asked, his voice gentle.

Bigger lump. She swallowed hard. “Fourteen.”

“Son of a bitch.” He slammed a hand against the truck. “You should have been out having fun with your friends, not worrying about a future I’m sure you didn’t even think you wanted.”

“Did you know what you wanted at that age?”

“Yeah.”

Her eyes darted to his face. “You did?”

A grin took hold, and a wicked gleam lit his gaze. “Yep. I wanted to get my hands up Lucy Grander’s shirt.”

She chuckled softly at first, then harder. “You are too much!”

“I’m also deadly serious. I played but wasn’t thinking about pro football when I was fourteen. And you shouldn’t have had to think about medicine.” He held her hands in his larger ones. “Now, do you want to go ice-skating?”

“Will you hold on to me until I get the hang of it?”

His eyes darkened. “Oh yeah, darlin’. I’ll hold on to you.”

She rolled her eyes at him. “You’re still that fourteen-year-old boy at heart, aren’t you?”

“God, I hope so.”

She grasped his shoulders and pulled him close. “Me too,” she said and settled her lips on his. Sparks ignited immediately. She curled her fingers into his jacket and pressed

herself into him. She might have started the kiss, but his low groan gave her fair warning that he'd be taking over.

And he did. His tongue delved deep into her mouth, possessing her, marking her in a way she'd never forget. She loved his taste—the hint of mint and the dark flavor that was all Luke. Add in the sweet part of him and the impossible was happening. She was falling hard for this man. Too bad all they had was a few days out of time. Because when all was said and done, nothing in her life had changed, her time for a relationship was zero, and Luke Thompson was a good man who lived in the state of Texas.

Chapter Six

LUKE DIDN'T HAVE to guess how Alexa felt or what she wanted. She wore her heart on her sleeve and her feelings on her face. And when she reached for him, he knew he was a goner. If he let the kiss go on, they'd end up on the ground, not on the ice.

With more willpower than he thought he had, he broke the kiss. "Skating, darlin'."

Eyes glazed, she looked up at him and nodded. "Skating."

"You gonna be steady out there?" he asked, his hands on her forearms, keeping her upright.

"No, but you already said you'd hold me." She grinned and stepped back. "Do I get to try on my skates now?"

He nodded, already knowing they'd fit. This time, he'd had to go to the source—her best friend Cara Hartley, a Serendipity police officer who Luke found at the police station in town. She'd looked him up and down, placed her hands on her hips, and divulged Alexa's shoe size. "I have a gun, and I know how to use it," she then said. "Break her heart, and you'll answer to me."

"Message received," he told her. "I like how you two look out for each other." He inclined his head. "Well done. And glad to see you're feelin' better."

The big bad cop's expression softened. "Thanks."

"Also glad your man came around," Luke said, pushing his luck a little further.

Her eyes narrowed.

"And now I'm getting out while the getting's good." With a wink, he'd taken off, heading next to the small store located in the skating rink in the next town over.

Cole joined him for the ride, laughing all the way there—and back. Luke ignored him, figuring he'd have some chuckles of his own when Cole found his woman.

Now, Luke turned back to *his* female and watched her lace up the skates.

“They fit!” she exclaimed, her excitement like his niece’s on Christmas.

“But they’re new, so you’ll probably end up with blisters,” he warned her. “We’ll take it easy.” He stood and held out a hand, which she readily grabbed.

A few minutes later, they were on the ice. He wished he could say she was a natural. She wasn’t. But what she lacked in skill, she more than made up for in both enthusiasm and willingness to keep getting back up—no matter how many spills she took. And unfortunately for her, she took plenty. Her ass would be sore tomorrow, which meant he’d have to give her some TLC today.

No big chore.

On what felt to Luke like her hundredth tumble, he caught her before her butt hit the ice. “And we’re all finished for today,” he said.

“I can go more,” she said through chattering teeth.

He wrapped his arm around her waist and steered them toward the lake’s edge. “If you won’t admit to freezing your ass off, I will. I’m cold, and I need your body heat to warm me.”

Her eyes darkened, but she didn’t give up that easily. “One more circle around the lake.”

At that moment, Luke cursed her father for instilling that need to prove herself in his daughter. “No. You’re freezing, and your butt cheeks hurt like hell, but you’ve never given up on anything in your life, so if I don’t call it a day, we’ll be out here while you try to prove something to me you don’t have to prove. This was supposed to be fun, remember?”

She blushed. “I . . . yeah, I remember. And I did have fun!” From the sparkle in her eyes, he couldn’t help but believe her.

“Me too. Now we have a cabin all to ourselves where the heat’s pumping and the bed’s warm. So you tell me, do you want to keep on bruising your pretty behind or let me ease those aches and pains in a way that I promise you’ll like?” His own blood pumped faster at the notion. He raised an eyebrow and waited for her to decide.

“Well, when you put it that way . . . ” She grasped his hand. “Last one to the cabin is a rotten egg.” She took off, but Luke wasn’t about to let her fall again, so he grabbed her around the waist and carried her off the ice, listening to her shrieks of *put me down* the entire way.



ALEXA HAD A blast on the ice. Sure, she sucked at skating. Who knew that it wasn’t like riding a bike? Not that her father encouraged that either—*concussions are dangerous, Alexa*. But Luke never lost patience. He just held out a hand, helped her back onto her feet, and off they went again. He held her tight in his strong arms until she was ready to go solo again. She inevitably fell onto her butt again.

By the end, her feet hurt like hell, she probably had those blisters he’d mentioned, and frostbite was setting in, but he’d still had to drag her off the ice. “Luke?” she asked as he drove them from the lake to the cabin.

“Yeah?”

“I loved every minute,” she said, wanting him to know exactly what kind of gift he’d given her.

“Yeah?” A smile pulled at his lips.

“Absolutely.”

He parked in front of the cabin and cut the engine, then got out and met her on the passenger side, opening her door.

Before she could hop out, he braced a hand on the roof over her head. “You know you didn’t need to prove anything

to me. I didn't care if you could skate or not. I just wanted you to enjoy the day." His serious gaze told her he was worried she'd pushed herself too hard.

"I did. Every last minute. Even when I fell on my ass," she said with a grin.

He scowled at her comment. "You won't be feeling so generous about that tomorrow."

She smoothed the frown lines on either side of his luscious mouth with her fingers. "I will if you take care of me like you promised," she said, her voice deep and husky.

The next thing she knew, she was back in his arms as he carried her to the front door. He smelled delicious, a combination of outdoors and sexy man, and she tangled his fingers in the back of his hair as he somehow worked the key, never putting her down as he let them in.

"What'd you have to promise Cole to get this cabin again?" she asked as she kicked off her shoes and let them fall to the floor.

He laughed, the deep sound rumbling through her. "Just my firstborn." On his kidding words, he snared her gaze with his, and her breath caught at the intensity she saw there.

Luke and kids. The idea, once planted, no matter how lightly, buzzed around her brain. Alexa loved kids and worked with them when she could because, as patients, they were far more fun than cranky adults. Hence her youth center hours and free medical care for them. She was beginning to think she'd never have a family of her own. With one joking comment, this man caused a yearning deep in her soul.

"Alexa? Lex?" Luke asked. "What's wrong?" He laid her down on the bed and eased next to her.

She blinked and deliberately cleared her mind. "Not a single thing," she assured him.

Fanciful thoughts and feelings about a man she'd known a few days were ridiculous. What he was giving her in this

precious time, the chance to experience *life* and to live all she'd been missing, was priceless. When he was gone, she knew she'd have choices to make about how she wanted to go forward from here.

But right now, she had him.

And just like he taught her, she intended to live in the here and now. So she unzipped her jacket, shrugged it off, and tossed it to the floor, then reached for his zipper and did the same to his.

He wore a fitted long-sleeve thermal in a chocolate brown that brought out the gold in his eyes and the muscles in his chest and arms. Mouth watering, she tugged at the bottom of the shirt, pulling it out of his jeans and working it up and over his head. With a targeted toss, the shirt hit his jacket on the floor.

“Hey I thought I was going to take care of you?”

If that's what the man wanted, that's what he'd get, Alexa thought and released her grip on his shirt. “Go for it,” she told him. “I'm all yours.”

With a low growl from deep in his throat, he raised himself on one knee and began divesting her of her clothes, piece by piece. Her jeans, damp from her many falls on the ice, took some effort, but finally, he'd bared her to him, except for her lacy underwear and matching bra.

“You take my breath away, darlin'.”

Her breath caught, and her throat swelled. “You do the same. But more than that, you make me feel good. Special. I'll never forget that.” She glanced away, embarrassed she was revealing so much yet unable to hold back the words.

“You *are* special.”

Not according to her father. *Surgeons like you are a dime a dozen, Alexa. Try harder. Do better. Give more of yourself, or you'll never stand out.* God, she was so sick of his words tormenting her. She'd taken the full day off, found a reliable

doctor to cover her patients, and deliberately not checked in with her service or looked at her phone. Yet the pressure remained as a subtle heaviness in her chest and that damn voice in her head.

“Lex,” Luke said in a concerned tone.

“I’m here.” She smiled into his warm eyes, liking how he shortened her name. It was special.

“You weren’t.”

“I am now,” she said with what she hoped was a seductive smile. She had no desire to get into where her mind had wandered. Not when she had such a sexy specimen in front of her.

But she was coming to know Luke, and if she didn’t distract him, he’d push her for answers and kill the mood. She refused to let that happen. She reached for the front hook of her bra and released the clasp, then slowly lowered the straps over her shoulders and down her arms. The cups eased down, one catching on her nipple, and Luke grinned at the sight.

“Let me help you with that.” He bent his head, and using his teeth, he gently pried the material away from her breast.

The material fell away, and Luke’s mouth quickly replaced it. One lap of his tongue and Alexa’s head fell back against the pillows, the sensations so strong and startling that she let out a moan. He licked again, nipped harder, and she began to tremble.



LUKE HAD NEVER been with a woman so open and genuinely responsive. There was no pretense, no artifice. Everything she felt, she showed, and knowing he could take her so high so fast gave him no small amount of satisfaction. She’d been starved—not just for sex but also for affection—and he wanted to give her everything he could in the time he had.

While he kept up the friction on her breast with one hand, he slid her panties off her body with the other. He cupped her

mound, feeling the heat emanating from her and stifled a groan as his cock let him know exactly how much he liked what he was feeling.

“Luke.” She sighed his name, parting her legs. He took advantage, slipping his finger into her slick opening.

Her hips jerked, sucking his digit in deeper. He grit his teeth and slid his thumb over the tiny knot of nerves, rewarded when she arched her back and thrashed her head from side to side.

“Beautiful,” he muttered, watching the flush on her cheeks as she lost every inhibition she possessed.

Her body shaking, her lashes fluttered up, her eyes locking on his. “I need—”

“I know what you need.” But she wasn’t coming alone or without him inside her. He rose and quickly shed the rest of his clothes, pausing only to grab a condom from his pocket before returning.

Taking him by surprise, she plucked the packet out of his hand, ripped it open, and managed to roll the latex over his straining erection.

She grinned at the results. “Now hurry.”

He swung a leg over her and positioned himself at her entrance. She whimpered, the sound inflaming his need, and he braced a hand above her shoulder, looking into her beautiful eyes as he thrust deep. Thrust home.

Her eyes widened and rolled back slightly before she managed to focus on him once more. “Oh God.”

“That’s not God, darlin’. That’s you. And me.” And damn, they were hot and wet.

He pulled out, slid back, the slick sounds of sex surrounding them along with Alexa’s whispered pleas of *harder, faster, and oh God* nearly making him come too soon. He held on, gritting his teeth, and she bent her knees, taking

him deeper. Then without warning, her body gripped his, clamping on tight as she came.

Her orgasm released his tenuous hold and restraint. He pumped into her, feeling more than he ever had in this lifetime. He knew in his gut this was so much more than sex, and he accepted it and reveled in it as he came.

It took a while for them to catch their breath, and finally, Luke rolled off her. “You okay?” he asked.

She met his gaze, her eyes glazed and dreamy. “Never better.”

“Glad to hear it.” He kissed her nose, then pulled himself up, heading for the bathroom.

He returned to find her staring at the ceiling, a satisfied smile on her face and a healthy, happy glow on her cheeks. One he’d put there, Luke thought, grinning too.

“Roll,” he said to her.

“Hmm?”

“Roll over.” He lightly patted her hip.

She groaned but turned over as he asked. He glanced at her bare bottom, smooth white skin with hints of pink and more than a few scrapes. He frowned at the sight. “Hurt?” he asked, rubbing his hand over one cheek, then the other.

“A little sore,” she admitted, her words muffled in the pillow.

“Sorry, sugar. I never meant to cause you pain.” He pressed a kiss to her cheek, and she giggled.

“I’ll live,” she assured him.

“I hope so.” He massaged her skin, and she sighed in contentment.

“When do you leave?” she asked, the question muffled. She didn’t peek out from where she’d buried her head in her arms.

The question was long overdue. “I have to be home for my niece’s birthday party on Saturday.” He pulled in a deep breath. “So my flight’s Friday.”

Silence surrounded them, the mood broken as reality intruded.

“You’d really like my nieces,” he heard himself say. “Cute little things. Girly girls with bows in their hair and cowboy boots on their feet.” He continued to speak, unsure of how to bring them back to before, when it was just Luke and Alexa in the cabin. Not Luke from Texas and Alexa from New York.

He heard what sounded like a hiccup. Or her choking back tears.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

“Take the weekend and come with me to Texas,” he said.

She popped up in bed and flipped over. Her eyes were red as they zeroed in on him. “Say that again?” she asked.

The question came out unexpectedly, but the sentiment was heartfelt, he realized. “Come to Texas. Meet my family. You’ll have fun, and they’ll love you.”

Her eyes opened wide. “But . . . work. The hospital. My patients.” *Her father.* That last one went unsaid.

“Will all be here when you get back.” He didn’t know what he hoped for out of the request. He only knew he wasn’t ready to be apart from her.

The rest he’d figure out.

If she said yes.

Chapter Seven

ALEXA SAT UP in bed with the sheets pulled over her breasts as she stared at Luke. Come to Texas, he'd said, and boy, was she tempted. She'd never wanted to chuck the responsibilities in her life and take off for the weekend more than she did now.

Unfortunately, the reliable, dependable side of her spoke louder in her head and took over. "I can't just pick up and go when the whim strikes me." She winced, knowing she sounded more like her father than herself.

And the hurt on Luke's face confirmed it.

"Luke—"

"I get it. You have to work." He'd been sitting on the edge of the mattress, and now he reached down and grabbed his pants off the floor.

She wasn't ready for their time together to end, especially not like this. "No, you don't get it. I want to go with you. I really do."

He paused in the middle of pulling on his jeans and glanced over his shoulder. "It's not as hard as it sounds. I'm guessing you have plenty of vacation time built up, and since you managed today, I figure you also have people to cover for you. Hell, knowing you, half the hospital probably owes you a favor."

Her cheeks burned because he was right, and he'd figured her out in a very short time. "I want to go," she repeated, needing him to hear her and believe. "But I can't leave without any notice."

He secured the button on his jeans before answering. "Lex, I'm not gonna lie to you. These couple of days weren't just unexpected. They were fucking amazing," he said, letting loose with his language for the first time.

She grinned but said nothing, mainly because a) it didn't bother her and b) she agreed. Their time together had been exactly that.

He hooked his fingers in the loop of his jeans, his chest bare, his gaze level on hers. "Nobody respects discipline and routine more than I do. I wouldn't be where I was in my career if I didn't dedicate myself 110 percent during the season and stick to a schedule during the off-season. And if I thought you were saying you couldn't come because you wanted to work or it would affect your career, I'd never push. But that isn't it, is it?"

With every word he spoke, her defenses rose higher. She stiffened her shoulders until her neck hurt, and she glared at him, but he clearly wasn't finished. "Tell me what you think it is," she said, folding her arms across her chest, protecting herself from whatever he would say next.

Ironic since five minutes ago, she wouldn't have thought she'd have to protect herself from this man—ever.

"You don't want to tell your father you're taking more time off. You don't want to disappoint the old man or lose the legacy he's so carefully prepared for you. But, darlin', I'm asking you straight out to be sure that's the future *you*, yourself, want."

Her mouth ran dry. As quickly as her anger had grown at his words, it deflated with his further insight. She wasn't sure about her life, and he knew it. And he didn't want to hurt her. He wanted her to be happy.

His gaze softened. "If I could stay longer and be with you, I'd do it. Give up a meeting or two, miss a practice if I thought I could work it out. But the one thing I won't miss in life is a family event because those only happen once. I can't get back a missed birthday or the look in my niece's eyes when she sees that power-charged Barbie Car I bought for her that'll be waitin' in the driveway."

Oh my God. He was killing her. Alexa didn't even know the little girl he spoke of, but she suddenly had a whole new vision of Luke Thompson, and it took her breath away. His words sliced deep because how many of her birthdays had her own father missed because of work, while Luke wouldn't skip his sister's daughter's special day?

She'd thought this man was something unique. Something real. Now she knew for sure.

Her phone suddenly rang from inside her purse, and it was the ringtone she'd programmed for her father. She cringed at the interruption.

Luke glared at her bag. "That him?" he asked.

Alexa nodded. Unable to help herself, she reached for the purse and pulled out the ringing phone. At least half a dozen missed calls, all from her father. "I didn't tell him I was taking off today." She glanced at Luke but found no understanding in his gaze.

"How long are you gonna let him run your life?" he asked.

"He doesn't—"

Luke pinned her with a knowing gaze. "Give me more credit than that. He does."

The annoying ringing stopped, and another missed call and voicemail message popped up on the screen. Disgusted, she tossed the phone onto the bed.

"Get dressed," he said more gently than she'd have expected. "I'll toss the sheets into the washer. Cole said someone comes in and does laundry, so she'll finish what I start."

Nodding, she rose, feeling self-conscious that she was naked and he wasn't. In silence, she looked for the clothes she'd shed and realized her jeans were still damp. She pulled on her underwear and shirt, her back to him.

"Do I have time to toss these in the dryer for a little while before I put them back on?" She turned to find him right there,

in her personal space, and she sucked in a shallow breath.

He braced his hands on her forearms, his thumbs rubbing lazy circles over her shirt. “I don’t want to end this with an argument.” He met her gaze, those warm eyes communicating real regret.

Her stomach twisted nervously. “Me neither.” She didn’t want to end it at all, but he’d made the gesture, and she’d turned him down.

Alexa knew she had a lot to process, but she couldn’t upend her life in a heartbeat. She’d always been a thinker who processed first and acted later. During this time with Luke, she’d enjoyed spontaneity, but a lifetime’s worth of habit wouldn’t be broken quickly.

“Give me your jeans. I’ll toss ’em in for a bit,” he said.

“Thanks.” She handed him the damp denim, then helped him strip the linen off the bed and pillows.

They worked in somewhat comfortable silence, but the atmosphere between them had changed. No longer sexually charged or light and playful, a pall had fallen over them because they both knew they’d reached the end of *this*.

Whatever this was.

And Luke was right. It had been fucking spectacular.

Luke drove Alexa home. He walked her to her front door, wrapped his arms around her, and kissed her. She knew it was goodbye, even if he didn’t say the words. Even if he’d programmed his phone number and address into her phone, she sensed the finality in the kiss.

Alexa entered her house, wanting nothing more than to be alone. She didn’t return her father’s calls. He could damn well wait until she returned to work on Friday before she dealt with his anger. Instead, she gave herself time to grieve. As insane as it sounded, that was what she did. She grieved for a relationship she’d walked away from before it began. For a man who’d given her more in two days than anyone else had

given her in a lifetime. And she grieved for the lonely years she'd spent growing up, and the frustrating time she'd spent trying to please a man who couldn't be satisfied.

Suffice it to say, Alexa held a pity party complete with ice cream and phone calls to her best friend. By the time she fell into a fitful sleep, she did so with the knowledge that this time tomorrow, Luke would be gone.

And she had some harsh decisions and choices to make about herself, her life, and her future.



ALEXA DRESSED IN her navy power suit, the outfit she saved for board meetings and arguments about changing the status quo with the so-called powers that be. The same board headed by her father. She slipped on a pair of high heels, not her usual choice for the hospital, but these made her feel in control. Like she could handle anyone and anything—the way she felt when she was around Luke.

Makeup in place, she climbed into her car and drove to University Hospital, parked and entered the building that had been home since she was a little girl. She listened to the click of her heels as she made her way down the halls to her father's office and realized there was a lot wrong with that bit of truth. But truth it was—and she was finally ready to confront it—along with the man who'd created her reality.

She knocked on her father's office door.

“Come in!”

She poked her head in. “Dad? I need a word.”

“I'm busy,” he said, not looking up from his paperwork. The one thing she'd always dreaded about the chief of staff job was the massive amounts of paperwork and the lack of interaction with the patients.

She took a deep breath and stepped inside anyway. “I'd appreciate it if you made the time. It's important.” She shut the

door behind her, not planning on leaving until she'd had her say.

With a resigned sigh, he put his pen down and gestured to the chair in front of his desk.

She opted to remain standing, needing all the leverage and power she could muster.

“Well? I don't have all day.”

She clenched and unclenched her fists. “Are you happy?” she asked her father.

He blinked, then looked at her with a frown creasing his forehead. “Excuse me?”

She'd thought long and hard about how to approach him and what she wanted to say. This was rehearsed, and she knew it. “I asked if you're happy. In your life? Your job?”

“Alexa, I'm a busy man. I don't have time for philosophical conversations.”

“Well, I'll say it again. I'd appreciate it if you made the time. This is important to me.”

Hands on his desk, he met her gaze. “Fine. I don't think about happiness.”

Her heart seized at the admission she'd expected. What she hadn't anticipated was how much the knowledge hurt. “Did you ever? Think about it, I mean.” To hell with power. She lowered herself into the chair, needing support. “When you were younger? When you met Mom? When you fell in love?”

That last question was a stretch. Alexa had no idea if her parents had ever been in love. Or not. She didn't remember them interacting, and her father never spoke about it.

His scowl deepened. “What's going on with you?”

She drew a deep breath. “I'm taking a leave of absence.” She said the words slowly and deliberately, not rushing through them the way she was tempted to do.

The only way he'd take her seriously was if she sounded firm, didn't back down, and stood her ground. All things Aaron Collins respected. Unless it involved going against his directives or wishes.

"Okay, now I know you're sick. What the hell do you mean you're taking a leave?" He leaned forward in his seat, talking at her like she was an employee, not his only child.

"In the past couple of days, I've had time to think about what I want out of life and—" She pulled in a deep breath. "This isn't it. I don't want to be a paper pusher for this hospital. I don't want to follow in your footsteps. I want to create my own path."

"You want to create your own path," he mimicked her. "Don't tell me. This has to do with that football player," he said in disgust.

"You know he plays football?" she said the first thing that came to mind.

"The nurses couldn't stop whispering about it. I thought you'd be above that sort of thing. At the very least, I thought you'd get that little rebellion out of your system and return to work fully focused."

She blew into her hands in an attempt to calm down. "Well, you thought wrong. And that little rebellion you mentioned? It's been a long time coming. These past few days may have shown me what it's like to really live and enjoy life and be happy, but the discontent began long before and has been brewing for years."

"Alexa, not many people have the opportunities you've had," her father said too slowly and patiently as if he were talking to a misbehaving child. "Not many people have the avenues available to them that you do."

She held up a hand. "Stop right there. I'm grateful for each and every one, but did you ever think that maybe I don't want the same things you did?"

"And what is it you think you want?"

There it was again, that patronizing tone. She knew then that he'd never get it; he'd never understand. Her stomach hurt because he was her father, but he wasn't her daddy. He'd never been. "I know that I want to enjoy my job. My days. I'm not naive. Life isn't always easy or fun, but I want to wake up in the morning knowing that, at the very least, I'm doing something of my choosing. Not yours."

His hands bunched in frustration, his knuckles turning white. "That's not gratitude. That's disrespect."

She cocked her head to the side. "I beg to differ. I did everything you ever asked or wanted. I tried things your way. Now I'm going on my own."

His face turned red, his cheeks flushed, and he vibrated with anger. "I raised you."

"Which is what you do when you have children. What you don't do is direct and manipulate them into being what you want, envision, or need. I love you, Dad. But I have to live my own life."

"Are you giving up medicine?" he asked.

She shook her head. "I just want the time to figure out what kind of medicine I want to be in." She wondered if she should add this and then decided she'd come this far, so she might as well go all the way. "I also need to figure out where I want to practice it." Hospital, private practice, more pro bono work at the youth center. Alexa didn't know, but she wanted to figure it out.

He cleared his throat. "You might want to reconsider. The world keeps moving. In other words, your job may not be here when you want to come back."

Her own father wouldn't hold her position for her. She hadn't anticipated that, but she managed to hide the pain of his betrayal. "I'll take that chance," she said.

"Your choice. Now, if you're finished, I have work to do." Without meeting her gaze, he picked up his pen and looked

back down at his papers. If not for the slight tremor in his hand, Alexa would think him completely unaffected.

“One more question,” she said softly.

Maybe it was her tone of voice, but he glanced up. “What is it?”

“What did we do for my fifth birthday party?”

His gaze narrowed once more. “I don’t remember.”

“Tenth?” she asked.

He clenched his jaw. “Same answer.”

Alexa nodded. The only birthdays she recalled were the ones she spent missing her mother and hurting that her father chose to work instead of staying home.

“The sad thing is I wish I didn’t remember them either,” she said, fighting to speak over the lump in her throat and the tears threatening to fall.

Something flickered in her father’s gaze. Or maybe Alexa just wanted to see emotion there. She didn’t know. “Bye, Dad,” she said.

But when she looked over, he’d returned to his work and didn’t reply.

Chapter Eight

FAMILY GATHERINGS AT Luke's parents were always huge. With three sisters, all married and all with kids, plus cousins, neighbors, and friends included, the noise level was high, and the privacy factor was nil. Usually, Luke loved these events. Not today.

Today, his heart wasn't here. It was back in the small town of Serendipity, New York. A place he never thought would leave a mark on him, much less impact him so strongly. He couldn't get Alexa out of his mind.

They'd said goodbye on Thursday. Today was Saturday. He'd programmed his number into her phone and hoped she'd use it. With the way they'd parted ways, Luke giving her his unasked-for opinion on how to live her life, he wasn't holding his breath.

To avoid focusing on himself, he looked around to see which sibling he was in the mood for, and his gaze settled on Ashley, the middle of his three sisters. She had two kids, having married right out of high school to a guy Luke hated.

And Luke considered himself an easygoing guy who got along with most people, but not her husband. "Hey, sweet cheeks," he said, using his nickname for her.

"Hey."

He sat on the picnic table bench next to her, and she immediately laid her head on his shoulder. Warning bells went off in his brain. "I was only gone a week. What happened?"

"I left Todd."

Luke held in his cheer, more concerned about his sister's feelings than his own. "Why?"

"He was cheating on me with Mandy Stone."

“Mandy Stone, whose daddy is Todd’s boss?” Luke asked through gritted teeth. The same Mandy Stone who felt it was her civic duty to hit on Luke at every town event he attended and had done so since Luke accepted the scholarship to the University of Miami to play football for the U.

“I think Mandy was just the most recent in a long line. He never liked being tied down.”

“Then he shouldn’t have gotten you pregnant the summer before college.”

She sniffed but ended in a laugh. “Takes two to be stupid, Luke. And I wouldn’t trade my kids for anything.”

“What will you do now?”

“The kids and I moved in with Mom and Dad. I need some time to work out a plan.”

He kissed her temple. “You will. And I’ll be here to help you.”

“Thanks.”

“Anything for you, sweet cheeks. You know that.”

She sighed. “I do. And I love you for it. So how was your trip east?”

“Business was good. Got some solid endorsement deals lined up.”

“Just for Men? Erectile dysfunction meds? Hemorrhoid cream?” She nailed him in the ribs with her elbow.

“This is when sweet cheeks changes to brat,” he muttered. “How about Ford Broncos and my own cologne?”

She nodded, her blond hair tickling his nose. “Proud of you, little brother. So what else did you and Cole do? Pick up any hot chicks while you were there?”

Luke weighed just how much to tell her, then decided to go for broke. He needed to talk about it, and Ash needed the distraction from her own life. “Cleaned out Cole’s dad’s house,

though I think he's gonna do some work on the place and keep it instead of selling. And yeah, I met someone."

Ashley sat up and turned in her seat, her eyes slitted as she stared at him.

"What?" he asked, uncomfortable under her narrowed gaze.

"I asked if you and Cole picked up any hot chicks. You countered with *I met someone*. Big difference. What gives?"

Luke glanced up at the cloudless sky. "Been asking myself that same question since I laid eyes on Alexa."

"What makes her special?"

Luke could list a million things, but the ones that came to mind were too personal to share, even with his sister. Like Alexa's stunning vulnerability. For a doctor who held lives in her hands, she'd been manipulated her entire life and didn't know her own self-worth. He'd tried to give her that in a few short days, then invited her out here, and when she didn't jump like the other women in his life—the women who meant nothing to him and who he easily left behind—he threw those insecurities in her face and told her she needed to figure out what she wanted.

Nice of him, he thought, with no small amount of regret and an even healthier dose of self-directed disgust.

"Oooh silence," Ashley said with a grin on her previously sad face. "You're in deep, and you can't even say why. You've fallen hard!" She clapped her hands in glee, suddenly back to the sister who liked to tease him when they were kids.

He rolled his eyes. "Cool it," he muttered, embarrassed.

"Sorry." She settled back in next to him. "What's she like?"

"She's a doctor. Busy. Not sure she loves her work situation. She's loyal, saw her step up to take care of her best friend when she was attacked, then stayed overnight at the hospital to look after her. Pretty. Auburn hair—"

“Brown with reddish highlights? About my height? Does she ever wear her hair in a ponytail, and would she look uncomfortable at a big Texas barbecue?” Ashley asked, a too-big grin on her face.

Luke jerked his body around, and there she was. Dr. Alexa Collins, walking across his parents’ big Texas spread, talking to his *mother* as she led her to where Luke and Ashley sat. “I’ll be damned,” he muttered.

“Since I always know everyone at these shindigs, I figured that had to be her. What’s she doing here?” Ashley asked.

“I invited her.”

“What? You didn’t tell me she was coming!” Ash punctuated this with a shot to his shoulder.

“That’s because she said no.” Luke rose to his feet as the women approached.

“Lucas Thompson, you didn’t tell me we were having a guest!” His mother, Louise, who ruled this ranch along with her family, glared at him like he’d committed a crime.

“He didn’t know, Mrs. Thompson,” Alexa spoke softly.

“He invited you. That means you’re important to him, and that means he should have told me.”

“Ma!” Luke knew he’d better call her off before she scared Alexa away.

Alex grinned, and man, Luke had missed that smile. “It’s fine,” she assured him.

Luke shook his head. Nothing about his mother’s form of torture was fine. “Alexa, this is my sister Ashley. Ash, this is Alexa.”

His sister jumped up and hugged Alexa. “He was just telling me all about you!”

Luke rolled his eyes. “God save me from the two of you,” he muttered. “Ash, take Mom away, would you? Go eat.

Drink. Something.” He met and held Alexa’s gaze. “We need to talk.”

“We’re going,” Ashley said, understanding in her tone despite her earlier teasing. “Come on, Ma. You can talk to Luke’s girl later.”

“Ash!” Luke’s voice vibrated with annoyance, but to his surprise, Alexa’s eyes were lit with amusement as she obviously held back her laughter.

“At least someone finds them amusing,” he muttered to his mother’s and sister’s retreating backs.

“You have no idea how lucky you are,” she said, staring after his family with a wistful expression on her face.

Luke didn’t know what she was doing here, but he had to assume it boded well for him that she’d come. He hooked his arm in hers and led her away from the yard and around the side of the house.

His mother had insisted she needed a place of her own, and his father had put up a gazebo in the most private corner of the yard, right off the side door to the house.

They settled in the swing chair. “I take it getting away wasn’t easy?” he asked.

“That would be an understatement.”

Her pretty green eyes told the painful story. He wouldn’t push her for an explanation because he was sure it would come when she was ready. “Yet you’re here.”

“Is the invitation still open?”

There it was, that vulnerability he’d been thinking about before she materialized before his eyes. In her blue jeans and white lace tank, a light denim blouse tied around her waist, she looked like she belonged here on the ranch, yet everything about her screamed hesitant and uncertain, two things he never wanted her to feel around him.

“Invitation’s always open, darlin’.”

“Well, that’s good since when I took a leave of absence from work, my boss informed me he wouldn’t be holding my position open.” Her jaw set tight at the admission.

That bastard. “Your father said that?”

“It seems he didn’t appreciate the idea of me finding my own path.”

He wasn’t sure what surprised him more, the smile she gave him or the fact that she’d listened to his advice and was taking time to figure out what she wanted, despite the consequences.

“I think that’s great,” he said, grasping her hands, thrilled down to his bones that she’d come to him. “So you’re here for a while?”

She shrugged. “I’m here. How long? I thought we’d figure that out together. See if we still like each other and all.”



GOD, SHE SOUNDED like an unsure idiot, Alexa thought.

It was a wonder she’d survived the plane ride, not knowing what awaited her here. She’d gotten Luke’s address from Cole Sanders, who swore his friend would be happy to see her and encouraged her to surprise him with the visit. Since she wasn’t in any hurry to have Luke turn her down if he’d changed his mind, she’d agreed and hopped on a plane.

“See if we still like each other?” Luke chuckled. “I don’t know about you, but what I feel is a lot more than like, darlin’.” Luke brushed his finger down her cheek, his golden eyes sparkling with reassurance. He dipped his head in close.

His heat reached out to her, his familiar scent settling the butterflies deep in her stomach. “I started falling hard for you the second we met. Having you come down here, unsure of your welcome but taking that chance on me? That just cemented the deal. I can’t see it going anywhere but forward from here.”

She swallowed hard, her heart pounding in her chest, everything inside her screaming this was right. “I’ve never felt anything like this before.”

“Me neither. And I sure never thought I’d want a woman with me by my side, not talking about leaving any time soon. But that’s how I feel about you. So let’s take this time to get to know each other better and help you figure out what you want to do with your career.” His eyes held hers. “And while you’re thinking about what you want, maybe you’ll reconsider where you do it. Assuming things keep on . . . keeping on.”

He grinned, and Alexa knew everything would be all right.

“Would you like that?” he asked.

“A lot,” she whispered.

“Good. Did I say I’m glad you’re here?” Before she could answer, he said, “I’m glad you’re here. Good play, darlin’.”

She grinned. Not a good play, she thought. A perfect one.

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The **Billionaire Bad Boys**, starting with GOING DOWN EASY.

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GOING DOWN EASY EXCERPT

EVEN WITH THE anxiety over her first day of work at her new job looming, Lexie Parker still took the time to count out the brightly colored pills and filled the plastic holder, labeled by

individual days and divided by a.m. and p.m. doses. She separated each medication and double-checked the dose on the list provided to her by her sister's doctor. In a separate pill holder, she included a daily dose of antianxiety medication, also doctor-prescribed and approved.

She clicked each holder shut tight, then left the plastic containers next to the cookie jar in the kitchen for her sister, along with ten dollars for coffee and breakfast downstairs at the market on the corner. Any extra change would probably be hoarded for shopping, but she'd accepted that particular vice. As long as she could keep Kendall on her meds, Lexie could breathe more easily. Her sister might not appreciate the effort, but Lexie knew, if not for her, the psych ward was waiting. Again.

Her sister's dog, Waffles, a small terrier mix she'd adopted during one of her manic phases, jumped up and down, begging for a treat.

"No. You just had breakfast, you piggy," Lexie said, bending to pat the tan fluffy dog on the head. "You're on a diet." Her sister tended to overfeed him, when she remembered to feed him at all.

Lexie ticked off her list of morning chores, satisfied she'd remembered everything before sparing a glance at the second bedroom in her apartment—paid for with her father's money. His way of showing gratitude for her sacrifice. She'd lost her last job because she'd been too busy looking after Kendall during her last depressive episode. The one that had landed her in Shady Oaks.

Lexie hated accepting her parents' money, but she'd been unemployed and out of options, and they'd leased this apartment for them a few months ago. After her sister's doctor had agreed to release her following a two-week stay in the psych ward, as long as she lived with someone who could keep an eye on her. Though her parents had a huge home on Long Island, Lexie had taken the burden off of them and agreed to the new living arrangement.

After all, Kendall was her twin. And her father had his hands full with her mother, who suffered from severe depression. Yes, her family had fantastic genes. Lexie always feared she was one bad mood away from falling prey to the same demons that consumed her mother and sister.

Lexie rushed into her room to get ready for her first day at her new job. The position wasn't glamorous. She'd been hired on as a personal assistant to a software mogul whose company her father was investing in. Her employment was a favor, since she didn't have a glowing letter of recommendation from her last job.

Her dreams of working in a PR agency in Manhattan had disappeared when she transferred to a local college not long after her sister had returned home following her first breakdown. Lexie had taken classes and finished her degree but wasn't able to build a career that lasted. Life was always busy, and her twin's periods of stability weren't long enough.

Despite her busy morning routine, Lexie couldn't afford to be late. She'd read the online write-ups on Kaden Barnes, software billionaire whose company was giving Snapchat a run for the money. Kaden was the financial guru behind the business, and if his partners were to be believed, he couldn't keep a personal assistant because he was too difficult to work for.

She wasn't worried ... much. The one thing Lexie was good at was keeping other people organized and ignoring frustrating personalities. She was sure she could deal with the stuffy billionaire with a stick up his ass.

She dressed in her best skirt and blouse, chose a pair of heels she could walk in without too much pain, picked up her purse, and started for the door.

"Lexie!" Kendall called, yanking her door open and rushing into the room. "I had the best idea for a job. What if I board dogs?" she asked, scooping Waffles into her arms. "You want playmates, don't you?" she asked, nuzzling the pup's fur.

Drawing a deep breath, Lexie turned. “We aren’t allowed more than one pet in this building, so I’m afraid you’ll have to keep thinking. I have to get to work, so we’ll talk later. Your meds are on the counter and so is money for lunch.”

“God dammit, you’re not my mother. I’m twenty-eight years old! I don’t need a babysitter,” she exploded. She bent and placed the dog on the floor, then glared at Lexie.

No, the meds hadn’t calibrated correctly yet, she thought, trying her best to maintain her composure. When Kendall was level-headed, she appreciated Lexie’s efforts at helping.

Ignoring her outburst, otherwise she’d end up engaged in a full-on war of words, which was what her sister wanted, she waved good-bye. “See you later!” she said and rushed out the door.

Unfortunately, when she reached the ground level and exit and opened the door to the street, rain sprinkled down just as the bus she planned on taking pulled up to the corner.

There was no time to run back upstairs for an umbrella, so she braved the rain and hoped she didn’t look like a drowned rat by the time she arrived at her new job.



KADEN BARNES WALKED out of yet another unproductive settlement meeting, his business partners, Derek West and Lucas Monroe, by his side. He exited into an early-morning drizzle. From the wet look of the ground, the skies had opened up while they were indoors, and his foot hit a puddle before he climbed into the waiting Town Car.

Fucking swell. This day was just fantastic already, and it was barely nine a.m. Julian Dane, their former friend, was suing them for a piece of their company and a huge chunk of money. Today’s plan had been to set the meeting early, intending to catch him at a weak moment, when he wouldn’t be as focused and ready to talk terms. The bastard trying to steal a piece of their empire had a problem with partying and a

bigger issue with drugs. As they all knew from experience, mornings were rough on him.

Unfortunately, all the power plays in the world didn't matter. According to their attorney, because Julian had been there during the initial design phase, they'd have to come up with some kind of settlement if they wanted this mess to go away. In Kade's book, any acknowledgment of Julian's supposed hand in the creation of the Blink app was a loss. And Kade didn't like to lose.

He remained silent on the ride downtown to their Soho offices while Derek and Lucas talked about potential offers Julian might accept. Kade was still brewing on that. The man had a cocaine problem. Money would probably be the most welcome solution. Lord knew he hadn't been interested in rehab when offered, and no way in hell would they give him a stake in the company.

"You could have shaved for this meeting," Derek said as they exited the car a little while later.

Lucas slammed the door behind them and laughed. The asshole.

Kade shrugged. "I wore a suit. You can't have everything."

They'd agreed to dress like the adults they were, not the tee-shirt-wearing juveniles they preferred to be, in order to let Julian know he wouldn't be walking all over them. They were taking his lawsuit seriously—because if it dragged out and ended up in court, their company valuation would be impacted. They couldn't afford to let that happen, and Julian knew it. Which meant he had the upper hand.

Still stewing over that fact, Kade followed the others into the elevator. He hit the button for the top floor, heading up to the area above the workspace they shared with employees. The offices were housed in a newly renovated garage.

He strode past the abstract paintings surrounded by steel beams toward his private office and stepped inside. The wall-to-wall windows provided him with a full view of the gloomy

rain that matched his mood. All he wanted was to hole up at his desk and work on the funding. No distractions, no bothersome annoyances, no—

“Good morning, Mr. Barnes,” a chipper voice said, popping up from beneath his desk.

He blinked in surprise, then narrowed his gaze at the strange woman he’d never seen before. “Who the hell are you, and what are you doing under there?”

“I moved your computer and was plugging it back in,” she said, pointing to the far corner of his desk. “You can pull it forward when you need to work. I set the keyboard at a better ergonomic location so it’s safer for your back. Not to mention, you’ll have easier access to your files when you’re sitting at your desk,” she explained, clasping her hands in front of her.

His lips firmed, and he was about to rip into her when he realized she looked as if she’d been caught in the morning’s downpour. Her brown hair was damp, curling at the ends, and her white shirt had water stains on the front, calling attention to a lace bra and her full breasts. None of which detracted from the beauty beneath the smudged makeup. With big blue eyes and porcelain skin, she was exactly Kade’s type.

Not skinny and more than a handful, he thought, his mouth watering at the thought. “And my other question? Who are you?” he asked, his voice harsh in order to cover the sudden rush of desire he didn’t need riding him here and now.

“Lexie Parker, your new personal assistant,” she said, her voice soft and pleasing, at distinct odds with her bossy personality, if her nerve in rearranging his desk before meeting him was anything to go by. His anxiety and ADHD were off the charts with a mere glance at the new setup, not that he’d admit to such a thing.

When he remained silent, she placed her hand on the stapler—on his now neat desk. Folders sat in precise stacks; his favorite pen was nowhere to be found, probably mixed in with the writing utensils in the holder he never used. His

organized disorganization was gone. Not even his meds took the edge off her changes.

“I didn’t hire you,” he said through gritted teeth.

“I see you two have met,” Derek said, joining them in his office and slapping Kade on the back as he drew up beside him. “Think you can hold on to this one?”

Kade unclenched his jaw. “Did I miss the interview?” he asked.

“Lexie is Wade Parker’s daughter,” Derek said, naming their biggest backer and investor. “She needed a job, and you, my friend, need a personal assistant you can’t run off with your not-so-charming personality and demands.”

His eyes shot daggers at his partner, who knew full well he liked to choose his own PA, before glancing back at Lexie. She smiled and treated him to a small wave. His dick responded to her smile. The wave irritated the shit out of him.

He turned to face her. “Guess we’re stuck with each other.”

She smiled, and it brightened her entire face, lighting up incredibly blue eyes. Sky blue, his favorite color. “So what next?” she asked.

“Don’t touch my stuff without permission.”

She frowned, her eyes narrowing, drawing attention to her dark lashes. “How about you try my changes. If you don’t like them, I’ll put things back the way I found them.” She patted his chair, indicating he should sit.

Well, what do you know? She wasn’t intimidated by him.

He met her gaze and grinned, extending his hand. “Just ask before you touch my things next time.”

“Yes ... sir.” They shook hands, and the feel of her soft flesh sent waves of desire rippling along his skin. He jerked his hand back quickly.

Derek chuckled. “I think you two will get along just fine.” He leaned in close and whispered in Kade’s ear. “And since

she's Wade's daughter, you can trust her with your keys. You won't have to pick up your own dry cleaning." Another slap on the back, and he walked out the door.

"Would you like to make a list of what's expected of me?" Lexie asked eagerly.

He groaned. A peppy, sexy personal assistant wasn't what he'd had in mind. Of course, he'd run off the older woman before Lexie (too many personal errands for her taste), the young woman right out of college (she'd come on to him and looked like jailbait, and when he'd not-so-politely turned her down, she'd walked out on the spot), and another PA who hadn't appreciated his request for coffee every morning. She'd said it went against her feminist sensibilities. He'd told her he didn't give a shit and she'd quit.

Lucas claimed Kade had control and trust issues with women and drove them off on purpose. He was right about one thing. Kade didn't trust most females. The first one in his life had abandoned him by choice, and the ones who'd come after had betrayed him. That didn't just jade a man. It embedded an ugly truth deep in his psyche. Women either wanted something or would stab him in the back, one way or another.

His personal assistant, as much as he needed one, had the potential to get too close and intimately involved, at least in his private life. Add in the fact that the woman waiting for his instructions was beautiful, and things were destined to get complicated. But he needed the help, something Derek obviously knew. So Lexie Parker was his, at least for now.

"Let's start with you giving my desk back."

He cocked an eyebrow and waited for her to walk around the piece of furniture, providing a view of nice legs beneath her pencil skirt that ended just above the knee and an ass she knew how to sway as she walked. With the way his body tightened, her damned hem might as well hit mid-thigh.

Pissed at himself, he strode around her, catching a whiff of a warm, feminine scent he couldn't name but would never forget.

"I'll just go get a pen and paper," she said.

"Here." He handed her a yellow lined notepad and a pen, pulled from the holder she'd moved to the right side of his desk.

He gestured for her to sit before easing himself into his luxurious leather chair and tipping back, getting as comfortable as he could within the confines of his suit. He much preferred his well-worn jeans. He loosened his tie and undid the top button of his dress shirt, his gaze locking with hers. She'd been staring, watching his every move.

Caught, her cheeks flushed a pretty pink, and she ducked her head, busied herself, making a show of clicking the pen open and getting ready to take notes.

He steeped his fingers and began to rattle off his list of daily needs. "First things first. Coffee waiting for me at nine. I like it fresh, hot, black with three sugars. You'll keep my schedule of meetings. I tend to forget without a reminder. You'll accompany me to meetings, get a feel for this business and anything I'm currently working on. I need you fluent in tech." He glanced over his fingers to find her writing quickly.

Finishing up, she met his gaze. "Ready."

Here's where the issues and deal breakers usually came in. "I'll expect you to pick up my dry cleaning from my house on Tuesdays and Saturdays and drop it off at my apartment." He handed her a card from his top desk drawer. "My preferred dry cleaner's address."

He spared her another look as she merely accepted the card. She didn't balk at doing his personal chores. Surprising respect rose before he smothered it.

"Got it. What else?" she asked.

Undeterred, he continued. “I work from home often. On those days I’ll ask you to bring me lunch or work from there as well.”

She nodded once again.

“No complaints so far?”

An amused smile lifted the corners of her mouth. “Nope. You haven’t run me off yet. So what do you like to eat for lunch?”

“Grilled chicken on whole wheat bread, mayonnaise, and two slices of avocado. There’s a place downstairs that delivers.” He slid another business card across the desk.

She picked it up, drawing his attention to her pink fingernails. Delicate, long fingers, made for curling around his —

“Keys. I’ll need a key to your house,” she said, interrupting his inappropriate train of thought.

“Apartment,” he muttered, annoyed she was a step ahead of him. And also irked by the fact that he couldn’t stop thinking about her in a sexual way. It was going to make working with her damned distracting. “I’ll get you a key soon.” He always had his locks changed after a PA didn’t work out.

“Is there anything else?” she asked, sliding the pen along her lip in a gesture surely not meant to be erotic, but his body registered it that way nevertheless.

“No. You can go home,” he snapped.

“Excuse me?” she asked, eyes wide. “You can’t just fire me for no good cause.”

“I didn’t. I’m giving you a break. You can’t be comfortable in that damp shirt,” he said, deliberately letting his gaze trail over the water stains on her chest.

Those luscious lips opened, then closed again in horrified shock.

Go ahead, sweetheart. Call me on sexual harassment, he thought. At least that would end his pain. He couldn't spend another minute wondering what color her nipples were beneath that lacy bra, and his jaw hurt from clenching his teeth so hard.

When she remained silent, he knew she was stronger than he'd given her credit for. "I'm going to work from home this afternoon," he told her, making the spur-of-the-moment decision. "Leave me your email and cell number, and I'll send you a grocery list. You can fill it and bring it by later today. My fridge is empty."

Realizing he'd have to have a company credit card put in her name if she worked out, he rose and reached into his pocket for cash, handing her money to pay.

"I need your address," she reminded him.

He picked up yet another business card, *his*, and handed it to her. "I'm uptown. Keep track of mileage, bus or subway fares, and you can submit expense reports."

"Yes ... Boss." She rose and hugged the clipboard to her chest. "You'll be happy with me," she promised him. "You'll see."

Oh, he was plenty happy with her. He was more curious how long she'd be happy with *him* and his endless demands.

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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.