



Baby One
More Time

Tamrin Banks

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90'S DUDE

TAMRIN BANKS



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For all of us who love a good romance, no matter the time or place! And for my hubby, Scott. Love you and thank you for keeping me on track when I veer off.

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CHAPTER 1

Lucian

The bus pulls up and it's so damn loud that my head hurts immediately. The brakes squeak and grind and I have to wonder how the hell they picked this bus to take on the field trip today. It sounds like it's on its last legs.

I turn to look at the teacher. "Mrs. Framer? Are you sure about this?"

She grins. "I know it sounds bad but it's actually a pretty good bus. Runs every day with no problems." She turns back to the kids, her short, iron-gray hair curling wildly in the heat. School is barely getting going this week but this field trip takes the kids to the fair that runs on the outskirts of Pine Grove every year at this time. It's a tradition that I took part in when I was younger. I like knowing that my daughter is following in my footsteps to participate in the same things I did. Makes me feel settled and I hope it does the same thing for her.

I know she's been upset for a long time. Her mother left us when she was only six and it's been just us since then. I'd like to say it was a huge fight or something dramatic that sent her running instead of she just got tired of being married. Just got sick of being a mom and did a runner.

Two months later, when I'd almost given up hope of hearing from her, she popped up again but not in the way I'd maybe hoped. She had me served with divorce papers.

I don't know that I was ever in love with Melissa but I cared about her. I wanted to make our relationship work after she got pregnant. But it just wasn't working. All we did was

fight and I suppose I should thank her for having the strength to leave and hold firm to the end of what we had.

I reach down and drag my daughter up against me for a quick hug. “Hey, kiddo! How are you doing?”

She flushes and pushes me away from her. “Stop, Dad,” she hisses. “You’re embarrassing me!”

She wriggles out of my arms and stomps away from me. “Hey!” I holler quietly, my heart knocking against my ribs as my lovely, grumpy, nine-year old daughter leaves me in the dust.

A soft chuckle wisps out of the woman standing next to me. “Don’t you just love the kids at this age?”

For some reason the voice sounds familiar and my heart bangs against my ribs as I turn to face the woman to my side. Her wild blond hair corkscrews out of a simple ponytail and her pale blue eyes stare up at me, narrowing like she sees a familiarity too.

My eyes widen as it hits me. “Serena Shire?”

She flinches and my eyes wander down her softly-curved body which is even sexier than it was when we were dating in high school.

Her blue eyes narrow. “Serena Talon.” And I see the exact moment that she realizes who the hell I am. Hurt radiates from her soft eyes before she covers it up by staring down at the concrete of the sidewalk like it’s the most amazing thing in the world.

“Lucian Marino. How...interesting to see you.”

I tug at my neon tank top and groan silently. This is awful! But she looks so beautiful. *Even more so than when I first saw her in high school as a very nervous freshman. We were both scared freshman and I knew as soon as I saw her that she was special. Her hair was up in a scrunchie and just a mass of corkscrew golden curls. She was wearing a pair of overalls and a soft green t-shirt that made her look gorgeous. Her big blue eyes stared around and her pink lips were smashed into a tight line nervously.*

She was gorgeous and sweet. I stopped in front of her and smiled. "Are you new here?"

She looked up and up. Then dropped her gaze. She was so damn tiny. "Yeah." She stared at her sneaker-clad feet and shuffled a bit.

"Do you have your schedule yet?"

"Yeah?"

"Can I see it?"

She holds out the piece of paper in a shaky hand tipped with neon pink nails.

I take it and smile at her. "Well, you're in my English class first so I can walk with you?"

Her head comes up and for the first time I see her smile. My heart stutters to a halt. Lord, she's pretty. "Thank you!"

"What's your name?" I handed her back her paper already and I could kick myself for not looking.

"Serena Shire."

"I'm Lucian Marino." The bell rings and the crowd starts moving, carrying us along. I block somebody who shuffles along and gets knocked over into her.

She smiles at me again, her blue eyes dancing. "Thank you." I can't catch my breath. Everything about her makes me want to hand her my heart on a silver platter for all time.

She shoots me a funny look and I lead her to our room, my hand finding hers to help her along and every cell in my body settling when I feel her skin next to mine.

It was at that moment that I knew that I found the one. The girl I was meant to be with for the rest of my life.

She was my penguin.

I shake myself out of my reverie as she scowls at me, grunting when a boy the same age as my daughter lunges at her, wrapping his arms around her middle. My own eyes widen when she smiles down at him and ruffles his hair. He

turns to grin at me, missing one of his front teeth and his blue eyes glowing just like hers.

“Hey, mom! I can’t wait to meet everyone! I can’t believe you grew up here. Everyone seems so nice. Why did you leave?”

He chatters away and I hear it as background noise as my heart drops to the ground.

The woman I forced to leave me is married and has at least one child. I should have expected that since I moved on too and found a life of my own. But somehow, like an asshole, I always expected to hear that she never even dated after me.

What an ego I have! She’s a beautiful, special woman. There’s no way that some man didn’t see that and take her for his own.

And it’s my own fault since I told her to leave. Why wouldn’t she find a man who appreciated her?

CHAPTER 2

Serena

I listen to my son's chatter and ignore the uncomfortable bus seats and the jouncing every time we hit a bump. He keeps talking but only half my mind is focused on him. The rest is focused on the one boy that I ever really loved.

Lucian Marino. Tall, dark, sexy and smoking hot. But I guess you can't really call him a boy anymore.

There's a girl sitting with him and she's got his whiskey-brown eyes and dark hair. She's flopped back in the seat while he talks to her softly. Her arms are crossed over her skinny chest and she's glaring off into space.

I grin to myself.

I remember those days with my own parents. They hated how I acted when I was little like that. I was a brat, there's no doubt. The only time I was ever happy was when I was dancing. Those lessons were the only times I really felt like I belonged. Like the world made sense.

After my parents divorced, Mom and I moved here to Pine Grove. Dad stayed in Seattle and every summer I went to spend a month with him. That and every other Christmas break was all the time he could spare for me. Even that went away when he married the woman who he was seeing when he was married to my mother. She didn't like me and of course I didn't like her. She broke my parents up.

Or that's what I believed at the time. My parents were never really what you'd call happy. They probably should have divorced a long time before that but instead he waited

until he found a woman he was willing to cheat with. Not exactly father of the year material there.

But when I moved here I met Lucian Marino and everything changed. My mom was working as a secretary for the school district in one of the grade schools and she was happier than I'd ever seen her.

And I had Lucian. My best friend. The boy who showed me the way to my class my first day of school, holding my hand while I breathlessly followed him, my heart twitching to life in my chest.

We were best friends until senior year and then...we were something more. We fell in love and I gave myself completely to the boy who was everything to me. He was my first in so many ways.

Six months later we graduated and he told me that he needed some space to figure out what he wanted to do with his life. He told me to take the scholarship to the dance school that wanted me and keep in touch.

Keep in touch!

I can't even believe he said that to me today. What the hell? We were everything to each other and then he told me to leave and keep in touch?!

So I did the only thing I could and I left, dragging my broken heart with me.

That was the last time I spoke to him. I took a bus out of town and I swear I saw him standing, leaning against a tree, his broad shoulders drooping.

I stood up trying to see him but he was out of sight in seconds and I still don't know if it was him. Tears streamed down my face for miles after that. Until I fell asleep, exhausted. Until I reached New York and buried myself in all the work it took to be a successful dancer.

Years of studying and I went on tour with the ballet company. I made prima ballerina after two years with the company.

And then I met Giorgio. My husband and the man I currently hate more than even my father or Lucian.

Gorgeous Giorgio, the gorgeous dancer with the smoldering sapphire eyes and dark hair that fell into his eyes like a little boy. I thought I loved him but after a year when I got pregnant and couldn't dance anymore it was like I didn't exist anymore for him. I went from his Corazon to some forgotten woman at home eating dinner by herself and checking the time until she finally puts the dinner in the fridge and goes to bed on her own.

We stuck it out until Seth was eight and then I came home early from an appointment and found Giorgio's car in the driveway and a strange woman from the company in my bed.

He didn't even try and deny it. That was the end of our marriage and I kicked myself every damn day for not realizing that he was just like my father.

He married her the day our divorce was finalized and didn't even care about seeing his son.

Selfish prick!

But thank heaven I'm well out of that mess and he had to pay up because he cheated. I could have been proud and not taken any money from him but too damn bad. He owed me something for all those years alone. For all the years he was probably dragging girls home to my bed, our bed.

"Hey Mom! Look at that!" My boy excitedly points out the window and I smile as the fairgrounds come into view.

"Yep! Look at that!"

The buses stop and we pour out into the steamy-hot parking lot. The kids automatically line up in uneven lines and the teachers count off names and then smile, turning them loose.

I hold Seth's hand and can't help but grin at the huge smile on his face. "Look at that, Mom! They have cows here!"

"They sure do! And pigs and all kinds of animals. Just don't touch anything. They are animals and they don't know

who you are.”

He nods excitedly and I let go of his hand slowly. He’s ten and I can’t hold onto him forever, no matter how much I want to.

My chest goes heavy and my throat tightens when he races away excitedly.

Almost immediately he finds the girl who was sitting with Lucian and his jaw drops. She glares at him and I see her saying something to him that I have to figure is not going to be super-nice. But he just throws back his blond head and laughs at her. Then he reaches out and takes her hand and she stares at him.

And I see that same scene playing out in my head. Only it’s Lucian and me. I close my eyes and swallow roughly, the pain still raw and ragged. After all these years I still can’t forget him.

“Can I talk to you, Serena?”

I open my eyes and he’s standing in front of me, his big hands shoved into his jeans pockets. His warm brown eyes are soft and nervous, matching my own feelings. Scary and intense. It’s like we’re still back where we were so long ago.

But we’re not and we never will be. There’s been too much time and pain between us.

But I stand tall and nod at him. His chin dips towards a bench over to the side and I follow him, willing myself to keep control of all those strange feelings and just listen to him and leave.

That’s all that I can give him. I don’t have anything left for more.

CHAPTER 3

Lucian

I sit on the bench and she sits next to me, her blue eyes wary and shuttered.

I sigh, knowing I deserve that.

“I’m sorry, Serena. I thought I was doing the right thing when I told you to leave. And it must have been good because you found a man who loves you. Who wouldn’t?”

Her head cocks, her blond curls slipping down her shoulder. “What do you mean?”

I nod at the boy and the wedding band she’s wearing. “You’re married and happy. I can tell.”

She throws her head back and laughs. “Wow! When was the last time you had your eyes checked?”

I rear back as she laughs, her head thrown back. She finally stops laughing and nods at her hand. “I just got divorced. And my ex just married the girl he cheated on me with.”

I wince. That sounds too familiar. Just like her father.

“I’m so sorry, Rena. You didn’t deserve that.”

She snorts. “Nobody deserves that.”

I huff. “Yeah. But with how your dad...”. I stop talking when she stiffens. “Ummm. Anyway, I’m sorry that happened to you. That really stinks.”

Another snort. “Yeah. Stinks.”

I don't know what to say to her right now. I know that I'm weirdly relieved that the bastard left her. I'm not happy that she's hurt but I am happy that the bastard is out of the picture.

“What about your son?”

She turns her head and smiles and it's so heartbreakingly familiar that my breath catches in my throat. *Fuck, have I missed that smile!*

“When did you get back here?”

She turns to me and her lush pink mouth tightens. “Why are you here with me, Lucian? You made your feelings plain when you told me that you needed space and told me to leave to go to school.”

I grasp her fingers, studying them like they're the most interesting things I've ever seen. Long, slender and tipped with clipped nails no longer painted.

“I didn't want to do that, Rena. I wanted you to go to school and dance like you wanted to. It's the only thing that made you happy. It's what you lived for.”

Her blue eyes lift and there's something dark and jagged hiding behind those eyes. Something wild and scary. I gasp.

“I lived for a lot more than just dancing, Lucian. I loved you and you told me to leave.”

She yanks her hands out of mine and stands, her curves almost shaking with anger. “I will never trust you again.”

I watch her walk away and I slump into the seat. I knew as soon as I saw her I was still in love with her.

But I've been alone for awhile. She just lost the man she thought she loved.

I refuse to believe that she loved him like she loved me. I can still see it hiding in her eyes behind a boatload of hurt that the world has given her. That I gave her.

It might have been for the best reason. But it was still brutal and wrong and I shouldn't have done it because I fucking hurt her so bad that she still remembers the pain today.

That hurts me worse than if she had smacked me into next week. It fucking guts me.

There should have been a better way to make sure that she got to live her dreams like I wanted her to. Some way that didn't hurt either one of us and that gave her my support for the rest of our lives. We both deserved that and we never got it.

Because I panicked when I heard her talking to her friends about what we were going to do after graduation and she wasn't going to school. She just wanted to be with me. I still remember the way my heart hammered in my throat and an icy chill skittered across my neck and up into my head, making me feel light-headed, guilty and sad all at the same time.

It's a mess and I'm not sure what to do about it. But we've been given a second chance. I've been given a second chance at something I never thought I'd get a chance to fix.

A chance at the one and only woman I ever really felt like I couldn't live without.

“Why are you looking at my mom like that?” I turn and face the young boy I saw earlier and eye him closely. He's the spitting image of Serena. Short blond curls and big, open blue eyes so guileless that it's like they can look through you. Find all your secrets and expose them to the world. When I stare at him he gives me a little grin that's just like his mother's.

The strangest feeling of seeing my future hits me again. A knowing that this boy was meant to be mine. My family. As surely as if he had been mine at birth.

I grin at him, liking the mischievous glint in his blue eyes. It reminds me so much of that girl I met in high school. The one that took the world by the tail and lived like she danced, wholeheartedly.

“I used to know your mom,” I say, holding out my hand like he was a grown-up. “My name is Lucian Marino. What's yours?”

“Seth. Seth Talon.”

I shake his hand firmly, not treating him like anything but a man. “It’s nice to meet you, Seth.”

He shakes my hand solemnly, his blue eyes still sparkling. “It’s nice to meet you too.”

I glance around. “I saw you talking to my daughter earlier. Have you seen her lately? The dark-haired girl with brown eyes.”

“Ah! Yeah. She wouldn’t give me her name but I saw her go to the barn with all the horses with another group of people.”

“Oh. Good, I guess.”

He glances around and then waves at someone and takes off, looking back at me as he runs. “See ya later, Mr. Marino. I’ve got to go!”

I smile and wave. “Have fun!”

I glance around and see if I can see who he’s looking at but all I see is groups of kids squealing and milling around. Nobody sticks out.

I head for the barn where he said that I might find Connie. But when I search the aisle and all the kids I don’t see her anywhere.

Where the hell is my little girl?

CHAPTER 4

Carrie

My heart beats crazy-fast when Seth jumps around the corner and scares the heck out of me.

“Dang it, Seth! Don’t scare me like that!”

He grins. “You’re too easy.”

I huff and smack his shoulder. Then I glance behind him. “Did anybody see you?”

He shakes his head and his hair whips into his eyes like a dog. “Nope!” He pops the p and smirks. “I think your dad was trying to follow me but I was too fast for him!”

I throw my head back and laugh. “Yeah. Dad doesn’t really run anymore. He’s too slow. He just walks on a treadmill at the gym and then he lifts weights.” I frown.

“Are you sure this is a good idea? I mean, I know my Dad talked about your Mom and I saw them in their yearbooks. I looked it up because my Mom was always yelling about how he couldn’t love her like he loved Serena. She was always really mad about it but I don’t think it was Dad’s fault. She didn’t seem like she was ever happy around him.”

Seth shoots me a grimace. “I think it will be good. But why do you talk like that?”

I lift a brow at him. “What do you mean?”

“You sound too grown-up. Aren’t you the same age as me?”

I smirk. “I’m advanced for my age. I read an unabridged dictionary for fun. It was a good summer.”

Seth's mouth drops open and I love the fact that I shocked him. That's what I like doing more than anything. I want to shock the whole dang world.

But especially my Dad. He needs this. He needs someone. He's been alone too long.

Seth said that his Mom has been really sad and that's why she came home.

So if we can make them both happy with a little bit of fun at the same time, it seems perfect!

I lean my head into his and say, "Okay. Here's what we're gonna do...."

Game on, parentals.

CHAPTER 5

Lucian

The next day I'm on my way into work at the gym and I'm running behind because Connie is being a huge pain in the ass this morning. Usually she stays with the babysitter but today there was some kind of emergency and Mrs. Renault called to say that she couldn't do it this morning.

So I'm dragging a sulky, glaring daughter who hasn't said a word to me all morning and she's giving me grief like you wouldn't believe.

"Connie! Come on! I've got to go! That new class is starting today and I need to check and make sure the room is ready." I turn away, muttering, "I don't know why we have to do dance classes anyway. What's wrong with what we already have?"

Nobody answers me back and I sigh and check my watch yet again. "*Connie!*"

"Jeez, Dad! I'm right here. What are you shouting for?" I glance down and see her standing next to me, her mouth twisted in a grimace.

"Oh. Okay. Let's go!" I hustle her out the door and check my watch yet again. I'm gonna be late and I'm only gonna have about five minutes to check on that room.

She digs her heels in and walks so slow that my hands are shaking while I fight the urge to pick her up and toss her in the car like a sack of potatoes.

She finally gets to the car in the driveway and I open the door, waiting impatiently as she steps inside so slowly that my

teeth grind again.

I don't want to say something I regret so I just ignore it and then stomp around the car. I haven't gotten a cell phone yet but I'm seriously considering it. All my clients have trouble getting ahold of me and it would probably be a godsend for that.

I work part-time at the gym and then do my real job, advertising, on the side. I need a reliable way to keep track of everyone.

We pull up to The Sweat Shop and I bounce out, once again fighting the urge to grind my teeth into dust when Connie fiddles around with her seatbelt and takes all day to get out.

“Connie! Let's go!”

She glares at me but finally puts one foot in front of the other and manages to get to the doors. I open them and blow out a breath of relief when I stop at the desk and see Jean. “Hey! Can you keep an eye on Connie for a little bit? Maybe have her help you stock? I've got some things to take care of and I also have a training session.”

She grins at Connie and I sigh when Connie glares back at her. “Sure, Mr. Marino. We've got a whole new box of t-shirts and tank tops to get out and priced.”

Connie rolls her eyes again but I see her smirk just a little bit and count it as a win.

I stride off and to the empty classroom on the second floor. It's unlocked and I'm not surprised to hear music coming from inside. I peek inside and my heart skips a beat when I see a flying figure darting to and fro and then leaping into the air in a gravity-defying jump that has me gasping for breath. I must make a sound because she turns towards me and comes to a stop.

“What are you doing here?” She grabs a towel and switches off the music, tapping her slipper-clad toes as she glares at me.

“I'm sorry. I was looking for the dance teacher.”

“That’s me. But it’s just a beginner’s stretch class with some ballet included. Not really a dance class.”

I nod my head but can’t resist stepping inside even though her soft pink lips tighten. Her glorious blond hair is scraped back into a bun with wisps of hair dancing around her red face.

“What do you need, Lucian?” Her back is stiff as she turns away from me and the low back on her leotard makes my dick hard as a rock. Which is a problem considering I’m wearing the regulation shorts that we usually wear to the gym and they leave little to the imagination. My tank top fits tight to my chest and I see Serena glance over and then look away quickly. I see her chest rise and fall rapidly.

A smile curls my lips when I realize that she likes what she sees. I can’t resist lifting my arm up and pushing my hand through my hair, knowing that my bicep curls up and she can see it.

She darts away and to the front of the class. I grunt and step closer to her. She moves away again until we’ve traversed half the damn room and she’s up against the mirror with nowhere else to go. Her head lifts and she glares at me in the mirror.

“Don’t you have something to do, Lucian?”

“Why don’t you call me Luke? You used to.”

She snorts. “I used to do a lot of things that I don’t do anymore.”

My lips lift, my heart quickly following suit. *Damn!* She’s still a spit-fire and I’m here for it.

“I’m not going anywhere, Rena. And I know you don’t believe me yet but I think that we both still feel something.”

She shakes her head and her eyes drop to her delicate fingers, twisting the towel. “No. All I feel is annoyed, Lucian.”

My hand lifts and she flinches away from me when I touch her shoulder gently, shifting her shoulder away. I let her. I know she’s still mad at me.

I know she deserves to be. I was an idiot. But I was a kid and it was the best I could think of at the time.

Now I'm a man. A man that knows he made a mistake and is willing to do whatever it takes to make it up to her. Anything to see if we still have the same feelings between us.

"Rena? There's still feeling bubbling up between us. I know you feel it. I think you know that I'm serious about this." I wave my hand back and forth between us. "We deserve a shot at something amazing and I know you know it's still there. I'm really sorry that I told you to go but I heard you talking and I knew you were gonna give up that scholarship. I couldn't let you do that."

She shakes her head and her little pointed chin lifts as she glares at me in the mirror. "You're wrong."

I back away. Rena's stubborn as a damn mule. All I can do is keep coming back until I hopefully prove to her that the feelings are real. They're not going away.

"I'll be around, Rena. See ya." And I reach down and drop a quick kiss onto the top of her head.

She jumps and glares at me but I see a shiver down her bare back. I'm desperate to trace the delicate trail of her spine with my tongue. To feel her under me and know that she's mine.

For good this time. I'm not letting her get away. Never again.

CHAPTER 6

Serena

The next day is the first day of school and I'm exhausted. I didn't sleep at all thanks to Lucian's glorious body. I tossed and turned, unable to get to sleep until late and then I dreamt of his solid muscles and wanting to cuddle up against them.

My clit is pulsing like a little hussy and she really wants to investigate all the other ways that Luke might have changed since we were in school.

I don't know exactly what to do about the way my body is fighting my head on this one.

Giorgio never made me feel this out of control. If I knew that Lucian worked at the gym I never would have agreed to teach the stretching/dance class.

I'm still trying to figure out what I want to do with the rest of my life. Not that I have a lot of options right now.

Except for the one that my friend, Allie came up with. She has a friend who's looking for a dance teacher for her daughter. Her new husband, Raymond has an empty building that he rents out and it's currently empty. She said that he'll gladly rent it to me if I want to start my own dance school.

But I just don't know if I have enough money to start down that road. And what if nobody comes? I can't sink all of my money into this venture and get nothing out of it. I have a son that I need to think about.

But I don't want to run into Luke all the damn time at the gym. Right now the guy's being a fucking barnacle.

My phone rings and I pick it up breathlessly. “Hello?”

“Hey, Serena? I was supposed to help shuttle kids to school but my car won’t start. One of the kids is new and she can’t miss today. She doesn’t even have her schedule.”

I bite my lip and chuckle. “Okay. Just give me the info and I’ll stop over there.”

“Great! Thank you so much!”

At least I know that’s not Luke’s daughter. She’s not new. Allie rattles off an address and then another.

“Those two were on the list of kids that I had to make arrangements for.”

“What are their names?”

Allie hollers something and comes back on the phone.

“I’m sorry, girl. I’m behind this morning and if I don’t get off of here I’m never going to make it to work.”

“Sure. I’ll talk to you later.”

And that’s the end of that! I stare at the receiver as it buzzes in my ear.

Huffing, I grab my purse and holler, “Seth! Come on! We’ve got to go! There’s a couple of extra stops we have to make.”

“Coming, Mom!”

Seth clatters down the steps and my eyes tear up. He looks so big!

“Don’t you dare cry, Mom! We’ll never get out of here!”

I nod my head and grab my camera, handing him the little board that I’ve made up for him to hold.

He sighs. “This is not good, Mom! Can’t we stop doing this?”

I shake my head. “Nope! I get my photo of the first day every year.”

He groans but holds up the board with the worst smile I've ever seen on his face. "Come on, Seth!"

He grins and I snap the picture, staring at it on the screen. "Perfect!"

"Let's go!" He grabs my arm and I drop the camera on the couch as we run past.

"Why are we in such a rush?" I holler.

"You said we have to get someone! Come on, Mom!"

Sighing, I check the address and pull out of the drive.

I already feel like this day is gonna be way too long. How am I going to deal with this for the rest of the school year?

Seth

I tap my foot on the front of the seat and fight the urge to sigh. Mom's always running late and I know we want her to be a little rushed so she doesn't look too closely at all of this but this is bad. I don't want to be late for my first day of school.

We finally come around the corner where Connie says she lives and I wince when I see that she's nowhere in sight. We need to go!

But as soon as Mom pulls into the driveway, I see her Dad walking out the door backwards and keeping an eye on a very grumpy Connie. I can't stop smiling. She's so funny!

But then he turns around and sees us in the driveway at the same time that my Mom looks up and I can see her hand drift down to move the gear shift.

I leap out of the car and smile when I hear her shout, "Dammit, Seth!"

But she puts the car in park and slams the door open. I run up and grab Connie's hand. "Come on! We're gonna be late!"

She jerks back but then sighs and runs for the car. "Fine!"

Both of us run for the car and I see my Mom standing in front of Connie's Dad. Her foot is tapping and I wince.

I glance back at Connie in the backseat. "She doesn't look happy and neither does your Dad. And do you think that they'll figure out what's wrong with the car?"

She smirks. "Watch."

CHAPTER 8

Lucian

“Hi, Rena! I didn’t expect to see you so soon!”

Serena jerks to a stop in front of me, a pair of baggy-waisted pants and a slim t-shirt on her soft curves making my breath hitch wildly. The burgundy top makes her pale cheeks blush with color.

Or is that me?

“What the hell is going on, Luke?”

“My car wouldn’t start. I called Allie because she works with me at the gym and I know she doesn’t work this morning. I’m gonna have to hurry up and try to get my car fixed. I don’t know what’s wrong with it.”

She huffs and crosses her arms over her chest. My eyes drop and I swear I feel drool on my lip.

Her very bountiful chest rises and falls quickly. I jerk my eyes away, knowing she’ll kill me if she sees where my eyes are looking.

“Sure. That’s really convenient, Lucian.”

I stand up straight and glare at her. “I told you to call me Luke. It’s ridiculous that you won’t call me that. We’ve known each other for a long time, Rena.”

“I don’t know you at all. It’s been more than ten years since I saw you.”

“So go out with me and you’ll realize that I’m basically the same guy who was in love with you all those years ago.”

“I don’t like that guy anymore,” she huffs and taps her foot. “I’ve got to go. I’ve still got another kid to pick up. Good luck with your car.”

“Can you bring Connie home this afternoon?”

She growls under her breath but then she says, “Sure. I wouldn’t want to disappoint Allie.” She turns away. But as she stomps off, I can’t help it.

“I’m not giving up, Rena.”

“Doesn’t matter. I did. Ages ago.”

She pulls out of the driveway and I see something in her eyes that gives me hope. She looks for me and although she doesn’t realize it, there’s heat there. And where there’s smoke there’s fire, right?

I call Allie from the cordless phone. “What did you do?”

She giggles. “Helped you out a little bit. Cupid is going to have to work overtime to fix this between you and Serena.”

“I’m working on it.”

She huffs. “We don’t have that kind of time. I’m still trying to convince her to use the office space that Ray has for rent. She’s being real stubborn about it but it would be fantastic if she could open her own dance studio in town. I know a ton of moms that would be bringing their daughters to her.”

“Uh-huh. And she’s being difficult. You do remember how Rena has always been, don’t you? She doesn’t just take stuff in stride. She tends to be a bit of a hard sell.”

“Yeah, I remember. I was hoping that might have changed.”

I snort. “Ummm. I don’t think so.”

“Well, I’m not giving up. That space would be perfect for her.”

“You work on that. I’m working on the other.”

“You need help, Luke. She’s still pissed and she’s also a lot more wary since Giorgio cheated on her and dropped her for a

younger dancer.”

Fury rages up inside me. “Is that what happened?”

“I shouldn’t have said anything. Forget I said that.”

“Nope. But I won’t tell her that you told me.”

“Good enough. Is she bringing Connie home?”

“Yeah. And I’m gonna have to do a lot to get my work done and get the car fixed.”

“You just need to hook the starter back up. That’s one less thing.”

“How the hell...?”

But she doesn’t answer me. Just hangs up, giggling.

I lift up the hood on the car and groan when I see what she did. Or someone did.

“This is going to be a really long day,” I sigh. But I grab my folders and head back inside to start working on some ads. There’s a new company in town and they want the full package which is gonna take some doing. But I’m also going to be very comfortable after this.

And I’ve got some ideas where to use that cash.

The phone rings right as I sit down and I growl, picking it up. “Hi! This is Missy from the dance committee. Your name was given to us by Allie and she said that you’d be happy to chaperone this Friday.”

I close my eyes and sigh, face-palming myself. “Sure. When and where. Do I need to bring anything?”

“Just you.”

“Great. Thanks. I’ll mark my calendar.”

“Terrific! Good-bye!”

She hangs up and I’m left staring at the phone. Somehow I think this has my daughter’s fingerprints on it too.

But I don’t have time to figure any of that out. There’s too much to do if I want to make sure that I have time if I ever do

actually get a date with Rena. And also, I need that money.

So I fire up my computer and start to work, my fingers flying over the keys as I build the program up and perfect what's needed for them to be happy.

By the time that Connie gets home, I've got a good start on it and I take a break to whip up spaghetti for dinner.

I'm not an exciting cook but I can make food for us. I can take care of myself and my daughter.

I just wish that Rena would let me take care of her too. Hopefully, soon.

Serena

“I don’t know how I got talked into this, Allie!” I’m pouting out my lips to slick on my favorite red lipgloss with the cherry aftertaste. My hair has been flat-ironed and slicked back in a high ponytail. My eyes are lined with black eyeliner and I’m wearing my very favorite long-sleeved dress in a classy black. It’s low cut but not really as bad as some.

It just looks that way because I’ve got enough boobs for two women at least.

I slip on my high-heeled pumps and stand. “Why exactly am I chaperoning this again? And why am I dressed like this?”

I glare down Allie but she just giggles. “You’ll see. But really you should dress like this more often. You’d have men eating out of the palm of your hand.”

“I’m not looking for something like that.”

“Like what?”

“So serious and unhappy.”

She sighs. “Love doesn’t make you unhappy, Serena. If it’s the right person.”

I huff. “Well, I don’t know how to tell the difference so I’d rather just leave it at that. I don’t need the hassle.”

“It’s not a hassle. Look at me and Ray.” Ray’s dark head pops up and he stares at Allie.

“What’s up, babe? How are you feeling?”

She rubs her tiny baby bump. “We’re doing good, Ray. Relax. Your little seed is growing quite well.”

I choke on a snort. “Wow.”

Ray grins at both of us. “Wow, indeed. I told you I’d get you knocked up, baby.”

She puffs out her lips and then plants her hands on her wide hips. “You’re not supposed to say that anymore, Ray. It’s rude.”

He shrugs but keeps an eye on her as he stands up. “I’ve got to go in to work. I guess I’ll catch you later.”

“Bye, Ray.” I groan as the two of them lock lips like they’ve been apart for six years. Then Ray waves and walks out.

“You guys are awful.”

Allie grins. “Nope. This is the life.”

It surprises me that a tiny nigggle of jealousy rolls over me. I don’t need or want a partner.

So I just need to keep reminding myself of that. No matter what Lucian does.

“Are we ready?” Allie dances over to the door and laughs. “Have fun tonight!”

“I’m gonna get you for suckering me into this.” My glare and growl don’t even phase her. She just grins and waves Seth and I out the door.

It doesn’t take me long to get to the school and when we walk in the gym, Seth immediately waves at his little friend, Connie. He’s wearing a suit and tie and Connie grins at him, high-fiving him.

I grin at Connie who’s wearing a sparkly dress with puffy sleeves and a fluttering skirt that has a tulle underskirt like a ballet tutu. She looks adorable.

“You look so cute, honey.”

“I wanted to look like a dancer.” My heart trips up and I can’t stop smiling even with the spurt of tears to my eyes.

“Well, it looks really sweet on you.”

“You look pretty damn good too, Rena!” I whirl around and it feels like the whole room comes to a standstill when I see Lucian. I don’t hear anyone else, don’t see anyone else.

He’s wearing a fitted button-down shirt in a soft green color that makes his whiskey eyes glow with a hazel light. His black dress pants are fitted to his thick thighs and his slim waist. His jaw is like granite, his full mouth working as he eyes me up and down. “Damn you look good enough to eat.”

I glare at him. The kids giggle and take off running to the corner where the usual fruit punch is being served. “You shouldn’t say that kind of stuff in front of the kids.”

“You shouldn’t look so good then.”

My whole body lights up and electricity sizzles over my nerves when he reaches out and pulls me over to him. I wish to heaven I wanted to run away from him but I don’t. We’ve been dancing around each other all week.

Hell, we’ve been dancing around our feelings all of our lives. And I don’t know if I can keep it up.

Last night I dreamt about him. My hands were running up and down all those muscles and he groaned in my ear. Shivers danced on my skin and I couldn’t stop touching him. Didn’t want to.

His big hands caressed my jaw as he pulled me in for a toe-curling kiss. I couldn’t breathe and when my hands tugged at his clothes, it was like they just fell away.

His rigid cock juttled out, his stomach muscles tight with control. I ducked my head and then dropped to my knees, my mouth closing over the velvet head of his shaft. I moaned around the taste and smell of him and he groaned and wrapped his hands around my hair, tugging it as tight as possible until he controlled every move of my head as I bobbed up and down on his thick shaft.

I can still hear his moans in my ears as my face reddens.

“I would love to know what you’re thinking, sweetheart,” he leans over and whispers in my ear.

A red tide washes all over my face and down my body. “None of your business.”

I stalk off and try to ignore his chuckle.

For the rest of the night, I can feel his eyes on me. Right up until the last slow song of the night.

Then I don't see him until I turn around and find him behind me, holding out his hand. “Dance with me, Rena.”

It's not a question and I find that I don't want to tell him no. My whole body cries out to be held in his arms again. To know what it feels like to be near him again.

I step up and he leads me to the floor, my hand in his. I shiver and his arms close around me, holding me tightly to his muscular chest. I close my eyes, the scent of him surrounding me. His hips rub against my belly and I feel the hard ridge of his erection pressed against me. My heart beats out of control and I look up at him as the song plays on. His deep brown eyes burn with a wicked, golden glint that fires up the heat scorching my lower belly.

“Rena?” he whispers my name and all of a sudden I want nothing more than to lose myself in all these old and new feelings. I open my lips and he dances us over to a dark corner where I would normally be on patrol for kids goofing around.

This time it's me as he leans down and his mouth takes mine, claims mine. His tongue pushes inside as I open my mouth, giving in to the wicked temptations that has pushed at me since the first time I saw him again.

His hands dance around until he's slipped his fingers up, pulling my dress up as well.

I huff out a moan and he growls under his breath.

“Nobody else gets to hear those sounds, Rena. You're mine. You've always been mine and you always will be. I'm not letting you get away again.”

My head is spinning and I can't think straight. He grabs my arm and drags me out of the gym and down the hall to the janitor's closet and opens the door, shoving me inside. His big

body follows me inside, taking up every last little bit of space and pushing me up against a wall along the side.

His hands, strong and tanned, come up and surround my face, holding me gently. His eyes search the dark and he groans. "So damn pretty. Like my own dirty little angel. I want to relive every damn fantasy I've had of you since you left."

I can't say I'm against that.

My mouth opens up and I want to relive my own damn fantasy. I drop to my knees and my fingers fumble in the dark with his belt and zipper until I can reach inside the soft fabric and my hand wraps around the thick, swollen length of him, exposing him to my greedy gaze.

"Damn, you're so hot when you do that," he gasps, his eyes locked on me.

I run my tongue along the length of him and groan when his taste and the scent of him, spicy and sweet bursts across my tongue. He growls under his breath and his hands tangle in my hair, holding my head steady.

"You want to lick me like a popsicle, sweetheart? I want that too. Take me, baby. Take me all the way back in that gorgeous mouth of yours. I want to feel you suck me dry, baby."

My eyes water as I suck him down as much as I can, my fingers straining to wrap around his thickness. He grunts and between my mouth and my fingers I can feel his dick grow, thickening even more.

I can feel him jerk in my mouth and that wakes him up. "Oh hell no! I've waited years for that sweet pussy of yours. The first time I come is not gonna be in your mouth."

He yanks me off and I growl, annoyed. He chuckles. "Such a fiery little thing. I swear you're sexier than you ever were! Jump!" I jump up and he grasps my thighs, holding me steady with one hand as he rips off my panties in one quick yank.

I feel the heavy heat of him pressed against me and he groans. "I can't stop this. I *need* you!"

“Fuck me, Luke!”

He growls even louder and I feel his cock line up with my slit as both of us lose the last vestiges of our control. With one quick thrust, I gasp and he’s balls-deep and both of us groan in ecstasy.

“Oh fuck, I love you, Rena! I’ve always loved you.”

“Not now, Luke! Fuck me!” He grunts and then his hands pull me up and down his shaft as I grind my hips into him.

“I’m so full. You’re so big!”

He chuckles. “You are very good for my ego, sweetheart.”

“Harder!” I yell and he pulls me around until I’m slammed into the wall and the shelves rattle as he thrusts, hard and fast.

“*Yes, yes, yes!*” I scream it to the rafters as my body flutters around the thick, hard length of him. I feel his length jerk inside me one, two, three, four times. And then he stills and his body covers me, pushing me into the wall as he empties inside me, his dick jerking a few times until his release is dripping down my legs and making a mess out of my thighs.

He rests against me and both of us drape across the wall, needing it to hold us up.

Lucian

I hold myself up and off of her and let her drop to the floor, my hands shaking as I tuck myself into my pants. Her skirt drops and she stands there a moment leaning on the wall.

I lift her chin, my fingers holding hers gently but firmly. “Tell me that you understand this, Rena. That you understand that this isn’t over. It’s never going to be over. We belong to each other. We always have and we always will.”

Her eyes search mine in the dark and she lifts up on her tiptoes to touch her lips to mine. “I understand. I love you, Luke.”

My eyes close in relief and I lean my forehead on hers. “I love you too, Rena. I never stopped. I must have done something right in this damn life to get a second chance with you and I promise you that I will never let you regret it. I will love you until I take my last breath.”

I can see the glitter of tears in her eyes and she leans her head into me, her body soft and sweet in my arms. “I will love you until we find each other in the next life. Fate is a funny thing but I think she knows we belong together.”

I hear that the music thumping has stopped and I jerk my head up. “Shit! We’ve got to get back to the dance. I think it’s over. We forgot about the kids.”

I mumble under my breath and yank at the doorknob but nothing happens. Over and over, I yank and pull but nothing happens.

Serena sags into the wall, laughing loudly. “I think that it’s not just fate that thinks we belong together. I think the kids are helping her.”

He growls. “This isn’t funny, Rena. They’re alone out there.”

“They’re in a school full of teachers. They’re fine for a few minutes. How about we enjoy these few minutes of peace and quiet before we’re busted.”

I glare at her and then I can’t help but laugh. “I can’t believe they pulled this.”

“I can. I think they’ve been pulling stuff all along. They knew we needed each other before we did.”

I stalk towards her and pin her against the wall, my hands bracketing her glorious face, glowing with happiness. That’s the look I want to see on her face for the rest of our lives.

“I knew I needed you as soon as I saw you the first time.”

She lifts a dark brow. “Are you trying to say I was the problem?”

I lean down and kiss her gently, her lips soft and supple against mine. I drink in her soft moans and lean into her, feeling electricity zap my skin everywhere her body touches mine.

“Love you, Rena.”

“Love you more, Luke.”

“Finally.” Mrs. Framer stands in the open doorway and grins with the kids lined up behind her. “I thought you two would never figure this out.”

My mouth drops open and when I look Serena is just as flummoxed. But she recovers quickly and steps out of the closet.

Like a queen she glares down at our kids and then she grins and squats down to hug them both.

“I wish I could be mad at you two but I can’t. I’m just too happy.”

I reach down and lift my daughter up in my arms and hug her tight, whispering, "I know this was you. Thank you!"

She grins at me and my heart melts.

How can I be mad at someone I love who was fighting to make me happy?

The answer is you can't. Family is sometimes a hard thing to find or even define.

But family to me is the people closest to you who want you happy at all costs. Who will even fight you to give you what they know you need.

I gather Rena and Seth into me and hug all three of them tight, my eyes itching with the tears crowding them.

My family is right here in my arms. It doesn't matter if we add to them or not. If we do, love will stretch, love will bend around all of us and cover us in all of its glory.

Rena smiles up into my eyes and I swear my heart couldn't be more full than it is right here, right now.

This is the most perfect moment of my life, here with all of the most important people I know and love.

I never thought I'd get a second chance at perfection but I swear I will not waste it.

I will embrace every second of it until my time on this earth is done.

Epilogue: Lucian

I hand over the little packet of batteries that Serena had me run after in the middle of the night. The only place open was the gas station but it luckily had batteries.

“I can’t believe you got her a Discman, Luke. You’re spoiling her!”

“She’ll love it. I’m not spoiling her any more than I spoil you!”

She grins and then shoots me an innocent look out of her blue eyes. “What did you get me?”

I hand her a box and smile. “Open it!”

She gives me a sharp look but then opens it and gasps when she pulls out a set of keys.

“What is this?”

“You know that studio that you’ve been too stubborn to look at of Ray’s?”

She nods her head and tears spurt up in her eyes as she sniffles. “Yeah?”

“I bought it. One side is an office for me with space for my advertising business since we’re gonna need all the bedrooms in this house because I intend to get you knocked up as soon as possible. The other side is a dance studio that’s fully outfitted and ready to go right after Christmas.”

“What!” Tears slip down her cheeks. “You shouldn’t have done that!”

“I should have. You’re being stubborn with Allie and Ray. So I fixed it! I will always take care of you and everything you need.”

Her smirk shoots up to me and there’s a wicked light in her eyes that I have to say I love.

“Anything?”

I lean closer and whisper against her lips, “Anything at all.”

Her lips touch mine softly and then I sink into them, grasping her bottom lip with my teeth and smiling when she moans into my mouth. “Come with me!” She jumps up and pulls me along to our master bedroom. Her hands start pulling at my clothes.

I grasp her fingers. “What are you doing?”

“Now, Luke. Fuck me now and forever! Make me feel like only you can make me feel.”

And I don’t bother arguing. It’s what I want too.

Clothes fly and before she can even blink, I’ve tossed her on the bed and I’m growling as I crawl up her sexy body. She’s panting and her chest heaves as she watches me stalk her.

“Luke?” She whispers breathlessly.

“Yeah, Rena?”

“I’m really glad I came home to you.”

“I’m glad you did too. There’s never been anyone but you and there never will be. You’re it for me.”

I cup her cheek and nuzzle into her throat and she smiles. “If you mean that then fuck me, dammit!”

Her soft giggle has my dick hard. “You bad girl. You know I love it when you talk dirty.”

She lifts up until she’s got her mouth pressed to my throat and then she sighs into my skin. “Now. Let’s see what you’ve got, angel!”

My hand slips down and I slide a finger between her slick folds, parting them just enough to slide that finger inside her, holding her open to tap at her little nub of exposed nerves. She humps up into my hand and sighs. Her mouth closes on my shoulder and she bites into my skin gently, just until I feel the soft sting of her teeth marking me.

I slide the finger in further and then fuck her with it while another finger taps at her clit over and over until she's bouncing her thick hips with each thrust of my finger, each swirl of my finger.

Over and over I do this until she's grinding against my hand and she bites my shoulder harder. I close my eyes and slam my finger hard into her tight pussy until I feel her body clamp down on my fingers and she shudders in my arms.

"Luke!" She cries softly. Her hips thrust up and her back arches until she's pressed as far into me as she can get without being part of my body.

I thrust inside her while she's still convulsing and she gasps. I groan when I feel the slight flutter in her pussy that's holding me tight.

And that's when I slam into her over and over again. Her body shudders under me and her skin is warm against my fingers. Her curves shift as my fingers dance along her hips and her thighs, tweaking at her full breasts even as she comes apart again.

I thrust hard two more times and then fall apart, my body going as deep as possible, my dick finally at home in her slick heat.

My dick jerks three times and my release coats her walls until it's dripping down her thighs, filling her up so full that she can't hold it anymore.

I fall to the bed and roll over, holding her to me. My hand lifts and I hold her own slender fingers wrapped in mine, peace overtaking me as I see my rings sparkling on her fingers in the dim light.

I married her two months after she came home. There was no reason to wait.

Rena is mine. She always has been. No matter how far apart we were.

I pull her hand to my lips and kiss her dainty fingers. “I love you, Mrs. Marino.”

“I love you too, Mr. Marino.” Her eyes close and she drifts off to sleep. I can’t look away though.

Her dark lashes fan out over her rounded cheeks and I run my fingers down her hips and rest them on her very slightly rounded belly.

“I love you too, little one.”

Two kids and another on the way and I never thought I could be this happy and fulfilled.

All I had to do was wait for my first love to come back and everything fell into place.

Sure, we missed out on some time. But there’s still a lot of living to do and I’ve found my penguin again. Her and the family that we’re going to raise in love and happiness are all I need.

SS loves LM forever.

Epilogue: Connie

I can't stop smiling. It's almost time to get up and tackle our Christmas presents but none of that matters. I've already got the Christmas Wish I wanted.

Someone to make my Dad happy.

Seth rolls over where he's been lying on the floor. His sleepy blue eyes find mine and I grin at him. "We did it, didn't we?"

"You know we did." Satisfaction coats my words. We really did do it. We got them together and made them realize how much they still loved each other.

With a little magic and a lot of help we did what seemed impossible.

Seth sits up in bed, giggling. "You think they know everything?"

"Nope. But they know a lot. Enough."

Mom and Dad already know that we did a lot of this but some things are secret and will stay that way forever.

I close my eyes, almost too excited to sleep. Our first family Christmas. And we're getting a new baby brother or sister!

Most kids would be mad. But not me! I want to be a big sister and take someone fishing or picking leaves to make into special vases.

All these fun things to do. To teach.

And so much love from Mom and Dad to go around.

I smile at Seth. “They should thank us for the rest of our lives!”

Seth giggles. “I didn’t do it for thanks. I did it because Mom needed to be happy.”

I nod my head. “So did my Dad.”

I guess that’s enough. I know that we’re all where we’re supposed to be.

Together. I’ve got a brother who might as well be my twin and a little brother or sister on the way.

Dad and I aren’t alone anymore and he’s happy. We’re all happy.

I eye Seth sleepily. One of these days, I intend to help him find love too.

And I bet it will last forever. Just like our parents’ love.

The real thing can grow and change but it always stays. I giggle.

I read that somewhere and I believe it’s true.

Love is out there for all of us. You just have to trust in it and it will find you.

Maybe with a little help from some friends!

About the Author

I have people that ask me, when did you start writing? That's an easy thing to answer. As soon as I could. The very first short story I wrote was in third grade. The Devil Horses! It was sci-fi which is also a love of mine. It was dramatic and crazy and I loved that story. I even did my own pictures for it!

Nowadays, I don't have time to draw because I'm always writing. Every spare minute, I pull out my computer and I'm doing something with my writing career.

I work full-time as well at a school district as the head cashier/accountant for the kitchen. So I'm always busy! But I am happy. I have a job that I like and a side hustle that fills my heart with joy.

I have a family that supports me and that I love.

And I have you! The wonderful readers out there that pick up my books and hopefully love reading them as much as I love writing them! This year is bringing about a ton of changes and I hope they're all for the good! So keep your eye out and watch because Tamrin Banks is expanding as a brand and I couldn't be more excited to introduce you to all the newness!



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