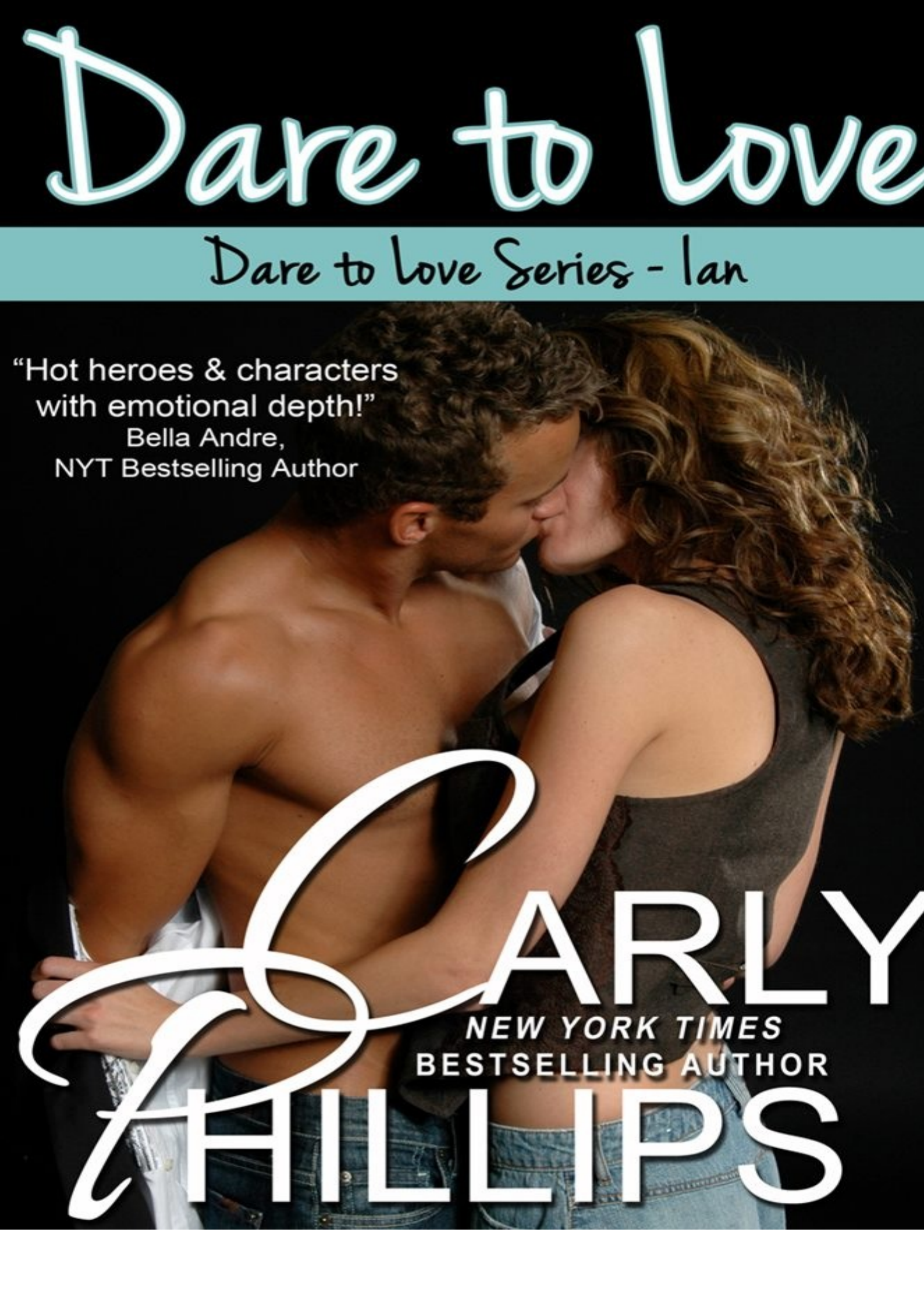


Dare to Love

Dare to Love Series - Ian

"Hot heroes & characters
with emotional depth!"

Bella Andre,
NYT Bestselling Author

A photograph of a man and a woman in a romantic embrace, kissing. The man is shirtless and muscular, wearing a white shirt. The woman has long, wavy brown hair and is wearing a dark grey tank top and blue jeans. The background is dark.

EARLY
NEW YORK TIMES
BESTSELLING AUTHOR
HILLIPS

DARE TO LOVE

Carly Phillips

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To all the self-published and indie authors who paved the way for me to make this leap, THANK YOU!

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Table of Contents

Cover
Title Page
Dedication
Copyright Page
Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Epilogue
Thank You
Sneak Peek of Perfect Together
Other Carly Phillips' Titles
About the Author



ONE

Once a year, the Dare siblings gathered at the Club Meridian Ballroom in South Florida to celebrate the birthday of the father many of them despised. Ian Dare raised his glass filled with Glenlivet and took a sip, letting the slow burn of fine scotch work its way down his throat and into his system. He needed another before he fully relaxed.

“Hi, big brother.” His sister Olivia strode up to him and nudged him with her elbow.

“Watch the drink,” he said, wrapping his free arm around her shoulders for an affectionate hug. “Hi, Olivia.”

She returned the gesture with a quick kiss on his cheek. “It’s nice of you to be here.”

He shrugged. “I’m here for Avery and for you. Although why you two forgave him—”

“Uh-uh. Not here.” She wagged a finger in front of his face. “If I have to put on a dress, we’re going to act civilized.”

Ian stepped back and took in his twenty-four-year-old sister for the first time. Wearing a gorgeous gown, her dark hair up in a chic twist, it was hard to believe she was the same bane of his existence who’d chased after him and his friends until they relented and let her play ball with them.

“You look gorgeous,” he said to her.

She grinned. “You have to say that.”

“I don’t. And I mean it. I’ll have to beat men off with sticks when they see you.” The thought darkened his mood.

“You do and I’ll have your housekeeper short-sheet your bed! Again, there should be perks to getting dressed like this, and getting laid should be one of them.”

“I’ll pretend I didn’t hear that,” he muttered and took another sip of his drink.

“You not only promised to come tonight, you swore you’d behave.”

Ian scowled. “Good behavior ought to be optional considering the way he flaunts his assets,” he said with a nod toward where Robert Dare held court.

Around him sat his second wife of nine years, Savannah Dare, and their daughter, Sienna, along with their nearest and dearest country club friends. Missing were their other two sons, but they’d show up soon.

Olivia placed a hand on his shoulder. “He loves her, you know. And Mom’s made her peace.”

“Mom had no choice once she found out about *her*.”

Robert Dare had met the much younger Savannah Sheppard and, to hear him tell it, fallen instantly in love. She was now the mother of his three other children, the oldest of whom was twenty-five. Ian had just turned thirty. Anyone could do the math and come up with two families at the same time. The man was beyond fertile, that was for damned sure.

At the reminder, Ian finished his drink and placed the tumbler on a passing server’s tray. “I showed my face. I’m out of here.” He started for the exit.

“Ian, hold on,” his sister said, frustration in her tone.

“What? Do you want me to wait until they sing ‘Happy Birthday’? No thanks. I’m leaving.”

~~Before they could continue the discussion, their half brother Alex strode through the double~~ entrance with a spectacular-looking woman holding tightly to his arm, and Ian’s plans changed.

Because of *her*.

Some people had presence; others merely wished they possessed that magic something. In her bold, red dress and fuck-me heels, she owned the room. And he wanted to own her. Petite and curvy, with long, chocolate-brown hair that fell down her back in wild curls, she was the antithesis of every too-thin female he’d dated and kept at arm’s length. But she was with his half brother, which meant he had to steer clear.

“I thought you were leaving,” Olivia said from beside him.

“I am.” He should. If he could tear his gaze away from *her*.

“If you wait for Tyler and Scott, you might just relax enough to have fun,” she said of the brothers. “Come on, please?” Olivia used the pleading tone he never could resist.

“Yeah, please, Ian? Come on,” his sister Avery said, joining them, looking equally mature in her silver gown that showed way too much cleavage. At twenty-two, she was similar in coloring and look to Olivia, and he wasn’t any more ready to think of her as a grown-up—never mind letting other men ogle her—than he was with her sister.

Ian set his jaw, amazed these two hadn’t been the death of him yet.

“So what am I begging him to do?” Avery asked Olivia.

Olivia grinned. “I want him to stay and hang out for a while. Having fun is probably out of the question, but I’m trying to persuade him to let loose.”

“Brat,” he muttered, unable to hold back a smile at Olivia’s persistence.

He stole another glance at his lady in red. He could no more leave than he could approach her, he thought, frustrated because he was a man of action, and right now, he could do nothing but watch her.

“Well?” Olivia asked.

He forced his gaze to his sister and smiled. “Because you two asked so nicely, I’ll stay.” But his attention remained on the woman now dancing and laughing with his half brother.

* * *

Riley Taylor felt his eyes on her from the moment she entered the elegantly decorated ballroom on the arm of another man. As it was, her heels made it difficult enough to maneuver gracefully. Knowing a devastatingly sexy man watched her every move only made not falling on her ass even more of a challenge.

Alex Dare, her best friend, was oblivious. Being the star quarterback of the Tampa Breakers meant he was used to stares and attention. Riley wasn’t. And since this was his father’s birthday bash, he knew everyone here. She didn’t.

She definitely didn’t know *him*. She’d managed to avoid this annual party in the past with a legitimate work excuse one year, the flu another, but this year, Alex knew she was down in the dumps due to job problems, and he’d insisted she come along and have a good time.

While Alex danced with his mother then sisters, she headed for the bar and asked the bartender for a glass of ice water. She took a sip and turned to go find a seat, someplace where she could get off her feet and slip free of her offending heels.

She’d barely taken half a step when she bumped into a hard, suit-clad body. The accompanying jolt sent her water spilling from the top of her glass and into her cleavage. The chill startled her as much

as the liquid that dripped down her chest.

~~“Oh!” She teetered on her stilettos, and big, warm hands grasped her shoulders, steadying her.~~

She gathered herself and looked up into the face of the man she'd been covertly watching. “You,” she said on a breathy whisper.

His eyes, a steely gray with a hint of blue in the depths, sparkled in amusement and something more. “Glad you noticed me too.”

She blinked, mortified, no words rushing into her brain to save her. She was too busy taking him in. Dark brown hair stylishly cut, cheekbones perfectly carved, and a strong jaw completed the package. And the most intense heat emanated from his touch as he held on to her arms. His big hands made her feel small, not an easy feat when she was always conscious of her too-full curves.

She breathed in deeply and was treated to a masculine, woody scent that turned her insides to pure mush. Full-scale awareness rocked her to her core. This man hit all her right buttons.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

“I’m fine.” Or she would be if he'd release her so she could think. Instead of telling him so, she continued to stare into his handsome face.

“You certainly are,” he murmured.

A heated flush rushed to her cheeks at the compliment, and a delicious warmth invaded her system.

“I’m sorry about the spill,” he said.

At least she hoped he was oblivious to her ridiculous attraction to him.

“You’re wet.” He released her and reached for a napkin from the bar.

Yes, she was. In wholly inappropriate ways considering they'd barely met. Desire pulsed through her veins. Oh my God, what was it about this man that caused reactions in her body another man would have to work overtime to achieve?

He pressed the thin paper napkin against her chest and neck. He didn't linger, didn't stroke her anywhere he shouldn't, but she could swear she felt the heat of his fingertips against her skin. Between his heady scent and his deliberate touch, her nerves felt raw and exposed. Her breasts swelled, her nipples peaked, and she shivered, her body tightening in places she'd long thought dormant. If he noticed, he was too much of a gentleman to say.

No man had ever awakened her senses this way before. Sometimes she wondered if that was a deliberate choice on her part. Obviously not, she thought and forced herself to step back, away from his potent aura.

He crinkled the napkin and placed the paper onto the bar.

“Thank you,” she said.

“My pleasure.” The word, laced with sexual innuendo, rolled off his tongue, and his eyes darkened an indication that this crazy attraction she experienced wasn't one-sided.

“Maybe now we can move on to introductions. I'm Ian Dare,” he said.

She swallowed hard, disappointment rushing through her as she realized, for all her awareness of him, he was the one man at this party she ought to stay away from. “Alex's brother.”

“Half brother,” he bit out.

“Yes.” She understood his pointed correction. Alex wouldn't want any more of a connection to Ian than Ian did to Alex.

“You have your father's eyes,” she couldn't help but note.

His expression changed, going from warm to cold in an instant. “I hope that's the only thing you think that bastard and I have in common.”

Riley raised her eyebrows at the bitter tone. Okay, she understood he had his reasons, but she was stranger.

Ian shrugged, his broad shoulders rolling beneath his tailored, dark suit. "What can I say? Only bastard would live two separate lives with two separate families at the same time."

"You do lay it out there," she murmured.

His eyes glittered like silver ice. "It's not like everyone here doesn't know it."

Though she ought to change the subject, he'd been open, so she decided to ask what was on his mind. "If you're still so angry with him, why come for his birthday?"

"Because my sisters asked me to," he said, his tone turning warm and indulgent.

A hint of an easier expression changed his face from hard and unyielding to devastatingly sexy once more.

"Avery and Olivia are much more forgiving than me," he explained.

She smiled at his obvious affection for his siblings. As an only child, she envied them a caring older brother. At least she'd had Alex, she thought and glanced around looking for the man who brought her here. She found him on the dance floor, still with his mother, and relaxed.

"Back to introductions," Ian said. "You know my name; now it's your turn."

"Riley Taylor."

"Alex's girlfriend," he said with disappointment. "I saw you two walk in."

That's what he thought? "No, we're friends. More like brother and sister than anything else."

His eyes lit up, and she caught a glimpse of yet another expression—pleasantly surprised. "That's the best news I've heard all night," he said in a deep, compelling tone, his hot gaze never leaving her.

At a loss for words, Riley remained silent.

"So, Ms. Riley Taylor, where were you off to in such a hurry?" he asked.

"I wanted to rest my feet," she admitted.

He glanced down at her legs, taking in her red pumps. "Ahh. Well, I have just the place."

Before she could argue—and if she'd realized he'd planned to drag her off alone, she might have—Ian grasped her arm and guided her to the exit at the far side of the room.

"Ian—"

"Shh. You'll thank me later. I promise." He pushed open the door, and they stepped out onto a deck that wasn't in use this evening.

Sticky, night air surrounded them, but being a Floridian, she was used to it, and obviously so was he. His arm still cupping her elbow, he led her to a small love seat and gestured for her to sit.

She sensed he was a man who often got his way, and though she'd never found that trait attractive before, on him, it worked. She settled into the soft cushions. He did the same, leaving no space between them, and she liked the feel of his hard body aligned with hers. Her heart beat hard in her chest, excitement and arousal pounding away inside her.

Around them, it was dark, the only light coming from sconces on the nearby building.

"Put your feet up." He pointed to the table in front of them.

"Bossy," she murmured.

Ian grinned. He was and was damned proud of it. "You're the one who said your feet hurt," he reminded her.

"True." She shot him a sheepish look that was nothing short of adorable.

The reverberation in her throat went straight to Ian's cock, and he shifted in his seat, pure sexual desire now pumping through his veins.

He'd been pissed off and bored at his father's ridiculous birthday gala. Even his sisters had bare

been able to coax a smile from him. Then *she'd* walked into the room.

Because she was with his half brother, Ian hadn't planned on approaching her, but the minute he caught sight of her alone at the bar, he'd gone after her, compelled by a force beyond his understanding. Finding out she and Alex were just friends had made his night because she'd provided the perfect distraction to the pain that followed him whenever his father's other family was near.

"Shoes?" he reminded her.

She dipped her head and slipped off her heels, moaning in obvious relief.

"That sound makes me think of other things," he said, capturing her gaze.

"Such as?" She unconsciously swayed closer, and he suppressed a grin.

"Sex. With you."

"Oh." Her lips parted with the word, and Ian couldn't tear his gaze away from her lush, red-painted mouth.

A mouth he could envision many uses for, none of them tame.

"Is this how you charm all your women?" she asked. "Because I'm not sure it's working." Her teasing smile lifted her lips, contradicting her words.

He had her, all right, as much as she had him.

He kept his gaze on her face, but he wasn't a complete gentleman and couldn't resist brushing his hand over her tight nipples showing through the fabric of her dress.

Her eyes widened in surprise at the same time a soft moan escaped, sealing her fate. He slid one arm across the love seat until his fingers hit her mass of curls, and he wrapped his hand in the thick strands. Then, tugging her close, he sealed his mouth over hers. She opened for him immediately. The first taste was a mere preview, not nearly enough, and he deepened the kiss, taking more.

Sweet, hot, and her tongue tangled with his. He gripped her hair harder, wanting still more. She was like all his favorite vices in one delectable package. Best of all, she kissed him back, every inch willing, giving partner.

He was a man who dominated and took, but from the minute he tasted her, he gave as well. If his brain were clear, he'd have pulled back immediately, but she reached out and gripped his shoulder, curling her fingers through the fabric of his shirt, her nails digging into his skin. Each thrust of his tongue in her mouth mimicked what he really wanted, and his cock hardened even more.

"You've got to be kidding me," his half brother said, interrupting at the worst possible moment.

He would have taken his time, but Riley jumped, pushing at his chest and backing away from him at the same time.

"Alex!"

"Yeah. The guy who brought you here, remember?"

Ian cursed his brother's interruption as much as he welcomed the reminder that this woman represented everything Ian resented. His half brother's friend. Alex, with whom he had a rivalry that would have done real siblings proud.

The oldest sibling in the *other* family was everything Ian wasn't. Brash, loud, tattoos on his forearms, and he threw a mean football as quarterback of the Tampa Breakers. Ian, meanwhile, was more of a thinker, president of the Breakers' rivals, the Miami Thunder, owned by his father's estranged brother, Ian's uncle.

Riley jumped up, smoothing her dress and rubbing at her swollen lips, doing nothing to ease the tension emanating from her best friend.

Ian took his time standing.

"I see you met my brother," Alex said, his tone tight.

Riley swallowed hard. "We were just—"

"Getting better acquainted," Ian said in a seductive tone meant to taunt Alex and imply just how much better he now knew Riley.

A muscle ticked in the other man's jaw. "Ready to go back inside?" Alex asked her.

Neither one of them would make a scene at this mockery of a family event.

"Yes." She didn't meet Ian's gaze as she walked around him and came up alongside Alex.

"Good because my dad's been asking for you. He said it's been too long since he's seen you," Alex said, taunting Ian back with the mention of the one person sure to piss him off.

Despite knowing better, Ian took the bait. "Go on. We were finished anyway," he said, dismissing Riley as surely as she'd done to him.

Never mind that she was obviously torn between her friend and whatever had just happened between them; she'd chosen Alex. A choice Ian had been through before and come out on the same wrong end.

In what appeared to be a deliberately possessive move, Alex wrapped an arm around her waist and led her back inside. Ian watched, ignoring the twisting pain in his gut at the sight. Which was ridiculous. He didn't have any emotional investment in Riley Taylor. He didn't do emotion, period. He viewed relationships through the lens of his father's adultery, finding it easier to remain on the outside looking in.

Distance was his friend. Sex worked for him. It was love and commitment he distrusted. So no matter how different that brief moment with Riley had been, that was all it was.

A moment.

One that would never happen again.

* * *

Riley followed Alex onto the dance floor in silence. They hadn't spoken a word to each other since she'd let him lead her away from Ian. She understood his shocked reaction and wanted to soothe his frazzled nerves but didn't know how. Not when her own nerves were so raw from one simple kiss.

Except nothing about Ian was simple, and that kiss left her reeling. From the minute his lips touched hers, everything else around her had ceased to matter. The tug of arousal hit her in the pit of her stomach, in her scalp as his fingers tugged her hair, in the weight of her breasts, between her thighs and, most telling, in her mind. He was a strong man, the kind who knew what he wanted and who liked to get his way. The type of man she usually avoided and for good reason.

But she'd never experienced chemistry so strong before. His pull was so compelling she willingly followed him outside regardless of the fact that she knew without a doubt her closest friend in the world would be hurt if she got close to Ian.

"Are you going to talk to me?" Alex asked, breaking into her thoughts.

"I'm not sure what to say."

On the one hand, he didn't have a say in her personal life. She didn't owe him an apology. On the other, he was her everything. The child she'd grown up next door to and the best friend who'd saved her sanity and given her a safe haven from her abusive father.

She was wrong. She knew exactly what to say. "I'm sorry."

He touched his forehead to hers. "I don't know what came over me. I found you two kissing, and I saw red."

"It was just chemistry." She let out a shaky laugh, knowing that term was too benign for what had

passed between her and Ian.

~~“I don’t want you to get hurt. The man doesn’t do relationships, Ri. He uses women and moves on.”~~

“Umm, Pot/Kettle?” she asked him. Alex moved from woman to woman just as he’d accused his half brother of doing.

He’d even kissed *her* once. Horn dog that he was, he said he’d had to try, but they both agreed there was no spark and their friendship meant way too much to throw away for a quick tumble between the sheets.

Alex frowned. “Maybe so, but that doesn’t change the facts about him. I don’t want you to get hurt.”

“I won’t,” she assured him, even as her heart picked up speed when she caught sight of Ian watching them from across the room.

Drink in hand, brooding expression on his face, his stare never wavered.

She curled her hands into the suit fabric covering Alex’s shoulders and assured herself she was telling the truth.

“What if he was using you to get to me?”

“Because the man can’t be interested in me for me?” she asked, her pride wounded despite the fact that Alex was just trying to protect her.

Alex slowed his steps and leaned back to look into her eyes. “That’s not what I meant, and you know it. Any man would be lucky to have you, and I’d never get between you and the right guy.” A muscle pulsed in Alex’s right temple, a sure sign of tension and stress. “But Ian’s not that guy.”

She swallowed hard, hating that he just might be right. Riley wasn’t into one-night stands. Which was why her body’s combustible reaction to Ian Dare confused and confounded her. How far would she have let him go if Alex hadn’t interrupted? Much further than she’d like to imagine, and her body responded with a full-out shiver at the thought.

“Now can we forget about him?”

Not likely, she thought, when his gaze burned hotter than his kiss. Somehow she managed to swallow over the lump in her throat and give Alex the answer he sought. “Sure.”

Pleased, Alex pulled her back into his arms to continue their slow dance. Around them, other guests, mostly his father’s age, moved slowly in time to the music.

“Did I mention how much I appreciate you coming here with me?” Obviously trying to ease the tension between them, he shot her the same charming grin that had women thinking they were special.

Riley knew better. She *was* special to him, and if he ever turned his brand of protectiveness on the right kind of woman and not the groupies he preferred, he might find himself settled and happy one day. Sadly, he didn’t seem to be on that path.

She decided to let their disagreement over Ian go. “I believe you’ve mentioned how wonderful I am a couple of times. But you still owe me one,” Riley said. Parties like this weren’t her thing.

“It took your mind off your job stress, right?” he asked.

She nodded. “Yes, and let’s not even talk about that right now.” Monday was soon enough to deal with her new boss.

“You got it. Ready for a break?” he asked.

She nodded. Unable to help herself, she glanced over where she’d seen Ian earlier, but he was gone. The disappointment twisting the pit of her stomach was disproportional to the amount of time she’d known him, and she blamed that kiss.

Her lips still tingled, and if she closed her eyes and ran her tongue over them, she could taste his

heady, masculine flavor. Somehow she had to shake him from her thoughts. Alex's reaction to seeing them together meant Riley couldn't allow herself the luxury of indulging in anything more with Ian.

Not even in her thoughts or dreams.



TWO

Riley walked into the main office of Blunt Sporting Goods, a manufacturer and retailer where she had been employed since she was seventeen. She'd worked her way up from sales to store manager until she was ultimately drafted into their corporate headquarters after college. She worked hard, earned good money, and best of all, loved her job. She was in charge of distribution and knew how to get the goods into the right hands. Too bad all those years of loyal service were now threatened by a sale to new owners.

When Jerry Blunt had decided to retire and travel with his wife, he'd sold the once-family-owned business to a pompous jerk who'd withheld his intentions of cleaning house and bringing in fresh new talent, as he called his hires, until the final papers were signed.

He brought in all his own people for lead jobs, which Riley grudgingly admitted made sense. But he also sought to hire new people from outside the company, those willing to work for less money. He didn't give the long-standing, once-valued workers a chance to prove their worth. Many old employees with families to support were let go and they'd have a tough time getting a new job for the same pay.

It sucked, Riley thought, and she wanted to at least try and save her department. To do so, she had to prove to her new boss that she could run things well and efficiently and make him money. Sadly, he wasn't the type to listen, and every day, more people left with their belongings in a box, escorted out by security.

When her intercom rang, calling her in to see the new boss, Riley had no doubt she would be the next one out the door. She flexed her fingers and rose, taking the stairs to the next floor, using the time to give herself a pep talk before approaching Franklin O'Mara.

"Go on in," Gail, his personal secretary, also new to the company, said. "He's expecting you."

"Thanks." She stepped into his office.

In his forties with a receding hairline and paunch in his stomach, he epitomized the lazy executive, and it killed Riley to see the company she loved be destroyed by someone who didn't see the value of the employees he'd inherited.

"Ms. Taylor." He held a file in his hand, no doubt filled with her evaluations and track record for the company.

"Mr. O'Mara." She waited until he gestured for her to be seated before nodding and settling into the chair across from his massive desk.

"I'm sorry to say, we'll be letting you go."

She swallowed hard. "I understand your new corporate policy involves bringing in fresh talent," she began.

"Then you understand it's nothing personal. We'll give you a good severance package and references. Marge in HR will discuss the details with you."

"What if I told you I could get you access to the Miami Thunder?" she asked, grasping at the firm's

—and clearly most absurd—thing that came to mind.

No doubt because Ian Dare, president of the Miami Thunder, who kissed like a dream, had been her dreams day and night since their hookup Saturday night.

O'Mara's eyes lit up with interest. "Keep talking."

She ran her tongue along the inside of her dry mouth, wishing she could take back her words. For one thing, Alex would kill her. For another, she didn't even have access to the man.

But she had a department of employees whose jobs and welfare depended on this one Hail Mary. "I don't have a personal connection with Ian Dare." The lip-lock they'd shared was very personal, she thought, suppressing a shiver.

"Go on."

She crossed her fingers in her lap and continued. "I've been planning on talking to him about changing suppliers for his team's inventory, or at least giving us a shot. I figured once he sees we're reliable and our deals are solid, maybe he'll throw more business our way."

She twisted her fingers, hoping he didn't notice how badly she was panicking as she spoke. Even she knew football teams had major multi-year contracts with big companies, but the words were out and there was no taking them back.

"Now that's a way to put yourself on my radar." He nodded approvingly. "Okay, talk to him. You have until Friday noon. No deal? I'm bringing in my people."

Riley rose to her feet. "Thank you," she said, extending her hand for his sweaty handshake, then turned and headed for the door.

"Noon Friday," he reminded her as she let herself out.

For the return trip to her office, Riley took the elevator, unsure her legs would support her on the walk down. She didn't want to lose her job, but unless she could reach Ian Dare and talk him into doing business with her, she'd be unemployed, unable to afford her rent, car payment, student loans, and other assorted bills. Even Alex would understand how her utter panic over the possibility had led her to Ian.

She hoped.

She leaned against the elevator wall and groaned. Thanks to her bluster and big mouth, her job was in Ian Dare's very sexy hands.

* * *

For the week following his father's party, Ian was tied up in preparation for the football draft. Agents were trying to pitch their best players, to trade their unhappy players, to work the system and his team to their advantage. This year, the annual event was being held in Ian's hometown of Miami, at his father's flagship hotel, which meant he'd have to be on guard while he was there. Dealing with Robert Dare's attempts at reconciliation could only distract him from business.

He was so inundated meeting with his general manager and scouts, he only returned calls relative to deals, ignoring all others, including his mother and siblings.

When he finally sat down to eat and listen to all his messages, he was shocked to hear the sexy voice he dreamed about at night.

"Hi, Ian. It's Riley Taylor. We—umm—met at your father's birthday party this past weekend. I have something important I'd like to discuss with you. My number is..." He listened to the rest of the message, absently jotting down her information while focusing on her voice.

Strong and husky, her tone aroused him all over again, but he also noticed a tremor as she spok

which made him wonder if the memory of their kiss haunted her as much as it did him. Since Saturday night, he'd alternated between cursing his half brother for interrupting and being grateful for the reminder that this woman had loyalties in direct conflict with him.

As an adult, Ian hated the notion of considering Alex competition, but the past couldn't be changed. When their father had had a choice to make, he'd picked Alex and his siblings, not Ian and his. They'd had him for concerts, sporting events, and graduations. Maybe not all his father's so-called hotel travel had been a lie, but there was no doubt who'd gotten short shrift when it came to having a dad. And though Ian had stepped up for his siblings, nothing could replace the gaping hole Robert Dare had left them with, both when they were ignorant of the other family and after he moved out.

So yes, Alex had always been a rival. First for their father's affection, then as the star quarterback of the Thunder's biggest competition, and now for a woman Ian barely knew. Even if that kiss had made him think they had a connection, her withdrawal afterward had made a bigger statement. The woman had gotten to him, something no other could claim. He wouldn't be giving her another opening. He might be curious as to what she wanted and why she'd reach out to him, but he couldn't afford to care.

He allowed himself a few last lingering thoughts of Riley, the fruity taste of her glossed lips and the sound of her soft moans reverberating through him. Then he picked up the paper on which he'd written down her number, crushed it into a ball, and tossed it in the trash.

* * *

For the first two days of the draft, Ian managed to miss bumping into his old man but knew his luck wouldn't hold out. Sure enough, Saturday morning, Robert intercepted him on his way to a breakfast meeting at the restaurant.

"Ian!" His father strode up to him, dressed in a suit and tie, happy as if he owned the world.

Ian inclined his head. "Good morning. I can't talk. I'm late for a meeting."

His father stared at him with knowing eyes. Eyes the same gray as his own. "I won't keep you. But I was disappointed I didn't get to talk to you at the party the other night."

"I was there. Only because Avery and Olivia asked me to come," he deliberately added.

Avery, his youngest sister, had been a bone marrow donor for their father's other daughter, Sienna—Sienna's illness being the only reason Robert Dare had revealed his cheating, lying ways. He needed to see if any of his legitimate children were matches. The girls had bonded over their experience, accepting them as family. Ian didn't feel the same way. He didn't hate his half siblings, he just wanted nothing to do with them. But unlike his father, he'd sworn to be there for his family, so when the girls had asked him to attend the party for them, he'd agreed.

"And I'm grateful you attended. A man never knows how many years he has left," Robert said.

Ian rolled his eyes at the dramatic statement. "You're healthy, and you'll probably outlive us all." He deliberately glanced at his watch. "I've got to get inside." He tipped his head toward the restaurant.

"Maybe we can have lunch or dinner?" the older man asked, hope in his eyes.

Ian shook his head. "Like I said, I've got meetings."

Shadows crossed his father's face, and Ian did his best not to feel guilty.

"Fine, but I'll keep trying, you know."

Ian straightened his shoulders. "It's too late for that too." He turned away and stepped toward the restaurant entrance when he heard his name being called and turned.

This time it was Alex rushing to catch up to him.

~~His father hadn't left, and he greeted his other son, not bothering to excuse himself as Alex stro~~
up to Ian.

"You're such a selfish prick," Alex said, getting into his face. "Would it have killed you to return her phone calls and see what she had to say?"

Ian immediately knew he was talking about Riley. "You're the one who made it clear she should have nothing to do with me, so what's up your ass now?"

"She left you a message, right? Said she had something important to discuss? And you couldn't be bothered to call?" Alex asked, jaw held tight.

In that instant, Ian saw shades of his father in Alex's younger face. It had been awhile since the blood connection between them had hit him so strongly. And damn but it hurt.

"Would one of you tell me what the hell is going on?" Robert asked, interrupting them.

Alex straightened his shoulders. "Riley called him this week. She needed a favor and asked him to call her back. He didn't."

"I was busy," Ian said, suddenly feeling a combination of guilt and overriding concern. "It's drawn a week, not that I owe you an explanation. Besides, *you* made it clear I should back off." Ian wasn't above sharing the blame when warranted.

Alex ran a hand through his hair, frustration evident in the bulging muscles in his neck. "She's my best friend. Has been since we were kids."

"What did she need from me?" Ian asked, ignoring any reference to how close Riley and Alex were. Even if it was friendship, it had come between Ian and the woman he wanted. He found it difficult to contain his jealousy.

Alex paused, looking torn, before he said, "It's not my story to tell, and besides, it's too late anyway."

"What the hell does that mean?" Ian asked.

"Is Riley okay?" Robert demanded. "I care about that girl like a daughter."

"As if you don't have enough of those," Ian muttered.

His father's face blanched, his skin color leaching out. "She practically lived in our house growing up. If something's wrong, I want to know."

"You know Riley. She's always okay or pretends to be," Alex said. "She's independent and proud and you know it. You also know why. It took enough for her to call *him*." Alex jerked a finger at Ian.

"But if one of us can help—" Robert said, only to be cut off by the abrupt swinging of Alex's hand.

"Let her handle her own shit. I've learned it's the only way to keep her in my life."

Alex turned back to Ian. "I came here because I was furious, and you deserved to know you fucked up. But it's too late now. There's nothing anyone can do."

There were so many questions raised by Alex's statement Ian didn't know where to begin. From her always pretending to be okay, to her being proud and independent, Alex and their father were privy to why. Ian wasn't.

But he wanted to know. Needed to understand her even if it meant digging deeper than she'd be comfortable with. He was also smart enough not to ask questions his half brother wouldn't answer.

"Give me her number," Ian said. "The least I can do is apologize."

Alex scowled at him. "Go to hell. She doesn't need your help anymore. And she sure as hell doesn't need to be another one of your conquests."

"Hey." Ian grabbed his shoulder.

Alex shrugged him away. "Back off."

“Just give me her damned number.”

~~“Not happening, and don’t think you can look her up in the phone book. She’s unlisted.”~~

With that, he stormed off, leaving Ian where he’d started, about to walk away from his father.

Before he could take leave, his father placed a hand on Ian’s shoulder, surprising him and causing an old memory to surface. Robert, getting ready to leave for a business trip, wearing a suit, and placing his hand on ten-year-old Ian’s shoulder. “Take care of your mother and siblings, son.”

At the time, Ian had been puffed up and proud his father trusted him with the job. Looking back the request was as much of an illusion as his childhood had been. No ten-year-old could possibly take on that responsibility. It was just something a parent said to make his kid feel important. But the reality was, that had been Ian’s job for way too long.

He stood stiffly, refusing to give his father the satisfaction of shoving him away, and waited for him to finish.

“You all don’t have to pay for my sins, son. You could get to know each other. You could be brothers.”

His suit jacket suddenly too tight, Ian broke into an uncomfortable sweat. “What part of the conversation indicated either of us wants that?”

“You’re both men with huge egos. Neither of you is willing to bend first. But you’re the oldest. Maybe you won’t give me a second chance, but you should give your other siblings a first one. You’re all family.”

Though he hated giving his father a glimpse into his feelings, Ian raised a hand to his throbbing temple. “Isn’t it enough I take care of my brothers, sisters, and mother after you couldn’t be bothered? I’m there for them.”

“If you ever need me…” His father trailed off as Ian turned to go.

Suddenly, he realized his father had something Ian wanted...or if he didn’t have it, he had access. He turned back to the older man. “You can do something for me.”

“What is it?” Robert asked, hope in his voice.

“I need to get in touch with Riley. Phone number, address, something. Can you get me that?”

Disappointment flooded Robert’s face before he schooled his expression. “I’ll give you her number if you do something for me in return.”

The calculating son of a bitch, Ian thought. “What is it?” he bit out.

“Reach out to Sienna and the boys. Invite them to lunch or dinner.” Robert eyed him speculatively, clearly eager to see what he’d do.

Ian gritted his teeth and didn’t answer.

“I thought apologizing to Riley was important to you.”

“It is.”

His father’s deal begged the question, did Ian want access to Riley Taylor badly enough to extend an olive branch to his father’s other family?

Her scent came back to him vividly, a fruity blend that had knocked him on his ass and had him daydreaming of her ever since. The thought of putting any kind of pain in those blue eyes was like slicing his own skin, yet apparently he’d done just that. He needed to fix it. But first he needed to know what the hell he’d done by not returning her call.

Hell yes, she was worth it.

Ian forced out the words. “I’ll invite Sienna for lunch.”

Robert’s narrowed gaze settled on Ian. “That’s a start.”

If Ian had wondered where he got his business sense, he now knew. “I’ll include Alex and Jason

too," he muttered.

Robert nodded, clearly pleased. "Good. Savannah has Riley's information in her phone," he said his current wife and Sienna, Alex, and Jason's mother. "I'll send it over to you later today."

"Fine." Ian wasn't about to thank the man for something he'd bribed him for.

Looks like he had a family reunion to plan. Because Riley Taylor had gotten to him that much.



THREE

Riley pulled up to the gate surrounding Alex's mansion on Star Island and entered the key code, letting herself in and driving down his long driveway. Alex's house was a far cry from the small apartment in Miami where Riley lived, but she was used to her best friend's wealth. He had his main house here and a luxury apartment in Tampa for during the season. He needed his privacy, and thanks to the one road in and out along with the guardhouse at the entrance, Alex was away from the prying eyes of rabid fans.

She parked in a guest spot on his driveway, and a few minutes later, she and Alex sat on the floor in his man cave, as he called it, eating pizza he'd had delivered.

"You're really a good friend, letting me cry on your shoulder like this."

He shot her one of his patented, *are you an idiot* looks. "Like you'd do anything different for me?"

She stretched her legs out in front of her, leaning her head back on the couch behind her. "I just can't believe it. I worked so hard for so long. And everything came down to one long shot."

She grabbed a soda instead of a beer, knowing she had to drive home later.

"You'll find something. You're talented, and you've got a kick-ass resume," Alex said in an attempt to reassure her.

She smiled at his unwavering support. "I'll give myself a short window to wallow in self-pity, and then I'm picking myself up and moving on."

"I wouldn't expect anything less from you. When things get rough, you never give in."

"Nope." Because if she had, she'd have become like her mother, and the one thing Riley had promised herself was, she would never be any man's doormat.

"I could make a few calls. Get your foot in the door at—"

"No. Thank you, but no. I can find something on my own."

Alex frowned. "Yet you had no problem calling *him*."

She raised her shoulders, unable to explain why she'd used Ian's name to try and save her job, even to herself.

"Never mind. You were desperate. I get it." Alex repeated what he'd said the first time she told him what she'd done. She'd been so upset with herself, and she'd felt worse when he hadn't even gotten angry. He'd merely pulled her into a hug.

When Alex was being rational, his jealousy and bitterness over how Ian treated him didn't come into play. She'd always sensed Alex would be more open to Ian and his brothers if Ian would do the same.

Alex took a long pull of beer. "The least he could have done was return your call."

"Well, maybe it's for the best. You know how much I hate asking for help. This way, I don't owe him anything."

An annoyed sound rumbled from deep in Alex's chest. "Yes, your best friend who makes millions knows how much you hate asking, taking, or even accepting help."

She shrugged, knowing how much she frustrated him, living in her one-bedroom apartment without a doorman. He considered her like one of his sisters and wanted her to move to a better neighborhood, but she was happy in her space and wanted to live on her own salary. She'd always felt the need to prove she could stand on her own, was worthy on her own merits, no matter what her father used to say.

"You're a pain in the ass," he said.

"At least you know I love you for yourself."

"Amen to that, sweetheart." He tipped his bottle her way. "I still can't believe the SOB didn't call you back," Alex said, returning to the subject of Ian. "It's not like *I* left the damn message," he muttered.

Remembering that kiss and the electricity that had practically crackled in the air around them, she was surprised too. Hadn't Ian been at least curious about what she'd wanted? If she weren't so upset about her career and her future, her feminine ego might be hurt.

"I nearly kicked his ass today," Alex said.

Riley choked on her soda. "You did what? Where did you see him?" She sat up straighter.

"I headed over to the draft hotel. I figured he needed to know what a selfish asshole he is."

"Alex," she groaned. She closed her eyes and leaned back against the sofa. "Couldn't you have let it alone?" Embarrassment already filled her at the thought of Ian's ignoring her call, let alone Alex confronting him over it.

"No, I could not. He needed to be taken down a peg. But don't worry. Dad was there, so we didn't get violent."

She glared at him from across the table.

"And I didn't tell him you lost your job either."

She exhaled long and hard. "Well, at least you spared me that."

He grinned. "Did I mention some of my teammates are coming by for poker tonight? You up to staying? You know the guys enjoy your company."

She groaned. "No thanks." She made a face. She wasn't in the mood for the guys or their crude humor.

He rose to his feet, collecting the pizza box. She stood and grabbed the empties. They cleaned up with an ease born of years of friendship. "Appreciate you being here for me," she said again.

"Always, Ri." He reached out to ruffle her hair, but, expecting the move, she ducked before he could reach her.

By the time she arrived home, she was exhausted. It didn't help that during the drive home, she mentally mapped out her future options, which mostly consisted of sending resumes to the big sports and distribution chains, some out of state. The thought of having to start over, prove her worth, and work her way back up the corporate ladder once more made her sick.

She loved Miami and didn't want to leave her stepmother or Alex and her other friends. There were other smaller local companies she planned to scope out, so all wasn't lost yet. And until all was lost, she wouldn't mention it to Alex. He'd only get upset and insist on helping. Obviously, people would bend over backwards to help the superstar, and his best friend by extension, but Riley really wanted to try and find a job on her own first.

She let herself into her building, walked up one flight to her apartment, and was startled to find someone waiting outside her door. Even in the dimly lit hall, she recognized Ian Dare's tall frame, dark hair, and handsome features. Excitement bubbled up inside her, followed by wariness.

"Finally," he said, leading her to believe he'd been standing there awhile.

She fought against her rapidly beating heart. "What are you doing here?"

~~He pushed off the wall and strode toward her. "Do you realize I walked into the building without being buzzed in? I just followed behind a couple who were too busy groping each other to pay attention to who was entering behind them."~~

He didn't have to further sum up his point. Riley already knew the argument well from Alex and her stepmom. "It's perfectly safe. I carry mace and I'm careful. And you still haven't answered my question."

Ian ran a hand through his hair, taking the time to tamp down on the anger that had been brewing inside him as he waited for her in this tiny hall that, despite her claim, was far from safe.

Not for a woman with her full breasts and curvy hips. Not for a woman with that mass of untamed hair and wild beauty, dressed in a short denim skirt with a ruffled edge and black sleeveless top that bared a hint of her stomach.

He fought for control over his libido and the desire to take her in every way imaginable. "I realize I didn't return your call, but I'm here now."

She met his gaze, brave and unwavering. "Go home. Whatever I needed from you, it's too late now."

His eyes narrowed. "That's what Alex said, but he refused to elaborate. He said it was your business, so I came to the source. I was busy this week. I had meetings for the draft, and I couldn't call you back."

She raised an eyebrow. "Bull. I'm guessing there are a whole host of reasons why you didn't get back to me. At the top of the list is that you hate Alex."

"I don't hate him." He clenched his hands and released them again, searching for focus. "Riley, you left me a message. Just tell me why."

"It's too late." She walked toward him as she spoke.

She passed him by, heading for her door, key in hand. "I already lost my job," she said as she slipped inside her apartment.

The door slammed closed behind her, leaving him basking in her scent.

"Son of a bitch." He knocked hard.

When she didn't answer, he tried again.

And again.

Worst-case scenario, he'd settle into the hallway for the night and wait to catch her when she left again in the morning. Unwilling to do that, he banged on the door again.

In the middle of his knock, she swung the door open wide.

"Fine. Come in," she said, her eyes narrowed and wary.

He stepped inside. Once enclosed in her small apartment, her luscious scent wrapped around him once more. His cock took a definite hit as desire filled him along with that burning need only she inspired. Knowing those feelings wouldn't be welcome, he took in her space. Bright colors on the walls, eclectic pieces of furniture, and a warm feel. She knew how to take a tiny area and make it feel like a true home.

"Can I get you something to drink?" she asked.

"No. I just want to know what happened."

She expelled a deep breath, causing her breasts to rise and fall beneath the flimsy material. He glanced down, trying not to ogle her cleavage because that made him want to test the weight of her breasts. And once he started touching her, he wouldn't be able to stop. Instead, he noticed her toenails were painted a bright orange, one toe surrounded by a thin silver ring. Even her fucking feet were

sexy.

“I worked for Blunt Sporting Goods,” she said, unaware of his train of thought. “I was head of their distribution and sales department. The company was sold; the new boss is an ass and began laying people off. I pulled a Hail Mary and told him I had an in with you, that I could get some of our products distributed to the team. He gave me until Friday to get back to him with something substantial. I called. You didn’t. End of story.” She strode over to the door and swung it open, obviously eager to get rid of him.

He stared in stunned surprise. “You told him that after meeting me for the first time on Saturday night?”

She raised her chin. “Yep.”

“After our kiss.”

Her cheeks turned a healthy pink. “Mmm-hmm.”

“After you walked away from me without a second glance.”

She blinked up at him. “I looked back,” she said softly.

He narrowed his gaze. “You’ve got nerve.”

“So I’ve been told.” She grinned.

He smiled back.

She obviously realized they were sharing a moment and turned off the megawatt grin. “So now you know. You can go now.” She tilted her chin toward the hallway.

Pride. She had it in spades and didn’t like him knowing she’d lost her job. He respected that. Too bad he wasn’t about to leave her now.

He shook his head, silently telling her he was staying. The guilt he’d felt when his brother told him he’d caused Riley problems was only magnified now that he knew how. Based on how angry Alex had been on her behalf, he cared about her deeply. He looked after her. And that was something else Ian could respect. Friendship with his half brother, Ian could work around.

But first, there was the issue of her job.

“I realize you don’t know me, but you’re going to. Because you brought me into your world by calling me, I caused a problem for you. Now I’m obligated to fix it.”

She leaned against the still-open door. “You can’t, because we both know you’re committed to whoever you already purchase from, and I shouldn’t have opened my big mouth.”

So she’d realized the way of things in the business. Although that ought to alleviate his guilt over her losing her job, it didn’t. “Maybe not, but if I’d returned your call, there are other people I could have referred you to who could have given your company business.”

“We’ll never know, now will we?”

“About that? No.” Pretending to be tough and unconcerned didn’t fool him for a second.

She lived in this building, in a not-great part of town, because it was all she could afford. With Ian’s background in owning investment property, he could figure out her approximate income and rent and knew, though she might have a small savings, she couldn’t afford to be unemployed for an extended period of time. So she’d panicked and called him, which meant he owed her.

But that wasn’t why he was still here. He wanted to help. She might not let his brother do it, but Ian damned well intended to.

“What are your plans now?” he asked.

She slowly shut the door, obviously realizing he had no intention of leaving. “I’ll send out resumes like any job-seeking person would,” she said, as if he were dense not to have figured her next step out for himself.

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