

Torn
HEARTS

M.E. GORDON

I needed time to at least talk to Simon and explain there was somebody else—but Spencer wouldn't listen...

I had mind blowing sex last night but I didn't remember making this official. I still needed to talk to Simon. At the very least he deserved—he deserved someone better than me. That was what this all boiled down to. I had turned into the one thing I used to despise, a careless, thoughtless, wishy-washy, Barbie and a slutty one at that. Everything had felt so good in the moment, but I was drunk and not thinking. *What am I going to say to Simon? Fuck, what am I going to say to Spencer?*

“Spencer I—”

“Don't,” he said, sighing and holding his hand up. “Don't even start with the excuses. You chose to be here with me. Why the fuck do you keep doing this to me if you're in love with him?” he roared, slamming his fist into the mattress.

“I don't know if I'm in love with him—”

Cutting me off, he stood from the bed, and his deep voice shook the walls as he spoke. “Now!” he spit, as he moved closer to me. “Choose now!” he growled.

“I can't,” I said back as sternly as I could.

“You can't or you won't?” Taking a step back, he turned from me shoving his hands through his tousled hair, the muscles in his back flexed, and I nearly went knees to the floor.

“You can't have us both, Elizabeth. You either stay with me, be with only me, love only me—or fucking leave.”

His words were raw and savage as he turned back to face me. I couldn't talk, so I simply stared up at him. *This isn't happening, is it? Things were perfect five minutes ago, now everything is just wrong. It's all wrong.*

Coming quickly toward me, he grabbed my upper arms, taking me to lie down on the bed. He stared into my eyes before running his hand up the inside of my thigh. Two fingers slid deep inside me. Who was I kidding? Just seeing him made me aroused and arguing with him only made it worse.

A tale as old as time—a girl, tall and wispy, hair the color of the sun, eyes as blue as the sky, caught in a love triangle with the noblest of men...Not in this book, honey!

Okay so maybe I am caught up in a love triangle, but I'm sure as hell not running through a field of daisies in a sun dress. My name is Elizabeth and I've managed to avoid men for most of my life. I wasn't a nun by any means, but I know what the hot guys want—and it usually isn't me. How I got myself involved in a love triangle with one sexy photographer and a millionaire bachelor, who had women worshipping the ground he walked on, is beyond me. Yet, here I am, attempting to navigate waters that I've never expected to. Trying to figure out which man was right for me, dealing with my family—and have I told you about the paparazzi? Well, it's all really making me rethink the situation. Who do I trust? Who's being genuine? What should I do if both men are perfect for me in different ways? How the hell am I supposed to choose just one? Or better yet, do I *have* to choose just one?

KUDOS for *Torn Hearts*

In *Torn Hearts* by M. E. Gordon, Elizabeth Monroe is a slightly overweight beauty who isn't used to having men pursue her. Now all of a sudden two handsome and well to do bachelors want her for their own. Due to her insecurities, she pushes both of them away. But both men refuse to go, and Elizabeth finds herself in a quandary. Does she choose the one she really wants, or does she choose the one she thinks she deserves, or at least the one she thinks she can keep? I thought the book very credible, with realistic characters and true to life situations. It just goes to show how your own insecurities can mess up your life if you let them. As a steamy romance, there is plenty of sexual tension and some very hot love scenes. What's not to like? ~ *Taylor Jones, Reviewer*

Torn Hearts by M. E. Gordon is about a woman who's not a perfect size 6 and who is very self-conscious about her size. The last thing she expects is to have two men in hot pursuit. And I do mean hot. The one she wants is not the one she thinks she can have, so she settles. Never a good idea at the best of times and as Elizabeth discovers it can be disastrous. The story is very well written, with believable characters dealing with realistic problems. Okay, maybe not so realistic, as how many of us chunkies have two hunks after them, one a millionaire? But you know what I mean. It's also a thought-provoking treatise on how screwed up people can get when they don't fit what society thinks of as acceptable. ~ *Regan Murphy, Reviewer*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Writing the story was always easy for me. I have a mind that goes a mile a minute, thinking up characters and the crazy scenarios that they get themselves in, but if it wasn't for these people, there would be no M.E. Gordon.

I want to first off thank my husband Shaun for giving me the opportunity to be in my head and giving me the time I needed to put those characters on paper. I love you so much and I truly wouldn't be able to call myself an author if it wasn't for you.

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It's hard to find people that will give you their honest opinion about your story. Most want to inflate you with compliments to avoid hurting your feelings, but lucky me, I have a great group or women on my side. Dora, without you helping me along the way and encouraging me, I think I'd still be on chapter one! Aileen, thank you for being my spell check, wording, and grammar wiz because things would be a hot mess if you weren't there to help. Thank you to my sister-in-law Jessica. Together we changed and talked about things until we were blue in the face. Our meetings at the library when we got kicked out at closing and yelled at for having drinks and snacks (who can work without either is still beyond me) I'll cherish those fun nights with you.

To my development team...or person, Meaghan. I don't know what I'd do if I didn't have you to bounce my crazy ideas off of. Thank you for listening and jumping into my sometimes scattered brain to help navigate an outline with me.

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Thank you to my parents, especially my mom for reading my crazy ideas before they were even a story. We were going through

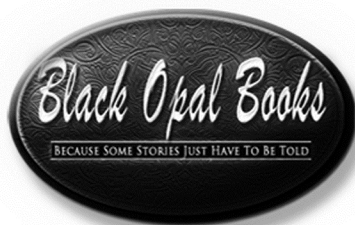
a rough time when I started this journey and I feel like this book brought us back together. Dad, I love you! Please, never read this book!

Lastly, I'd like to dedicate my first novel to my Grandmother, Irene. I used to ask her why she read so many books. I thought it was stupid, and a waste of time. I wish you were still here to read my first novel. I wish I would have known you even more than I did, because I think we could have been best friends. I think we were more alike than I would have liked to admit back when you were alive. I hope you can forgive me and are proud of me.

torn
HEARTS

M. E. GORDON

A Black Opal Books Publication



GENRE: CONTEMPORARY ROMANCE/WOMEN'S FICTION

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DEDICATION

To MomMom

Chapter 1

Beth

My heart rate accelerated as we pull up to the popular DC night club, Mood. I was currently sitting in a limo that my brothers sent over to retrieve my best friend Gia and me. Taking a steadying breath, I took a peek out the window. Of course, they had a small red carpet set out for celebrities and socialites like my brothers.

Let me make this a little clearer, I don't do this.

I didn't go out dressed up like I was right now. I glanced back at Gia who looked anything but anxious. She was in her element right now, and I...well, I was not!

I preferred sitting at home reading a good book. It was a passion of mine. My Gran was an avid reader. What could I say? I took after her and my mother, who happened to have been an editor in-chief for a big publishing company. I guess I could have followed in her footsteps, but I had a passion for History. With only a few classes left, I was well on my way to restoring books at the Library of Congress. Still, no matter how many books I'd read, nothing could prepare me for nights like tonight.

Sure limos, nice dresses, socialites, photographers, it all sounded like a great time, and maybe it was, but not for me. *Do you have any idea how difficult it is to find an appealing outfit for a size twelve, tall, curvy, twenty-three-year-old? Well I'll tell you, it's nearly impossible!*

Sure there were things in my size, but that wasn't the problem. The problem was feeling exposed, and not in a good way—the bad way, like every-inch-of-fat-had-been-magnified-by-tight-fabric

way. Even Gia, the fashion stylist in training, had a hard time finding me something to wear. It' was mortifying.

I didn't know what I was more worried about, falling on my ass or getting my picture taken. Oh, right. It was falling on my ass *while* getting my picture taken. I tried my hardest to get Gia to go in the side entrance, but clearly, I lost that battle.

Gia stepped out first, thankfully. The cameras were snapping away like crazy, but why wouldn't they be? She looked like a movie star in her short gray dress and sparkling heels. Smiling at the cameras and swaying her long blonde hair, she posed like it was second nature to her.

Taking a deep breath, I closed my eyes. I could do this. *Just get out of the car and don't fall on your ass.* With one last, quick prayer, I scooted over and let my foot glide out of the limo. Holding on tight to the door handle, I exited the limo and cautiously made my way over toward the sea of cameras. I clung tight to the shawl that was covering most of the red dress that I had finally found, after hours of shopping with Gia.

I stopped moving when the photographers started snapping a few pictures. Maybe they thought I was a lighter haired Kardashian or something. It didn't take but a few seconds for them to find out I wasn't.

"She's nobody!" I heard one of the snakes say to his neighbor.

Knives, meet my heart...ouch! I wanted to run back to the limo or into the safety of the dark club, but I couldn't move. I glanced over in Gia's direction where she was using her hands to take off an invisible jacket. I guessed she was telling me to take my shawl off? I couldn't help but think that this was a very stupid idea. And, of course, against my better judgment, I did it anyway.

I quickly un-wrapped the fabric. My long, wavy, brown hair fell against my bare back and exposed cleavage. The unseasonably, cool air brushed against my arms, making a chill run up my spine. This dress was perfect, practically made for me. It hit all my curves and pushed my boobs and ass up too. But most importantly, it flattened my stomach—magic!

The wall of cameras turns back to me. I guess they think I might be someone worth photographing after all.

"Red Dress—Red dress, can we get a name?"

I turned in the direction of the warm voice and felt the heat rise to my cheeks. Embarrassment? Flattery? I tried to make out the

person calling to me as I scanned the wall of photographers. My eyes were instantly drawn to a handsome man with shaggy, sandy hair and muscular build. Well, I'd like to think it was muscles under the sweat shirt he had on. I squinted to get a better look but lost sight of him as the flashes went off.

"A name?" another man called.

"Elizabeth Monroe," I answered back.

Chapter 2

We were sitting in the empty VIP area, sipping the drinks that the waitress had just dropped off. Gia and I scanned the room as more and more people entered and started dancing. My brothers both arrived with new girls. There was no doubt in my mind they'd only brought them to look good on their arms. *Beautiful people using beautiful people, such a vicious cycle. Glad I'm not involved.*

Getting up from one of the many white couches to greet my brothers, I was relieved when it wasn't as difficult as I imagined. *Tight dress, heels, me, I'm sure you get where I'm going with this.*

"Well, well, look who decided to grace us with her presence."

"Hello Charles," I said smiling, while he cringed at his proper name.

"Will you ever just call me Chuck like everyone else?" he asked, giving me a big brother hug.

"Nope, I like watching you squirm."

Shaking his head, he took a step back to admire me from a distance. "Really Beth? You choose tonight, of all nights, not to look like a frumpy, housewife. We're meeting with an important business partner, and now I'm going to be distracted, trying to make sure guys don't try to...to...ugh, I don't even want to think about it," he said, pushing me away and into the arms of my beloved brother Teddy.

"Beth you look beautiful," he whispered in my ear because he knew I didn't like all the attention. "Unfortunately, I'm going to have to agree with Chuck on this one."

He smiled down at me, kissing my forehead. Out of the corner of my eye, I caught Gia hugging Charles a little bit too long. I

couldn't help rolling my eyes. I knew she had a crush on him. She had for the past five years. I just thought that she would have gotten the memo. Charles was the playboy and Teddy was the keeper.

I'd been told by so called "friends" that my brothers were attractive. Sure, they both looked like Abercrombie and Fitch models—which, I thought, Charles did for a while. In all fairness, they possessed every beautiful feature my parents could have given them. *Tall, well built, perfect hair, perfect teeth, perfect eyes...do I have to go on? I'm getting more depressed just thinking about it. Why the hell did they have to get all the pretty genes? I'm the girl for Christ's sake.*

The more people started trickling into the VIP section, the more insignificant I felt. I didn't come to places like this ever. How Gia had wrangled me into this was still a mystery. One minute I was unpacking from summer break, then the next I was shopping for a dress.

I sat in a chair off to the back and people watched. As I glanced across the club, a man entered with two bodyguards. He caught my attention. My initial reaction was that it had to be someone famous. Who else would come into a club with bodyguards? I stood up to get a better look, but didn't recognize him at all—just another rich, attractive guy coming to the club to pick up a "Gia."

Okay fine, I guess you can say I'm jealous. Oh, for Christ's sake, I'm jealous, just because she can get picked up by a hot guy and I can't. Skinny bitches, I thought, as I looked down at the floor and shook my head.

When I looked back up, the Greek God was still making his way across the club and over towards the VIP area. I stared, openly gawking at him while his well-dressed body made its way through the crowd. The sea of people on the dance floor moved like he was Moses parting the Red Sea. *Wait a minute. Is he looking at me?* I couldn't take my eyes off of him as he ran his fingers through the dark hair atop his head. *Oh hell no, I'm dreaming or hallucinating. Someone must have put something in my drink.*

Brought back to reality by the pain from the heels Gia let me borrow, I quickly sat back down. Leaning over, I rubbed the back of my ankle, basking in the relief. I wasn't even standing that long and I hadn't even started dancing yet. *See, this is why I don't wear heels.* Closing my eyes, I let my head fall onto my crossed knee, as I continued to relieve my aching foot.

Fingers grazed the side of my ankle, and I froze, because it wasn't my fingers doing the grazing. Something was happening to me. I'd never been so out of my own body. Although the mystery fingers stopped moving, the skin under them felt on fire.

What do I do? Scream? No, whose ever hand this was felt too good to scream. It would probably sound more like a moan. Instinct took over and I slowly lifted my eyes to follow the fingers. Mesmerizing was the only way I could describe the sea-blue eyes that met mine as a strand of dark hair fell on the forehead of the Greek God.

I could only imagine what my face looked like in that moment. A mouth gaping blow-up doll came to mind. *Why wouldn't it be the Greek God?* I glanced back down to where his hand was still around my ankle. Why the hell was he touching my ankle?

I perused his crouching body. No doubt he saw the confusion on my face because he let go and stood hastily before me. He was the most attractive man I had ever laid eyes on. I was finding it hard to focus on anything but his face. The loud music quieted and all the people around us disappeared, while I studied him.

"I'm sorry. I thought you might have hurt yourself."

Oh God, he sounds as good as he looks, he's definitely not human.

Say something Beth, tell him you're okay.

My throat was completely sealed. There were no words escaping any time soon. I smiled up at him and shrugged my shoulders with a little chuckle. I instantly wanted to melt into the chair and pray that this awkward situation would just end. Moving the hair from his forehead, he smiled back. *Oh my God, you could solve world peace with that megawatt smile.*

Before I could stand up and give a proper response, Charles came barreling over, making the Greek God turn away from me.

"Mr. Salvatore, it's great to finally meet you, please come with me and I'll introduce you to my brother Teddy."

Before I knew it, the ankle rubbing Greek God had a name and was taken away right before my eyes, not even a second glance back.

After gaining my composure, I watched as Charles ushered him away. He completely ignored me, in typical Charles fashion, not even bothering to introduce me. Well, now that I felt even more

insignificant than usual, I thought it was time to go. I looked down at my phone. *New record, forty-five minutes.*

I looked back and saw Teddy shaking hands. My in-tune brother caught my gaze and mouthed “Are you okay?”

I nodded back, as a wave of guilt hit me. *I should stay.* Teddy was here and I didn’t get to see him as often as I’d like to. So once again, against my usual better judgment, I pointed over to the restrooms. Turning on my six-inch heels, I made my way across the dance floor, all the while thinking about my chance encounter with a Greek God, or Mr. Salvatore as my brother had called him. *Why did that name sound so familiar?*

I reached the restrooms and, as always, there was a line. While waiting, I overheard two Bratz-looking dolls talking.

“Oh, my God did you see him, Courtney? Pictures do not do him justice!” one said.

“I know. I still can’t believe we are in the same building as Spencer Salvatore, well worth the wait in line.”

At the sound of his name, I found myself butting into their not so private, drunken conversation.

They clearly knew who he was and my curiosity was getting the better of me. I couldn’t help myself but to ask, “Umm, excuse me, who is Spencer Salvatore?”

The two girls turned toward me and looked at me as if I’d just asked the dumbest question in the world.

“Uh, he’s only one of the most attractive men in the universe. Not to mention one of the most eligible bachelors,” the blonde doll said as she swooned over in the direction of the VIP area.

“He owns, like, every popular nightclub and bar on the east and west coast,” the other added.

I suddenly felt stupid. I knew my brothers were meeting someone, in hopes of having them help open their own nightclub. I should have put two and two together.

“And most importantly, he’s, like, top fifteen on the Forbes list. The man could buy an island if he wanted to,” the first one said.

Well, I sure got all the information I needed from Thing One and Thing Two. Kind of weird that someone as exquisite as Spencer Salvatore was touching my feet. My cheeks flushed as my mind wandered back to the soft caress of his fingers on my ankle. A shiver ran through me and I shook my head to get the memory out, because that was all it was ever going to be, a memory.

Things like that didn't happen to girls like me. We didn't get swooped off our feet and carried away by the rich, attractive bachelor. Nope, we were the best friend of the girl who got swooped off her feet by the man who would never see us as sexy or alluring. Unfortunately, I knew this first hand.

On my way back to the VIP section, I did a quick Salvatore scan but he was nowhere to be found. He probably got what he came for and left. The dance floor was packed as I shimmied between people dancing. I got halfway when I ran into Gia and Charles dancing.

"Beth! There you are. Stay, dance with us!" Gia shouted over the loud music, while Charles held her around her waist. *Disgusting.*

"Let me go do a couple of shots and I will get the courage to come bust a move with you guys," I said before I walked away.

I saw some shots sitting on one of the tables and downed them one after another. I thought I stopped at four, but it very well could have been more. *Liquid courage!* I was ready to join them now. Feeling buzzed, I started swaying my hips to the music. These curves were good for something and, luckily, I had some rhythm to go with them. Gia and I took a few more shots and continued dancing and singing at the top of our lungs. She leaned over, telling me that she was going to sit down. I nodded back, letting her know I heard her. Charles said something in my ear, but all I heard was, "Blah...Blah...Blah."

I lost myself in the music and felt free. *Maybe I should come out more often.* I felt so liberated. Alcohol could do that to a girl. My eyes got heavy and my movements became more drunkenly. I lost my balance, but two hands saved me as they gently landed on my hips and pulled me toward the mystery person they were attached to.

I turned around, wishfully thinking that it was that Salvatore God, but it wasn't. I looked at the man in front of me, sandy hair, good looks, and a nice thick body. It was the freaking photographer from outside and, damn he smelled good—some kind of aftershave I guessed—charming. In that moment, right then, I didn't care who the hell he was.

I felt amazing as we danced together. I saw now why Gia came out all the time. *If guys did this every time, I might become a little more familiar with the night scene.* His hands were tight around

me and his warm breath tickled my neck. I pushed back against him, wrapping my arm around his muscular shoulders. When I did, he sprawled his hand across my stomach. *Oh crap!* I instantly sucked my stomach in, but I wasn't sure how successful I was, since I was pretty much three sheets to the wind. I needed to stop this before he felt something not so attractive.

"Hey, do you want to come over and sit at the VIP with me?" I managed to say, turning to face him, the words slightly slurred. I expected him to say "No," and "Thanks for the feel up."

"Sure, lead the way, sexy."

He was mere centimeters from my lips. *Breathe, Beth! What the hell was going on around here tonight? Some rich, beautiful bachelor felt my legs up and now this gorgeous guy called me sexy.* I quickly squeezed my arm as we make our way through the crowd.

"Ouch!" I said loudly.

"Huh? Did you say something?" he asked as his breath warmed my neck again.

Nope, you are not dreaming.

The photographer helped me up the few steps. My dress popped in color off the starch, white couches as we sat down.

"So," I said looking at him.

Gorgeous, his eyes were a soft brown, his features... stunning. I couldn't believe he was a photographer. He could easily be a male model.

"So," he said back. "My name's Simon."

I had met men like him before, the ones that threw all the right lines and talked their way in and out of everything. I didn't know them personally, but I'd seen plenty of them try to pick Gia up.

He held out his hand and I put mine in his, still skeptical, but intrigued to see what he would do next. "Elizabeth."

"I know," he said. "Elizabeth Monroe. It's a pleasure to be in your beautiful presence."

Is this guy for real? Come on, really? I'm drunk, but this is a bit much to believe. I smiled back and lowered my head shaking it in disbelief. "You don't have to do that, act like you're interested in me just to get to the VIP section." I made sure he could hear the annoyance in my words.

With a raised brow and soft face, he looked me in the eyes, grabbing my hands that were resting in my lap. “Who said I wasn’t interested?”

Wow, his hands are soft, damn it! I’m not being that girl, not tonight.

“Come on, I know how this works. I see it all the time,” I said coolly, sliding my hands out from his. I had to look toward the crowd as I spoke. *Stay strong.* “Be nice to the chubby girl and get in. I know how you paparazzi are.”

“You really have no idea how beautiful you look tonight, do you? You’re not chubby. Whoever told you that is just jealous, and I’m not with the paparazzi,” he finished.

Heat rushed to my cheeks. Being flattered by men was something that just didn’t happen to me. Insecurely, I lowered my head and rubbed my aching limbs. I couldn’t look at him right now.

Catching a shadow, I looked up and saw Charles standing in front of me, all big-brother-to-the-rescue.

“Beth, can I have a word?” Charles’s voice sounded annoyed.

I glanced over at picture boy, who seemed to be waiting patiently. I indicated I would be right back, as I got up and walked away with Charles.

“What?” I spat at his face, annoyance dripping off me.

“Are you all right? Is this guy bothering you? Just give me the word and I’ll make him go away. You know I will.”

Still feeling tipsy, I almost lost my balance twice. I placed a hand on my brother’s strong shoulder. “I’m F—F—Fine.” I said, managing to stumble the words out.

“Really? I’m not so sure about that.”

“Listen, Charles—” As I began to reprimand my brother, something stopped me and stilled every fiber in my body.

Across the way, that Salvatore God was staring over at us. I blinked my eyes to see if I was imagining it. *Nope*, he was still there. I stared back at him. There was no expression on his face.

He was just standing there like a beautiful sculpture. Slowly he turned, leaving from sight, but his image was burned into my mind.

“Elizabeth,” Charles said, shaking me out of my God-knew-how-long trance.

“Huh?” I said, looking back at his worried face.

“Damn, Salvatore was right. You are done. I think it’s time to go. You don’t need hounds like this trying to take advantage of you.” He nodded over in picture boy’s direction.

“Wait—Salvatore was talking about me?” I asked.

“Yeah, we were finishing up when he saw you and douche bag over here. He thought it might be a good idea to come get you before something happened that you might regret in the morning.”

Mr. Salvatore was concerned about little ole me? I was shocked. “Did he say anything else?” I asked, a little too hopeful.

“Nope, not really.” Charles had a vicious, what-do-you-expect look on his face. The kind that I got all the time. It was even harder to have your own flesh and blood belittle you.

“Well, things are dying down and I’m not trying to close the place, so let’s go baby girl,” Charles demanded.

“Whatever, Charles, I’m going to stay a little longer. Do you know where Gia’s at?” I asked, scanning the crowd for her.

“No, you’re not staying here by yourself and Gia is just as trashed as you. She’s with Teddy getting the car. I was sent to get you,” he said, crossing his arms and trying to sound intimidating.

“What if I don’t want to go with you? I’m having a good time for once. Geez, you people are ridiculous. You bitch when I don’t come out and, when I do, you make me leave when I’m actually having a good time.” I folded my arms across my chest and pouted at the floor like a two-year-old.

While in my two-year-old pout, I saw two, well-polished shoes standing in front of me. I followed up the legs to the slender, fit waist and broad shoulders. *This isn’t happening.* I blinked a few times, but Spencer Salvatore was standing in front of me and next to what I thought was my good-looking brother. Spencer was by far the most attractive man in the universe, no joke. He kind of made my brother look ordinary. I liked the thought of Charles being average. It made me chuckle inside.

“Spencer, I thought you left.” Charles voice was high and he seemed taken off guard.

“I thought I forgot something. I saw you talking to your sister and figured I’d properly introduce myself.” He smiled at me, his blue eyes absolutely breathtaking. Taking my hand in his, he brought it to his perfect lips and gently skimmed the top of my knuckles. The feeling of his lips on my skin went through my body like an electric shock, waking my insides with a spark of fire.

“Miss Monroe, it’s nice to meet you, my name is Spencer Salvatore.”

A sad little, “Hello,” was all I could muster out of my voice box. *Figures.*

“Well, it was a pleasure. I got what I came back for, and I’ll see you two around.” Just like that, he turned and walked away again.

“Okay, Beth, for real, let’s get lost. It’s two in the morning. I’m beat and your little friend got scared and ran away,” he said, pointing to where picture boy had been sitting.

“Fine, my buzz is gone, anyway. Let me go grab my shawl and we can leave.” As I reached down to the couch, I noticed a folded piece of paper where I was sitting. I grabbed the paper, hidden under my shawl, and walked out of the club with my brother. *Not how I pictured myself leaving twenty minutes ago, but at least someone possibly left me a note.*

Chapter 3

Light was shining through my window, which I had forgotten to close the night before as well as change my clothes. My head was pounding as I crawled out of bed. I stripped out of my new favorite dress and jumped in the shower.

The warm water ran over my face, washing away all the beautiful make-up and hair products until I was plain old Beth again. I stepped out of the shower and began drying myself off. Bending down, I dried my ankles and, in that simple action, everything from last night came rushing back—Spencer’s gentle fingers on my leg and his soft lips on my hand. I stood abruptly and wrapped the towel around my body. Sitting on my bed, I tried to recall every little detail about him.

Falling back in a flush of bizarre giddiness—*because I don’t do giddy*—my hand slid over a piece of paper. *The note!* I had totally forgotten that I even had it in my hand when I passed out last night. I held the note in my hands, opening it to see beautifully scripted handwriting.

You intrigue me. Miss Monroe. ~ S

Are you kidding me? Really? They couldn’t just write their full name. My mind started racing. It could be from Spencer. He did say he left something behind. Maybe he placed the note on the couch. Or it could have been Simon. I thought that was his name.

Who am I kidding? I’d probably never find out. No name, no number, another mean joke at my expense.

There was a loud knock at the door, which nearly made me fall off the bed.

“Gia, you got that?” I waited for a response “Gia, I just got out of the shower,” I called to her again, but all I heard from her room was a low grumble of what I thought was drunken English, saying no. *All right, I guess I’ll just get it myself.*

I wrapped the towel even tighter around my voluptuous curves and went for the door. Looking through the peep hole, I saw a man standing with a vase full of red roses. I looked down at the towel around me and contemplated opening the door. Maybe he had the wrong condo number. When he didn’t turn to leave and knocked again, I figured I’d better answer.

I opened the door just a crack.

“Are you Miss Monroe?” the delivery guy asked.

“Yes?” I answered, frowning.

“I have a delivery for you,” he said sarcastically, holding the flowers up toward the door.

“Huh?” *Now I know why everyone hates my sarcasm.*

“Of course.” He handed the big arraignment of flowers to me then turned, tipped his invisible hat, and exited down the hall.

I rested on the closed door and took a deep breath. Gia came out of her room and perked up when she caught sight of them. “Oh, flowers for me? I wonder who they’re from?” she said, skipping over.

“Actually, they were sent to me.”

Her excitement dropped off and a depressed “Oh,” left her mouth before she could stop it. “I didn’t mean it like that,” she said, making a quick recovery. “Well, open the card. I want to see who the hell sent you flowers,” she demanded.

I pulled out the card and read.

*Saw these beautiful flowers this morning
and thought of you ~ S*

Nope, this can’t be happening, there must be some mix up.

“Well, what does it say?” she asked, greedily taping her fingers together.

“Here,” I said, handing it to her.

She read it and looked up with wide eyes. “Is it from that guy you were dancing with all night?”

Yeah, him or the ankle-touching Greek God. I made sure to keep that securely locked in my head, though.



The next Saturday morning, I was drinking my tea and scanning the Internet for any interesting news. I clicked on the infamous gossip page, Fame, because they always had the latest scoop. I wasn't surprised to see a picture of my brothers, smiling and posing with Spencer Salvatore, the night outside of Mood.

Oh God, he even looks good on the gossip page. Unfortunately, my brothers looked just as handsome standing next to him. Disgusted by their good looks, I quickly clicked the over button to go to the next page.

Holy Fuck! Was that me or just someone that kind of resembled a better looking me? Nope, that was, without a doubt, me, and that was clearly Spencer Salvatore on his knees, caressing my ankle.

The next picture was him kissing my hand. Some crazy paparazzi had sneaked a camera in and snapped the pictures. Some pretty good ones at that.

I stared, wide eyed. The memory made my stomach flutter as I thought back to the way his voice danced around my ears and how his soft lips felt on the back of my hand. Below one of the pictures, the caption read:

Spencer Salvatore, seen with beautiful vixen in sexy Ann Robin cocktail dress and vintage heels. Watch out, ladies, Mr. Salvatore might be off the market soon. He looks absolutely smitten, wouldn't you agree?

I had to read and re-read the caption a couple of times to make sure I wasn't just willing the words on the page. Suddenly, it hit me, reality. Everyone who followed Fame, or even Spencer, would be looking at me as the vixen trying to weasel my way into his life. I could already see future posts in my head. *Who does this fat girl think she is? She can't steal the modern day sex symbol.* Ouch. I wasn't sure I could handle all that. Hopefully, no one would recognize me. I would be keeping my fingers, toes, arms, and legs crossed.

"What are you looking at, all face in the screen?" Gia asked, entering the kitchen.

I shot my head up from the computer and slammed it shut. “Nothing! Just the news,” I said, as casually as possible.

“I find that hard to believe. Let’s see it. What are you looking at?” she asked, trying to grab my laptop.

Thank God for good reflexes. I was able to move it before she could snatch it. “You were out late last night. I didn’t even here you come in,” I said, thinking fast on my feet to change the subject.

She held her hand to her head.

“I take it was a wild night,” I said.

“It was so much fun. You should have come with me. Your brothers were even there,” she said through a grin.

“I told you last week that it was a onetime thing?” I said, glaring at her.

“Well, you’re going to wish you would have,” she said teasingly.

What was she getting at? *Let’s not play dumb with yourself, Beth. You know exactly what you want her to say and it involves a particular pair of beautiful, blue eyes.*

I watched as Gia walked back to the kitchen. She handed me a folded piece of paper. I took it with an anxious hand and saw the same beautiful script as the very first note.

Missed you tonight. ~ S

I stood there, bewildered again. “I give up, I must be cursed!” I said.

Snatching the paper from my hand, she read it out loud then sat down next to me.

“Who gave this to you?” I ask, frustrated.

“Just some random guy. I had never seen him before. He just told me to give it to Miss Monroe,” Gia said, smelling the flowers.

Once again, Beth is getting the run around. It has to be some kind of joke. What can I say? I have experience in this area. Even though that was in middle school, I have learned my lesson. Trust no one, especially men.

I took the note back from Gia, stomped back to my room, and place it with the other two. I didn’t have time to play silly games. I did have a life, and this wasn’t middle school. I wasn’t going to let

this affect me. I walked over, pulled a random book off my shelf, and dove into it head first, not looking back.

Chapter 4

Ah, the last first day of school. I walked up to the common area, taking in the fresh, fall air. What was with all these people just standing around? Students, teachers—and the closer I got I saw—

What the hell are the paparazzi doing here? God, I hope there not here for me.

“Hey, Tina,” I called to a fellow History major. “What the heck is going on over there?” I asked, pointing to all the commotion.

“You didn’t hear? It’s been all over campus and the Internet.”

Here we go—my demise.

“Danny Fenton, you know, the singer?” she continued. “He’s starting his freshman year here.”

Oh, thank God. I finally released the breath I had been holding for the whole conversation. “Just what we need our last year, Teeny Boppers.” I glanced over in the direction of the building that I had to navigate toward. *Figures they would all be camped out at the building I have to go in.*

I was almost to the safety of the building. I just had to make it up the front stairs.

“Hey, red dress!”

I froze on the stairs as I recognized the voice calling. I immediately whipped around, but dropped my books in the process. Before I bent down to pick the books up, I scanned the crowd and saw people whispering as they looked me up and down. *Oh, shit, please don’t let them recognize me in my regular jeans and T-shirt.* I quickly knelt down to retrieve my books while simultaneously hiding my face.

“Let me help you.”

I looked up to see Simon kneel next to me. I'd thought that was his voice. "I'm sorry I startled you," he said. "I just wanted to get your attention."

Mission accomplished. Standing, I looked up into his warm brown eyes. He had his sandy hair tucked under a backward baseball hat and was even more handsome than I remembered. He definitely rivaled Salvatore with his boy-next-door good looks.

"How are you doing?" he asked.

Geez, I don't know...how about totally confused? "I'm doing well."

His lush lips turned up when I finally spoke.

"Did you get the flowers?"

Flowers? So he sent the mystery flowers. "Yes. They were beautiful. I wanted to tell whoever sent them thank you, but there was no name," I said, crossing my arms. *I can't wait to hear this excuse.*

"I'm sorry. I thought that guy was your boyfriend."

Boyfriend? My mind rewound back as fast as it could. *Charles.* "Oh, he's not my boyfriend. That's my brother, Charles." *The pain in the ass, that he is.* "Wait, how did you know where to send the flowers?" I asked.

"Well, I knew your name and the Internet did the rest," he said.

Okay, a little creepy that he knows where I live, but let's face it. He's, without a doubt, the most attractive man that has ever talked to me without being friends of my brothers.

"Hey, would you like to go get some coffee?" he asked.

Stay cool, Beth, act casual. Yeah, like guys this hot ask you out all the time. How the hell am I supposed to stay cool? I probably look like a bumbling fool.

"Yeah. That would be great!"

Oh, that came off a little overly enthusiastic. Bring it back a notch or two. "I mean, I have class now, but if you can wait till I'm done, I can." *Much better.*

"Sure, I can wait, I have to get my shots anyway," he said, holding up his camera.

Not paparazzi. huh? I find that hard to believe.

"Okay. I will see you after my class."

"Can't wait."

I turned and headed back up the stairs and into the building.



After what seemed like an eternity, class had finally ended. As I rounded the corner of the building toward the benches, there sat a perfectly proportioned man, typing on his phone, a huge smile on his face. A dark gray T-shirt hugged his clearly worked-out arms, and the blue jeans he had on were just tight enough to not look girly.

“Hey, are you ready to head out?” I called as I walked over toward him.

Quickly putting his phone in his ratty old backpack, he looked over at me and stood to meet me halfway. “Yeah, where would you like to go?” he asked.

“There’s a nice little café right off campus.” I suggested this place because I knew it like the back of my hand. I had spent many a night cozying up with a book there. So just in case this guy was a psycho, I’d have home field advantage, plus I knew everyone that worked there.

“Sounds great, lead the way,” he said, holding his arm out.

We got our drinks, which Simon very kindly paid for, and sat down in a cozy love seat at the back of the café.

“So,” I said, taking a sip of my tea and placing it on the table next to me.

“So,” he said back, a smile turning his lips up.

Déjà-vu much? “So, you *are* with the paparazzi?” I asked, getting straight to it.

“No,” he said, sounding nervous, which clearly meant yes to me. “It’s complicated,” he continued.

“Try me,” I said, taking another sip of my drink.

“Well, I work for celebrities and businesses. They contract me out to get good pictures of them and their businesses.”

So he was using me. I should have guessed and he was probably using me now.

“Okay. Well, thanks for the coffee. I think it’s best to just, ya know, move on.” I stood from the couch, but didn’t move as his hand held on to mine.

“Where are you going?” he asked, almost nervously.

“I get it, Simon, you just needed an ‘in’ to get pictures of my brothers or Spencer Salvatore. I’m not going to give you the chance to do that again.”

Letting go of my arm, he stood, blocking my exit. “Elizabeth, please, I want to get to know you. Just give me a chance to prove myself.”

I kept my eyes locked on his. *Maybe I should just give him the chance he’s asking for. What’s the worst that could happen?*

“Fine,” I said, sitting back down and looking up at him. “Tell me about yourself.”

I learned the essentials quickly—twenty-seven, only child, from California, and was an aspiring photographer. He told me he traveled a lot for his job, but he was contracted to the DC area until further notice. He didn’t go in to too much detail, but he reassured me he was not the crazy, chasing paparazzi that I despised. He worked for a company who hired photographers to go out to events to help with good publicity. *I guess I have to take his word for it—until I get home and research it, thoroughly.*

He waited for me to start talking about myself. I hesitated, of course. The past wasn’t something I liked to talk about with strangers, or anyone, so I tried to keep it light. “Well, I have two older brothers, Teddy and Charles. I’m twenty-three. I was born and raised in New York, and I came here five years ago to go to college. Not that exciting,” I said, reaching for my drink.

“Five years? You on the long term college plan?” he asked, chuckling.

I couldn’t help but smile. *Damn, he’s charming.* “Ha, very funny! No, I had to take some time off to deal with some family issues.”

“Oh, right, ‘family issues.’ That’s what they’re calling it. Give it up. Were you backpacking through Europe or were you spending all your time partying?” he said cockily.

I hit his shoulder, almost hurting my hand. *Fuck, this man is ripped.* “I wish I was backpacking in Europe. My grandfather passed away and we were really close. I just needed time off before getting back on track.”

Simon froze, looking at me as if thoroughly embarrassed. “Elizabeth, I’m so sorry—I didn’t—”

“It’s okay, really.” I knew he felt bad and I knew it was not really appropriate, but it was funny to see him taken off guard.

Hearing a buzzing sound from his bag, he bent down and pulled his phone out. Sending a quick message, he placed it back as fast as he took it out.

“Who was that?” *I can’t help it. My mind instantly goes to a dark place, probably a girlfriend.*

“No one important.”

Damn, he’s good and that smile is contagious.

Our conversation then led to movies and music. Come to find out, we had a lot more in common than I thought imaginable. He was slowly captivating me, although my wall was still very securely up. There were times in the conversation when I could see him holding back, as if he was reeling in his personality, or trying to keep it business-like. It was weird, but he was hot, and I was a sucker for eye candy.

Standing up suddenly, he stretched his arms over his head and leaned to either side. His shirt rose when his arms did, and a sliver of flesh peeked out beneath. *Oh my God! Look at the floor Beth. Look. At. The. Floor. Before you embarrass yourself. Too late.*

I could feel him smiling at me, as if he knew exactly what he was doing.

I wasn’t going to let him win that easily. He didn’t need to know that I was drooling on the inside. “Wow, didn’t realize I was boring you,” I said before he quickly looked down at me.

“Oh, you could never bore me, but my ass was starting to fall asleep from sitting and staring at you.”

Well my cheeks are officially red.

“You’re blushing. You don’t get compliments often do you?”

How embarrassing.

“Shut-up!” I said, hitting his arm.

“Well, you better get used to the compliments, because I’m going to be making a lot of them from now on.”

Hold on a minute, time out. Did he just say that—to me? I scanned the room, expecting a camera crew to jump out. When no one in the café moved, I looked back up at his smiling face.

“Elizabeth, can I have your number?” he asked with a wicked grin.

“All right, I’ll give you my number, but you have to promise me that you’re not going to make me fall in love with you and then break my heart.” I said it as a joke but the look on Simon’s face had me worried. The smile left his eyes as he looked over at me. “I’m kidding,” I said, nudging him. “I’m not going to fall in love with you.”

“Don’t be too sure about that,” he said, chuckling back at me.

I checked the time on my phone as we exchanged numbers. *Holy crap!* We had been talking for nearly four hours.

“Well, I better get going. Photo ops await,” he said, finally breaking the silence.

“Yeah, I have to get ready for my next class.” I held on to my book a little tighter as he leaned down to kiss my cheek farewell.

“See ya around, Elizabeth,” he said, before turning from me.

I hung there, momentarily dazed that my morning had gone so drastically different than I ever expected.



I sat in class, staring at my un-open books, with the biggest smile on my face. Nothing could take it away.

Except for the jerk next to me.

“Are you going to get that?” he groaned.

I looked over to him, my smile replaced with a thin line. “What are you talking about?” I snapped back.

“Your phone has been going off for the past five minutes, and I can’t concentrate with the annoying buzzing in my ear.”

I narrowed my eyes at him and reached down for my bag which was on the floor between us. I finally found my phone at the bottom of the black hole I called my purse. Two missed calls and two new texts. I hit the little envelope and saw that it was Simon who sent the messages. My grin returned as I read the first one.

Just making sure you didn't give me a bogus number ☺

I quickly read the next one.

I really enjoyed our morning 2gether. can't wait 2 see u again soon! ;)

This class could not end too soon. I had too much to tell Gia. I felt like a giddy little school girl waiting for the bell to chime. *I've been giddy a lot lately, weird.*

Chapter 5

Gia and I sat on the couch while I gushed about Simon. This was so surreal. It was usually the other way around. “Wow, he sounds great! I mean for what you know about him,” Gia said warily.

“I know what you mean. He does seem too good to be true, for me at least.”

“Don’t sell yourself short like that. I hate it when you do that,” Gia said.

God love her, she tried her hardest to make me feel better.

She talked over her shoulder while she headed toward her bedroom to grab her laptop. “Did he say anything about the other notes?” she asked, yelling from down the hall.

“No, he didn’t mention it, but I never asked him about them either.”

“I can’t stand this damn thing. It’s frozen again. Can I use yours for now?” she asked.

I could hear her slamming her laptop shut over and over again.

“Yeah, it’s on my desk. It should be fully charged.”

“Great! I’ll be right back,” she called from the hallway.

What the hell is taking so long? She’s blonde but I don’t think unplugging a laptop is rocket science.

“Oh my God, Elizabeth Monroe! Why the hell didn’t you tell me that your picture was on Fame?”

Oh, crap. I hadn’t turned on my computer since I saw the pictures of Spencer and me.

Gia was standing in front of me, shoving the computer in my face, as if I hadn’t already seen them.

“I was going to tell you, I just got side tracked,” I said, sinking onto the couch.

“Yeah, you got side tracked all right, reading a freaking book! You didn’t feel the need to tell your best friend that The Spencer Salvatore is ‘smitten’ with you?”

Geez, you would have thought that I’d gotten married in an Elvis chapel and didn’t invite her. I stood up, grabbed the computer from her, and quickly closed down the web page.

She sighed. “If you want my opinion, Salvatore’s the way to go. I mean he’s hot, rich, a gentleman. Did I already say hot?” A dreamy look washed across her face as she stared off, in another world.

“I don’t think so, Gia. He’s not my type,” I said, shaking my head.

“Not your type. So your type doesn’t involve hot, hot, and filthy dirty hot?” she said snidely, crossing her arms and tilting her head at me.

“Yeah, pretty much. Let’s get real, Gia. I’m not his type.”

I will not feel bad for myself over a man that I only said three words to in my life. I need to focus on other things.

“Are you kidding me? Beth you’re gorgeous, I’d kill to have those curves,” she said, looking me up and down as if I was a steak dinner and she hadn’t eaten in months.

I ran my hands over my hips and shook my head fiercely.

“Don’t you do that—don’t start picking yourself apart.” She eyed me up and I knew what was coming next. “If you’d come out more than once a year with me, you’d realize how hot you are. You always say your brothers got the good genes but they didn’t, you did!”

“I appreciate that Gia, and I know that you’re trying to be a nice friend but—”

“But what! If you wanted to, you could be the next Kate Upton.”

I rolled my eyes at that similarity because it was absolutely absurd.

“I’m serious, stick some of your long, golden, obnoxiously perfect hair, that takes me hours to even come close to, on her head and she’d look just like you.”

“Even if that was true, it doesn’t change the fact that Spencer Salvatore is way out of my league, if I even had a league—which I

might. I'll be right back." I headed to my room, pulled out my cell phone, and finally sent Simon a message back.

Nope this is not a bogus #. u didn't trust me? My feelings r hurt.

Not five minutes after I sent the message and nodded in false agreement with Gia to get her off my back, my phone started buzzing on my desk. Jumping at the sound of it, I picked my phone up and scrolled to the new message.

I think I can trust you, but I know how you girls can be. when r u free? Id like 2 take u 2 dinner.

I was actually bouncing up and down in my chair. I could only imagine what that sight would have looked like. Luckily, the curtains were drawn and the door was locked.

Four messages later, we decided to go out Thursday night. Now I just had to get through two and a half days until I got to see if Simon could potentially be the man of my dreams. Well, one of them at least.



I decided to go for a jog to get the blood flowing and kill some very anxious time, since I had no classes. I might have been a size twelve, but I did try to take care of myself. And I might have been curvy, but at least they were smooth curves. Along with reading, jogging was one of my favorite pastimes. It really helped me to relax and clear my head.

With my black yoga pants and favorite work-out sports bra/tank top combination, I laced up my running shoes and headed down to the street. Popping my ear buds in, I set my jogging playlist. A few more last minute stretches and I was off.

Thirty minutes in, a light fall breeze cooled my reddening face. My pony tail bounced with each stride as I rocked out to the latest upbeat music. I was lost in the run. The street was unusually busy with people for a Thursday morning, but I guessed they were all taking advantage of the nice weather.

While weaving in and out of the crowd on the large sidewalk, I hit what felt like a brick wall and fell back, flat on my ass. Seeing what looked like white birds above my head, I soon realized that it was papers flying in every direction. I had tried to plow through a person, a large, hard person, who was also lying on the sidewalk, mirroring my exact position. . I watched the last of the flying pa-

pers fall to the ground, and that's when it happened. That's when I saw clearly who it was that I'd just tried to run through. There I was sprawled on my ass, staring straight into Spencer Salvatore's beautiful, blue eyes.

A wave of fear, excitement, and mortification came over me. Rushing to my knees, I started to pick up the papers which littered the side walk. Copying my position again, he started picking up the papers as well.

"I'm so sorry, I didn't even see you," I said apologetically, looking up at his face. Even though I was all red-faced from running, I could feel an embarrassing blush reach my cheeks.

"It's okay."

His cool voice danced around my ears and I had to shake my head to regain consciousness, so I could go back to picking up the papers.

"You're hurt," he said, ignoring the scattered papers. Reaching over, he took hold of my wrist, turning it to see the cuts along my forearm and elbow.

Kneeling in front of this man while he looked at my arm, I took a second to look at his flawless face. I felt like I was looking down on a silly romantic comedy. *Good grief, here we go again. Another out of body experience with this man.* I jumped quickly back into my body and looked at the nasty scrapes on my arm. "Oh, it doesn't hurt. I'll be okay." *So true. I can't feel anything, except the ridiculous urge to have him never let go of my hand. Maybe sweep me off my feet, make dirty nasty love, but definitely not pain.*

"Come on," he said, helping me to my feet. "I think I saw a first aid kit inside. We should get this cleaned up."

Does that count for being swept off your feet? Because I'm totally ready for the dirty nasty love making.

"What about all this?" I said, holding up the few papers that I had managed to pick up. "Aren't they important?"

"No, not really. I have copies of everything on file. Jay can handle it," he said, gesturing at his assistant who was frantically running after the papers, which were blowing down the sidewalk.

I followed Spencer, stride for stride. His hand was still firmly around my wrist as we walked into the once-fine-dining restaurant. He took me back to where the bustling kitchen used to be. Finding the first aid kit, he snatched it off the wall and brought it over to where I was leaning against the large, industrial sink. Taking a

damp paper towel, he dabbed the bloody scrapes. His touch felt like electricity coursing through me. I couldn't help it. Soon, I was imagining what it would be like to have his hand touch me in other places. *Oh my God, I need to think of something else before I combust in front of him.*

Finding my voice, I tried to engage him in conversation. "Are you planning on buying this place?"

He was paying careful attention to my scratched arm as he reached for a few bandages. Looking up to meet my eyes, he smiled that megawatt smile. "It would seem that way, wouldn't it?" he said, continuing to patch up my arm.

"Ah, a smart ass. I'm sure you get along great with Charles," I said, rolling my eyes.

"I do, actually."

What a jerk, a hot-ass jerk.

"It's one of the places I have in mind to buy." His voice was calm and confident.

Damn, he sounds good, too good.

"I like the area because it's close to the campus, but far enough away to still have the lure for high-profile clients."

Not sure why—like I even knew what I was talking about—I nodded my head in agreement.

"There," he said, applying the last of the band aids to my arm. "All better."

I looked down at my neatly bandaged arm, impressed with his nursing skills. "Are you planning to turn this place into another restaurant?"

Nice one, Beth, engage him in business conversation. Men love talking about their businesses. I learned this one from watching girls with my brothers.

He was next to me, leaning against the sink. He turned his finely dressed frame parallel to mine.

Oh, and what a frame!

Fitted, dress pants, a vest layered over a crisp white shirt. And the top two buttons were undone, revealing the slightest glimpse of his stone chest. His sleeves were rolled up to his elbows, displaying his toned forearms which were currently crossed over his muscular chest.

"Come with me?" he asked, unfolding his arms and leaving his hand out in the open space between us.

Standing a little straighter, I tried my hardest not to take his hand as fast as I really wanted to. I reached my wounded arm out and gently put it into his. The spark was instantaneous, the moment my hand was in his. I wanted to catch his eye, see if he felt the same spark that I had, but I was too chicken because it was me and it was him, an attractive, sexy, man. I already knew the spark was clearly, only on my side, so I didn't look up. I didn't want to take that chance.

He led me to the middle of what was once the dining room and released my hand, standing before me.

Damn it, he let go.

"Picture this." Walking over to one side of the room, he held both hands up. "This is where the new bar will go, and over here will be the DJ booth, raised up about three feet, tables and chairs over there..."

As he kept enthusiastically describing his plans for the space, I couldn't take my eyes off of him. He was almost dancing around me with that megawatt smile on his face. He seemed carefree and young, not like the businessman I had met two weeks before. A small laugh escaped my lips while I spun in a circle to follow his every movement.

He walked back to the center and stood before me again. "Do I get the little sister's approval?"

Little sister? I knew I was imagining everything. It wouldn't be the first time that I've misinterpreted guys being nice to me just because of my brothers. "It sounds like it's going to be great!" I couldn't help the melancholy in my voice. "What about up there?" I pointed up to the second floor, which was guarded by a railing that encompassed the whole room.

"I haven't decided yet. This place is so big. Do you have any suggestions, Miss Monroe?"

How about a place to hang myself for thinking you like me? "It might be a nice place for dining or a VIP area," I said, shrugging my shoulders. I looked up at him to see confusion on his face. "Or don't do that. You asked for my opinion remember." I crossed my arms and looked toward the exit, ready to bolt out of there.

"I know. I'm just trying to figure you out, Miss Monroe." His deep voice echoed off the barren walls, as his brows drew together while he studied me.

Okay, this is weird, right?

“So you live close to here?” he asked, running his hand through his dark hair and bringing out the business man side of himself that I had met two weeks ago.

“Yeah, a few blocks from the campus. I have a condo in the Vanderhall building.” *Shit, I just told an almost complete stranger where I live! Who am I kidding? He could come snatch me out of bed anytime.*

“Oh, you are really close to here. This building gets better every second,” he said, scanning the bare space one last time.

I felt the color rush to my cheeks and I instantly averted my eyes at the ground. He placed a hand on my shoulder. I panicked at the closeness.

“Are you okay?” he asked. “You’re not going to pass out on me, are you?”

Ah, hell, I’m completely frozen by his touch. Speak, Beth. “No—I’m—I’m fine. I should get going.”

At this point, I tried really hard to bring back to mind that I had a date that night, and only half an hour ago, I was highly looking forward to it. But now I was slowly starting to forget all about it, and him! “I’m sure that you have tons of things to be doing.”

Letting his hand fall from my shoulder, he simply stared at me.

“I’m just going to let myself out.” I turned, taking two steps toward the door that I really wasn’t ready to walk through just yet.

“Wait, I’ll walk you out.” He sounded annoyed as he walked over to meet me.

When his hand found my lower back, I felt my skin burn and I had to take the chance this time. The annoyance on his face was clear, but it melted the longer his hand touched me. *Legs, you better not to give out on me!*

We walked outside the building and that was when my subconscious reared her head for information—information that I’d wanted to know as soon as I realized who I had run into. But I suppressed it because I was too busy being a girl and gawking at his good looks.

“Did you leave the notes?” I asked, once we were face to face.

Clearly shocked by my blunt question, he just stood there. I could see the gears turning in his head as he tried to come up with an answer.

Maybe deep down I didn’t want him to answer, just in case I was fantasizing all of this.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw an SUV pull up in front of the building. The window rolled down slowly and before Spencer could get a word out, Charles's annoyingly perfect face was hanging out the window.

"Hey, what the hell, Salvatore? You show our baby sister the place before your partners?"

Always the scene stealer, first with Simon and now, once I finally thought I was going to get some answers, Charles came barreling out of the SUV laughing, holding his hand out to shake Spencer's.

"Chuck," Spencer said, sounding irritated.

Seems I'm not the only one heated about this intrusion.

Teddy followed next out of the SUV and walked over to the three of us. Putting an arm around my neck, he kissed my head, like he always did. He then turned to greet Spencer with a disturbed look.

What was that for?

"What's going on here?" Charles asked, pointing to the both of us.

"Nothing Charles, we just ran into each other."

There's no way I'm going to tell them that I actually ran in to him and knocked him on his ass and if Spencer knows what's good for him, he won't say anything either. I made sure to shoot him a warning look as I gave the false explanation to my brothers. Charles squinted his eyes at me. I knew exactly what he was getting at. The typical, if-you-screw-this-deal-up-I-swear-you-will-pay look.

I wasn't going to get any questions answered now, not with these two looming over me. "I have to go. Good luck on the project," I said, lifting Teddy's arm from around my neck. Before I turned to leave, I couldn't help but catch Spencer's eye. *Is he going to say something?*

He went to move in my direction, opening his lips, and getting ready to speak, just as Charles's voice flared up. "Bye, baby girl."

I need to leave now, before I kill my brother. I started walking away from the beautiful men, when I heard Teddy call to me. "Beth! Are you coming to Grans on Saturday?"

Turning, I glared at my brothers and Spencer, who looked just as annoyed as I felt. I made sure to speak loud and clear. "I'm not a baby, Charles Ferguson Monroe!" I caught Spencer raising a

hand and covering his mouth as if to stifle a chuckle. Lowering my voice slightly, I addressed Teddy, who was also laughing. “Yes, I am going, and you and Fergi can pick me up at ten sharp!” I put my ear buds in, turned up the music, and jogged back to the condo.

I really hated the fact that Spencer had this strange pull to him. It was no wonder women couldn’t get enough of him. I saw him and I wanted to be near him. I heard his voice and everything else went mute. But when he touched me, I felt like I could light all of Main Street with the electric charge I got from him. It was technically only the third time that I had ever spoken to him, but, damn, if each time, it didn’t get more intense.

Through my jog, I tried to calm my body’s sudden need for Spencer. So I made myself think of Simon, and the fact that I was going out on a date with him in less than seven hours. I had to be rid of any feelings for Spencer by the time Simon came to pick me up. It was pretty obvious that Spencer was a fantasy, that I would never see come true, but Simon...Simon could be real.

Chapter 6

Satisfied with how I looked in my pencil skirt and sheer red blouse, I ripped the last tag off. Fluffing my curled hair one last time, I exited my room.

“Well, what do you think?” I spun in front of the TV where Gia was sitting. “Does the fashionista approve, or what?”

“Are you trying to get laid tonight? Because that’s what that outfit says.”

Grabbing a pillow off the chair closest to me, I chucked it at her face. “No! I just want to look nice, you freak!”

“Considering the last date you went on, where you wore jeans and a T-shirt, I would have to go out on a limb and say that you’re really trying to impress this guy,” she said, wiggling her eyebrows.

“No—fine—maybe a little,” I confessed.

“I want to hear everything when I get home tonight,” she said.

“Wait, when you get home? Where are you going?” I asked.

“Mood,” she said, talking under her breath and not looking at me.

What the hell is she up to now?

“You’re not going by yourself, are you?” I asked, sitting back on my hips and crossing my arms.

“No, not really. Chuck invited me,” she said over her shoulder.

“When did you talk to him?”

“I was coming home for a lunch break today and he was just standing outside some abandoned building with Teddy and Spencer Salvatore. Speaking of Mr. Hottie Salvatore, have you seen the Fame web page today?” she asked.

Damn, she’s good at taking the heat off of herself and putting it elsewhere. “No, I try not to look at it on a daily basis. Why?”

Salvatore, plus me, plus Fame equals bad news. I can only imagine what she's going to tell me.

"Umm, there's another picture of you two up."

Great.

She turned her lap top so I could see. The scene on the screen was still very fresh in my mind. Spencer and I were standing outside the old restaurant when the photo was taken. I had just confronted him about the notes. His body was tense, his fingers in mid-run through his hair. *God, he looks good. Me, on the other hand? Not so much.* My face was red and splotchy, while my hair was falling out of the pony tail and, damn, did I look desperate. Scrolling down, I read the caption.

What's this? An intense, exchange of looks between Mr. Salvatore and his not-so-secret vixen. That's right. We know who you are, Elizabeth Monroe.

What the hell? That's it. I'm convinced the world is out to get me.

"Spencer seemed to get more interested in our conversation when your name came up, in case you were curious."

As Gia spoke, I could feel the color drain from my face.

"You do have a thing for him, I knew it!" Gia clapped her hands happily and squealed. "Looks like you have a leg up on the competition, girly. I'm pretty sure no one else can say that he's kissed their hand or rubbed their feet, not in public, anyway. You know, he's, like, really private with his love life. I heard a rumor he pays woman to keep their mouths shut after he sleeps with them."

I rolled my eyes at her, not believing a word of it. "First off, I was jogging and ran in to him. Second off, I don't have a 'thing' for him. And thirdly, I don't believe he's 'private' with women. He's got to be linked to someone." I tried to say it like I didn't care, like he didn't make me go on the fritz.

"Okay. Fine, I'll let this go," she said smugly. "But eventually you are going to have to talk about it. I'm just letting you know I'm here when you need me to listen. And if you don't believe me about his love life, check for yourself. He's not linked to anyone, but you."

With that, the conversation ended as I marched to the kitchen to get a glass of wine, hoping to calm my nerves. I tried desperately not to think about Spencer or the fact that he “perked up” at the sound of my name. I took a sip of wine while I wrapped my head around the last ten minutes. I couldn’t believe Fame rated me out. Now everyone would know it was me in all the pictures. *Lots of people had their pictures on that site, and they are all fine, right? I need more wine.*

There was a soft knock at the door. Gia and I quickly turned to one another, freaking out with excitement. I downed the last of the wine while Gia went over to let my date in. I straightened my skirt and fixed my hair, praying I didn’t look a hot mess.

Gia ushered Simon in after a quick introduction and hello.

Damn, he looks good.

He had a light blue dress shirt on, which fit him perfectly. His biceps stretched against the fabric. The sleeves were rolled up to his elbows and, for a second, I forgot he was even here to pick me up. He had left his shirt un-tucked over a pair of light blue jeans that hugged his masculine hips. Looking around Gia’s tiny frame, he found me standing near the kitchen. And that was when my brain registered that, yes, he was here to pick *me* up.

I chewed nervously on the inside of my lip, embarrassed by how long he stared at me. He finally walked around Gia. Practically brushing her aside and coming straight for me, he took my hand in his and kissed it softly.

“Wow, you look beautiful,” he said, with a surprised inflection to his voice.

What the hell? Did he expect me to look like shit? Maybe this is a mistake.

“Are you ready to go? I got us a reservation,” he said, clearing his throat, so his voice went back to normal.

“Yeah,” I answered, inwardly wishing that I hadn’t agreed to this date. “Let me just grab my shawl.”

We took a cab downtown to a restaurant, where we were escorted to a private table at the back of the fine dining, Italian restaurant.

As he held my hand in his, I felt on edge. I could have sworn I could feel the tension in his hand as we made our way to the table.

“Can I offer you a glass of our house wine selection?” the waiter asked.

“Give us a bottle of your best,” Simon said, smiling up at him.

When our wine arrived, I caught Simon watching me as I took a sip. “Did I spill some?” I asked, pulling my hand to my chin.

He laughed and shook his head.

“What then?” I asked, leaning over the table and resting my chin on my hands.

“I like looking at you. I really do,” he said, almost as if he didn’t even believe himself.

“Thanks?” I half-smiled back, arching an eyebrow at him. *I’m not imagining this, right?*

“Can I take a picture of you?” he asked, studying my face.

Damn you, cheeks. I know you’re flushed! “Right now?” I asked, sitting back in my seat and looking around the crowded restaurant.

“Yes, right now. Can I?”

This is going to backfire. I just know it. I stared at him, still confused as to why he would want a picture of me right now.

“Please.”

Oh, God, he’s begging.

He pulled his cell phone out and smiled over at me.

Yup, this is going to bite me in the ass later, but I’m a gluten for punishment lately. May as well not stop now. “Fine, go head, but be quick about it,” I said, glancing around at the room full of patrons.

“Okay, ready?” he asked.

I folded my hands back under my chin and gave a little smirk for the camera. He snapped the picture, checked to make sure it went off okay, then turned it for me to look at.

“Not too bad. If I didn’t know any better, I would have thought Simon Sullivan, professional photographer to the stars, took it.”

We both laughed, but as I thought of his picture, another came to mind, one with another man in it.

“Hey, Simon, I need to tell you something.” I took a quick sip of wine before I continued.

“What is it?” he asked, looking at the picture on his phone again.

“Do you ever look at Fame’s web page?”

He tensed and placed his phone back in his pocket before answering my question. “No, not really my thing. Why do you ask?”

His whole demeanor had changed. His cheerful personality was gone as he waited for me to answer.

“Well, there have been some pictures of me with Spencer Salvatore. I don’t know if you know him—”

“I know him,” he said, cutting me off abruptly.

“I think they’re trying to say we’re romantically involved, but it’s not true. They’re just digging for a story.” *Ew, that tasted so bitter. Hopefully, he’ll believe me.*

“It’s no big deal. Like I said, I don’t follow that stuff. I’m sure they’ll stop soon.” He said it as if he knew for sure.

Any tension that was brewing just a few seconds before was gone and Simon’s cheerful personality returned.

I still had my doubts. Sometimes he seemed uninterested, and other times, he was fawning all over me, complementing me, reaching for my hand. One minute, we’d be talking like we were old friends, which was great but, the next, he’d act like he didn’t want to be there. It was almost as if he was fighting with himself. Sometimes, it seemed like *he* didn’t even believe that he could actually be having a good time with me.

“So, you haven’t told me about your family. All I know is that you’re an only child,” I asked, after the whole Fame nonsense.

“Not much to tell. My mom stays at home and volunteers her time, and my father is a hot shot lawyer in LA.”

Okay so his family has money, explains the career choice.

“My parents expected me to be a lawyer or football player,” he continued. “I played all through college. I could have gone pro, but decided against it. I got a degree in sports medicine, but I never really got into it. I did it more for my parents.”

Football player, eh? I should have known he played sports, with that physic.

Taking another sip of his wine, he caught me in a day dream. “Am I boring you now?” he asked.

Snap out of it, Beth! I was stuck with a cheerleader-quarterback fantasy, fresh in my mind, and couldn’t help the wicked grin on my face. “No not at all.” I quickly held up the menu to hide my embarrassment.

“What about your parents? You conveniently skipped over them,” he said, looking over his own menu.

Crap! Can’t hide now. He used my own line to dig for information. Here goes nothing. “They died when I was two.” *Wait for*

it. There it is. The look everyone gives me when they find out my parents are dead. I hated when people acted as if I was still that fragile two-year-old I was when they were taken from me.

"I'm so sorry, Elizabeth. What happened?" he asked, placing his menu down on the table.

"They died in a car accident." I kept it short and simple, Simon didn't need all the baggage in one night.

"I'm...wow, Elizabeth."

Poor thing is fumbling his words. Better save him. "It's okay. It was a long time ago." I caught him doing that internal struggle thing again. "You know, I'd love to know what's going on in there," I asked, pointing to his head.

He laughed nervously and took a sip of wine. "Me, too. All I know is that, I'm really enjoying tonight."

I looked at him questioningly. *Did he expect tonight to be a total bust or what?* "That's good. So stop looking like you're shocked that I'm so cool," I said with a grin.

He shook his head and laughed. He seemed to relax at that and acted like the Simon that I was finding to be pretty irresistible.

The restaurant was emptying and I figured it was getting late. *Holy cow, almost eleven!* I slid my phone back into my purse just as Simon's went off.

He checked the screen then looked up at me apologetically. "I'm sorry. I have to take this. It's my boss."

I motioned for him to go ahead and take the call. I sat back in my chair for the first time and tried not to listen to the conversation going on across the table.

"Right now?...I can't...This isn't right...No, I'm not..." Simon turned away from the table when he spoke, making it hard to hear anymore. His boss must have said something very convincing because the next words out of his mouth were, "Fine, I'll have the package there within the hour." He didn't even say bye, just hung up in frustration.

"I guess you have to go?" I asked.

"Yeah. The guy that was going to cover for me got sick, so I got caught." He placed his cloth napkin on the table. His expression was torn, as if he didn't want to do something. Calling the waiter over, he asked for the check. Not even bothering to look, he placed his credit card in the binder and handed it back.

“I can help. How much do I owe?” I asked, grabbing for my purse.

“I think I can pay for your dinner, Elizabeth. I might be a struggling photographer but I’m not poor.”

Leaving my bag in my lap, I smiled back at him and shook my head. *Men and their chivalry. Can we say sexy?* “Okay, but next time you let me pay or at least tip.”

“Fine,” he said. “I guess I can do that.”

This stupid grin on my face is actually hurting.

The waiter came back and handed Simon the small black binder with his card and receipt.

“So where do you have to go?” I asked while he signed his name.

“Mood, actually. Will you come with me?”

I frowned at him. “You want me to go to Mood, while you work? I don’t know. I should probably get home,” I said as we both stood from the table.

“Come on, we had fun the last time we were there together.”

What’s he getting at? “Well—” I paused, considering.

“Great! You’re coming with me,” he said, not even giving me a chance to say no. “A birdie told me your brothers and friend are there. You can hang out with them, until I’m done.”

I couldn’t help the eye roll that came when I thought about sitting in a crowded club. “Fine. I’ll go, but you better never ask me to do this again.”

Crossing his heart, he held up his hand like a boy scout. “Promise, this is the one and only time,” he said with a warm smile.



Before I knew it, I was entering through the back door of Mood. Simon was able to get me in without causing a fuss. Not that I couldn’t just walk up and tell them my brothers were here, but I didn’t want to hurt his ego. The music was loud and the place was packed. Simon walked me to the bar where we were able to share a drink before he had to leave.

I scanned the place for my brothers or Gia. I should have guessed. VIP. I walked over.

A man dressed all in black stopped me just before the VIP area. “Sorry, miss, this is the VIP area. You can’t come in unless you have an invite.”

No shit, it’s the VIP. With my hands firmly planted on my hips, I set fire to him ranting and raving that I was Elizabeth Monroe and that my brothers probably paid for him to stand there. I went on, yelling at him that he should let me through before he lost his job. “Go over there and get them. They will tell you who I am. They just can’t hear or see me over all these people and this loud fucking music—” In mid-sentence, I saw the bodyguard abruptly turn from me and hold his ear piece closer.

What an asshole. Now he’s ignoring me!

“Yes, sir, I understand,” he said, before facing me again.

I was confused, and a bit scared, when he leaned in closer to me.

“I’m sorry about this. Mr. Salvatore was sure to straighten everything out. Please,” he said, holding his hand out to help me up the few stairs.

Why can’t I move? Move, Beth. It was no use. My eyes wandered around the crowded club. I was on the hunt for blue eyes and a beautiful face.

“Miss Monroe? Are you okay?”

I looked back at the man standing before me. “Yes—yes I’m fine.”

I took hold of his helping hand and walked up the steps. Spencer was there, somewhere, watching me. I didn’t know if I should feel flattered or petrified. In that moment, it was a nice combination of both.

The beautiful people saw me as I was coming down from a Spencer high. “Beth, what the hell are you doing here?” Gia asked, rushing over to me.

She’s drunk. “Simon had to come here to work and persuaded me to come with him.”

Gia hugged me tightly, swaying me side to side.

Yup, she’s done.

“Baby girl, you are just everywhere today,” Charles said from beside me.

“Charles, always a pleasure—not,” I said, shooting him a look.

“Oh, whatever. We’re actually here for a good time, so don’t ruin it.” He slurred his words as he grabbed Gia around the waist and kissed her neck.

That’s pretty gross. I tried to hide my disgust because Gia clearly loved all the attention she was getting from him. I saw Teddy stride over, drink in hand. Placing his brotherly arm around my neck, he gave me my usual kiss on the head.

“Don’t you dare let him take her home,” I said, looking threateningly up at him.

“I won’t, baby girl. I won’t let him hurt her.”

I got the feeling that he wished it was him she was wrapping her arms around. Stifling the urge to pry, I decided that this was neither the place nor time.

I danced to a couple of songs with Gia, then I finally saw Simon walking over. I wrapped my arms around his neck, talking into his ear so he could hear me over the music. “I thought you would never be done.”

Okay maybe I had a few too many drinks. Do you blame me?

“I’m not, just on a little break.”

I held him tight as we swayed to the music. This felt good, he felt good. I’d never felt this comfortable with a man. His strong arms held me securely and I melted into him.

Simon’s hands moved over my backside and around either hip. Dropping a hand, he pulled out his phone, checking the time I assumed.

“Do you have to leave already?” I asked. *Please say no, please say no.*

“No, not yet, one more dance.” He pulled me even tighter and I let my tired head lean against his chest. It was happening whether he liked it or not. I felt him tense up when I did, but the alcohol was making it easy to ignore.

When the song changed to another, he pulled his phone out again. “I have to go now. Will you be okay to go home with your brothers and friend? I have to do some more work.”

“Yeah that’s fine.” I was relieved he had to go. I still didn’t get him. He was so back and forth all night and, with me so tipsy, I didn’t trust myself to “walk away” if things got intense. *Slow and steady—there is still so much I don’t get about him. Now, if I could only remember that when I’m around Spencer, I’d be good.*

With one last hug, he casually kissed my cheek. I watched him walk back into the crowd and eventually disappear.

I didn't see Simon again after our two, short dances. I wanted to believe that we could take things farther, but I was skeptical. Spencer was MIA the whole time I was there, but I could feel him, like a dark, sexy, looming shadow in the corner. It kept me on edge the entire night. The only time I was able to relax was when I was in Simon's arms. Unfortunately, the moment I was left alone, I was back on that thin ledge, waiting for Spencer to pop out of the shadows or sneak up next to me like he did that first night at Mood. *Vampire?* No way this wasn't *Twilight* and I sure as hell wasn't Bella.

I spent the rest of the night sitting on a couch, watching, waiting for something that never came, something that I imagined up in my head.

Chapter 7

I slept soundly, waking up when my alarm went off at eight. A huge smile appeared on my face as I stretched. I'd categorized last night as a nice first date, or a great start to a friendship. Either way, it was fun. I made my way to the shower and, as I took my shirt off, the fabric caught on the bandages that were still on my arm. Blue eyes were all I could see when I closed mine. My heart raced at the memory of Spencer Salvatore. *This calls for a very, very cold shower.*

My hair was still damp when I went to the kitchen for tea. I had time before class, so I decided to leave early. I needed a nice long walk. I had hoped the fresh air would help clear my mind of the fact that I was infatuated with two men—two men who were so different.

I walked by the front desk on my way out, saying “Hi” to Derrick before leaving. “How’s it going Derrick?” I asked as I walk by.

“Miss Monroe, things are wonderful. It’s Friday and I have an exciting weekend planned for the misses.”

Derrick was my favorite desk operator. An older man, probably the same age my father would be if he were alive. His salt-and-pepper hair was combed back off his face. He was some kind of handsome for an older man.

“Oolala,” I sing-songed back. *I love talking to him.*

“Speaking of oolala, someone dropped these off for you very early this morning.”

He held a bouquet of red flowers out in my direction. They were beautiful.

Reaching for them, I wondered who could have left them.

“Looks like someone is going to have an exciting weekend as well,” he said, winking over at me.

“Oh, I don’t know about that. I’m scared to ask, Derrick, but was there a note left with them?”

“How did you know?” he asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Fourth time’s a charm,” I said, shrugging my shoulders as I smelled the beautiful flowers.

Without missing a beat, he pulled a small note from under the desk and handed it over.

I took it with a shaking hand. “Thanks, Derrick, see you after school.” I held the flowers in one hand and shoved the note into my pocket. *This is going to have to wait until after class. I need to concentrate. Lord knows, I need to graduate this year.*

Ugh I can’t stand it! That didn’t last long. I tried to submerge the urge to read the note before class. *Be strong, you can do this. It’s only an hour class. You can wait that long.* Chewing anxiously on the inside of my cheek, I felt my stomach doing summersaults. I couldn’t decide who I wanted the flowers to be from, and the fact that the answer could be in my pocket was royally killing me.

I managed to make it all the way to campus. I was outside of the English building when I couldn’t take it any longer. *Fuck it, I don’t care.* I quickly sat on a bench, placing the flowers next to me. I reached in my pocket, took a deep breath, and opened the note slowly. When I saw the signature handwriting that I knew was Spencer Salvatore’s perfect penmanship, I panicked.

You’re killing me...Lose the surfer. ~ S

Once again, this man had totally confused the hell out of me. If he meant that I was “killing” him, then why the hell didn’t he do something about it?

I’m not doing anything to him. Where does he get the right to say that? And who the hell is he to tell me to “lose the surfer”? *What a jerk!* At least Simon had made an effort, even if he was a bit wishy washy. *You know what? I like the fact that I affect Spencer but, come on, all these little double meaning notes are getting old, and a bit creepy.*

In class, the teacher and a few stragglers arrived a few minutes after class was scheduled to begin. One late comer sat next to me—a girl definitely in her freshman year. *Great, another*

leggy blonde to add to the army of them walking around campus. *What is this girl's problem?* She kept leaning forward on her desk, trying to take stolen glances up at me. I tried to ignore it as the teacher organized herself up at the front of the room. *Okay, for real, what is this girl's deal? Maybe she's into girls. Who knows?*

"Can I help you with something?" I asked with a frown, making sure to keep my voice quiet so I didn't draw attention. She paused while looking over at me. *She's got five seconds before I lay in to her.*

"I'm sorry. You just really look like Elizabeth Monroe. Ya know, the girl that has been linked to Spencer Salvatore," she said, studying my face.

My vision became blurry and the room began to spin. I closed my eyes, hoping that my body would right itself. When I opened them back up, I prayed that I hadn't given myself away. *Goddamn Fame!*

"I guess you're not though," she said, a little disappointed.

The teacher started calling out people's names for attendance. I looked up toward the front, ready to make a run for it, but I couldn't move fast enough, because the next name she called was mine.

"Elizabeth Monroe? Is there an Elizabeth Monroe in attendance?"

Fuck! I've been had. When I raised my hand, about fifteen women turned around in their seats to get a good look at the "vixen" who had Spencer Salvatore smitten.

"I knew it!" the skipper doll next to me said.

"Do you think you could just—umm—keep it to yourself? There's nothing going on between us."

My nonchalant statement was more than overlooked as she stared at me in awe.

"Well, yeah, I saw the pictures from last night," she said. "I can't believe you left him for whoever that guy is. I mean he's cute too, but Spencer, come on, you must be crazy."

Just then the skipper doll turned her computer screen around and there I was on the pages of *Fame* again.

A picture of Simon and me dancing was the first one up, and you could clearly see Spencer looking on in the background. The next few pictures read like a movie in stills, as Spencer watched while I held on to Simon and rested my head on his shoulder. In

the last picture, he had turned and was out of the frame. I stared at the pictures and couldn't get over how angry he looked in the photos.

The flowers and note finally made sense. *Wait a minute, why do I feel bad? Like I betrayed him? I don't owe him an explanation. I don't even know him. Well—No! I don't know him!* If he was really as mad as he looked, why didn't he do anything about it? I was alone most of the night and he knew I was there. *Oh, right, I know why. Hot, attractive, sexy men like that don't like girls like me, that's why! This must be his idea of a sick joke.*

"Well, if you're not interested, would you mind giving him my number?"

Who the hell does this Mattel doll think she is, handing me her number? Goddamn skinny bitches always feel they are entitled to men like Spencer.

"Ooo, sorry I can't. He specifically told me he doesn't like the 'Barbie doll look.'" I held a straight face as I watched skipper melt into a puddle of plastic.

After her rejection, she didn't say a word to me for the rest of class.

I closed my books and packed up, grabbing the bouquet from the chair next to me. I approached the door, noticing that there were a number of people standing around in the hallway. I ducked my head and pushed through the waiting bodies. The sun was so strong when I opened the door, I was momentarily blinded. Blinking, I raised my hand with the flowers to help shield my eyes. As I found my sight again, I heard the familiar click of a camera or two or three. *What the hell? Who is taking pictures? Wait a minute, are they taking pictures of me?*

My nightmare was confirmed when I saw three men with cameras. "Who are the flowers from?" one yelled.

"Are you dating the new guy?" another asked.

"Why did you leave Spencer?"

I didn't know what else to do, so I just covered my face with the flowers and kept walking, giving them nothing but the middle finger. *Take that, Fame!*

"Ahh, come on, Elizabeth," one man said as I walked past.

Shit, they really know who I am now, no more hiding for me. They followed me for a while, still asking questions, before the campus police stopped them, but they couldn't stop my fellow

students from snapping pictures with their cell phones. *Great, now my face is going to be plastered over every gossip site known to man.*

I reached my building and ducked inside. Thankfully no one followed me home. Heading into the condo, I placed my bag on the table and got a vase for the flowers. *Why did they have to smell so good? What is your deal Salvatore?* Pulling my laptop out, I expected to see my face but so far nothing had been posted yet. I jumped when my phone started buzzing from within my bag. Dumping it out frantically on the table I found it and a new message from Simon.

I had a great time last night. For some reason I can't get you off my mind.

How cute was that? Not creepy, but thoughtful. So, why was I still getting the feeling that this was all too good to be true? These love-story scenes never happened to me, yet there I was, getting secret notes and thoughtful texts.

I couldn't tell if Spencer was for real or not. It seemed a bit out of character for a multi-millionaire bachelor, and all that. The number of women that must throw themselves at him had to be through the roof. *Maybe he's watching out for me like my brothers do. On second thought, I don't want or need another over-protective brother telling me what to do and who to date.*

Now I had to deal with the freaking paparazzi following me, too. I was finally at a point in my life where I was happy with myself, my body image, which now I was more than paranoid about. My career choices were...well, I could only imagine what the media was going to say when they found out I was going to school to become a librarian—double embarrassment. I couldn't go back to the way I was, a yearlong depression, anger management, and countless hours of therapy sessions. That was something I wouldn't wish on anyone.

I think I'll take the lesser of the two evils.

I texted back, *It's because I'm awesome.*

That's not too weird, right? Too late, I already sent it. The scent of the flowers drifted past my nose and, with that, Spencer was back at the forefront of my mind. I didn't want to cast him out just yet. I wanted to believe that someone like Spencer Salvatore could really like me, even love me maybe?

R u free tomorrow?

At least I didn't have to lie about that. I was leaving early to go visit Gran with my brothers and we usually ended up staying all day if not overnight. Since the boys had taken over all of our father's companies we did these weekends at Grans less and less.

I'm out of town for the weekend. Rain check for Monday?

He responded. *Okay, is it sad that I wish it was Monday already? Have a great weekend.*

Even with all the crazy emotions, I couldn't help but smile at the fact that this man seemed to like me. His warm brown-eyed smile came to mind and I soon found myself wishing it was Monday, too.



The ride to Grans started off quiet. Teddy drove, Charles sat in the passenger's seat looking at his phone, and I was banished to the back as usual. We endured the three-and-half hour ride to the eastern shore where Gran spent her springs, summers, and falls. I had stayed with her all summer at the beach house, lapping up the sun and enjoying the quiet that was Fenwick Island.

Not able to stand the quiet any longer, I decided to get answers from Charles about Gia. "So what are your intentions for my friend?" I asked.

Turning in his seat, he looked back at me with a frown. "Gia?" he asked, as if it was a stupid question.

"Yes, Gia. Why do you keep asking her to go out with you?" Turning back to look out the front window, I heard him chuckle. "Charles, I'm not messing around. Don't lead her on," I barked at him.

"I'm not leading her anywhere. I didn't sleep with her—wait, did I?" he said as a smirk appeared on his face.

I had been friends with Gia ever since I went to college. We were roommates our first year. A bit of an odd couple at first, we had become fast friends. She didn't put up with my stubbornness, and I didn't treat her like she was a super model. So it was not like Gia just came into my life. She'd been to plenty of Christmases and vacations with my family. Of course, I had always known she thought Charles was attractive, but she never did anything about it. Not until lately. Now, she had been sure to put herself in places where he was going to be.

“Charles, this is not funny!” I yelled, smacking his shoulder.

“Geez, Beth, I get it. You don’t want me to mess with her. That’s fine, but I can’t help it if she can’t resist all of this,” he said, gesturing to his body with his hand from his head to his toes.

“You are so full of yourself!” I huffed, sitting back in my seat. “You’re going to get an STD if you don’t knock it off with all the women.”

“What the hell, Beth? Why are you giving me such a hard time? Teddy does the same shit. I don’t see you yelling at him.”

He pointed over at Teddy, who adjusted himself in the driver’s seat at the sound of his name.

Looking away from the road and over at Charles, Teddy defended himself. “I might take out different girls, but I’m not bringing them home with me, and Beth is right. You should cool it. Maybe focus on one girl, instead of leaving a trail of carnage behind you.”

“God, you both are out-of-your-minds cryptic today. You think I’m going to get some deadly case of syphilis and you think I’m leaving a trail of dead bodies behind me.”

“Chuck, we just care about you. I know you are so much more than a stupid one night stand,” I said from the back seat.

“She’s got a point. We just want the best for you,” Teddy added, placing a hand on our brother’s shoulder.

“You guys are talking like I’m dying, but if it will give you both peace of mind, I will cool it with the women, and I promise to stay away from Gia.” He turned while he talked to me. His face softened and my loving brother smiled back at me.

We arrived at Gran’s in the afternoon. Even though I had just left the beach house, I was so happy to be back. There were so many good memories made here, it was hard not to look around and think of one. Gran had decorated in classic beach fashion—blues, whites, and lots of nautical-themed ... well everything.

As usual, we found Gran on the back deck in her rocking chair, reading. Hearing the footsteps from behind her, she turned to greet us. Her bobbed white hair was blowing in the warm sea breeze. A smile appeared on her face as she saw us. She looked timeless, like an old Hollywood actress. Her eyes were a brilliant blue like Teddy’s and her hair had once been dark brown like Charles.

“Gran!” Charles yelled. Running to greet her, he picked her up, spinning her around.

“Oh, Chuck my dear, I’m getting a bit old to me tossed around like this,” she said through a laugh.

“Never,” he replied as he placed her firmly back on the ground.

Teddy walked over next giving her a hug and kiss on the cheek.

“Where’s my little muffin?” she asked, looking between my brothers.

I had stayed inside, looking out the window from the kitchen.

“You two broods didn’t forget her, did you?”

“Nah, we tried but she just kept following us,” Charles said, shrugging his shoulders.

“That’s because she looks up to you boys. How many times do I have to tell you that? It’s like you’re ten years old again, the way you complain about her following you.”

Thank you, Gran. She was always getting on Charles’s case about being nice to me.

“She’s coming,” Teddy said. “I think she stopped off in the bathroom.”

“Come on, Teddy,” Charles said. “Let’s get our suits on and check out the water.”

It was an exceptionally warm September day, and my brothers never let a beach day go to waste. They ran back into the house, sounding like a herd of cattle going up the stairs. I made my way outside and sat down next to Gran in Pop’s rocking chair.

“Oh, there you are, muffin. I was starting to worry,” she said, picking her book back up from the table.

“Hey, Gran,” I groaned.

“Oh, I don’t like the sound of that hello,” she said, looking over at me.

Just when I was ready to tell Gran everything about Spencer and Simon, the herd of cattle came back down the stairs and out on the deck.

“Come on, sis, let’s go,” Charles demanded, standing in front of me.

“Umm, I don’t know. I think I’m just going to sit up here with Gran.”

“Well, you have no choice in the matter. Teddy and I couldn’t make it down all summer so we are getting it all in now!”

A wicked grin appeared on Charles’s face and I knew I was in for it. I stood to run away, but he grabbed my hand tightly and held me under my arms. Teddy came over and grabbed my feet,

lifting me completely off the deck. It was no use. I was no match for their strong, overpowering bodies. They started to carry me down the back stairs, as I screamed for them to put me down.

"You boys be careful with her," Gran scolded, like they were teenagers taunting me just like they did years ago.

"Don't worry. We will take good care of your little muffin," Charles said as he rubbed his knuckles into my scalp.

"Will you stop that? And put me down, you creep!" I yelled, trying to flail my body, hoping that they would either drop me or put me down. But, of course, it only made them hold on tighter. Lucky me, there were only a few people to witness the pathetic excuse of an escape.

"Come on, guys, put me down." *Maybe if I'm nice, they'll let me go, since sheer physical flailing is not working.*

"Hold still, will you? It will be over soon," Charles said, cackling so hard he almost dropped me in the sand.

"Hold her, Chuck, we're almost there. If you drop her, she's going to run." Teddy's upper body was shaking from laughter, too, but he recovered by scooting up my legs to hold me tighter around my thighs. I made sure to shoot him a death glare.

They finally made it down to the water. "Ooo, that's a little chilly," Charles said, sucking in air.

"Please don't throw me in. These are my favorite jeans. I promise I will get in. Just let me change into my suit," I begged.

"Too late," Charles said, nodding up at Teddy.

"One...two..."

I didn't hear three because I was under the water. Jumping to my feet, I pushed the hair from my face, just in time to see the next wave coming straight for me. We all dove under, and it wasn't as cold as I thought it was going to be. The rays of the sun helped make it feel warmer.

Coming up from the wave, I screamed at my brothers and swam over to them, jumping on their heads and pushing them under the water. Looking back at the house, I saw Gran standing at the railing, laughing at us. Seeing her happy made my brothers and me very pleased. We were all that was left of our shrinking family, and I'd do anything for them, even Charles.

Dinner was delicious—like I expected anything less with Gran's cooking. The boys were telling Gran about all their business deals. Charles got extra excited when he started talking about

the club. "I think we have decided to call it 21, what do you think, Gran?"

She smiled at her eager grandson.

I couldn't help myself. "Why are you calling it 21? So you know how old you have to be to get in?"

"No, Beth, that's not why. Well, it's not final but we like it because it has sentimental value, you know, Mom and Dad. Teddy and I want it to have a meaning, and what better meaning than the love shared by two people. Makes for a romantic setting. We plan on running it by Spencer, our business partner this week."

Oh, God. My fork stilled in my mouth and I almost choked on a piece of meat. Coughing, I placed my hand around my throat, trying to catch my breath. Again, the mere sound of Spencer's name took me by surprise.

"Geez, Beth, I only said his name. I know you women are all crazy about him, but damn."

I do not need this right now. "It's not like that, Charles," I snapped, a little too fast, and felt the redness in my cheeks.

"Beth, we have all seen the pictures of you guys on Fame," Charles said, taking another bite of food.

"I—I—" *There goes my college vocabulary again.*

"I think it would be best if you stayed away from Spencer," Teddy said, placing his fork down on his plate.

"Thanks for the warning, but there is nothing going on between us and, even if there was, I think I could handle it on my own, thank you."

"I'm sure that you could, but I would just feel a lot better if you kept your distance."

Why does he do this? He's not my father. "You're not my father, Teddy. I can talk to whoever I want." I narrowed my eyes at him, ready for the next warning.

"Now, children, let's please have a pleasant dinner. No more of this talk. Do you understand?" Gran always had a way of pulling us back from an imploding argument.

"Sorry, Gran," a chorus of voices said.

That evening, I grabbed a blanket and joined Gran outside on one of the couches.

"Ahh, my little muffin, come sit with your Gran tell me what's going on in there?"

I sat next to her, laying my head on her shoulder while she played with my hair. I took the quiet time, while my brothers were out, to spill my heart. I told her everything, from the first night at Mood to all the crazy notes, the run-ins with Spencer, my date with Simon. “Do you see why I’m so confused now? It’s not like I have ever had *one*, let alone *two*, guys knocking down my door. What am I going to do?” I sat up to look at Gran, praying that she’d have the magic answer.

“Well, muffin, I think that you need to just have fun. Don’t worry about anyone but yourself. Do what makes you happy, not what will make others happy. If you want to go out with both of these guys, then I think you should. We don’t live in the stone ages anymore. Get to know them both, see what happens, and who you find you can’t be without,” she said matter-of-factly.

I kept thinking that I had to make a decision on who to concentrate on, but here was my grandmother telling me to just go with it, which I was more than ready and willing to do.

“I saw those photos of you on that web site. I may be old but I keep up with the gossip like everyone else, especially if my grandchildren are involved. I think you are one lucky girl to have these two hunky men pursuing you.”

“Thanks, Gran, but I’m not so sure Spencer will be coming around any time soon after seeing those pictures of me and Simon online, if he even looks at them. He’s so confusing, and he’s too good looking. My eyes actually hurt when I stare at him too long. It can’t be healthy.”

“A man like that does not back down so easily. Your father was one—a young, self-made man. They don’t usually take no for an answer. Look how long it took for your mother to come around, but once she finally did, they were the happiest couple I had ever met.” Gran had always told me stories about my parents. How my father pursued my mother for over a year before she finally gave in, then six months later they were married. My parents were twenty one when they got married and they had twenty-one great years together.

“Spencer and I are nothing like Mom and Dad. He’s perfect, like I think he was called the sexiest man alive in a magazine once, and I’m—well, it took me a long while to be happy with who I am. And perfect and me don’t go together.” It was the truth. It was what I thought and I was sure the entire world thought that same

thing about Spencer and me. “Ouch!” I shouted, rubbing a spot where my gran had pinched my arm.

“If I ever catch you talking like that, a pinched arm is going to be the least of your worries. You understand, young lady? You are perfect. You are someone’s perfect. You just have to find them. It might be this Simon guy or it could totally surprise you and be Spencer Salvatore, or it could be the garbage man. You have to stay optimistic and let things fall where they may.” She sat me up and held my shoulders as she spoke.

Her words hit me. I was *someone’s* perfect, though I highly doubted I was Spencer’s. But I wouldn’t tell her that. I didn’t want another bruise.

Chapter 8

My weekend at Gran's went by so fast and, before I knew it, it was Monday morning. After my revelation over the weekend, I now had a new attitude on my situation. I knew Gran told me to just let things fall into place as they would, but I liked to be in control, especially with my so-called love life, which had been nonexistent until a few weeks ago.

Spencer was a fantasy—one that I planned on keeping locked tight in my mind. I knew, deep down, I was simply imagining everything with him. The stupid gossip about us was good enough to make even me believe I had something with him when I clearly was imagining it all.

Simon was reality and a pretty hot reality at that, no Greek God, but I was definitely attracted to the boy next door. I wasn't going to sabotage my chances at a real relationship with a great guy just because I had some school girl crush on the popular guy. I sent Simon a text. *It's Monday, what u doing 2nite?*

It didn't take long before I got a response to that little text.

U ;)

That was the smallest and sexiest text I had ever received in my life. *What a smartass.* I was sure I looked like a crazy person, laughing out loud in the library.

But I could play that game too. *Sorry your boss called. You have to work tonight.*

Don't mess with the queen of sarcasm, you will lose every time. I placed my phone back in my bag and continued walking home. I was a few steps farther before my pocket starting buzzing.

"Hello?" I answered after seeing it was Simon calling.

"Elizabeth, it's Simon."

No shit. “Yeah. I know. Caller ID,” I said.

“I—umm, my boss called you?”

I stopped walking and look down at the phone. *What?* “I’m not at liberty to say,” I said, exaggerating.

“I’m so sorry.”

He sounded strange and I couldn’t help but laugh at him. I saved him before he embarrassed himself anymore. “Simon, I was joking. Why would your boss call me? If you’re going to be a smartass, then you’re going to get it right back.”

The sigh of relief through the receiver made me chuckle again. “Right, I knew that,” he said.

I could practically see the relief on his face. “Secret’s safe with me,” I said. “So tonight. My place? Movie?”

Gia had a late class and was going out after. We would have the place to ourselves. See if it was friendship or who knew what else?

“I’ll be over around seven,” he said, amused.

“See you then,” I replied.

“Hey, Elizabeth?”

“What?” I asked.

“I wasn’t being a smartass.”

I couldn’t reply before I heard the phone click dead. I hung up my end, beaming with delight. If it wasn’t sunny out, I was sure the glow off of me would have lit the whole street. Soon, the glow dimmed as I thought about what he was really implying. I was not a virgin, by any means, but sex with a guy like Simon was new territory for me. Having a horrible body-image problem could do that to your sex life. The shield that I had built up since getting to know Simon was slowly falling down. Maybe it could be more than a friendship.



I sat on the couch, nervously waiting for Simon to arrive. I jumped up and out of my skin when I heard a knock at the door.

When I opened the door Simon stood casually on the other side. “Hey.”

Upon entering, he didn’t waste one second. I was wrapped in his arms tightly as his lips found mine. Releasing me, he coolly

walked over and placed his tattered bag on the kitchen table. I stood, shell shocked as I watched him.

Something had changed in him. Maybe he had let his guard down, too. Closing the door behind me, I took a second to recover. God, did he look good in a hoody and jeans, and he smelled even better. Turning back to me, he stopped to admire the flowers that were on the counter. *Crap! I forgot to get rid of them. Please don't ask about the flowers. I could always say they were Gia's.*

"You look wonderful tonight," he said, turning from the flowers and walking over to me.

Thank you. Having my silent prayer answered, I exhaled with relief. My eyes met his just as his complement registered. My cheeks instantly flushed with color. *If I had a dollar for every time this man made me blush.*

"I told you to get use to the compliments."

He had warned me earlier.

I shook my head as I lead him to the couch. "Come on, Casanova, let's find a movie."

I went to turn the TV on but Simon took the remote from me and placed it back on the coffee table. He took my hand in his, running his fingers softly over the tops of them.

"What's this about?" I asked, looking down at our hands.

"I'm just grateful to be here, getting to know you," he said, as if he hadn't been all the other times we'd been together.

"I'm glad you're here, too. Did you see the pictures from our date?" I asked, squeezing his hand a little, figuring this was why he was acting weird.

"No," he said, looking a little scared. "Did you take a picture of us that I don't know about? I thought I was the photographer... Speaking of pictures, this light is perfect. You don't mind if I take yours right now do you?"

His eyes seemed to sparkle as he asked.

"Seriously, Simon, some paparazzi snuck in and took a picture of us. It's actually a good picture, but it's still annoying."

Letting my hand go, he went over to his bag on the table. "I told you, I don't care about that stuff. I don't look at it and, frankly, neither should you. Now, more importantly, perfect light, camera, you."

How did he do that? Be so confident and unbiased? People were going out of their way to take candid, intimate pictures of us

in front of Spencer. *Okay, so I left that little detail out but still, he should be flipping out .Hell, I've been flipping out since the first camera clicked.* I'd had enough with the pictures and paparazzi. Going from a nobody to a mysterious vixen had me ready to move to Siberia.

"You don't want to take a picture of me. I look awful," I said, running my fingers through my hair.

"Never, that's impossible. You're perfect." He walked back over as I covered up my face. "Come on, I know you're not shy." Sitting back down, he started snapping away. "Perfect," He said it without hesitation. *It couldn't be that easy, could it?* Could I be his perfect match? Was he mine? Sure, the times we had spent together felt right, but were they perfect? All I knew was it was way too early to give in so fast, especially with the weird way he acted on our date. He was battling something and—*God damn it, that was like thirty clicks of the camera!*

"Okay, that's enough," I said, peeking through my fingers before letting them down all the way. Looking at him through the camera lens, I couldn't help the stupid smile on my face. I was sure I looked like a goof ball, but I couldn't hide my smile, even if I'd wanted to.

Moving the camera, he looked down at me. "Has anyone ever told you that you should model?"

Ha! He's joking, right? Me, a model? That's rich! I chuckled. "Umm, no, I don't think I have ever heard that one before—oh wait, Gia's tried to tell me I look like Kate Upton. I told her she was crazy and, frankly, so are you."

"She's right you know, only, you're more beautiful. You photograph really well. It's so easy to take a good picture of you."

Apparently it was, and apparently he was not the only one that had been. He was telling me all this while he walked back over to his bag. Pulling out his laptop, he placed the memory card from the camera into the computer.

"That's very nice of you to say, but I'm not the modeling type," I said firmly, shaking my head.

"I'd beg to differ," he challenged, turning back and winking at me from the table.

"It's true. I'm more of a book worm than a flashy butterfly."

Rejoining me on the couch, he placed his laptop on the coffee table. "Look," he said, messing with the computer some more.

I glanced at the screen and ended up doing a double take. *Shit, it's stunning.* Turning the pictures to black and white made such an artistic difference. These photographs were gorgeous, and they were of me. *His camera must be magical. That's the only logical answer here.*

"I told you, Belle, you are a beauty."

Taking my eyes from the computer, I studied him.

"Belle, huh? Does that make you the Beast? Simon, I can't believe you just did this. You really are good at what you do."

"It wasn't me, it's all you. And yeah, I like the name Belle. You love books and you're beautiful. I would be honored to be your Beast, so long as I turn into the prince at the end," he said as his warm eyes met mine.

I smiled over at him. "Okay, Beast it is."

I loved his sense of humor and his witty one liners. He seemed to always know exactly what to say, in a good way. So the real question was, what was the catch? *My doubting mind can't help itself. It knows guys like this don't just magically pop into my life.*

Just like that, the little piece of my shield I lost earlier was replaced. I was safe, at least for tonight. We never even turned on the TV, nor did he let my hand go the entire night. The front door rattled then swung open as Gia came barreling in with shopping and school bags.

"Oh, God," She jumped back when she saw us sitting. "Sorry I just barged in like that." She looked just as shocked as I felt. "I'm just going to go back to my room, lots of work to do!" she said, holding up her bags and heading out of the room backward.

"Well, I think that's my cue. I'd love to stay all night and talk, but I have an event I have to get to." He stood from the couch, but kept a hold of my hand, pulling me up to join him. Letting go only to pack his bag, he quickly took back possession of my hand. I grabbed onto his large biceps, not even able to wrap my hand half way around it. Our eyes met as he pulled me even closer. My heart raced faster at his closeness. His lips only an inch from mine, I was in a trance as I watched his tongue dart out and wet his full lips.

"I'd like to make this a new habit of mine."

It took me a moment to focus on what he was saying, because all I could seem to concentrate on was his hand moving slowly up

and down my back. Once again, I was glad he had to go. My shield had so many cracks in it after sitting with him all night.

“I’d like that. I mean, I have class and need to study. I’m a pretty busy person, but I think I can make some time for you.” I said, rolling my eyes.

“You better,” he challenged.

“Oh really, is that a threat?” I asked, smiling up at him.

I could feel his body tense as he began to lean closer. His soft lips were millimeters away now.

“Yes,” he said, nodding once and wetting his lips again.

I closed the miniscule space that separated our lips. I took the chance and was wholly rewarded.

I felt so comfortable in his arms. I didn’t mind his hands running over my hips. He wasn’t judging me or my size. I couldn’t help but think that this was how it was supposed to feel when you started to fall for someone. That feeling when it was just the two of you and nothing else mattered. *I hate to admit it, but I like this feeling, a lot.*

Breaking the kiss, he whispered softly into my neck, “You are making me do things I didn’t think were possible. I’m completely under your enchantment, Belle.”

That’s it. My knees are going to give out. He was still holding me tightly and I relished the moment as his warm breath danced across my ear and down my neck.

With one last kiss, he stepped back and made his way out the door and to the elevator down the hall. “I’ll call you tomorrow,” were the last words I heard him say as the elevator swallowed him up.

I rested on the back of the door, taking deep breaths. He was under a spell I wasn’t even trying to cast.

Chapter 9

I waited lazily on the couch for Simon to arrive. We had spent every free second we had together. We'd meet at the café. He'd help me study, and I had to succumb to him taking pictures of me. I'd protest, but eventually give in. The past two weeks had been out of a story book. With no word from Spencer, I felt liberated. I concentrated all my efforts on Simon. Fame seemed to have dropped their relentless attack on Spencer and me, and even though I knew it was for the best, a little part of me missed it.

I was usually excited when Simon came over, but tonight I was all nerves. Gia was away for the weekend and she was always my go to for stopping things before they got too far. I knew that he knew that she was gone. He was here earlier in the week when she told me about it.

Simon was a man. I shouldn't expect anything less than the next step. Not that I didn't want him to be on top of me, I just didn't want him on top me with me naked.

Tonight, I had made sure my armor was polished and welded as strong as I could get it. I wasn't ready yet. Three weeks might be all right for others, but I needed more time. *I'm not ready for him to see me naked and vulnerable.*

The knock at my door set my heart racing. I knew that tonight was going to be the hardest night. It was like everything had been leading up to it. The kissing and touching had become deeper and more sensual. Simon might have had it in his head that he was going to have sex with me tonight, but I had other plans.

He stood in the doorway, smoldering as usual. "Hey, baby."

Simon's voice always warmed me.

"Hey, come on in."

Closing the door, he sat on the couch in our usual spot. Walking over, I had to stop in front of him. Otherwise I was going to jump on his lap and run my fingers through that perfect, sandy hair of his. "How was your day? Do you want something to drink?" I asked.

"Sure, whatever you're having is fine, and you should know by now that my day always gets better when I'm over here."

Shit, the first notch in my armor. Too fast. At this rate he's going to have me sprawled on my back in ten minutes flat.

I headed to the kitchen to get some wine. I took my time pouring, needing a minute to recover. I handed Simon his drink and sat farther away from him than I ever had. He eyed me skeptically. I took a big gulp of my wine.

"What's going on with you? Do I smell or something?" he asked, sniffing his arms.

Not a chance. You could never smell bad. I need more wine. "No, I...umm...I think I might be catching a cold. Don't want to spread it," I said with a very fake cough.

"You don't look sick to me, let me check you out. Come here. Dr. Sullivan is in the building."

There's no getting out of this one, is there? I gave his gorgeous body a once over and found myself unintentionally moving closer to him. *Why am I so nervous about this? Simon has given me no reason to be even the least bit insecure.*

He patted his lap. I laid my head on his thick thighs and looked up into his concerned face.

Gently, he brushed my hair so it fell over his leg. "Now, let's see here."

My mouth instantly went dry and I was finding it very hard not to close my eyes in pleasure as he brushed his fingers through my hair. He felt my forehead, cocking his head in concern. "You feel a little hot and your cheeks are pretty flushed. I think I need to keep checking you out. Don't want to miss anything."

I can't take it anymore. My eyes closed as his hand moved down my neck and shoulders.

"How does that feel? Any pain?" he asked.

I opened my eyes to look up at him, shaking my head no to his question.

"Good."

Shifting down over me, Simon's lips found mine, kissing them tenderly. I reached up, curling a hand around the back of his neck. The thin strap of my tank top slid down and off my shoulder as Simon's warm hand ran over the top of my chest. I arched into his hand, wanting more. I was sure he could feel my heart pounding against my chest. He had to, because, to me, it felt as if it was going to explode from my body. I dug my fingers into the back of his neck as I raised my head off his lap to kiss him deeper.

I want it bad! Really bad! And I want it now! I want his hands all over me. I can't believe I was even considering shooting him down. There is no way my body is ever going to let that happen. I just needed to shut my stupid, doubting head up. It was obvious Simon was into this. I could feel it on the back of my head for Christ sake.

The gentle hand on my collar bone took a slow plunge down the center of my chest. Thank God I didn't have a bra on, because his hand on my skin felt too good.

"Your heart rate is a little elevated."

I opened my eyes to see his smiling face. "I wonder why that is, Doctor."

Smiling back at him, I let a soft murmur escape as his hand ran over my breasts. I arched off his lap again, grabbing him around his neck, pulling him closer to me. *That's it. No more shield, I need this. I need him, now!*

I pushed him off of me and sat up.

"Feeling better?" he asked smugly.

He knew what he was doing. I stood from the couch, looking down at him, grabbed his hands, and led him back to my room. If I was going to do this, it needed to be now before I chickened out or started thinking logically.

The seductive come-hither I gave him was all he needed to move his ass off the couch. Ushering him over to my bed, I laced my arms around his neck, nervously biting my bottom lip. I watched in awe as he raked his eyes hungrily over me. *Shit, this man is so sexy.*

His strong arms grabbed me, pulling me closer to his hard body. The heat radiating between us was something I had never felt with anyone before, except—*Nope, don't even go there, Monroe.*

His breathing was just as labored as mine as we panted between kisses and fell on the bed. His sturdy body straddled mine, his eager hands pushed up my tank top to reveal my stomach and bare chest. *God, this feels good.*

He sat up and unzipped his sweat shirt, taking it off with urgency. My hands seemed to have had a mind of their own as I slipped them under the hem of his shirt. My fingers moved slowly over the ripples of muscle. I had never felt a stomach as toned as his before, or arms as ripped as his. *Yes, I want this! I'm so ready for this. I don't even care if he's just using me because I'm not far from using him in the same way.*

Grabbing my jaw, he turned my head slowly, gaining access to my neck and leaving deep kisses along it. My eyes rolled to the back of my head as his tongue made my body spring to life with a sexual desire I had deprived it of for so long. The muscles in his back flexed and moved under my hands. Lost in the moment, I regrettably heard the familiar buzzing in his pocket. Of all the nights for him to get a call, it would be tonight, right in this moment. Stilling over me, he pushed himself up, pulled the phone from his pocket, and stared at the front screen. *He's joking right? He won't answer it, will he?*

I looked up at him, suddenly questioning everything. His expression was not what I wanted to see right then. What I wanted to see was him tossing the phone against the wall and finishing what he'd started.

Maybe I can persuade him. "Come on, don't answer it."

I tugged at the belt on his jeans, hoping to make him forget about whoever was on the other side of his ringing phone.

"Elizabeth, I'm sorry, I have to."

Clearly he wasn't desperate enough or I wasn't seductive enough. *What a blow to the ego.* I let my hands fall from his belt. *This is why I need armor.*

He moved off of me, leaving me on the bed in a fit of raw sexual frustration. I felt like hiding under the covers or making a bee-line for the bathroom. Tugging at my shirt, I covered my exposed chest.

What is wrong with me? Am I that repulsive? I mean, hello, I'm basically laying here saying take me and he just gets up and leaves me—for a phone call! Here it comes. My mind was fully awake. That was not what a girl like me needed. Well, it wouldn't be the

first time I got left alone in a bed. I should be used to it by now. I just thought Simon was going to be the exception. Wrong again.

As much as I wanted to turn away from him, I couldn't. My gaze was fixated on him as he pulled the phone up to his ear. His right hand rested on his hip just above the belt I'd been trying to relieve him of a few moments ago. Too busy admiring his body and the naughty things I wanted to do to it, I didn't hear much of his side of the conversation. Although, I did make out a few phrases in-between the long list of fantasies that were piling up in my head.

"Can't you get someone else?"

Work, it was always work. I really wanted to give his boss a piece of my mind.

"Fine...whatever...I'll be there soon," he said, clearly aggravated.

All the delicious things that were just running through my head suddenly fell to the depths of the floor. I glanced up at Simon as he placed the phone back in his pocket and turned his attention to me. With a wicked grin on his face, he ran over and jumped on the bed, making me lose my balance. I giggled and squirmed in protest. Simon had gone right for the tender spot just under my ribcage and tickled. Finally, he let me breathe. I sighed with contentment as he pulled me closer to his body.

Face to face with me, he ran a tender hand over my cheek. "I have to go," he said

"No, stay with me."

That was pretty damn desperate. I hoped he would fall for it. I made sure to bat my eyelashes a few extra times. *It worked in the movies.*

"You are making it very hard to leave, but I have no choice in the matter. Trust me, it's better if I go."

What? He has no choice. Something isn't right here.

"Better if you go? You don't want this—me?"

Great, I must have freaked him out, or grossed him out. Sitting up in my bed, I drew my legs in close. I knew I should have waited. He didn't want this, or me.

"Belle, that's not what I meant at all. I want to stay here so badly, but I'm stuck in this job and I can't tell them no. There is nothing wrong with you. You are perfect and beautiful. Maybe it's

just the universe telling us to take this slow. I want you, Elizabeth Monroe, and nothing is going to stand in my way.”

Taking my chin between his fingers, he turned my head up so I was forced to look into his eyes—soft brown eyes that warmed me whenever I stared into them. *I'm so screwed.*

I opened the front door for him while he slid his sweatshirt back on and zipped it up half way. Pulling the straps of his backpack over his broad shoulders, he stood in front of me, wrapping his hands around my hips, swaying me slightly. I smiled up at him.

“I promise you, next time, I’m not going to answer the phone.”

“You better not or I might chuck it out the window, but not before I tell your boss off.”

As he laughed down at me, I took in the deep resonance of his voice. He kissed me one last time then I pushed him out the door and leaned on the frame.

“Ooo a little hostile. I think I like it,” he said with a smirk.

“Ha, not even close, more like sexually frustrated. Get out of here, Doctor, before I sue for malpractice.”

Holding his hands up, he backed away from the door. “I’m gone. I’ll call you tomorrow, bye Belle,” he said, before turning down the hallway.

Several hours later, I called it quits on school and changed gears to check my neglected e-mails. Scrolling down the screen and skipping over all the junk, I saw a message from Gran, not uncommon, so I opened it.

My Dear Muffin,

It's your gran. I have been thinking about you, and how things have been going with the new men in your life. You seemed so excited when you visited the other weekend. I hope that these words find you well. Call your old gran more often. I miss the sound of your laughter. I'm very excited about the charity event. Theodor called me today to make travel arrangements. I'm looking forward to seeing all my beautiful grandbabies.

Love you, Muffin.

Gran

Crap, I totally forgot about the charity event. With all the excitement in my new found love life, it completely slipped my mind.

Since we had been old enough, my brothers and I gave back every year to the program that helped us cope with the loss of both our parents. Over the years, the event had become bigger and bigger. I was sure my brothers being in the spotlight helped out, too. Anything we could do to raise a little money to help those in need. We hadn't even started planning anything yet. I mean, I knew that Teddy usually took care of everything, but we always met up to discuss costumes and activities for the kids.

Grabbing my cell phone, I got ready to call Teddy. On second thought, it was nearly two in the morning. I decided to just wait until later to bug him. Before closing my laptop, I decided to check out Fame's webpage. *Yeah, I like punishing myself, so what?*

There were new pictures of Spencer up. *Shit, that man looks good in a suit.* They'd been loaded only a few hours ago. I clicked through all of them. He didn't look pleased at all to be getting his picture taken. He looked pissed and irritated, and I couldn't blame him. Scrolling down, I read the caption.

Spencer Salvatore, highly private but sought after bachelor, caught leaving the night time, hot spot, Mood in DC. Why look so glum, Spencer? Are you missing your vixen? Were you hoping to see her tonight? So sad, I'm sure there are plenty of ladies, waiting to make you number one on their list.

My heart froze as I drew my hand up to my mouth in disbelief. *Could any of this be true? Oh God, do I want it to be true? Yes—No!* He hadn't tried to contact me and I knew that he knew where I lived. I'd told him for Christ's sake. Not to mention, he sent flowers. *Shit, I guess I can be blamed, too. It's not like I couldn't ask my brothers for his number or where he's staying.* I didn't want to admit how much seeing him or hearing his name affected me, but it wasn't a good thing. It was not right to be so affected by someone you knew nothing about. *Nope, that definitely can't be healthy. God, why do I feel bad for him? Shit, it's not like we were ever dating. We will never be dating.* I wanted to punch the little

devil and angel on my shoulders, just so they'd shut up and stop arguing back and forth.

Slamming my computer closed, I flopped down on my bed, waiting for sleep to come. I was stuck wrestling with the fact that I barely knew Spencer, yet the minute I saw him or heard his voice, all the crazy things I thought I felt for him came to the surface.

Crap! Then there was Simon, and his compliments that made me hold onto his every word. I really thought I was starting to fall for him. How could someone not fall for that? Sure, it started off rocky, but he hadn't acted shady or distant since those first few nights. *You'd have to be deaf, dumb, and blind not to fall for him.*

Chapter 10

I sluggishly opened my eyes, then rolled onto my back and stared up at the ceiling. My face was flushed with the memory of a naughty dream, and I couldn't help the grin that spread across my face as I tried to remember it. Tossing the covers off, I skipped into the shower and let the scalding water fall against my chest. Steam rolled up and out of the shower, filling the room with a foggy haze. Leaning against the wall of the shower, I let my hands roam my body as I fantasized that they weren't my hands at all, but the strong hands of a man. But which one? *Both? Yes, please—*

What am I doing? I don't do this! My eyes flew open and my hands dropped from my sensitized body. I placed them on the shower wall, as if I was getting arrested for touching myself while thinking about two different men. I quickly turned the shower to spout out cold water. *Come on, Beth, snap out of it. It was just a fantasy for Christ's sake.*

Rushing across the room, wrapped in a towel, I snatched my cell phone off my desk as it rang loudly. Grinning widely when I saw it was Simon calling, I wasted no time answering. "Hey, you!" I said happily.

"Hey, how did you sleep?" he asked.

"Good, how about you? Were you out late?"

"A little...Umm...Elizabeth, I need to tell you something."

The sudden silence on his side of the phone was starting to scare me. If he was going to end things, he needed to just get it over with. *Damn it, I knew he was too good to be true.* I guessed he figured out last night that I wasn't what he wanted after all. I waited for him to talk but there was just silence on his end. *Oh, for*

Pete's sake, if he's not going to say anything, I guess I should just get it over with. "I get it, Simon, I had a blast spending time with you, and thanks for making me feel special for a while. Good luck with your photography career," I said, trying to sound just as happy as I was when I answered.

"Wait, Elizabeth, are you breaking up with me?" he asked.

I can't believe he's still trying to string me along. Way to rub salt in it. "Weren't you going to break up with me? I mean, usually 'I need to tell you something' equals we're done in my book," I said, getting pissed off that I was still on the phone with him.

"Well, not in mine. How could you think that? I'd be stupid to let you go."

He seemed shocked and possibly hurt. *Shit! I always overreact.*

"If you weren't ending things, then what were you going to tell me that made your voice all weird and stressed?" I asked.

"I have to leave town for work for the next week. My flight is leaving in an hour. I found out as soon as I woke up. Not exactly the wakeup call I was expecting."

I didn't know whether to be relieved or upset at this news. "Oh, well, where do you have to go?"

"I think they're sending me to Seattle. Hopefully, I'll be back by next weekend," he said.

Just a week, I can handle that. "Will you call me?" I asked. *Shit! That sounded desperate and clingy. I am so off this morning. Damn you, sexy dreams!*

"Of course, I'll call you, every morning and every night. Elizabeth, I'm going to miss you."

How sweet is that! I needed to let my guard down and accept that good things could happen to me. Enough with the doom and gloom. I'd had an adequate amount of sadness and heartache, to last a lifetime.

I was tired of never letting anyone get close to me and, even if I was trying to fight it, I was letting Simon get close to me.

"I'm going to miss you, too." I said, smiling into the phone.



The week Simon was gone went by faster than I expected. He kept to his promise and called every day, sometime twice a day. He ended up having to stay out on the road for longer than he'd

thought, some special project that his boss wanted in only his hands.

I took the time I had alone to study and catch up on school work. I couldn't afford to let my classes slip out from underneath me. After hitting the books all morning, I took a break and made myself a quick lunch. Just as I was getting ready to indulge in the masterpiece of a sandwich I had made, my phone started buzzing from in my room. I ran down the hall, snatching it from its charger. *Simon!* Fumbling with excitement, I finally slid the unlock button and accepted the call.

"Hello," I said, a little too excited to speak with him.

"Hey there." His voice was instantly calming.

"How are you?" I asked, almost sighing into the phone.

"I'm doing better now that I hear your voice."

The raspiness of his voice sent a shiver down my spine. *Thank God, he can't see me because I know my cheeks are pink.*

"You're not blushing, are you?"

Damn, how did he know that? "Wouldn't you like to know?" That should shut him up.

"You're damn right, I would like to know. I miss you. It's so boring here."

"Don't be so beastly. I miss you, too. When are you coming home?" I asked.

"Don't be mad, but they are making me stay for the rest of the week," he said.

"Really? They already made you stay one week, now they get two! I think you should find a new job." *If I didn't like his boss before, I really despise him now!*

"I'm sorry. I'm kind of stuck between a rock and a hard place. Don't have too much fun without me."

His voice sounded jealous, as if I would ever go out with someone else. *Well—No! What am I thinking? Spencer has been MIA for almost three and half weeks. I'm pretty sure he's not going to show up to touch my ankles, anytime soon.*

"You're not the angry, jealous type, are you?" I asked curiously.

"They don't call me the Beast for nothing," he said, practically growling into the receiver.

"Maybe I should go out with someone else. Will it bring you home faster?"

“Don’t even joke about that! You know I’d be on the first flight home, but I’d also be living in a van down by the river if I didn’t have this job.”

Huh. Good to know.

Our conversation continued for the next hour. He told me that he was going from Seattle to Vegas, for some restaurant opening, and then coming home Friday.

“I wish I could come with you. I’ve never been to Vegas.”

“Next time, baby. When you’re done with school. Speaking of such things, I don’t want to keep you from your work, so get back to it.”

Looking down at my now-hour-old sandwich, I sighed, knowing that he was right. “I miss you. Call me later on when you have free time between jobs.”

“I miss you too, Belle. I’m counting down until Friday!”

“Me too!” I said, smiling into the phone.

“Bye, babe.”

“Bye.”



Two days later, I decided to go pay my brothers a visit at their office. Most of the time they were in New York at my father’s building, but since taking over, they had expanded to DC and LA. Their office was located in the tallest building in DC. It oozed New York sky scraper among all the older, more historic-looking buildings. To be honest, I wasn’t sure why they moved some business down here. Probably to keep an eye on me.

Walking into the lobby of the building through the revolving doors, I was still proud to know that my brothers had accomplished so much in such a short time.

“Hey, Danielle. How’s it going?” I asked, nodding over at the long-haired model-looking receptionist.

“Hump day!” she said, smiling back. “Oh hey, can you give Chuck a message for me? I’ve been trying to catch him, but we keep missing each other.”

I rolled my eyes, disgusted that she was interested in Charles. “Really, Danielle? Charles? You are so much better than that.”

“Oh, come on, he’s your brother. He can’t be that bad. Can he?” she asked, leaning over the desk and watching as I entered the elevator.

“You should know by now,” I yelled out the elevator as the doors closed.

Hitting the number seven on the panel, I leaned against the back wall as the elevator began ascending up to my brothers’ floor. Two other business men took the ride up with me. Smiling to myself about how crazy women acted when my brothers were involved, I let out a little chuckle. Both men turned to stare at me—another classically, embarrassing moment.

The numbers highlighted as the elevator kept making its way up, stopping at the third floor. One of the men exited. Hearing my phone buzz, I dived into my black hole of a purse in search of it. The other rider got off next and I continued ascending to the seventh floor. I was left alone in the elevator and finally found my phone at the bottom of the black hole. I leaned back against the wall again. It was Simon who had called. I made a mental note then to call him back as soon as my meeting with my brothers was over.

Just as the elevator came to a stop, I could feel a charge of anticipation and excitement coursing through my veins. I usually got excited to hear from Simon, but this was a new sensation all together.

The doors opened and, as I looked up from my phone, I was confronted by a man in a stunning three-piece midnight blue suit. The man stood there staring at me from the opposite side of the elevator doors.

My heart fell from my chest into the pit of my stomach with a thud that echoed in my ears. My phone slipped from my hand when I realized who it was that had just made my heart thump into my abdomen. Spencer Salvatore’s blue eyes were locked tight on mine. Coming out of my momentary paralysis, I dropped to my knees to retrieve my phone and, of course, my bag fell off my arm. All of its contents spilled over the floor. *Perfect!*

“Oh my God.” I said aloud. *What is it about this man that makes me so, on edge?*

“Here, let me help you,” he said, stepping onto the elevator with me.

Fear gripped me as he knelt down to help pick up all my scattered belongings. *I am so cleaning this purse out when I get home. Honest. Only I would have candy wrappers and an empty box of Gas-X fall out of my purse in front of the most gorgeous creature alive.* I snatched up the incriminating evidence before he even had a chance to see it. Or at least I hoped he hadn't seen it. Nothing turned a man off more than a girl with gas. *I can only imagine how red my face is right now.*

When we stood back up, he held a lip gloss and a pen that he'd managed to grab before I could. *Thank God, it wasn't a tampon.*

"Here," he said, holding them out for me to take.

Ugh, he even sounds hot. This is not my day. As I took the objects from him, our fingers grazed against each other's. The charge was instantaneous. I glanced into his blue eyes and felt dizzy. He ran his hand through his thick, black hair that had fallen perfectly onto his face while he was helping me. My heart again thumped loudly in my ear. *Sexiest man alive. I totally get it now. Maybe he doesn't have a trail of ex-girlfriends because they are all dead from having heart attacks. It's a theory I'm seriously willing to consider.*

With my chest rising and falling faster the longer I stared at him, I felt the elevator begin to descend. *When the hell did the doors close?* The sudden movement jarred me to look down and see that our hands were still touching.

"Thank you," I said, moving my hand from his.

I tossed the lip gloss and pen back into my purse, not caring which pocket they fell into at all. *Okay, breathe. What do I do now? What do I say? This Greek God of a man leaves me strange notes and flowers and then disappears for three weeks. How do you start that conversation? "Hey, asshole, what's with the notes? Or maybe are you playing a sick joke by getting my hopes up that you have any kind of interest in me?"*

The silence in the elevator was chilling, but the tension was searing. Standing next to him in the tight confines of that small space, I could feel my skin tingling. I knew he had to feel something too. There was no way that I was imagining all of this.

"Sorry you missed your stop." His deep voice broke the heavy silence, and my knees nearly gave out.

"Oh, it's okay. I can just take the ride back up again." *I needed the ride back up, to calm myself down.*

“I was just meeting with your brothers. We decided to open on New Year’s Eve,” he said, very businesslike.

Peeking up at him, I knew my face was screaming confusion. How the hell could he just start talking to me as if nothing weird had happened in the last month and a half? *I guess if he’s going to act like nothing is strange, then I will, too.*

“That’s great. I’ll have to let my boyfriend know to save the date.”

Oh shit! I didn’t mean that. Damn it, I need to start thinking before I speak. I took a chance and glanced over at him. The sexy little smirk he had on earlier was gone, replaced by a hard thin line while his hands went into his pockets.

Gran’s advice rang in my ears, something about having fun and getting to know both guys. I shouldn’t want to get to know Spencer. I was happy with Simon—I thought. *Damn, he looks really upset. Curse me and my sardonic mouth.* If I ever wanted a chance to get to know him, I needed to bring him back from the edge of annoyance before the elevator came to a stop. “Did my brothers tell you about the charity event that we host?” I raised my eyes to gage his reaction. *Thank God, the tension is fading away. At least he’s not scowling at me anymore.*

“No, they didn’t mention it. We usually just keep to business during meetings.”

Leaning back against the cage of tension we were stuck in, he crossed his arms over his solid chest. I swallowed the dry lump in my throat and attempted to shake the image of him rushing across the distance and crushing his lips to mine.

God, I need to get laid. “My brothers and I host a charity event. It’s a costume thing since it’s around Halloween,” I said, still trying to shake that earlier image.

The doors to the elevator opened and we both turned, not expecting the ride to be over yet. “This is my stop, good luck with the event,” he said, stepping out of the elevator and turning back toward me. His eyes roamed over me from head to toe.

Holy fuck! He just eye fucked me!

Rubbing the stubble under his chin, he turned and headed toward the exit. *Okay, I didn’t just imagine that because Danielle is staring at us with her jaw practically on the floor.* There was no way I was letting him walk away after that little stunt. Taking a quick step out of the elevator, I stopped the automatic doors from

closing. Standing half in and half out of the elevator, I yelled across the lobby. "Come to the charity event, for me?"

The tall, six-foot, god-only-knows-how-many-inches of pure, sexy male eye candy stopped in his tracks and turned back toward me. His blue eyes fixed on mine, and I was all sorts of messed up.

"Please," I pleaded, when he didn't answer.

I can't believe I'm begging. What am I saying? Yes, I can. Anyone in their right mind would beg to those blue eyes. I dragged my suddenly heavy leg back into the elevator. *Come on, doors, any time now. Why are these freaking doors not closing? Any other time they close too fast, but not today when I want them to.* I hesitantly looked up, expecting to see the empty lobby. But as my eyes rose up from the floor, they latched onto Spencer, now only standing a few steps away. *Any time now, doors.*

Finally, they began to close, but the last thing I saw was that megawatt smile, and I knew that I hadn't been imagining anything.

Slumping back against the wall, I stood there in a shocked awe. My hands went to my mouth as I covered the stupid grin that was actually hurting my face. It only took twenty-three years but I was as giddy as a twelve-year-old.

I finally reached the seventh floor again. Walking past the reception area, I nodded over at Adam, a friend of my brothers from college.

"Hey, Miss Monroe, did you see that Salvatore God?" he asked, fanning himself.

"Yeah, I did," I said, trying to stifle the effects of my intense elevator ride.

Adam was a gossip queen and I didn't need my brothers knowing I had a thing for their business partner.

"Oh, the things I would like to do to that man! You know, I heard a rumor he swings my way."

I couldn't help but laugh. There was no doubt in my mind that Spencer was *not* hitting for Adam's team.

"I guess anything is possible," I said, laughing and walking past him as I headed back to Teddy's office.

On my way, I stopped by Charles's office. He was sitting at his desk with his feet propped up as he talked on the phone. *I can't not take advantage—*

I banged loudly on his door with my fists, adding some extra oomph with both feet. Charles jumped so hard that he fell off his

chair. For my own safety, I booked it down to Teddy's office and hastily closed the door behind me.

Crouching over, I held my stomach tightly as tears ran down my cheeks from laughing so hard. Teddy was sitting at his desk, going through the mounds of papers in front of him.

"What the hell is going on?" he asked, freezing, the papers still in his hands.

"Elizabeth!"

We both turned toward the door to hear Charles storming down the hall. I ran behind Teddy's chair for safety. The door swung open. Charles was on a mission—to kill me. We ended up running around Teddy's desk like a cat and mouse.

"You're going to get it, you little twerp. Come here, baby girl," he sang devilishly.

"I'm not a baby. Stop saying that, jerk," I yelled back.

"Oh no, not that, anything but 'jerk.' You know it's my kryptonite," he said, standing still and clutching at his heart, while falling to his knees.

"You two need to grow up!"

Charles and I looked at each other before throwing our heads back in laughter.

"Lighten up, Teddy," Charles said, sitting in one of the two large leather chairs in front of his desk.

"We were just messing around," I said.

"Well, do it somewhere else, not in my office. Some people have to work."

Shit, now I feel bad. I knew Teddy worked hard and I felt bad that he couldn't put work down to have a good time, even for a minute. I backed off and got to the point of why I was there.

"I wanted to talk to you about the charity event," I said, sitting in the other leather chair.

"I have everything done, invitations have already been sent out. It looks like it's going to be nice turn out this year," Teddy said matter-of-factly, all business.

"Oh? Do you think you can send out one more invitation?" I asked.

"I just need the name and address," Teddy said, his face still in all his papers.

"I—umm—I have a name, but I don't know the address. It's for Spencer Salvatore."

Teddy jerked his face up to me with a look that could kill. “Why the hell would I send him one?” he asked, almost crumpling the papers in his hand.

“I kind of invited him. I ran into him on the elevator and brought it up. I thought you guys would have already invited him since he’s your business partner and all.” *What is Teddy’s deal with him? I swear, I see steam coming out of his ears.*

“Well, we didn’t invite him and I don’t think he should come.”

I turned to Charles for help on this one. “Come on, Teddy, it’s charity,” he said. “He’s got a lot of money. May as well take advantage and let him put it to good use to help the kids out. What’s it going to hurt, anyway?”

At least Charles is good for something.

“Fine, but if I see anything out of the ordinary, he’s gone. I’m not going to ruin what the three of us have worked so hard on because you feel bad about not inviting him.” Teddy pointed to me and his eyes showed just how serious he was about kicking Spencer out.

Thank God that’s over. Talk about overreacting. “Anyway, on to more important things,” I said. “What are we going to dress up as?” After shooting down blue body paint for Avatar people and unattractive, angry bird costumes, I finally couldn’t hold my tongue any longer. “You two suck at picking out costumes. Must I do everything around here?” I said, shaking my head.

“Pray tell, Queen Elizabeth. What do you want to wear this year?” Charles asked, looking over at me from his chair.

“Ha, very funny, Charles. I was actually thinking about a Mad Men theme.” I waited as the idea slowly sunk in before I elaborated.

“Mad Men, huh? I like it. We can get some vintage suits. Nice idea, Beth,” Teddy said.

“Thank you!” I took the small victory because there was no way I was going to strut around a party in blue body paint.

“Since that’s settled, get the hell out of my office,” Teddy demanded.

Charles got up to leave first, pointing over at me with two fingers once he got to the door. “You better watch it, baby girl. I got my eyes on you.”

“Yeah, yeah, I love you too, Chuck.”

Once the door closed behind him, I stood from my chair and approached Teddy's desk. *Call me nosy or intrusive, but I have to know why he is so against me having anything to do with Spencer. He did agree to be his business partner, after all. It must be bad. Maybe he hates kids or is involved in an underground kinky, sex ring—head out of the gutter, Beth.*

"What, Beth?" Teddy asked, looking up at me as I quickly pulled my mind out of the underground sex ring.

"I—I was—umm. What's your deal with Spencer?"

His full attention was on me the second he heard my question. "You're my little sister. I feel the need to protect you. It's what I do, what I've always done. I just think you should stay away from him, that's all." Teddy's posture and the command in his voice screamed father figure.

I still don't get it. "But why should I stay away from him? What did he do that was so horrible or unworthy of your respect for him as a person rather than just another business partner?" My need to know any and everything about Spencer was starting to become a nasty little habit.

"Beth, drop it. I said he could come to the charity event."

Hearing the anger rise in my brother's voice, I decided to let it go—for now. "Okay." I sighed. "I guess I'll see you on the plane. We're leaving Saturday, right?"

"Yes, everything has been booked. I'm going to have a car pick Gran up."

Walking around my brother's desk, I leaned over and gave him a hug and kiss on the cheek. "Thanks, Teddy."

"Bye, Beth. Please stay out of trouble, no pictures on Fame. We don't need any more stress for the week."

"You trying to tell me I'm a trouble maker? Have you met our brother Charles? I'll be an angel, promise," I said with a grin.



Thank God, Wednesday was my light day, only one class, which I sat through thinking about Spencer and his gorgeous hair falling over those brilliant, blue eyes. *That man does something spectacular to a three piece suit.*

Knowing full well there was nothing to eat at home, I decided to take my chances in the cafeteria. Hours later, I was through eat-

ing and my research for my impending paper was practically done. Needing a break from ancient China, I went to my home page to catch up on the latest news. Scrolling down, my eye was automatically drawn to a small picture of Spencer with the word “Caught” under it.

Clicking on the picture took me to Fame’s web page. There, in black and white, was a picture of Spencer and a beautiful woman holding his arm. *I think I’m going into cardiac arrest.* My first instinct was to slam the computer shut, but I liked to cause myself unnecessary heartache. I tried to look away, but instantly started to size myself up to this chick. *You know what makes this even better? That fact that she’s a fucking Barbie doll! Tall, thin, and blonde.* Now I knew I was just imagining everything between us. *Us? Like there ever was an “us” to begin with.* Nope, it was just a man taking advantage of a woman who became mush when spoken to. *I am officially delusional.*

The rock-star Barbie was wrapped so tightly around Spencer’s arm, his face looked like he was in pain. At least he wasn’t passionately looking into her eyes. Maybe he was pulling a Chuck? *Why am I trying to convince myself otherwise?* This was the same man that a month ago was never even photographed with a woman. *Now, he has one hanging on him like a freaking scarf!* I pulled my ear buds out and closed up my computer, throwing everything into my bag. I needed to get home before I broke down in public over a man who was never mine to begin with. *Jealousy is such a bitch.*

It was dark by the time I made it home. “Hey, Derrick. You’re here late tonight?” I asked stopping in front of the desk.

“Getting some overtime, the new guy is running late,” he replied, shrugging his shoulders.

“Sorry, hopefully he will be here soon.” My feeble attempt to sound encouraging was dismal.

“Oh, Elizabeth, before you go, up a package was dropped off earlier for you.” Bending below the counter, he reappeared with a very small child size shoe box looking package.

The box was wrapped in brown shipping paper, I recognized the handwriting instantly. Salvatore. I took the box from Derrick’s hand cautiously, like it might explode if handled the wrong way.

“Are you okay?” Derrick asked, looking over at me curiously.

“I’m fine. I just have to sit down and figure out if I want to open this or toss it in the trash.” Sitting in the lobby, I dropped my bag next to me and sat, placing the box on my lap.

I weighed my options. On one hand, he was a freaking Greek God, and if a Greek God sent you something, you should probably open it. On the other hand, Salvatore was absolutely baffling. *Who goes around grabbing random people’s ankles? And who sends someone flowers and love notes, and then goes out to be publicly photographed with another woman? What, he didn’t think I’d see it? Maybe he is into kinky, underground, multiple partner sex/relationships. Yuck! I think I need to bow out before I find myself chained to a bed.*

I started to think that maybe Teddy was right. I needed to stop day dreaming about someone who wasn’t at all who I was pretending they were, and focus on the man I was getting to know and really like. Taking to my feet, I grabbed my bag and put the box under my arm as I started to head toward the elevator.

Standing outside my door, I could hear talking. *Damn, Gia must have the TV up loud.* Turning the knob, I opened it slowly, taking one last breath to clear my head of anything having to do with Spencer Salvatore. I looked down at the box in my hand before covering it with my jacket and placing it on our entry way table.

“Hello, Belle.”

Spinning with sonic force, I whirled around to see Simon standing at my kitchen island next to Gia.

“What are you doing here? I thought you weren’t coming home until Friday?” Dropping the rest of my belongings, I did a double take to make sure the box was securely concealed from Gia’s prying eyes.

I met Simon halfway in the living room. He grabbed me in a tight embrace. I had almost forgotten how strong he was and what it felt like to be wrapped in his gentle arms. Guilt hit me hard as I realized I hadn’t thought about him since I was trapped in the elevator with Spencer.

“I’ve missed you so much, Belle.”

His voice was deep as his eyes raked over me. The hunger in them was so real, I thought he might throw me over his shoulder and take me to my room right then and there.

“I missed you, too,” I said a little less enthusiastically.

I didn't mean it to sound as bad as it did. *It's just been one hell of a confusing day.*

"Where have you been? I've been waiting for you all day. I tried calling, but you never answered. Your phone just kept going straight to voice mail."

Crap, my phone! Everything before Spencer came rushing back to me. I remembered getting a call from him and missing it. I was going to call him back, but Spencer happened. I never even looked at my phone the rest of the day.

Did I even have it on me? I think I would have heard it ring. Taking a step back from Simon, I held my hands up to his chest.

"Hold on a minute, let me check my bag." I dived head first into my bag, searching through the black hole. *Nothing.* "I must have left it at my brothers' office, God I hope I didn't lose it."

I looked up at Simon. He smiled back at me, holding his hand out for me to take.

"I'm sure you just left it with your brothers," he said confidently.

"I hope so." Placing my hand in his, I came toe to toe with him. I almost forgot how wonderful he smelled too. *Stupid Salvatore.*

"Did I tell you how beautiful you are?"

The warm breath that escaped his lips ran over my ear. The sensation sent a chill through my body, waking it up from its Spencer slumber. I pulled back to look deep into his warm, brown eyes. *This is the man I should be thinking about. This is the man who treats me the way I deserve to be treated. It took long enough, but I think I finally found him.*

I draped my arms around his neck and pushed up on my tip toes to kiss his waiting lips. As he pulled me closer, I forgot where I was and concentrated solely on the hand that was running from the middle of my back and over the curve of my bottom.

"Ahem, I'm still standing in the room."

Gia's voice brought me back. Breaking our kiss, I smiled up at Simon who still had a firm grip on me.

"Sorry," I said apologetically.

"It's fine. Just take it to your room. Otherwise, sit your ass down, Survivor's about to start," Gia said on her way to sit on the couch.

Looking up at Simon, I pleaded with my eyes. I wasn't really in the mood to go to my room. Unfortunately, Spencer was still

clawing at the corners of my mind, evidently not wanting me to have any fun with Simon.

We sat on the couch with Gia and I tried to focus on the show, but I wasn't even in the same room as them. I heard Gia talking and felt Simon rubbing my arm, but as much as I hated to admit it, I was stuck in a small elevator with Spencer Salvatore.

I found myself making a dumb excuse about being tired and needing to sleep after the show was over. Not even arguing with me, Simon simply kissed me goodnight. *How much more perfect could he possibly be?* The guilt of thinking about another man while being in the arms of this one was gnawing at my insides. *I don't deserve Simon.* I found it hard to believe Simon was so laid back and easy going.

Chapter 11

Grabbing my jacket with the box tightly concealed under it, I made a break for my room. “I’ve got a lot of work to get done, so I’m just going to call it a night,” I said, keeping my head down and heading for my room.

“Hey, are you all right? Did something happen today?” Straining her neck before I slipped into the hall, Gia shot a concerned look my way.

I can’t get into this with her right now.

“Nah, I’m fine, just a lot on my mind with the charity event and school.” *Hopefully that will keep her off my back until I’m ready to bring another person into my twisted love life.*

Turning back to the TV, she called down the hall, “Well, I’m here if you need me.”

“Thanks, Gia,” I said, before closing my door.

That night my head was moving at warp speed. How could someone I barely knew, have such an effect on me? I should have been knee deep into Simon, yet I was lying in bed, alone, watching the clock tick as my mind kept throwing ridiculous fantasies of Spencer at me.

It was a good thing I didn’t have classes tomorrow because, before I knew it, it was two in the morning and I hadn’t even closed my eyes yet. *Oh, this is ridiculous!* I ripped the covers off and went to sit at my desk. I turned the computer on and waited for it to start up.

Fame’s website stared back at me. It wasn’t a good idea. I shouldn’t be interested in anything on this web page. *Oh, what the hell?* I moved the cursor to search and typed in Spencer Salvatore. The page went black while it loaded. *Lovely.* His beautiful face

was staring back at me when I looked up. Scrolling down, I read the little biography they had on him.

Spencer Salvatore, young, determined, and sexy as hell! This thirty-year-old has taken the night, bar, and restaurant scene by storm. Having over twenty hot spots all over the world, this newcomer has plans to expand even more. Did I mention he's single ladies? Although Mr. Salvatore is rarely seen with a woman by his side, it seems times are changing. Recently spotted with Elizabeth Monroe—the mysterious sister to Theodore and Charles Monroe—it seems there is still hope for those of us waiting for this very eligible bachelor to pick the perfect woman. We'll all be on the edge of our seats waiting to see what happens.

Bad idea, very bad. I slammed the computer shut and threw myself into bed, thankful that sleep finally came, but not before I imagined what it would be like to be with Spencer, to be his “perfect woman.”

I woke up in a haze, not sure how to deal with the day that was ahead of me. I still hadn't opened that stupid box and I had to find a way to get excited about Simon, since Spencer pretty much made me forget about him with one look. I needed to shower. *Maybe I can wash Spencer out of my mind.*

With my thoughts back together, I called Simon on the house phone.

“Hey, babe,” he answered.

“Good morning.”

“You just get up?” he asked with concern in his voice.

“Kind of, I was up later than I expected catching up on school stuff.” *Well, not all of it was a lie.*

“Oh, well, do you want me to come over and pick you up? I'd like to spend my whole day looking at you.”

Damn he knows how to make me feel good. “Yes, please. I wouldn't mind looking at you all day, either.”

“I'm on my way,” he said, before hanging up.

I was watching TV when the doorbell chimed. There on the other side of the open door stood Simon, arms crossed and the devil in his smoldering brown eyes, not saying a word. I had to

back up to give him room as he walked in. Smiling at me, he moved quickly. His strong arms lifted me up and spun me around.

My first reaction was to wiggle free. Not one to be picked up like a rag doll, I was petrified he was going to drop me. *How embarrassing would that be, my fat ass landing on top of him.*

“Oh my God! Simon, put me down.” My half-laughing, half-shrieking protest was high-pitched and not normal coming from my mouth.

“I’ve never heard that sound before. I like it,” he said, nuzzling his head in my neck, as he let me slide down his solid body.

Blushing—I know I am.

“There it is, that beautiful pink hew on your cheeks.”

I took a moment to look up into his warm, brown eyes, his smile, his...hair? “You cut your hair!” I ruffled his shorter hair. *Man I can’t curl it around my finger anymore. What the hell?*

“What? You don’t like it? It was getting a little long. I don’t want to look like a girl, or worse, Fabio.”

Fantasies started taking over. Simon with long, shoulder length, sandy hair leaning over me as it gently fell around his face. *Add that one to my ever-growing list.*

“It’s okay for now, but I kind of like the idea of Fabio,” I said, while running a hand back through his shorter hair.

“Well, if Fabio is what you want, Fabio is what you’ll get. I’m never cutting it again,” he said, grinning. “I was thinking that we could go over to your brothers’ office, see if anyone has found your phone, and then possibly get lunch? What do you think?” he asked, holding me tight around the waist.

Humph, the two of us riding in the elevator hand-in-hand? Of course, Spencer would be standing right outside the doors as they opened. I’d drop Simon’s hand and rush into Spencer’s arms, because that’s what I do in my fantasies. I always choose the wrong guy. Not today! I’d hold onto Simon’s hand. Who cares if Spencer sees me with someone else? It’s not like we are, ever were, or ever are going to be dating.

“That’s a great idea and you can officially meet my brothers.”

“Wow, this just got serious, meeting your family. Maybe I should have thought this out a little more. I’m a little nervous all of a sudden.”

Stretching up on my toes, I touched my lips to the corner of his mouth. His hold on me tightened, as he turned to kiss me full on. His now-familiar taste was welcome on my lips.

“If you do that in front of them, there might be a little tension, so make sure to keep your beastly paws to yourself while were there.”

Smiling down at me, he rested his head on mine. “Dually noted, no groping in front of your brothers. It will be challenging, but I think I can manage for an hour,” he said, smiling against my cheek.

When we arrived at my brothers’ office, we went straight for the elevators. I waved over to Danielle as we waited for the doors to open. She gave me a big thumbs up and smiled over at me. I smiled back, not really sure what the thumbs up was for. *Did she finally get to sleep with Charles? Who knows with that one?* She then pointed next to her, nodding her head as she looked Simon up and down. I peeked over at Simon who was oblivious to the whole silent conversation. The sun caught his light-colored hair and his muscular frame was perfectly dressed.

I instinctively grabbed a hold of his hand, claiming him as my own. Such an insecure thing to do, but who was I kidding? It wasn’t every day a hot guy like Simon was with a girl like me.

“What’s this about?” he asked, holding our hands up. “Nervous?”

I couldn’t help but chuckle up at him. “See the girl over at the reception desk?”

He tried his best to nonchalantly look over, but he was a man and incapable of that.

“Yeah?” he said, turning back to me.

“Let’s just say she’s a bit of a man hoarder. She was checking you out and I wanted to make sure she knows you’re not available.”

“Oh really, a man hoarder?” he asked, looking over at her again.

“She collects them. She’s currently trying to get Charles, as of yesterday, that is. Who knows about today?”

I could hear the elevator approaching. It couldn’t have gotten there fast enough. It was an awkward feeling, having to claim someone so they didn’t get snatched out from under you. Glancing up, I saw Simon smile over at Danielle, only to see her send a se-

ductive one back. The next thing I knew, my cheeks were warm and covered by large hands that weren't mine. Lips found mine as Simon kissed me. Pulling away when the door opened, I blinked my eyes open to see a wicked grin spread across Simon's face. Taking my hand in his again, he pulled me into the elevator, spinning me so my back was to his front. As the doors closed, I saw Danielle's, mouth hanging open.

"What was that for?" I asked, chuckling and squeezing his arms around my waist.

"Just making sure she knew I was taken. That's all," he said into my neck before kissing it.

I chuckled. "I think that definitely did the trick."

As we ascended, the tension turned more serious with every floor we passed. The nerves seemed to be getting to Simon. He wasn't joking around anymore and he became still. Just as we reached our destination, I pulled away from his embrace, because... *Ugh, who am I kidding? I know why I pulled away. The scenario of Spencer standing on the other side of the doors terrifies me and, if by some chance it does come true, I don't want Simon to feel my body tense up at the sight of Spencer.* When they did open, I was extremely relieved that no one was standing on the other side. I walked over to Adam, Simon hot on my heels.

"Hey, Adam," I said, leaning on his desk.

"Hey, girl, you miss me that much?" he asked, while he primped his slicked back, blond hair.

"Obviously! But in all seriousness, I lost my phone yesterday. I was wondering if anyone has seen it."

"No, honey, I'm sorry, no one has said anything."

"Great," I said, rolling my eyes. "If you see it or hear anything about a found phone, please let me know or give it to my brothers."

"Sure thing, I can do that. Hey, did you ask Danielle downstairs?"

I shook my head, smiling inwardly. "I'll ask her on the way out. Are the boys busy?" I asked, pointing down the hall, silently sending a prayer up that they were alone and not meeting with a certain someone.

"Nope, they're just in their offices. They only had one meeting today, which was early this morning. You can go ahead on back. Not like you need my permission."

I smiled across to him.

“Umm, who’s this?” Adam asked, resting his elbows on the desk to hold his head up, a seductive smile spread across his face.

What is with people today? Doesn’t anyone have any self-restraint? “This is Simon. Simon, this is Adam, my brother’s very nosy receptionist.”

Adam held his hand out femininely toward Simon. Taking Simon’s hand in his, Adam shook it daintily. “And Simon is...” he asked, gazing into Simon’s eyes.

“Umm...he’s umm...” I stumbled with my words like a child.

“I’m a good friend,” Simon said for me.

We hadn’t discussed anything about how I was going to introduce him to, well, anyone. Were we dating, hanging out? The idea of casual dating made me feel a little less like a crazy, horny woman with her sights set on two different men.

“Well, I’m Adam, as Beth so nicely put it before, and if you need anything, you just let me know,” he said winking at Simon as he finished introducing himself.

Still holding onto Adam’s hand Simon leaned a little closer to him. “Oh, I will do that, thank you.”

I was pretty sure if Simon hadn’t been holding Adam’s hand, Adam would have fallen off his chair.

Shaking my head, I grabbed Simon’s free hand. “Come on, you savage beast, let’s go find my brothers.” I dragged him down the hall, all the while Adam was practically leaning over his desk to watch us walk away. “You sure do know how to leave people speechless,” I said to Simon.

“I can’t help it. I have that effect on people. After all, that’s how I got you.”

I shook my head as I peeked into Charles’ office. “You are something else. Should I be worried if you have this ‘effect’ on everyone? They must be in Teddy’s office, come on.” I started walking the rest of the way down the hall, but was pulled back toward Simon.

“No,” he said.

Confused, I frowned, not sure what we were actually talking about anymore.

“You don’t have to worry about anything or anyone. You are it for me. There’s no one else.”

“Oh, that’s good to know,” I said, smiling up at him.

“Belle, listen, you’re not my good friend.” He held tighter onto my hands. “You’re more than that, but if that’s what you’re comfortable with right now, then that’s what I’ll be for you, but I want you to know I’m ready for more. I’m ready for all of it, all of you.”

Is this happening right now? Is he asking me to be exclusive with him? All the years I spent as a lonely teenager, only wanting one thing—to have a boy ask me out. And now, I can’t even be sure I can say yes without thinking I’m making a mistake. God damn, Salvatore, why did I have to meet him?

I was so mad at myself for not being able to just say yes. Simon was searching my face for an answer, a smile, something to show him that I was in it with him. When I didn’t answer him, he did.

“I can be whatever you want me to be, just know that it’s not going to turn me away, or stop me from doing this,” he said, pulling me closer to his body. Caressing my cheek, he ran his thumb across my lower lip then down the side of my jaw before he kissed my lips tenderly.

“Thank you, Simon, thank you for being patient with me. I don’t deserve it, but I’m so new at this I—I know that’s not an excuse, but I still have a few walls up. I’m working on them, I promise.”

Giving him one last comforting hug, I walked to Teddy’s door. I knocked gently before opening it, walking in, and checking the surroundings. The boys were sitting at a table filled with papers and their lunch.

“Hey, guys,” I said, walking all the way in, but taking a glance back to nod Simon in after me.

“Hey, baby girl,” Charles said, spinning around in his chair like a child. He quickly slammed his feet on the ground to stop the spinning the moment he saw Simon walk in behind me. Teddy simultaneously looked up to see Simon mid-bite into his sandwich. He placed it back on the wrapping paper.

“Who’s this?” Charles asked rudely.

My usual, jovial brothers were nowhere to be found, as they eyed Simon up.

“This is Simon, my umm...” *God here we go again. Why can’t I just say it?*

I turned to Simon for help. Taking a step closer, he took my hand in his, and I was thankful for the support.

“I’m dating your sister.”

As if the tension in the room wasn’t already on high, my over-protective brothers both stood, looking at one another.

Teddy was the first to move toward us. I didn’t know if he was going to shake Simon’s hand or punch him in the face. Fortunately, no one was punched in the face. Teddy held out his hand and introduced himself. My brother was taller than Simon and had a more slender build. Charles soon followed suit and introduced himself. Although he was the shortest of the three men, he had a certain air about him which I was sure was why women flocked to him.

I took a second to admire all three of them. I felt really out of place. Put Simon in a suit like my brothers and, if someone would have walked by, they would have thought it was a photo shoot for Ralph Lauren. Then there was me, standing between them in jeans and sweatshirt, my hair in a messy bun, and no makeup. *Just plain, ordinary, and frumpy*. I shook myself out of my self-pity to give my brothers a better introduction to Simon.

“So you’re sleeping with my baby sister?” Charles asked, going totally off topic in the middle of my intro about Simon being from California. “Well, are you?” he asked again.

Simon laughed nervously, running a hand through his hair. “Umm—no?” Simon said nervously.

“Are you asking me or telling me?” Charles replied.

“Charles! Are you kidding me right now?” I shouted, letting go of Simon’s hand to hit Charles in the arm.

“What? I’m just getting the facts,” Charles said, rubbing his arm.

“You don’t need any facts, you jerk. It’s none of your business,” I snapped back at him.

Finally, Teddy stepped into help with this very awkward and embarrassing conversation. “I think what my no-filter brother is trying to say is, are you treating our sister the way she deserves to be treated?”

“I believe that I am, but you’d have to ask her.”

All three heads turned toward me, waiting for my response. I stood there opened mouth, stunned that this was really happening.

“Yes! Of course he is. Good God, you people are making this way more stressful than it has to be.”

“Just checking hiney holes, baby girl. You never know—”

“Charles, stop now. Just stop talking,” I said, holding my hand up to him.

Everyone laughed as we took seats at the table filled with papers and half eaten lunches. Simon began explaining what his company did and how it worked.

“If you don’t mind, I’d love to get a business card. We might need some good publicity for the opening night of 21,” Teddy asked.

“Here you go,” Simon said, pulling his wallet out of his back pocket and handing a card to Teddy.

We had been sitting and talking about this and that when my stomach rumbled loud enough for all to hear. I felt my face instantly flush.

“Geez, Beth, hungry much?” Charles asked.

I held my stomach in embarrassment. “Ha, ha, Charles. I haven’t had anything to eat today. We were going to get lunch after coming here,” I replied, relaxing a little.

“Well, don’t act too much like a pig at a trough. Don’t want to lose this good guy here,” Charles finished with a haughty laugh.

You know, for someone who says he wants to protect me, take care of me, and would never hurt me, he sure knows how to make me feel like scum.

“Damn it, Chuck, you are such an ass sometimes,” Teddy said, coming to my rescue like always.

“What’s wrong with a healthy appetite?” Simon chimed in, placing his hand on my knee under the table.

Charles looked between us all, a bewildered expression on his face as if he didn’t just say something cruel. “Whatever, you guys. Beth, you know I’m just messing with you.”

“It still hurts my feelings, regardless if you’re ‘joking’ or not,” I said as calmly as I could, since I was doing my damndest to hold back the tears that were moments from flowing.

“I’m sorry, baby girl, come here,” he said, as he stood and walked around to me. Tugging me up and out of my chair, he wrapped his arms around me. “I love you and I won’t talk to you like that again. I promise.”

He spoke softly in my ear, and a smile spread across my face whether I wanted it to or not. My brother could be the biggest jerk to me, but he was one important part of my life. Jerk or not, I loved him.

“I think Simon and I should get going. You guys look like you have a lot of work,” I said, gesturing to all the papers on the table.

Standing, Simon shook Teddy’s hand once more. “It was nice to meet you guys.”

“Same here, Simon,” Teddy replied.

“I guess we’ll be seeing you next Friday?” Charles said, while taking his turn to shake his hand. Simon looked quizzically from my brothers to me.

“What’s next Friday?” he asked.

“Oh, I was under the impression that—umm.” Charles raised his brows in my direction not sure if he should continue.

Shit, I had forgotten to invite, let alone even tell, Simon about the charity event.

“I’ll fill you in at lunch,” I said to Simon, taking his hand and leading him out of the office, as my brothers looked dubiously at one another.

Just before the doors to the elevator closed, Adam made his way back to his desk. I waved bye to him and caught Simon giving him a little wave and wink.

“You are trouble!” I said, hitting his arm and laughing.

“So I’ve been told. I like keeping people on their toes. Now come here,” he said, pulling me into his arms and kissing me.

Before we left the building, I asked Danielle if anyone had found a lost cell phone, but there was no luck there either. Danielle was usually a very confident person. Not many people, men in particular, could get her all twitchy and anxious. Simon was standing behind me, holding onto me around the waist, which still made me cringe a little, knowing that he was touching parts of me I wasn’t even comfortable with. I could only imagine what he was doing back there because the expression on Danielle’s face was priceless. I turned to see what all the fuss was about only to catch Simon grinning down at me all innocent and hot.

We decided to get a sandwich from around the corner. I filled Simon in on the charity event, not expecting him to be able to come.

“So, you’re leaving on Saturday?” he asked with a tinge of sadness to his voice.

“Yeah, I’ve got to get there early to set up and organize all the activities.”

“I wish you would have told me so I could have made ar-

rangements to be with you. Wait one second, I'll be right back."

I watched as he stood from the table, pulling his phone out of his pocket, and walking out of the sandwich shop. I sat there, not thinking anything of it.

"I've got good news!" he said when he came back. "I just talked with my boss and I can make it out there Thursday night, which gives you the whole week to get things together without me being there to distract you."

I sat staring at him with a stupid look on my face—that, I was sure of. "Wait. You're going to come?" I asked in disbelief.

"Of course, I am. If it's important to you, then I want to be there. Where am I going for this event?"

I explained to Simon that it was at our family's house outside of New York City. My parents bought it, to get us out of the city. It was the house they were going to grow old in, see their kids grow up in, and have their grandchildren come visit. The house was huge, something you'd see on the life styles of the rich and famous. It had its own staff to keep the massive space clean. Gran and Pop lived there with us after my parents died. Now Gran lived there during the winter until she could go back to her beach house.

We hosted the event at the house every year, it was more room than needed with a massive hall for parties and tons of rooms for guests, Gia was even able to claim a room for herself. My brothers and I couldn't bear to sell it. It was the last thing our parents had given us and there wasn't a chance in hell we were getting rid of it. Mixed emotions went rushing around my head. I was glad he was going to come, but the more I thought about it, the more I was hoping he wasn't going to be able to make it. I wanted to get answers from Spencer, if he even showed up. Subconsciously, I knew that was why I didn't tell Simon in the first place. I wanted to have all my attention on Spencer, find out what his deal was, or if I was seriously imagining it all. I didn't need Simon breathing down my neck while I was trying to get answers out of Spencer.

Just then a fabulous idea popped into my head, an idea where I could win all around. "You need to bring your camera with you. I'm officially putting you to work. We could use the pictures you take at the party to put on the site and send to magazines." *God, you are so smart, Elizabeth Monroe. While he's taking pictures, you can question Mr. Salvatore.*

Feeling pleased with my plan, I smiled devilishly at him.

Chapter 12

The week leading up to the charity event blew by and before I knew it, Thursday night had arrived.

“That was so yummy, Gran. I’ve really missed your cooking,” I said as I cleared the table of dirty dishes.

“You know, I love cooking for my grandbabies, even if it is just one of you tonight,” she replied.

“So remember, tonight Simon should be getting in late.”

“I remember, muffin, you’ve told me every night since you got here and I even spoke with him yesterday. I may be getting old but perhaps you should have your memory checked?”

Witty old bat.

“I’ll send him up to you when he arrives,” she continued, winking up at me as I took the plate from in front of her.

My brothers were out for the night and staying in the city, so it was just Gran and I. Thankfully, she was a night owl. Me, not so much.

With my brothers gone for the night, I felt it safe to have Gran send Simon to my room, not that I would listen to them, anyway. Even though our house was huge with lots of spare bedrooms, I still wanted Simon with me. *No distractions.*

After cleaning up the kitchen, I retired up to my room. I got comfy in my bed and began perusing the local TV channels. I stopped on a pop-culture news station while I waited for the Thursday night line up to begin. The screen flashed to a picture of Spencer and all at once, my stomach started doing summersaults. *Shit, the ultimate distraction.*

“...we have just been informed by an irrefutable source that Spencer Salvatore is here, in New York, for a charity event. It

seems the multi-millionaire has been inspired to publicly do some donating to a charitable cause. Our sources say that he will be attending an event, conveniently hosted by once thought to be lover, Elizabeth Monroe. Is this a chance to get back together? Our sources say yes. It seems as though he is taking all opportunities given to win her back. But like everyone else, we will have to wait and see what happens. In other news, lead singer from ONS, Kane Lawson has been..."

I quickly turned off the TV. The picture of Spencer was still burned into my mind even though the TV had been shut off. My thoughts turned to the box he left me. I had packed it, along with all the little notes. They were all sitting at the bottom of my suitcase in the closet. *Why would he choose my family's charity event to make a big stink about?*

I chewed nervously on the inside of my cheek. My eyes burned a hole through my closet door. *Should I look in his package? Ahh, hell, I can't take it anymore.* I had put it off since I'd gotten it and I couldn't ignore it any longer. I needed to know what was inside.

I rushed over, slung open the door, and kneeled down. I quickly unzipped the bag and there, at the bottom of my suitcase, was the still perfectly wrapped box.

My fingers grazed lightly across his perfect penmanship.

I ripped the paper on the side. My chest became heavier with every rip. Setting the paper aside, I lifted the lid.

The first thing I saw was my phone on a bed of browning rose petals with a post it stuck to it.

Sorry, picked this up thinking it was mine.

I picked it up, pushing the on button, but it was completely dead. Glancing back down at the box, I notice a folded piece of paper amongst the petals.

I was almost positive that I was going to pass out. I unfolded the paper and read.

Miss Monroe.

It seems as though I can't shake you. I will come to your event if that is what you want, but I do not share. I will not be made a fool. ~ Spencer Salvatore

Oh God, I didn't need this right now. Why did he keep doing this? I was so confused. If he wanted me, why hadn't he just told me in the elevator or outside the club? Clearly, he had come by my building—twice! Why not just call up for me or wait for me to come out? I really needed some answers now. This was getting borderline stalker. He'd better show his face tomorrow night because, I had a mouthful for him.



As I lay in bed, sleeping, I was awoken by the rustle of clothes and a warm body cozying up to me. My eyes flew open, and I scooted back in bed, kicking my legs at the warm body.

I screamed when a hand wrapped around my ankle, totally forgetting that Simon was even staying with me. My first thought was that somehow Spencer had broken into my house and was trying to do god knew what to my ankles.

I reached over and flipped on the light on my nightstand and grabbed my alarm clock, ready to hit someone in the head.

“Hey, babe,” Simon said sheepishly.

I clutched at my chest as my adrenaline slowly began to subside once I realized it was Simon and not Spencer or a burglar. “Jesus Christ, Simon.”

He had a devilish smile on his lips and a twinkle in his eye. “Sorry I didn't mean to scare you. Your grandmother told me you were expecting me. FYI, I see where you get your good looks.”

I pushed his shoulder as he laughed at me. “You scared the be-geezus out of me!” At that point, I was so far away from him, I was almost falling out of my queen-sized bed.

“That wasn't my intention, believe me.” He scooted closer, rested his head on the edge of the pillow, batted his eyelashes like a girl, and stuck his bottom lip out. “Can you find it in that big ole heart of yours to forgive me?”

I rolled my eyes before I lay back down next to him. “I guess.”

“Good, now come here.” He pulled me against his warm shirtless body. “I'm beat and although I might kick myself later, I'm very content just holding you and passing out. That all right?” he asked.

I nodded “Yeah.”

I was glad to have him close again. I hadn't realized that I missed him as much as I did. But with Spencer still fresh in my mind I was thankful he only wanted to sleep and not "sleep" with me.



The morning light came through the window sooner than I wished. Simon's arm was still holding onto me tightly, as I listened to the many voices bustling around downstairs. I needed to get up and get helping, but the comfort of my bed with a man in it sure was tempting. Turning to face Simon, I reluctantly opened my eyes to stare at him.

"Hey," I said, letting my fingers glide down his stubbly jaw line.

He stirred beneath my touch, his warm brown eyes opened and found me. He kissed the tip of my nose. "Hey, back."

"I have to get up and get my butt in gear. It's going to be a busy day."

Lying back on his pillow, he rubbed his eyes with the backs of his hands. I took that as my opportunity to get out of bed. I was a second away from throwing the covers off when I found myself pinned down.

"I don't think so," he said with a seductive grin.

"Simon! I have to get up." I smiled up at him, but he didn't budge. Using both hands, I pushed hard on his chest to get him off me. No luck, I was stuck, and not going anywhere. "Move, you beast!"

"Nope, not a chance, sweetheart. I was a nice guy last night. This morning is a whole different story. I haven't seen you in a week," he said, kissing either cheek. "Belle, you're not going anywhere until I say so."

"Simon, I get—"

"Shhhh. No talking." He trailed kisses up and down my neck. "You. Taste. So. Sweet."

My body took over, and I lost the fight. Arching up to him, I pulled him down closer to me. A warm hand brushed against the skin under my night shirt. His hand continued to move over my stomach and ribs, stilling under my chest. It felt so good, I didn't want to him to stop.

This was it. All this time, and I was finally going to sleep with Simon, in my childhood bed no less. The bed that I had spent every evening praying for a boyfriend, praying for someone to love me the way I was. *How ironic.*

Breaking the kiss, he sat up, kneeling between my legs. Instinct took over. I reached out for him, dying to feel his bare skin under my hands. The tips of my fingers rippled over his abs. Covering my hand with his, he pulled me up toward him. Taking the bottom of my shirt in his hands, he pulled it off and tossed it on the floor, laying me back down. I prayed that I looked at least half as hot as I was picturing myself.

Swallowing hard, I tried to wet my dry mouth. I stared up into his warm brown eyes. I felt safe with him, comfortable. We had come a long way and I was ready to get and give more.

“You are so beautiful.”

I watched his eyes dance over me. All the self-deprecating thoughts left my mind because I knew that he was attracted to me, the same way that I was to him. Not able to wait any longer, I swiftly wrapped my arms around his neck, pulled him down over me, and kissed him.

“Elizabeth,” he said, pulling back slightly from my kiss, “I need to tell you the truth before we go any farther.” Taking a breath, he started again only getting a syllable out before all hell broke loose.

With what felt like a tornado, my door flew open.

“Baby girl, time to wake up and work—”

And just like that our sensual moment was ruined as we watched Charles barrel through my door. The word “work” still lingered in the air as his shocked saucer eyes stared at my bed.

Simon quickly moved off of me as I simultaneously pulled the covers over my head. “Charles!” I screamed from under the covers, letting only my eyes look over the top. “Can’t you freaking knock before coming in to someone’s room?”

Charles stood in the middle of my room, looking as if he wanted the image out of his mind as badly as I did.

“Jesus Christ, Beth...” he said, turning back toward the door. “Hurry the hell up and put some clothes on. Next time do me and everyone else a favor and lock your door!”

He slammed the door closed as I pulled the covers back over my head.

This would happen. The Gods have it in for Simon and me. I'm definitely convinced. I felt the covers start to slide down my face. Simon's bright smile met me on the other side.

"Can you believe that?" I asked. "If it's not your boss calling you to work, it's one of my brothers."

"Ah, come on. It will happen when it's supposed to happen. Don't worry too much about it. This is only going to make it all the better," he said, kissing my forehead.

God this man is perfect. Who says stuff like that? Simon Sullivan, that's who.

He chuckled. "Well, I guess breakfast is going to be interesting."

I put a pillow over my face. "Oh my God, I don't want to get out of this bed. Kill me now!"

"Come on, it's not that bad. Go take a nice cold shower. I'm sure Chuck won't run his mouth. He looked just as embarrassed as you did."

"You must not know my brother. He lives to rile me."

Grabbing the extra cover at the bottom of the bed, I wrapped it tightly to my body. It was one thing to be lying under a hot guy, but to stand in front of them, in only my panties, in the light of day, was something that I had no intention of doing—ever.

I stood up, wrapped safely, or so I thought. Simon ripped it away from my body. Right away, I covered whatever I could with my arms.

"Nope, not a chance, baby. Now walk your sweet ass in that bathroom."

Really? Jerk! Backing up, my feet grazed his T-shirt on the floor. I bent down, grabbed it, covering my ass with it as I high-tailed it into the safety of the bathroom. I could hear him laughing through the door, which I made sure was locked.

"You better be careful. Paybacks are a bitch," I yelled from behind the door, before turning the shower on.

After my shower, I reached for my towel on the hook. Dread nearly stopped my heart. *Where's my towel? In my closet of course, on the other side of the room.* Holding his shirt over my chest, I opened the door slowly, praying it wouldn't creak, and peeked out. I was safe. He was sound asleep. I tiptoed across the room, but stopped to watch him for a moment.

Perfect. This guy was everything I could have ever wished, dreamed, or prayed for. And I did all of the above. Why couldn't I just be happy, content?

Fucking Salvatore.



Closing the door behind me, I made my way downstairs. A dozen or so people ran frantically around the first floor. Turning into the kitchen, I was pleased to see Gran sipping tea and reading the morning paper. Looking up, she smiled over to me.

“Good morning, muffin. Where’s Simon?” she asked.

“Still sleeping,” I said while getting myself a glass of orange juice and sitting next to her. “Thanks for waiting up for him.”

“Not a problem, muffin. Your brothers came home early this morning. Have you told them yet that Simon is staying here?”

“They’ll figure it out.” *Chuck already did, and I’m sure he’s going to rat me out to Teddy.* “I’m not a little girl. I can have man sleep in my bed,” I said, holding my head up high.

My brothers had never had to deal with me and a guy before, but they were going to have to get over themselves because Simon wasn’t going anywhere.

“I know that, and I respect it, but your brothers—”

“They’ll deal with it, Gran.” A look of concern was all over her face. “Spit it out,” I said. “I know that look.”

She wasn’t very good at hiding her feelings. I guess I got that from her.

“I was reading the paper this morning and it seems we’ve made the *Times*,” she said, casually handing me the paper.

I saw not only my brothers and me, but a picture of Spencer off to the side. There it was in black and white.

Spencer Salvatore to Attend Monroe Fundraising Event.

“I just lost all respect for journalism.”

“Have you talked with him to see what his intentions are?” she asked, sipping her tea as if it was no big deal and there wasn’t another man laying up in my bed.

These were the times I wished my Gran wasn’t so liberal.

“No, but as you can see, I guess he’s coming tonight.” My thoughts drifted to last night with Simon, and then to Spencer’s notes. The emotions I’d squashed when Simon wrapped his arm around me crept their way back to the forefront of my mind.

Teddy and Charles came in the kitchen, papers in hand. *Great, here it comes. Is it weird that I can sense when I’m about to be ridiculed?*

“Good morning, Beth,” Teddy said, kissing the top of my head as he made his way to the coffee pot.

“Hey,” I replied.

Taking a chance, I glanced at Charles as he turned my way. Closing his eyes, he shook his head and body as if a chill went down his spine. *Go figure. I should really revel in this. I’ve never known what it’s like to have the upper hand on him. This feels good. No wonder he messes with me so much. It’s a great feeling.*

I busied myself the rest of the morning, checking on all the activities we had set up for the children that were attending this year’s event. On my way back to the house, I spotted Simon sitting on the porch steps, talking on his phone. And, from the looks of it, he wasn’t having a very pleasant conversation. Once he spotted me, he quickly got off the phone, ending the conversation abruptly.

Strange, but you know what? These days, not much surprises me.

“Hey, sleepy head,” I yelled over at him.

Shoving his phone in his pocket, he stood, walked in my direction, took my hand, and kissed my cheek. “It looks great out here.”

“It looks okay,” I said, smiling up at him. “Who were you talking to? Looked serious. You don’t have to leave, do you?”

He shook his head. “No.”

I gripped his arm tightly. He smiled down at me. I didn’t buy it. It wasn’t his usual carefree smile. There was something else going on that he wasn’t telling me.

“Your brother, Chuck, came to see me,” he said, squeezing my hand.

“Oh God, what did he say to you? He couldn’t even look at me this morning. Which was kind of nice actually.”

Pulling me even closer, he laughed softly. “It wasn’t bad. He just wants to make sure I’m treating you good. Very big brother of

him. I didn't get the father sitting on the front porch with a shot gun vibe from him."

I chuckled at his analogy of my brother. Simon had it dead on. "He's much more laid back. Teddy, on the other hand, is definitely a shot-gun-wielding father figure."

"Well, for my sake, I'm glad it was Chuck and not Teddy this morning."

We made our way back to my room to get into our costumes. The kid part of the party was less than an hour away. As Simon took a shower, I got ready. The door to the hallway opened slowly and Charles stepped in, looking around—no doubt making sure no one was naked.

We stood there not saying anything for a while.

"All right, let's get this over with," he said. "I'm sorry I barged in. I never thought that—I mean, I wouldn't have—I'm sorry."

Charles apologizing? I couldn't help but snicker. Of course, he wouldn't think I'd be sleeping with anyone. *Ouch, that hurts a little.*

"Thanks, I think. I'm sorry you had to see that, trust me."

Shaking his head and body like he did at breakfast, he finally made eye contact with me. "Don't worry, my lips are sealed, especially to Teddy. If it would have been him, I think Simon would be on the next flight home."

Even though they were fourteen months apart, my brothers were decades from each other in the way they treated me. I loved that we both got how old school Teddy was. It was the one thing that we could agree on. I walked over to my brother, who was already in his vintage suit and fedora hat, and gave him a hug.

Pulling away from each other, we turned in unison as the bathroom door opened. Simon came walking out. His muscular body was glistening from his recent shower. His hand ran through his sandy hair as droplets of water fell onto his face. *And the best part? Only a small, white towel was sitting low on his hips.* If my brother wasn't standing right in front of me, I think I would have jumped him or taken a picture.

Glancing up, Simon realized that it was more than just me in the room. Quickly, he covered his body with his arms. *Funny, I believe he made fun of me for that this morning—two words, pay back!*

“Dude, for real, the next time I see you in my sister’s room without clothes on, you’re sleeping on the front lawn,” Charles roared. Rolling his eyes at us, he adjusted his hat and exited my room, stopping at the door. “And remember to lock this please,” he said, slamming it closed.

I glared over at Simon.

“What?” he demanded, shrugging his bare shoulders. “I forgot to take my clothes into the bathroom with me.”

Chapter 13

The big night had finally arrived. We were all standing in the kitchen when Simon entered in his *other* costume. He'd thought his Superman spandex might be a bit much for the more upscale party. Although I was sad to see the spandex go, I loved the "Newsies" look. Wool cap turned backward and newspaper in his back pocket, he truly looked like he'd stepped out of the 1920s. Gia arrived just in time for the main event. Donned in our retro dresses, we were waiting for our hair and make-up artists to arrive. If we were going to do this, we were going all out!

Later, just before people started arriving, I took one last look to admire the amazing job the ladies did on my hair and make-up. My hair was in perfect, honeycomb waves, half of it pulled back, and the rest falling over my shoulders and back. I felt beautiful and confident—that was, until I glanced at the box sitting at the bottom of my closet.

All the confusion from the past few months was going to be resolved once I was able to confront Spencer. I needed this little infatuation to be over. I needed to move on. It was the right thing to do. I grabbed all the notes, shoving them into my clutch, and left the safety of my room. I wasn't sure what to expect tonight, but I knew I was ready to get it all over with and move on. I hoped.



Standing with my brothers, monotonously saying hello to everyone as they arrived was making me more anxious, for with every car that arrived it was one more closer to having to confront Spencer.

Before I knew it, I was being escorted into the ballroom in our house. No Spencer. A wave of relief/sadness engulfed me. I knew this was all a joke, that someone like him would never be interested in someone like me. *What was I thinking? I should know by now.* He was just being nice to me because he was in business with my brothers, simple as that. *I'm not going to feel bad for myself!*

I took a moment to scan the room. People were happily mingling with each other. Waiters were serving drinks and hors-d'oeuvres on shiny silver trays. It seemed like everything was going great. In my scan around the room, I saw Gia openly gawking at Charles. Although he was giving her a little bit of the cold shoulder, I still caught him checking out her ass when she walked by him. Charles was still Charles and I guessed he couldn't completely ignore a beautiful woman.

On the opposite side of the room, Simon was hard at work taking pictures of all the guests. When I caught his eye for a second, he gave a cute little wave and wink. I waved back, blowing him a kiss. This was how I wanted my life to be. I was so grateful he was here to share this with me. I couldn't think of anyone else—

Suddenly a sharp chill ran down my spine. Rubbing my arms, I felt the hair on them rise as goose bumps covered my flesh. I turned around, expecting to see someone. When I found no one remotely close to me and the doors securely closed, I turned around again, trying to locate where the chill had come from. *Weird, must be a draft above me.* Rotating away from the crowd of people again, I looked up at the vent-free ceiling. I had no clue what that chill was. In mid-spin back to the filled ballroom, I jumped back when I realized there was a man standing in front of me. *How the hell? Jesus Christ, I think I'm having a heart attack.* I clutched at my chest and I tried to steady my frighten heart.

I bent over, putting my hands on my knees, while I took a few deep breaths. Straightening, I focused in on the mystery man. It took me less than a second to figure it out. Salvatore. I narrowed my eyes up at him as he removed his dark sunglasses and placed them on the inside of his jacket pocket. Those cool, sea-blue eyes found their way to mine, and I felt like a pubescent, pimpled-faced, pre-teen getting caught looking at naughty pictures.

“Good evening, I hope I didn't catch you too off guard,” he said in that sweet, seductive tone as he held his hand out.

Not even thinking, I placed mine in his and watched as his lips brushed across my knuckles. *Frozen, who knows how long, a second, a minute, an hour?* Everything came back to real time, as I looked down at my hand in his. I instantly ripped it away and held it tightly to my stomach.

“Hello,” I said boldly, as if my world hadn’t just literally gone into slow motion when he touched me.

Placing his hands in his pockets, he turned his head, trying to hide a chuckle, but I saw it. *Jerk.*

“Looks like a nice turn out. Hope I’m not too late.”

Oh no, don’t do it. Please. Dammit, he’s running his hand through those dark, Greek God locks of his. Focus, Beth!

“Yes—I mean no, not at all, you’re not late. It’s a wonderful turn out.” *Ugh, someone shoot me.*

“I was—”

The pure sound of his voice was like a melody I could have listened to all day. *That’s it, I can’t let him talk. He’s a jerk, just remember, he’s a jerk.*

“So,” I said cutting him off rather rudely. “Who are you supposed to be dressed up as? Yourself?” *Jerk, he would come to a costume party dressed as himself. What a conceited jerk!*

Maybe that wasn’t the best idea. A seductive grin turned up his lips as he chuckled softly to himself. “You have a bit of an edge tonight. You can’t tell?”

He stood there, fixing his jacket and looking all sexy. *Stay strong!* I shook my head and popped my hip out, as if I was bored by him.

“I’m an agent from Men in Black,” he said, pulling his sunglasses out of the jacket and putting them on for a second before taking them off again.

“Humph. Very clever.”

He made me so on edge, but I sure as hell wouldn’t admit I was so affected by him. *I’m only talking to him right now to get to the bottom of whatever he wants with me.*

I should have stayed planted right where I was, asked the questions I needed answered right there. But I didn’t I want an audience. I looked around and saw a few people pointing in our direction, no doubt trying to decipher what was being said between us.

“Will you come with me?” I asked, pointing with my clutch at the door.

“Of course,” he replied without delay.

No one followed us as I led the way down the hall and around the corner to my father’s office. The large window behind my father’s desk let the moon light shine in, which danced off the glass book shelves. It always reminded me of a disco ball and tonight was no exception.

Setting my clutch on the desk, I reached in and grabbed the notes, holding them tightly in my hand for strength. Looking up, I watched as Spencer closed the door behind him. The notorious click of the lock made my heart quicken. *Why the hell is he locking the door? Great he probably locks all his girls up then kills them or something. That’d be my luck.* Fear and excitement coursed through my veins. I prayed that I hadn’t missed the article that said he was an axe murderer.

Smoothly turning back, he strode toward the desk, all Greek God like. The tips of his fingers slid across his bottom lip. *Oh my goodness, I want to touch those lips—Beth!* I snapped myself back to reality, which looked pretty damn good right then, but I needed to get serious. Checking that I had what I needed still clutched in my hand, I took a deep breath and began my interrogation.

“What is all this?” I demanded, walking from behind the safety of the desk—which was the only thing keeping him from me and me from him. He calmly undid the buttons on his jacket. I could only watch, motionless for the second time tonight. He shrugged his shoulders, and the jacket fell easily down his arms. A sliver of jet black hair slipped out of place as he laid the jacket on the chair next to him. His crisp, white shirt was tight enough to see the outline of his muscular body but loose enough to bunch together.

Looking up at me, he raked the stray hair back in place. “I think you know damn well what they are, Miss Monroe,” he said evenly.

“My name is Elizabeth,” I replied, annoyed that he was trying to make this funny or jovial. “I know what they are, jer—” I held back what I really want to say. “I want to know what they mean, what any of this means.”

“They mean exactly what they say. What else would they mean?” he responded matter-of-factly.

All right, that’s it. No more ms. nice girl! “Fine, you need it spelled out for you? Stop being a confusing, note dropping, word twisting, sexy-ass man and tell me what you want from me! You

leave me notes and act all nice then disappear. I don't know if you're messing with my head, if you're an escaped mental patient, or—craziest of all—if you're actually into me. Jesus, I don't know how much more of this back and forth, here today gone tomorrow, stay with this guy, give that one a chance, he likes you, he doesn't like you, I can take," I ranted until I had to suck in a breath of air.

Closing my eyes, I rested my hands on the top of my head in frustration. I realized I had called him a "sexy-ass man," during my five minute rant. *Incredible. I would say something like that!* I took a second to breathe and collect my thoughts.

Within that second of retreat, strong arms wrapped around my torso and plush lips crushed mine with a sensual force I had never felt before. The feeling of being weightless came next as I was lifted off the ground. Instinct took over as I dropped all the papers that were clutched in my hand. I wrapped my arms tightly around Spencer's strong neck, then wrapped my legs around his waist, and gave in fully, kissing him back, like I had done so many times in my dreams.

All the frustration I had built for Spencer went right out the window the minute his mouth touched mine. The only thing I could concentrate on was his lips—and the fact that they felt so good against my own. Every single stolen moment, the catch of an eye, the graze of a hand, it had all led up to this.

With one hand firmly under my ass and the other on the small of my back, he took the two steps to the desk and set me down, his lips still on mine. Our movements were as choreographed as a dance—how perfect that moment was. Taking only a second to look him in the eye, I stared back in amazement before he kissed me again. His hand rested against my waist and I wondered if he could feel the slight roll under the fabric of my dress. I did my best to sit up straighter, all the while praying that he didn't notice. The worst thing that could happen was that he'd realize I wasn't one of his typical, famous arm candies. *Fuck! I don't know what I'm going to do, because now that I've had a taste of him, I'm not sure anything will ever be as good.*

Breathing heavily, he slowed all his movements. *Oh God, he felt it, the pudg roll. Please don't leave me sitting here alone.* He rested his forehead on mine, and I was so thankful that he didn't turn and leave because that was by far the best first kiss I had ever had.

“Oh, so you are crazy,” I said, finding my voice.

We smiled at one another as I played with the collar of his shirt. Surprisingly, it didn’t feel weird or forced—no silent awkwardness. It just felt right. Being in his arms felt right.

“No, I’m not crazy or so my doctor says, and I’m not messing with you either.”

I arched an eyebrow at him. “Really? Then why all the notes and awkward run-ins? Why didn’t you just talk to me, ask me on a date? I don’t understand.” I sat back from him, wanting my answers *now*.

“I don’t know. I mean, I know—it’s just that you make me feel things, things I don’t—I haven’t let myself—you were always leaving or with someone. It was just never the right time,” he said brushing it off as if that was an acceptable excuse. \

Is he kidding me right now? Come on, he can’t be serious. How lame of an excuse. I played back all of our little run-ins and he was kind of right, then there was Simon—*oh God, Simon. Shoot me now. I’m a horrible person.* Apparently, seeing my sudden change in body language, he took my hand in his.

“I tried to keep my distance,” he noted, turning my chin with his fingers so that I was forced to look into those beautiful blue eyes of his. “I tried not thinking of you. Be the gentleman I was raised to be. But you were always there when I least expected it, even if you didn’t see me, I saw you, everywhere. At night, I’d close my eyes and you’d be there. I had to do something, so the notes were my way of dealing.”

He held his head down as if he was ashamed of thinking about me. *Well, that makes me feel peachy!*

I snatched my hands from his. “Dealing, so you’re dealing with me?” *Oh, I am right.* To him, I was just the annoying little sister of his business partners. “All right I’ve heard enough, I’ll make sure to stay out of your way since you don’t want to think about me, see me, or be in the same room with me. Like I said before, and what I honestly thought all along, you’re crazy and I’m even crazier for thinking that—”*What was I thinking? That we’d end up together? Ha! Joke’s on me.*

With my hands on his strong chest, I tried to push him away.

“What are you doing?” he asked, planting himself farther against me so I couldn’t move.

“I’m trying to get off the desk so I can leave.”

“I don’t want you to leave.”

“Too bad, playboy, I’m leaving.”

“No, you’re not.”

“Yes, I am,” I replied, standing my ground.

Just like before he took me by surprise, only this time I saw it coming and I didn’t do shit about it. I saw him lean in that extra inch. I watched as his eyes closed, and his hand reached up to cup my cheek before his lips caressed mine for the second time.

I ran my hands over his chest, feeling his stone-like muscles. *Does this mean I haven’t been imagining everything and this is really happening?* It really was his chest rising and falling beneath my hand, and it was his hand that was gripping my neck and drawing me in for more.

Spencer pulled back and studied my face. Those were really his eyes looking back at me. I didn’t know what to say. He had me pinned there and, lord help me, I didn’t want him to let me leave.

“Not leaving,” he said on a sigh.

I nodded my head, agreeing with him, loosened his black tie, and unbuttoned the top few buttons of his shirt. My fingers sneaked inside, and I had to remember to act cool. If this was my one chance to do this, I wasn’t going to waste it. His chest was firm and solid. No doubt he worked hard to stay fit, but his skin was surprisingly smooth. I didn’t know if any of this was real. I could have woken up at any moment, but I knew right then that I didn’t want it to end. All thoughts of anything but Spencer Salvatore left my mind.

I watched him as his eyes closed at my touch. I thought of what we had been missing out on for so long. If only he would have talked to me, told me.

“You should have told me,” I said, stubbornly pulling my hand away from him as I sat back and crossed my arms in frustration at how things could have been so different.

Taking a calming breath, he pulled back, too, removing his hands from me to rest them on either side of my hips on the desk. “I told you, I was trying to stay away. I thought it was better that way. I thought you were happy. I tried to find someone else, but something kept pulling me toward you. I know you feel it, too.”

His voice turned raspy, almost needy as he rushed forward, grabbing the back of my nape. His possessive kiss took my breath away for a third time.

His warm hand found my knee and moved up and under my dress. With his thumb latched tightly in my underwear, I sat up straighter trying to hide whatever imperfections I could. They were my tricks of feeling toned and I had a whole library of them. Inside, I was thanking myself for wearing lacy boy shorts rather than spunks. *How embarrassing would that be if he couldn't find my underwear because they were hiked up under my boobs? Thank God for small miracles.*

His hand moved painfully slow until it reached my core. Before I could even comprehend, his hand was on me. I felt my underwear being ripped away and I watched as he discarded them on the floor. *That's not fair! He's too sexy.* He quickly slipped his hand back under my dress. I moaned as his warm fingers moved back and forth, petting me, before one sank deep inside me.

I dropped my head back in pleasure and clutched the edge of the desk for dear life. I'd been touched by men or—should I say—boys before but, Spencer must have taken extra sex education courses, because he knew every stop and the exact amount of pressure to apply.

Not much was going through my head at that moment, but the one thought that kept popping back up was that I couldn't believe I was letting this man make mush out of me. Up until tonight, I had never been so ready so fast, or given it up so fast. It was like he knew exactly what I wanted and when I wanted it. *Every man should enroll in whatever sex education courses he's had.* Within minutes of his hand being under my dress, I was on the verge of exploding.

My hands left the sides of the desk, needing something else to grab onto. I clutched his shoulders, bringing my forehead to meet his while I rode his hand.

"Come for me," he said in a deep, seductive whisper.

Ah hell, that's it, I'm done for. Those three words had me clawing at his shoulders as I grinded into his hand harder. My sheath squeezed around him. Leaving his hand under my dress, he kissed my lips softly. I realized then that I wanted even more—more of him, more notes, more anything Spencer.

Thinking I heard someone jiggle the door handle, I quickly came back to my senses. "I think someone is trying to come in," I breathed. "Did you hear that?"

Turning to look over at the door, I felt his arousal graze the inside of my thigh. The sudden urge to touch, see, even have that particular appendage inside me made me erupt with excitement. *What is happening to me? I don't think or talk like that. What the hell has Spencer Salvatore done to me? I've got sex on the brain!*

Praying my eyes had gone back into their sockets before he turned back, I was saved by the obvious knock at the door.

"Okay, I heard it that time," he whispered, stepping back. Grabbing me around the waist, he helped me off the desk.

"Hey, who the hell is in here?" It was Teddy's distinct voice from the other side as he tried to turn the handle.

Spencer and I looked frantically at one another. He began buttoning his shirt and fixing his tie, while I fell to the ground to pick up the pieces of paper. I stood, straightening my dress, then ran behind the desk and grabbed my clutch, shoving the papers inside.

"I said, who's in here?" Teddy's voice got noticeably louder.

Striding over to the door, I put my hand on the knob. Glancing back at Spencer, I nodded, letting him know I was going to open it.

Crap! My underwear! I quickly looked on the floor, but didn't see them. Hopefully Spencer had gotten them. Turning back to the door, I undid the lock and opened it, looking up at Teddy who appeared to be on the verge of kicking in the door. He took a half step back, startled to see me. Taking a second to look me up and down, he then shot a look over my head at the man looming beside our father's desk. I could actually see the blood rush to my once-calm-and-controlled brother's face.

"What the hell is this?" he asked, looking across the room at Spencer then back down at me.

"I was just showing Spencer dad's old office. I always thought it looked so cool in here at night. Remember, like a disco ball when we were kids?"

I knew Teddy wasn't buying anything I was trying to sell.

"Okay, Elizabeth, would you mind giving me a moment alone with Spencer?"

Not knowing if I should stay by his side or leave him for Teddy, I looked apprehensively over at the man that I was ready to fight with my brother over. But Spencer simply nodded his head.

"Fine, whatever," I said, not giving either man a second glance.

I strode out of the room and down the hall, feeling like a fool. Stopping at the end, I turned back to catch my brother's other foot enter the room. Inching back up the hall, I saw that he'd left the door cracked. I moved close enough so I could hear what was being said.

Not even starting with small talk, Teddy just got right to the point. "What are you doing with my little sister locked in a room?"

"Nothing. She was just showing me around," Spencer replied.

"Don't play dumb with me, Spencer. I will not have you treating my sister the way you treat other women."

My heart dropped, questions popping in my head. The biggest one—other women?

"She's not a little girl. You can't—" I heard Spencer take a deep breath, as if trying to calm himself. "Listen, it's not what you think. She's not like any other woman I've been with. I care for her and she cares for me."

"Oh that's rich, Salvatore. Glad to know you *care* for her. That makes it all better. Now cut the crap. You're nothing to her and don't you dare tell me what she is or isn't. You don't even know her. You've met her, what, two times?" Teddy paused and drew in a deep breath. "Let's just finish this club. It's a little more than two months away and, once it's done, you can get the hell out of town and leave my family alone."

"And what if I choose to stay?" Spencer asked challengingly.

"Fine, do what you want, stay, go. But if I see you near my sister again, I'm going to unleash a reign of fire on your perfect little persona. I'm not naïve. I do my research on people before doing business. I found some pretty incriminating stuff that you made sure to keep out of the public's eye. You see, it's actually rather simple, stay away and I keep quiet. Keep your troubled life away from my little sister. She's seeing someone else, anyway. Have a little respect."

I waited to hear what Spencer said in response. I expected him to fight, call Teddy's bluff, but I heard nothing, only the sound of Teddy walking out of the room. I leaned up against the wall as my brother stormed out, not even noticing me on the other side.

A defeated looking Spencer followed, his jacket hanging over his arm. He stopped just outside the doorway. Stepping away from the wall, I stared at him, wrapping my arms tightly around my

waist. The look in his eyes told me I was never going to be in his embrace again, and I was crushed.

“You’re not going to listen to him are you?” I asked, desperation in my voice.

“Miss Monroe, I’m very sorry. Your brother is right. I’m no good for you, and you’re with someone else.” He sounded all business and not like the Spencer I had just spent the last hour with.

“I told you, my name is Elizabeth! And who the hell is he to say what I want or don’t want? I know you. I know enough to make a decision to get to know more of you. Spencer, I can’t function—in a good way, the butterflies and fireworks kind of way—when you’re around.”

I was getting little, if any, reaction out of him, not even a smile, nothing. He was straight, poker faced.

“I’ll leave him,” I continued in a rush. “I’m not even technically with him. I’m willing to take this chance with you.” I took a step closer.

He smiled back! *That’s a start.* “Everything I told you or that you have heard is true,” he said. “Tonight wasn’t a mistake. It just made me realize I’m not as lost as I thought I was. I think I’m falling for you. But it’s safe to say you’ve changed me, woke me up. Thank you.” Placing his hand in his pants pockets, he turned to leave.

What the hell? Here we go with Confusion 101 again. I thought for sure we’d passed this class already.

“No! No,” I yelled, making him turn back around. “You can’t say that and then just expect to leave. I won’t let you! Jesus, you can’t keep doing this to me. Please, I’m begging you.”

Sighing, Spencer finally walked back over to me. Running the back of his hand down my cheek, he ran it along my jaw as he kissed my forehead. “You are a stubborn woman. You make it hard to walk away, but—”

Now, I’m pissed. I stepped back from him, pushing on his chest in frustration. “But what? You can’t tell someone you’re falling for them and then—nothing, you’re not even willing to try, give it a chance? Nothing?”

Closing the distance between us, he dropped his jacket and pulled me tight against him, his hands firmly on my cheeks. I was taken aback by the fierceness in his voice when he spoke.

“Damn it, Elizabeth. Just—” He crushed his lips to mine, his hand pressed firmly on the small of my back, pulling me painfully close, before letting me go and stepping back. He reached down and picked up his jacket, slinging it over his arm. “I have to leave.”

As fast as it all started, it was over. Not saying another word, he turned and walked down the hall. I stood for a second until he rounded the corner. I made a mad dash for the stairs, taking them two at a time. Rushing into my childhood room, where I spent most of it crying over being teased or boys using me, I slammed the door shut behind me, leaning against it. My legs gave out from under me. I slid to the floor and sat sobbing like a baby. Spencer’s last words echoed in my head. *How bitter sweet. He finally says my name, and it could very well be the last time I ever hear him say it.*

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About the Author



M.E. Gordon, was born and raised in Maryland, where she still resides with her husband. She is a stay-at-home mom to four children, three boys and one very, spoiled, little girl, all under the age of five. Growing up Gordon was an avid journal writer. She wrote her first romance novel at the age of 14, and it was pretty bad, but over the years and through all the kids she honed her craft. When Gordon doesn't have her mom hat on, you can find her reading, working on her next story, or watching guilty pleasure television.